



Review

# How Are Leadership Programs Empowering Our Vulnerable Children and Youth? A Scoping Review

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**Abstract:** Globally vulnerable populations are negatively impacted by policy and practice. For vulnerable youth, risks to growth, development, and a lack of participation in decisions about their lives are common. Leadership programs are frequently implemented to address the risks faced by vulnerable youth. This review sought to describe the goals, content, and outcomes of existing youth development programs to better understand if they are meeting the needs of vulnerable youth. A scoping review was conducted using the PRISMA-ScR methodology. Ten electronic databases and grey literature were searched. A total of 89 youth development programs were identified. The goals, content, and outcomes of the programs were thematically analyzed. Four foci emerged, namely, youth, relationship, community, and social justice-focused development. A youth focus was most commonly represented, and the social justice focus was the least represented. Most programs addressed only one focus area. If youth development programs are to provide youth with both the skills to engage with and opportunities to change their circumstances, then all four focus areas need to be included. Secondly, a need for the active involvement of youth in both the planning and implementation of programs was identified. Finally, safeguarding needs to be highlighted in any program working with vulnerable youth.



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## 1. Introduction

The period in one's life termed "youth" is identified as a particularly sensitive period for biological development as well as the development of identity and independence. It is during this period that the foundations for full functioning in society are laid (Blakemore and Mills 2014; Hall 1904; Lerner et al. 2019; Patton et al. 2016). The process of combining rapid biological development with social development is, however, extremely stressful for children and youth who are strongly influenced by both engagement and social contexts (Blakemore and Mills 2014). For vulnerable children and youth, this period is even more challenging.

For the purposes of this review, we used the terms "children and youth" and "youth" interchangeably to include children, adolescents, and youth aged 10–24 years old (United Nations 2009). Vulnerability is defined by Schroeder and Gefenas (2009) as facing "a significant probability of incurring an identifiable harm while substantially lacking ability and/or means to protect oneself" (Schroeder and Gefenas 2009, p. 117). Vulnerability for children and youth may arise in relation to deprivation (food, health, education, and parental care), exploitation, abuse, neglect, and violence. In particular, the absence of one or both parents is a major determinant of vulnerability (Fernandes-Alcantara 2014). Similarly, extreme poverty, chronic illness of self or parents, disability, and a lack of social support and education also contribute to vulnerability.



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For children and youth in families and communities who are at risk of vulnerability, the means to protect themselves are typically provided by their own support structures, within which they have a voice (Sanders et al. 2020). However, where the parents and family are absent or unable to advocate on behalf of the child or youth, it becomes the responsibility of the state and civil structures to ensure that they are not harmed, and their rights are met (Bexell and Jönsson 2017; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2019). Vulnerable youth, however, do not typically have a voice within the structures and institutions which should be protecting them. This in itself is a breach of their right to participate in all decisions which affect them (UNICEF 1989, articles 12 and 13).

For vulnerable youth, the need to have a voice and to participate alongside the structures and institutions which maintain their rights is of particular importance, as these individuals are fully reliant on the application of policies in order to be granted life opportunities (for example, home placement, schooling, healthcare, and rehabilitation). In addition, vulnerable populations are disproportionately impacted in a negative manner by policies and practices applied “to” them with limited engagement or participation in a top-down approach (Shaw 2017). A lack of participation by children and youth in the child protection system renders them “invisible” and increases the risk of further victimization (Greenson et al. 2020; Nurcombe-Thorne et al. 2018; Rudolph et al. 2019; Sanders et al. 2020; UNICEF 1989; United Nations General Assembly 1998; van Ijzendoorn et al. 2020). Furthermore, a lack of participation in their own lives was identified as a contributing factor to negative outcomes, including developmental delays, mental health problems, and interpersonal violence, while the presence of participation was shown to result in improved developmental, social, educational, and employment outcomes (Clark et al. 2020; Middel et al. 2020; Patton et al. 2016; Plageron et al. 2019; Rudolph et al. 2019; Sanders et al. 2020; Shaw 2017).

Within child protection or care and support services for vulnerable youth, the ability of youth to participate is often not acknowledged due to deficit-based perceptions that they are problematic (Crone and Dahl 2012; Freud 1969) and lacking in capacity (Kay and Tisdall 2017). This is particularly the case for children and youth with disabilities (Cussen et al. 2012; King et al. 2000; McPherson et al. 2016). Furthermore, patriarchal viewpoints which prioritize protection over participation (Middel et al. 2020), dubious standards of care (Better Care Network 2017; van Ijzendoorn et al. 2020), and a lack of resources and structures to support the contributions of the children and youths’ voices, result in limited adherence to the right of participation for children and youth who are vulnerable (Gal 2017; Kay and Tisdall 2017; van Ijzendoorn et al. 2020).

In order for children and youth who are vulnerable to be provided with a place at the table in discussions regarding their future, two key areas need consideration: an individual’s opportunity and ability to influence, and the political or institutional structures’ will to be held accountable (Burns et al. 2015; Shaw 2017).

For children and youth, the skills and opportunities needed to influence could be developed through direct teaching, experiential learning (Macneil 2006; MacNeil 2012; Redmond and Dolan 2016; Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003), and community organizing activities. Community engagement, in particular, has been highlighted as being beneficial for promoting personal growth and the ability to effect change amongst children and youth (Christens and Dolan 2011; Fertman and van Linden 1999; Lawrencejacobson 2006; London et al. 2003; Morton and Montgomery 2013; Parkhill et al. 2018). The political and institutional will to be held accountable by beneficiaries is termed downward accountability. Downward accountability has been identified as critical for the effectiveness and transparency of organizations or institutions and is most often implemented through stakeholder engagement between institutions and the stakeholders. Hence, youth require skills in order to be able to engage with their institutions (Awuku et al. 2020).

This review aims to evaluate how current youth leadership and development programs for vulnerable children and youth are facilitating the participation of vulnerable youth in

engaging with structures and institutions such that they are able to have their voices heard in order to achieve their rights.

The review is a part of a broader project entitled “Changing the Story: Building Civil Society with and for young people in post-conflict settings”. The review aims to support the project through the identification of the conceptual foundations of existing youth leadership programs, identifying their components, and evaluating these against those required by youth in order to be able to influence and apply downward accountability.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Aims and Objectives

This scoping review aimed to identify the conceptual foundations, goals, content, outcomes, and adaptations of youth leadership programs for vulnerable youth and evaluate how these are supporting vulnerable youth to participate in processes which facilitate them achieving their rights.

These aims were achieved through the implementation of the following sub-aims:

1. Develop a protocol for the scoping review with stakeholders;
2. Conduct a search across peer-reviewed journals, electronic databases, and grey literature to identify youth leadership and development programs for vulnerable youth;
3. Evaluate the quality of the research relating to the identified programs and the quality of the programs;
4. Describe the overall characteristics of the included studies;
5. Describe the primary conceptual components of the programs; goals, content areas, outcomes, implementation strategies, and youth engagement within the included programs;
6. Describe the adaptations reported for youth who are vulnerable or who have disabilities in relation to safeguarding;
7. Describe the evaluation mechanisms used for the included programs;
8. Evaluate the program components in relation to those required for youth to be able to engage in downward accountability.

### 2.2. Research Design

A scoping review was selected for this methodology as it provides a broad overview of the literature in the field without being restricted by how the data are reported or the quality of the studies. The PRISMA-ScR methodology was applied to the scoping review in order to ensure that it met the international standards of rigor and reporting (Tricco et al. 2018).

The research question and search process for the review were structured and guided using a PESIO (population, environment, stakeholders, intervention, and outcomes) template (Schlosser et al. 2007). Although the PICO (population, intervention, comparison, and outcomes) template is a more commonly used question template, the specification of the environment is important in this study as it is most often the environment which results in vulnerability for youth (Ruiz-Casares et al. 2017; Schlosser et al. 2007). Similarly, the specific stakeholders targeted in the intervention are relevant to this study, as youth with disabilities or vulnerabilities are often excluded from interventions and research in preference for indirect stakeholders such as caregivers. However, if we are to meet the participation rights of vulnerable youth, it is key that their voices are heard (Bastable et al. 2021; Schlosser et al. 2007; Wong et al. 2010). The research question for this scoping review was as follows: “What are the conceptual foundations, goals, contents, outcomes and adaptations of youth leadership programs for vulnerable youth which facilitate their participation in attaining their rights?”

### 2.3. Search and Screening Procedure

The search terms were identified from the PESIO template and applied in a pilot search. The use of highly specified search terms relating to the included concepts identified

only a few relevant articles. Hence, the search terms were broadened in order to identify the most relevant articles. The final search terms were searched for studies from 2000 and were AB (youth or adolescent or young people or teen or child\*) AND AB (leadership development) OR (empowerment program\*).

The search was conducted across the fields of humanities, arts, and law and included ten electronic databases: the Academic Search Complete, Africa-Wide Information, APA PsycInfo, CINAHL, Criminal Justice Abstracts, ERIC; Family & Society Studies Worldwide; Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition; Humanities Source; Social Work Abstracts searched using the EBSCOhost platform, SAGE platform, Sabinet and Scopus. Additional searches for grey literature were conducted across Clearinghouse, ProQuest Thesis, and university repositories. In addition, ancestry searches of the reference lists of the included articles were performed. The search procedure was conducted and reported using a PRISMA-ScR protocol and reported using a PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al. 2021).

Articles were included if they included children or youth aged 10–24 years old (population), from institutions, or identified as vulnerable (environment), who were directly involved (stakeholders) in a youth leadership or development program (intervention) which aimed to develop skills which could facilitate downward accountability (outcomes). Downward accountability skills were those which could facilitate the process of holding institutions accountable to their beneficiaries and included the development of engagement, participation, accountability, community involvement, empowerment, trust, advocacy, and leadership and youth engaging with government/governance/structures which should support their right to be included in decisions regarding their future. The full inclusion and exclusion criteria are available in Supplementary Materials Table S1 (p. 1).

The screening was conducted independently by two researchers using the Rayyan QCRI online review platform. Initially, screening at the title and abstract level was conducted; thereafter, screening was conducted at the full-text level. Disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached. The inter-rater reliability of screening was reported using Cohen's kappa.

#### *2.4. Stakeholder Involvement and Evaluation*

Stakeholders from Deafkidz International and Hope and Homes for Children (HHC) were consulted in the process of establishing the search criteria for this review. Their feedback was integrated both into the search terms and the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the review.

#### *2.5. Data Extraction*

The data extraction was conducted using Excel. Descriptive data from the identified studies and programs were extracted according to the predefined criteria of the (a) title, (b) author, (c) date, (d) aims, (e) design, and (f) participants and were reported quantitatively. While the program-related information, including the (g) name, (h) goals, (i) structure, (j) description, (k) conceptual components, (l) country of implementation, (m) stakeholder involvement in the program's development, (n) manner of participant involvement in the program, (o) staff training, (p) target population requirements, (q) program adaptations, (r) outcomes, and (s) evaluation were reported qualitatively.

#### *2.6. Program Quality Evaluation*

The evaluation of the quality of the included programs was a goal for this review. However, there was insufficient information on the programs identified for this to be possible. As quality evaluation is not required for a scoping review, this was omitted.

#### *2.7. Data Analysis*

The descriptive data from the studies were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed following the six phases recommended by Braun and Clarke, which include familiarising one's self with the data, the generation

of initial codes, reviewing the identified themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report (Braun and Clarke 2006). An inductive approach was used for theme identification, where themes were identified based on the data and not a pre-identified theoretical foundation (Braun and Clarke 2006). The stakeholder involvement of the youth in the planning, preparation, and execution of the programs was analyzed using the involvement matrix (Centre of Excellence for Rehabilitation Medicine UMC Utrecht 2017).

### 3. Results

This review aims to describe youth leadership programs' aptness for facilitating vulnerable youth to be able to participate in realizing their rights. The results of the review are outlined below, with the studies being described according to their conceptual components, goals, contents, outcomes, implementation strategies, youth engagement, adaptations, and evaluations. The review was conducted between February and July of 2021.

#### 3.1. Search and Screening Results

The electronic database search identified 2992 records for screening. The title and abstract screening resulted in 343 articles which proceeded to full-text screening, and 68 studies were included in the review. A further 64 programs were identified through additional searches (repositories, recommendations, etc.), these were screened at the full-text level, and 15 programs were identified for inclusion in the final review. Of the studies identified in the search, seven contained programs duplicated in other studies (Bulanda et al. 2013; Forbes-Genade and van Niekerk 2017; Redivo and Buckman 2004; Shelton 2009; Ty 2011; Zimmerman et al. 2018), and five reported on more than one youth leadership program (Aldana et al. 2016; Berlin et al. 2007; Dowds et al. 2017; Larson et al. 2005; Owen and Irion-Groth 2020; Ty 2011), resulting in 89 youth leadership programs reported on in the full review. The full list of included programs is available in Supplementary Materials Table S2 (pp. 2–43).

During the screening, an inter-rater agreement of 96.5% (a Cohen's kappa of 0.84) was achieved at the abstract and title level and 97% at the full-text level (a Cohen's kappa of 0.91). When disagreements occurred during the study selection, they were discussed until consensus was reached. Figure 1 describes the process of the study selection.

#### 3.2. Overall Characteristics of the Included Studies

The studies identified were published between 2001 and 2021. These included 17,931 participants from 8 to 29 years of age, with the majority being from 14 to 18 years of age (not all studies reported on the number of participants). The youth included in the programs faced vulnerability from a number of (or multiple) sources, including being a member of a minority group, economically vulnerable, "at risk", unemployed, in foster care, institutionalized, exposed to family or community violence, incarcerated, refugees or immigrants, homeless, deaf or hard of hearing (Kamm-Larew and Lamkin 2008), and youth living with a disability.

The majority of the programs reported on in the review originated in the high-income countries of the US ( $n = 56$ ), Canada ( $n = 5$ ), the UK ( $n = 3$ ), Australia ( $n = 3$ ), Portugal ( $n = 1$ ), Romania ( $n = 1$ ), and Israel ( $n = 1$ ). Other studies originated from the upper-middle-income countries of South Africa ( $n = 3$ ), Brazil ( $n = 2$ ), Iran ( $n = 1$ ), and China ( $n = 1$ ), the lower-middle-income countries of Jordan ( $n = 1$ ), Pakistan ( $n = 1$ ), India ( $n = 1$ ), the Philippines ( $n = 2$ ), and Ghana ( $n = 1$ ) and the low-income country of Uganda ( $n = 1$ ) (World Bank 2022). The complete list of studies is available in Supplementary Materials Table S2 (pp. 2–43).

#### 3.3. Conceptual Foundations of the Included Programs

The conceptual foundations of the programs, as identified by the authors of each of the articles in the review, were found to be grouped into four theoretical areas, namely



developmental, self-development, empowerment, and social justice theories. Each of the theories included in the thematic areas is further described in Supplementary Materials Table S3 (pp. 44–46).

The programs founded on the developmental theories considered development to be a sequential and ongoing process which is influenced by conditions in the environment. These included theories by Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the adolescent resilience model, the vulnerability-stress model, the leadership identity development model, and the developmental assets framework.

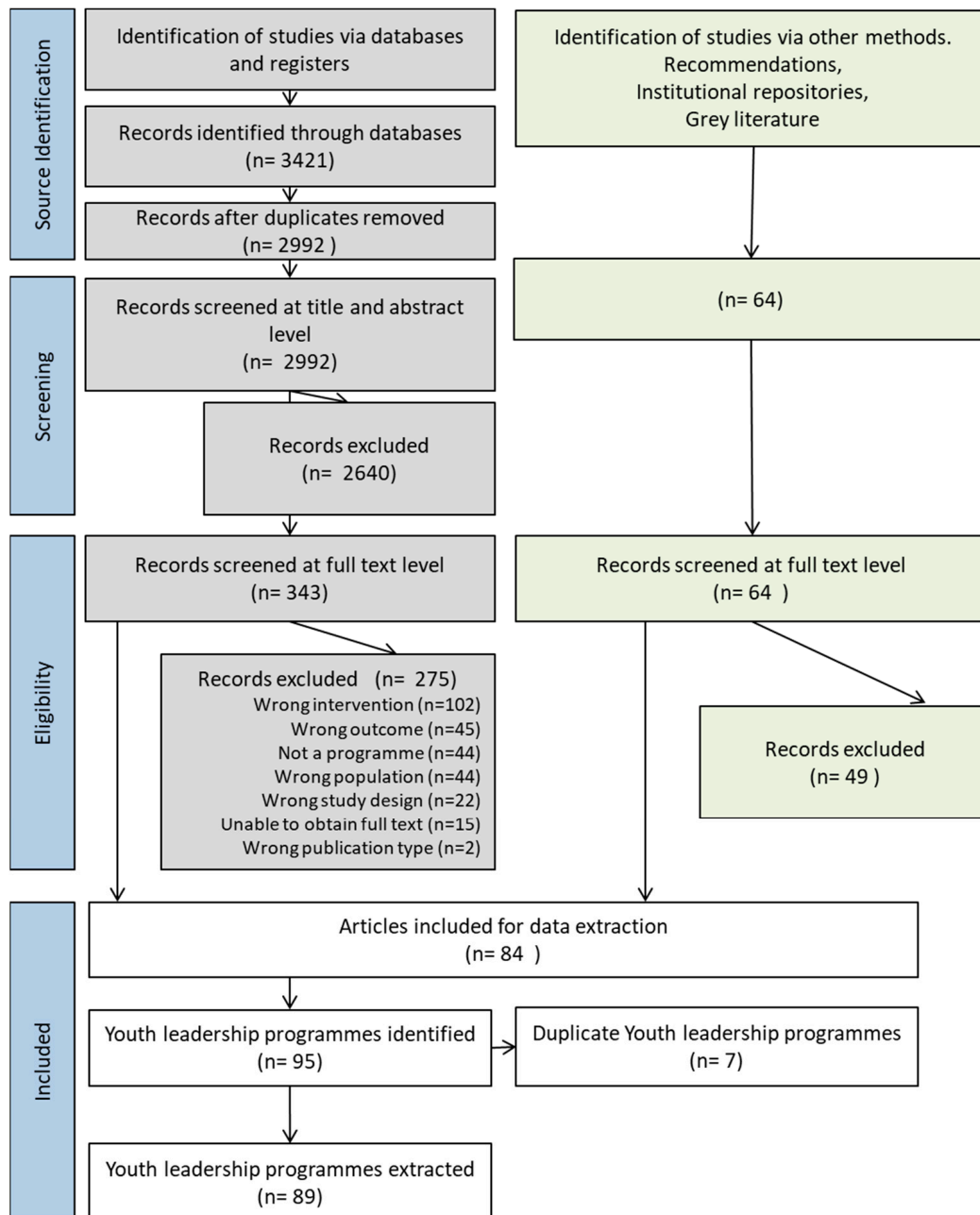
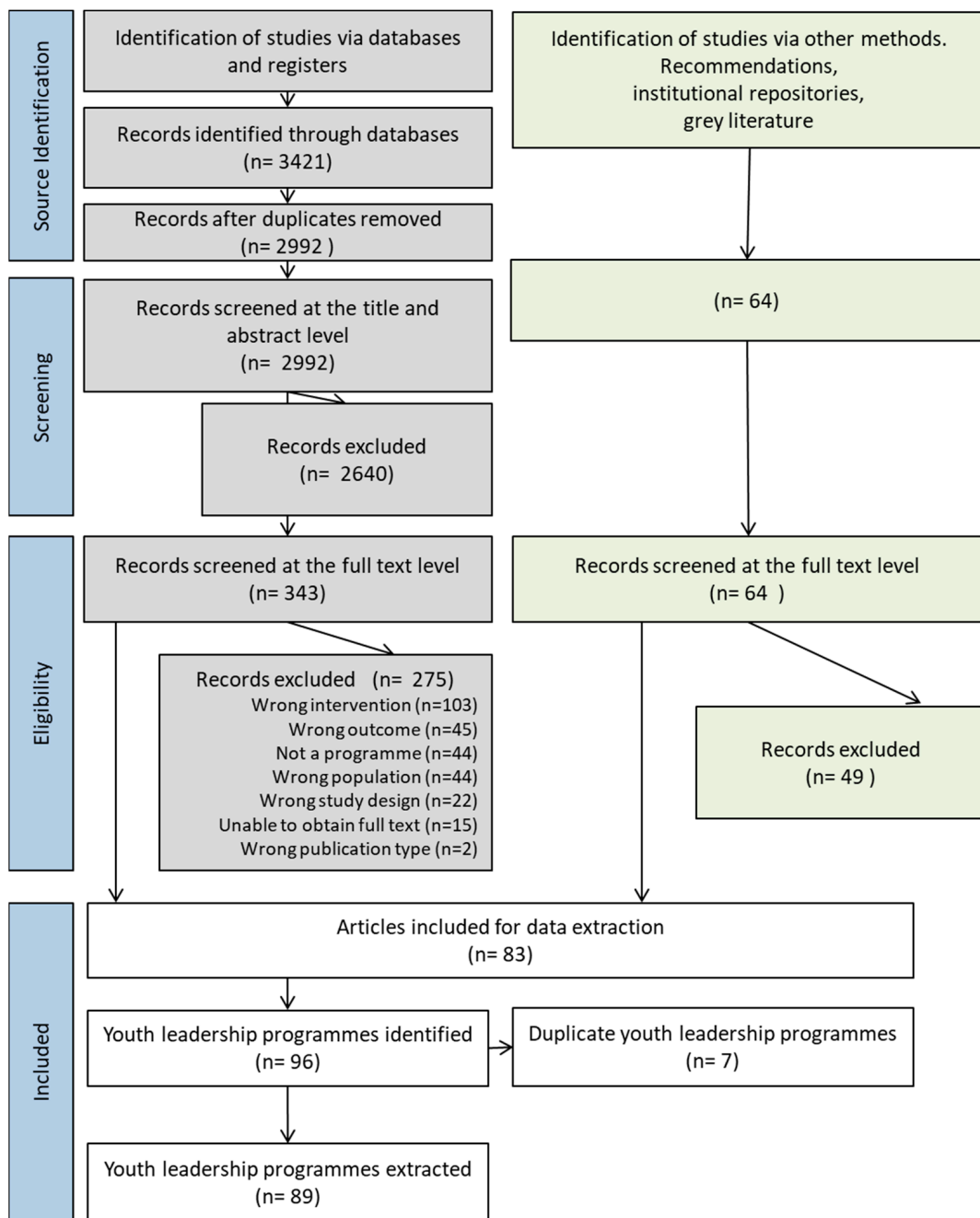


Figure 1. Cont.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram of the search process (Page et al. 2021).

Other programs were founded on the principles relating to self-development, where an individual takes on the responsibility for changing their life with less of an emphasis on the environment or developmental sequences. The conceptual self-development frameworks were derived from Seligman’s positive psychology, critical thinking, or the transformative learning approach.

In contrast, a number of programs were founded on the principle of empowerment or social justice. In general, the programs founded on empowerment maintained a focus on the individual but considered the individual as a positive asset to be used within their environment in order for change to be possible. These included programs founded on empowerment theory, Lee’s principles of empowerment, positive youth development, the principles of youth development, and the social theory of disability.

The programs which focused on social justice highlighted youth as co-constructors of knowledge with their communities in order for change to be possible. The social justice programs included were based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Bronfenbrenner's biopsychosocial framework, Freire's critical pedagogy, intergroup dialogue pedagogy, social justice youth development, social action philosophy, a black feminist pedagogy, Sen's theory of social justice, critical social theory, an integrative framework from Zinn's people's history, place-based education, normalization theory, and a transrational pedagogy.

The information on the conceptual foundations of a number of programs was not available.

### 3.4. Program Goals, Contents, and Outcomes

The program goals, contents, and outcomes identified in the review were analyzed thematically and grouped into themes according to the focus of the goal. Four themes were found across all areas, namely, youth-focused, relationship-focused, community-focused, and social justice-focused themes.

Each theme is described in Table 1 below. The goals, contents, and outcomes per program are available in Supplementary Materials Table S2 (pp. 2–43), and the specific goals, contents, and outcomes per study are available in Table 2.

**Table 1.** Themes identified and descriptions.

Theme Focus	Description
Youth-focused	The youth-focused theme highlighted the skills to be developed by the individual and enhanced independent functioning, sense of self, and self-esteem.
Relationship-focused	The relationship-focused theme highlighted skill development in relation to relationships with known persons (i.e., not the broader community as a whole) and included aspects of leadership, conflict resolution, and working with a mentor.
Community-focused	The community-focused theme focused on interactions and engagements with the community of which the youth was a part. This included increasing awareness within the community and implementing community projects
Social justice-focused	Social justice goals, contents, and outcomes: the social justice theme is related to the role of the youth within society, their understanding of that role, the historical context, current-day situations, and the mechanisms maintaining the ongoing status quo.

The youth focus area was the most frequently addressed focus area, followed by the community and relationship-focused areas. The social justice focus area was the least frequently addressed. Table 2 indicates reports on the distribution of the program goals and contents across the four thematic areas. A single focus area (each program only addressed the goals and content from one focus area) was addressed in 49 programs, two focus areas (each program included the goals and contents from two focus areas; for example, youth development and a community project) in 28 programs, and three focus areas in eight studies. No studies addressed all four focus areas. The distribution of the program goals and contents per program are reported in Table 2 below.



Table 2. Distribution of program goals and content across identified themes.

Name of Program	Authors	Thematic Areas			
		Youth	Relationship	Community	Social Justice
	(N)	53	24	33	19
"Down Woodward": A Photovoice Tour	(Aldana et al. 2016)			•	
4H residential camp	(Garst et al. 2011)	•			
A High School Theatre Production	(Larson et al. 2005)	•			
A the ART FOR CHANGE project	(Bentz and Brien 2019)			•	•
A Youth development program	(Collins et al. 2020)	•	•	•	
An adapted life skills empowerment program for homeless youth.	(Sisselman-Borgia 2021)	•			
Arkansas FFA Leadership Conference	(Ahrens et al. 2015)	•	•		
ArtThrust Teen Empowerment Program	(Northington 2018)	•	•	•	
Black Girls United	(Lane 2017)				•
Career Training in the Arts.	(Larson et al. 2005)	•			
Changing the story	(Harvey et al. 2021)	•		•	
Chicano-Latino Youth Leadership Institute	(Bloomberg et al. 2003)	•	•	•	
Children's International Summer Villages (CISV) Victoria program: The Youth Executive	(Thorpe 2007)			•	
Congressional Academy for Students	(Owen and Irion-Groth 2020)	•		•	•
Cyclopedia	(Collins et al. 2013)	•			•
Deaf Teen Leadership camp	(Kamm-Larew and Lamkin 2008)	•		•	•
Family Wellbeing Program	(McCalman et al. 2009)	•		•	•
Freedom School	(Shimshon-Santo 2018)	•			•
Girls on the Move' Leadership Program	(Taylor 2016)		•		
Harlem RBI	(Berlin et al. 2007)	•			
Healthy Initiative Collaborative: Community University Partnership	(Arches and Fleming 2006)			•	
HEAR Indiana Youth Leadership Camp	(Kamm-Larew and Lamkin 2008)	•	•		•
Homeward Bound (HB)	(Quinn and Nguyen 2017)			•	•
Hoops and Leaders Basketball Camp (HLBC)	(Berlin et al. 2007)	•	•		
Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC) for youth	(Christens and Dolan 2011)			•	
Intentional Leadership Identity Development Program.	(Bailey et al. 2017)		•		
Kicking Goals Together	(Pink et al. 2020)	•			
Kids for Action	(Gullan et al. 2013)	•		•	
LEAD	(Shelton 2008)	•			
Leadership, Education, Achievement and Development	(Panosky and Shelton 2015)	•			
Lexington Youth Leadership Academy (LYLA)	(Otis 2012)		•		
Local Enterprise and Skills Development Program (LESDEP)	(Ile and Boadu 2018)	•			
LOOK to Clermont	(Corboy et al. 2019)	•			
Movimento Al Exito (MAE)	(Farley et al. 2019)	•			•
Operation Fresh Start	(Scruggs 2007)	•		•	
Planning a Day Camp for 4th Graders	(Larson et al. 2005)			•	
POWER	(Goossens et al. 2016)	•			
Project Citizen	(Owen and Irion-Groth 2020)			•	•
Revolution	(McNae 2010)		•		
Sariling Gawa	(Luluquisen et al. 2012)	•		•	

Table 2. Cont.

Name of Program	Authors	Thematic Areas			
		Youth	Relationship	Community	Social Justice
	(N)	53	24	33	19
Snowsports Outreach Society	(Berlin et al. 2007)	•			
Social and mental Empowerment Program (SMEP)	(Asanjarani and Asgari 2020)	•			
Stand Up Help Out (SUHO)	(Bulanda and McCrea 2013)	•			
Summer performing arts program	(LeMire et al. 2017)	•			
Summer Youth Institute	(Glisson 2013)		•		
Teen Tech Mentors	(Dowds et al. 2017)	•	•		
Tenacity	(Berlin et al. 2007)	•			
The All Starts Project, inc.	(Lobman 2017)			•	
The Canadian SNAP-Boys Youth Leadership Services (SB-YLS) and The Summer Leaders in training (LIT) Program	(Sewell et al. 2020)	•			
The Creating Opportunities for Personal Empowerment (COPE) Healthy Lifestyles Thinking, Emotions, Exercise, and Nutrition (TEEN) Program.	(Mazurek Melnyk et al. 2007)				
The Cultural, Economic, Political, and Social Youth Leadership Development Program (CEPS)	(Brown and Albert 2015)				•
The GIRRL Program	(Forbes-Genade and van Niekerk 2017)				•
The Michigan Youth Policy Fellows (MYPF)	(Aldana et al. 2016)			•	
The National FFA Organization	(Horstmeier and Ricketts 2009)	•	•		
The Peer Ambassadors Program	(Case 2017)	•	•		
The Philippine Minorities Program (PMP)	(Ty 2011)		•		
The Philippine Youth Leadership Program (PYLP)	(Ty 2011)		•	•	
The Teaching Empowerment through Active Means (TEAM) program	(Redivo and Buckman 2004)	•			
The Teen Empowerment Program	(Pearrow 2008)			•	
The Teen Gaming Specialists	(Dowds et al. 2017)	•			
The Teen Leadership Breakthrough (TLB) program	(Hindes et al. 2008)	•	•		
the Texas Statewide Youth Leadership Forum Summer Training Event	(Grenwelge 2010)	•			•
The Urban Youth Scholars Fellowship Program (Urban Youth Scholars)	(Allen-Handy et al. 2021)	•	•		
The Washington Leadership Conference (WLC)	(Stedman et al. 2009)		•		
The Western Bulldogs Community Foundation (WBCF)	(Puxley and Chapin 2020)	•	•		
The Western Bulldogs Leadership Project	(Parkhill et al. 2018)	•	•		
The Young Empowered Sisters (YES!) Program	(Thomas and Mcadoo 2008)	•		•	
The Youth Empowerment Solutions for Peaceful Communities (YES)	(Franzen et al. 2009)			•	•
The Youth Media Practice Pilot Program	(Chan and Holosko 2020)				•
This is my body, hidden girls, the nobody girls	(Levy 2012)				•
Uganda Training Program	(Crave and El Sawi 2001)	•	•		
Unique Grace Commando Unit (SAHI)	(Einat and Michaeli 2016)			•	
United Future Leaders (UFL)	(Kostina-Ritchey et al. 2017)	•			
Vila Paciencia Initiative	(Becker et al. 2005)				•
Voicing hidden histories	(Cooke et al. 2018)	•		•	
We the People	(Owen and Irion-Groth 2020)	•			
Working for Social Justice.	(Larson et al. 2005)			•	
Young People's Research and Development Project	(Arches and Fleming 2006)			•	

Table 2. Cont.

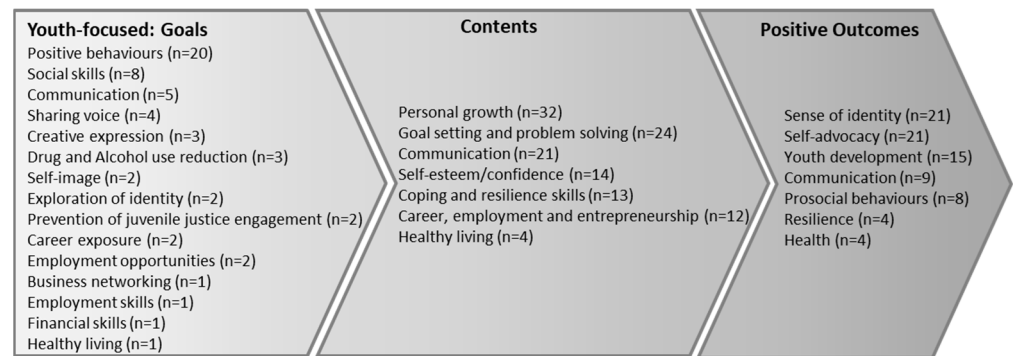
Name of Program	Authors	Thematic Areas			
		Youth	Relationship	Community	Social Justice
	(N)	53	24	33	19
Youth Empowerment and Support Program (YES-P)	(Moody et al. 2003)	•			
Youth Empowerment Solutions	(Morrel-Samuels et al. 2018)			•	
Youth Empowerment Solutions	(Zimmerman et al. 2011)			•	
Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL)	(Conner and Strobel 2007)	•		•	•
Youth Leadership Program (YLP)	(Halsall and Forneris 2018)	•		•	
Youth Leadership Training Program (YLTP)	(Siddiq et al. 2015)	•	•		
YouthBuild USA	(Scruggs 2007)	•			
	(Briggs 2010)				
	(Dima and Bucuta 2020)				•
	(Morton and Montgomery 2012)			•	•
	(Teasley et al. 2007)	•	•		

### 3.4.1. Youth-Focused Goals, Contents, and Outcomes

The youth-focused goals included the personal growth and development of the youth in the program. The personal growth goals for the youth included the development of positive behaviors ( $n = 20$ ), self-image ( $n = 2$ ), the ability to share their voices ( $n = 4$ ), the exploration of identity ( $n = 2$ ), the development of communication ( $n = 5$ ), social skills ( $n = 8$ ), the enhancement of the protective factors and developmental assets included the development of financial skills ( $n = 1$ ), creative expression ( $n = 3$ ), and behavioral skills relating to the prevention of engagement with the juvenile justice system ( $n = 2$ ). Assisting the youth in the establishment of career paths was a goal in various studies, which included providing exposure to different career options ( $n = 2$ ), the promotion of networking with businesses and organizations ( $n = 1$ ), the development of employment skills ( $n = 1$ ), and providing employment opportunities ( $n = 2$ ). Youth health was a goal in four studies, three of which focused on the reduction in the use of drugs and alcohol, while one aimed to develop knowledge of health topics and healthy living.

Most studies included content relating to personal growth ( $n = 32$ ), goal setting and problem-solving ( $n = 24$ ), communication ( $n = 21$ ), self-esteem and confidence ( $n = 14$ ), coping and resilience skills ( $n = 13$ ), healthy living ( $n = 4$ ), and career, employment, or entrepreneurship content ( $n = 12$ ).

Positive outcomes were broadly reported as youth development in fifteen programs, in addition to improvements in the sense of identity ( $n = 21$ ), self-advocacy ( $n = 20$ ), communication ( $n = 9$ ), resilience ( $n = 4$ ) (Berlin et al. 2007; Larson et al. 2005; Shimshon-Santo 2018; Sisselman-Borgia 2021), health ( $n = 4$ ), and pro-social behaviors ( $n = 8$ ). The youth-focused goals, contents and positive outcomes are presented in Figure 2 below.



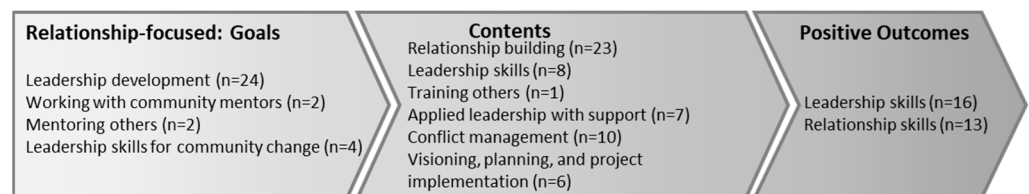
**Figure 2.** Youth-focused goals, contents, and positive outcomes from the identified programs.

### 3.4.2. Relationship-Focused Goals, Contents, and Outcomes

The relationship-focused goals included leadership development goals which were addressed in 24 programs, working with community mentors ( $n = 2$ ), mentoring others ( $n = 2$ ), and specifically leadership skills to effect community change within projects, which the youth proposed, designed, and implemented in four studies.

Content pertaining to relationship building was included in 23 studies, and leadership skills were included in 8 studies. Additional leadership skill-based content included training on how to train others (Crave and El Sawi 2001), visioning, planning and project implementation ( $n = 6$ ), the practical application of leadership within a supported environment ( $n = 7$ ), and conflict management ( $n = 10$ ).

Positive outcomes were reported from the programs in the areas of leadership skills ( $n = 16$ ) and relationship skills ( $n = 13$ ). The relationship-focused goals, contents and positive outcomes are presented in Figure 3 below.



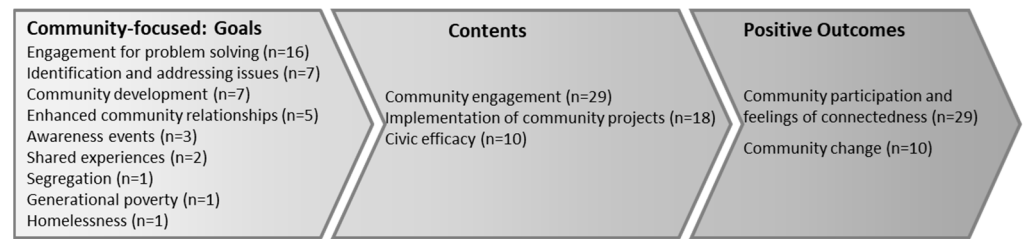
**Figure 3.** Relationship-focused goals, contents, and positive outcomes from the identified programs.

### 3.4.3. Community-focused Goals, Contents, and Outcomes

The community-focused goals included the development of social analysis skills which was addressed in eight studies and included skills relating to the identification of issues within the community and planning to address these. The development of communities was addressed in nine studies through the performance of community activities. Engagement with the community was a goal of 29 studies. This included increasing community awareness of youth-identified projects around segregation ( $n = 1$ ), generational poverty ( $n = 1$ ), homelessness ( $n = 1$ ), sharing experiences with others ( $n = 2$ ), enhancing community relationships ( $n = 5$ ), and engaging with the community to solve problems/complete projects ( $n = 7$ ).

Program content relating to civic efficacy (the working of the civic and community systems) was addressed in 10 studies, and content relating to community engagement ( $n = 29$ ) and the implementation of community-based projects was present in 18 studies.

Positive outcomes for communities were reported in the areas of community participation and feelings of connectedness to the community ( $n = 29$ ) and community change ( $n = 10$ ). The community-focused goals, contents and positive outcomes are presented in Figure 4 below.



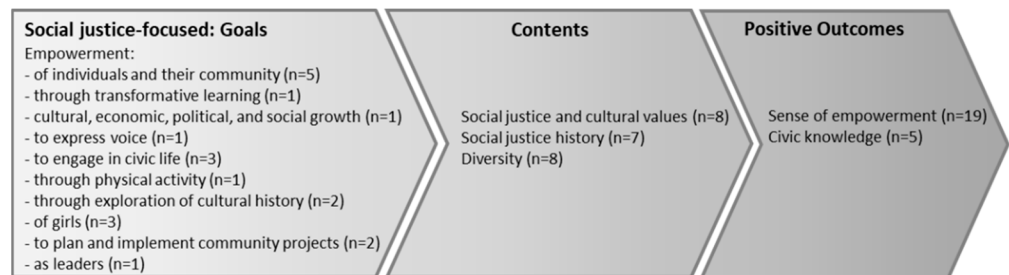
**Figure 4.** Community-focused goals, contents, and positive outcomes from the identified programs.

#### 3.4.4. Social Justice-Focused Goals, Contents, and Outcomes

Empowerment was identified as a social justice goal in 22 studies and included the empowerment of individuals and their community ( $n = 5$ ), empowerment through transformative learning ( $n = 1$ ), enhanced cultural, economic, political, and social growth ( $n = 1$ ), the empowerment of youth to express their voices and engage in civic life ( $n = 1$ ), the empowerment of youth through physical activity, teamwork, exploration, knowledge development, and self-expression ( $n = 1$ ), empowerment through the exploration of their own cultural history ( $n = 2$ ), the empowerment of girls ( $n = 3$ ), empowerment to plan and implement community projects ( $n = 2$ ), and the empowerment of youth as leaders ( $n = 1$ ).

Social justice and cultural values content was addressed in eight studies, while social justice history was addressed in seven studies and diversity was included in eight studies.

Positive outcomes relating to social justice were reported in relation to youths' sense of empowerment ( $n = 19$ ) (Aldana et al. 2016; Arches and Fleming 2006; Bailey et al. 2017; Bentz and Brien 2019; Briggs 2010; Chan and Holosko 2020; Christens and Dolan 2011; Collins et al. 2013; Collins et al. 2020; Cooke et al. 2018; Glisson 2013; Gullan et al. 2013; Harvey et al. 2021; Larson et al. 2005; Levy 2012; McCalman et al. 2009; Morrel-Samuels et al. 2018; Morton and Montgomery 2012; Scruggs 2007), and their civic knowledge for five studies. The Social justice-focused goals, contents and positive outcomes are presented in Figure 5 below.



**Figure 5.** Social justice-focused goals, contents, and positive outcomes from the identified programs.

#### 3.4.5. Implementation Strategies

The programs were implemented in different ways, some following specified strategies which included participatory action research (Aldana et al. 2016; Bailey et al. 2017; Bulanda and McCrear 2013; Forbes-Genade and van Niekerk 2017; McCalman et al. 2009), photovoice (Aldana et al. 2016), therapeutic media empowerment (Levy 2012), cognitive behaviour therapy (Mazurek Melnyk et al. 2007), Glasser's reality therapy (Hindes et al. 2008), Sarling Gawa's youth leadership development model (Luluquisen et al. 2012), a trauma-informed strengths-based approach (Sisselman-Borgia 2021), the youth leadership life-skills approach (Ahrens et al. 2015), the PICO model of community organizing (Christens and Dolan 2011), the pedagogical framework for youth media participation (Chan and Holosko 2020), the theory of service leadership (Stedman et al. 2009), group work principles (Northington 2018), a conceptual framework of the directionality of effects (Conner and Strobel 2007), and Tuckman's group developmental stages (Dima and Bucuta 2020). Although a specific framework was not always reported, a number of programs used creative arts in their

implementation ( $n = 7$ ) (Bentz and Brien 2019; Bulanda and McCrea 2013; Chan and Holosko 2020; Cooke et al. 2018; Harvey et al. 2021; Larson et al. 2005; Lobman 2017; Northington 2018; Shelton 2008; Shimshon-Santo 2018; Siddiq et al. 2015).

#### 3.4.6. Youth Stakeholder Involvement in the Programs

The involvement of youth stakeholders in the programs identified was considered for both the preparation or planning of the program as well as the execution and implementation of the program and is described in line with the involvement matrix in Figure 6 below (Centre of Excellence for Rehabilitation Medicine UMC Utrecht 2017).

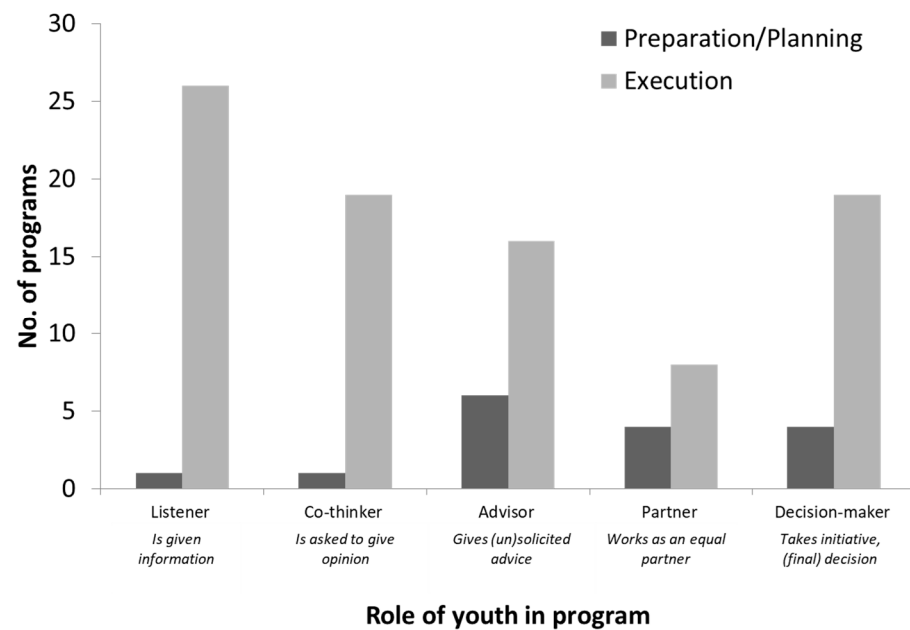


Figure 6. Youth stakeholder involvement in youth leadership programs.

The involvement of youth stakeholders in the preparation phase of the program was reported on in 16 studies and included involvement as listeners or co-thinkers in two studies which are considered less active involvement. The remaining studies included more active involvement with stakeholders as advisors ( $n = 6$ ), partners ( $n = 4$ ), and decision-makers ( $n = 4$ ).

The involvement of youth stakeholders in the execution phase of the studies was less active as listeners in 26 programs or as co-thinkers in 19 programs. More active involvement was identified with participants as advisors in 16 programs, partners in 8 programs and decision-makers in 19 programs.

#### 3.4.7. Program Adaptations for Vulnerable Youth

Program adaptations before the implementation of the programs for vulnerable youth included the safeguarding of identity and personal information within a correctional facility (Panosky and Shelton 2015) and the use of a trauma-informed approach (Sisselman-Borgia 2021). No specific adaptations were highlighted for youth in institutions or youth with disabilities.

After the programs, the following studies stated these recommendations with regard to adaptation: the inclusion of specialist support staff, such as social workers (Sisselman-Borgia 2021), the use of a more culturally appropriate venue (Shelton 2009), and the inclusion of additional stakeholders (Mazurek Melnyk et al. 2007).



### 3.4.8. Program Evaluation

The programs identified in the review used a range of both qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods. Many studies employed interviews with participants ( $n = 22$ ) (Brown and Albert 2015; Bulanda and McCrea 2013; Christens and Dolan 2011; Dima and Bucuta 2020; Franzen et al. 2009; Gullan et al. 2013; Halsall and Forneris 2018; Harvey et al. 2021; Ile and Boadu 2018; Levy 2012; McNae 2010; Owen and Irion-Groth 2020; Parkhill et al. 2018; Pearrow 2008; Pink et al. 2020; Quinn and Nguyen 2017; Sisselman-Borgia 2021; Stedman et al. 2009; Taylor 2016; Zimmerman et al. 2011) or surveys ( $n = 11$ ) (Franzen et al. 2009; Mazurek Melnyk et al. 2007; Moody et al. 2003; Morrel-Samuels et al. 2018; Redivo and Buckman 2004; Sewell et al. 2020; Sisselman-Borgia 2021; Taylor 2016; Thomas and Mcadoo 2008; Thorpe 2007; Zimmerman et al. 2011), while others used scales ( $n = 9$ ) (Crave and El Sawi 2001; Grenwelge 2010; Teasley et al. 2007; Zimmerman et al. 2011), including the youth leadership life skills developmental scale (Ahrens et al. 2015; Puxley and Chapin 2020), the individual protective factors index (Berlin et al. 2007), a program session satisfaction scale (Panosky and Shelton 2015), and the Hare self-esteem scale (Siddiq et al. 2015). The programs applied these methods either in pre-test and post-test models or as outcome measures following the program.

The results of the evaluations of the programs as a whole reported positive effects of the youth leadership programs. However, a number of common themes were raised through the evaluation process. The first theme was that evaluations not only need to be conducted in the short-term but also in the longer term in order to identify the long-term effects of such programs (Berlin et al. 2007; C. C. Collins et al. 2020; Grenwelge 2010; Harvey et al. 2021; Hindes et al. 2008; Sisselman-Borgia 2021). Secondly, programs for youth development need to include youth in their development and implementation (Becker et al. 2005; Bloomberg et al. 2003; Bulanda et al. 2013; Conner and Strobel 2007; Crave and El Sawi 2001; Franzen et al. 2009; McCalman et al. 2009; McNae 2010; Redivo and Buckman 2004; Sewell et al. 2020). Thirdly, in addition to involving youth in the development and implementation of programs, various authors highlighted that it is important not only that youth are allowed to use their voices but that their voices are actually heard (Cooke et al. 2018; Ile and Boadu 2018; Levy 2012; Sewell et al. 2020). A fourth result, highlighted by a number of the programs, was that community involvement was particularly important for the success of the program (Becker et al. 2005; Christens and Dolan 2011; Halsall and Forneris 2018; Parkhill et al. 2018). Finally, the need for programs to celebrate and encourage diversity was also highlighted (Pink et al. 2020; Thomas and Mcadoo 2008).

## 4. Discussion

This scoping review aimed to describe and evaluate youth leadership programmes for vulnerable children and youth in terms of their conceptual components, goals, content and outcomes, implementation strategies, youth engagement, adaptations, evaluations and overall suitability for supporting children and youth in their participation in their lives such that they are able to have influence and ensure downward accountability with regards to having their rights met.

Based on the number of programs identified in this review it is clear that the need for vulnerable children and youth to be provided opportunities for growth, leadership development, and empowerment is an area which is being considered by numerous countries. However, the majority of programs were developed and implemented in high-income settings, with only 15% of the studies being designed for application in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where the majority of vulnerable children and youth reside (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2018). Furthermore, it is in LMICs where non-western epistemologies are primarily found. As epistemology is culturally determined and shapes comprehension of the world (Draude 2007), programs which seek to impact interactions may not be applicable from one culture to the next.

A further difficulty identified in this review is that although the programs were identified as focusing on “vulnerable” children and youth, the primary focus was on

children and youth who were economically vulnerable or “at risk”, with few programs focusing on children and youth in institutions or children and youth with disabilities. This is a concern as these children and youth are the most disempowered, as they may lack the family and community who are able to support and advocate on their behalf (van Ijzendoorn et al. 2020).

#### 4.1. Conceptual Foundations

The conceptual foundations of the youth leadership programs included in this review ranged from traditional developmental theories to social justice viewpoints. In spite of the range of conceptual foundations, particularly those in the social justice genre, the focus of the studies remained primarily on children and youth, with less emphasis on their surroundings, communities, or relevant institutions. This is of particular importance for children and youth as they are but one cog in the machinery of change (Chowa et al. 2021), and it is not the youth themselves who cause vulnerability but the environments in which they find themselves. In addition, a lack of reporting on the conceptual foundations for approximately 40% of the programs introduces the risk of excluding important areas or neglecting relational experiences, which are key for development (Catalano et al. 2004).

#### 4.2. Program Goals, Contents, and Outcomes

The program goals, contents, and outcomes reported on by the programs included in this review were thematically grouped into four areas which ranged from a focus on the individual to a focus on relationships to the consideration of the greater community. Although the themes for the goals of the programs were identified using inductive thematic analysis (based on the data), the themes identified corresponded well with both Bronfenbrenner’s model of social ecology (Bronfenbrenner 1977) and with the intrinsic, contextual, and structural approach (ICS) (Chowa et al. 2021). The model of social ecology describes children and youth as components of a larger ecological system. Within this model, the individual youth goals correspond to the child or youth in the centre of the system. The relationship goals correspond to the microsystem, which is the youth’s immediate environment. Community goals to the exosystem, which is the extended family and neighbours, and social justice goals to the macro system which includes attitudes and ideologies in the system (Bronfenbrenner 1977). Similarly, the ICS approach considers the intrinsic (youth-focused), contextual (relationship and community-focused) and structural (social justice-focused) components of the system, which contribute towards vulnerability (Chowa et al. 2021). The correspondence of the goals, contents, and outcomes of the programs to both the model of social ecology and the ICS approach is a positive indictment of the thematic analysis conducted in this review and the field of youth leadership programs for vulnerable youth, which are not solely focusing on the youth as being in need of change.

However, although the breadth of goals provides an encouraging outlook for the leadership programs for vulnerable children and youth, the distribution of goals and content across the four areas remains a concern as youth-focused goals are the predominant goals, followed by community-focused goals, while relationship and social justice goals are addressed to a lesser extent, and 66% of the programs addressed only one focus area. As described in the introduction, if change within institutions is to be possible, and if it is to be driven by the children and youth, then the individual requires both opportunities and abilities to influence, as well as institutions having the will to be held accountable, termed in the literature as downward accountability (Awuku et al. 2020; Burns et al. 2015; Shaw 2017). Hence, each focus area identified needs to be addressed in the youth leadership programs if participation in decisions and the achievement of their rights are to be realized.

Within the thematic areas identified in this review, the youth-focused goals and content included a primary focus on personal growth and development, including the development of pro-social behaviours, individual voice, and communication skills. Programs overwhelmingly considered children and youth from a positive youth development perspective (Damon 2004), where the children and youth were identified as having resources

to contribute and views which were valuable. Such perspectives allow the children and youth to see themselves as whole contributing members of the community, in which they are able to have a voice and exert change (Burns et al. 2015; Damon 2004).

The relationship focus included the development of leadership skills, through which children and youth are able to gain skills, develop identities as leaders and are provided with opportunities to both experience and practice leadership across different situations (Komives et al. 2006).

The community focus included community engagement and the performance of social action. However, in most of the programs, community engagement involved the children and youth engaging with the community rather than the children and youth as a part of the community engaging with institutions. Such community engagement does not fulfil the role of developing downward accountability within institutions.

The social justice focus included descriptions of youth empowerment in the programs, which ranged from the expression of voice to the understanding of social and cultural history and transformative learning. Through the expression of voice and greater social understanding, children and youth are provided opportunities to engage with the broader community and negotiate and challenge existing norms. It is through ongoing discourse and engagement with the community that action and change become possible and institutional and political power become challenged (Burns et al. 2015; Jennings et al. 2006; Perkins and Zimmerman 1995; Speer and Hughey 1995). This area, however, was the least frequently addressed area, with only one-third of studies including social justice components.

In combination, the youth, relationship, community, and social justice-focused goals provide children and youth with opportunities to share their voices and engage as members of the community rather than as outsiders, leading to a collective identity and sense of solidarity (Blanchard et al. 2013). However, it is concerning that the majority of programs addressed only one focus area, thus providing youth with skills but no opportunity to use them or providing opportunities for engagement but without the skill development to ensure that the youth would be successful while doing so.

A final concern regarding the goals, concepts, and outcomes reported on in the programs is the correlation of the goals identified in comparison to the content introduced, and the outcomes reported. Although the goals identified were broad based, the content introduced was specific. In spite of the specific content the outcomes reported were broad based, and did not always align with the goals or the content. In order for the programs to be able to provide a valid evaluation of their effects, more specific goals, contents, and outcome reporting are required.

#### *4.3. Implementation of the Programs*

Although the goals and content of a program may focus on concepts which seek to allow for the participation of children and youth and the achievement of their rights, if those goals are not implemented in a manner which facilitates relationships within the environment, then the efficacy of the program may be impacted (Blanchard et al. 2013; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). The programs that reported implementation strategies were founded primarily on relational theories ( $\approx 20\%$ ), such as participatory action research, but the majority of programs did not report on their implementation strategies. When the lack of implementation strategies is considered in combination with stakeholder involvement in the execution of programs, a concerning picture is identified, i.e., one in which children and youth are included in passive roles as listeners or co-thinkers (Smits et al. 2020). Passive roles do not facilitate the formation and experience of relationships in which one's voice is shared, debated, and the status quo challenged. This concern was further highlighted by children and youth within the programs who reported that marginal involvement does not qualify as participation and that they need to have their voices heard. A similar lack of stakeholder involvement in the planning stages of the

programs may also result in a lack of focus on the areas of particular importance to the children and youth (McNae 2010).

A final area which may have been impacted by the lack of stakeholder involvement in the development of the programs is adaptations or safeguarding for vulnerable populations. The safeguarding of vulnerable youth must be central to any program which aims to empower youth and engage with institutions regarding their needs, as with engagement comes risk. The risk may be associated with sanctions due to unpopular opinions being expressed, for example, children in orphanages who were abused for reporting abuse (van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg 2022). In spite of this risk, only one program highlighted the use of a trauma-informed methodology (Sisselman-Borgia 2021), and another safeguarded the identity of participants. In their conclusions, however, a number of studies provided recommendations which addressed inclusion and safeguarding issues.

#### 4.4. Limitations

The limitations of this scoping review included the authors' reliance on the descriptions of youth programs by the authors in the reporting studies rather than obtaining the programs directly from their source. This was unfortunate but necessary due to time and workforce constraints but may have resulted in certain aspects of the programs being omitted from the review. A second limitation of the review, which may stem from the first, was the lack of quality assessments for the programs identified. Although initially planned, due to a lack of detail on the programs, this was not possible.

## 5. Conclusions

This scoping review sought to identify the extent to which youth leadership programs for vulnerable children and youth were addressing the youths' need to be able to participate in the processes required to have their needs met. The review identified that although each of the programs addressed key areas for youth development, few programs provided both individual youth development and suitable opportunities for the youth to deploy their development in the relevant settings, with the majority of the youth leadership programs focusing on individual youth development. Secondly, although the programs aimed to allow youth to participate, this was not represented in their design and implementation, where the youth remained mostly passive contributors. Finally, the lack of information provided regarding the safeguarding of the youth is particularly concerning. In order for institutions to change, the problems with their current functioning need to be highlighted, and this could be extremely dangerous for direct stakeholders who are reliant on those institutions. Any program working with vulnerable youth must include safeguarding practices and procedures, but none more so than programs which aim to develop their empowerment.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci12010002/s1>. Table S1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria of the scoping review, p. 1; Table S2: Program goals, content, outcomes, stakeholder involvement and evaluation, pp. 2–43; Table S3: Conceptual foundations of programs, pp. 44–46.

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