

## Article

# Developing Youth Leadership for Social Justice: A Micro-Macro Analysis of the Youth Citizens Action Programme in South African Schools

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## Abstract

Youth leadership plays an important role in addressing social challenges within environments with limited resources and institutional constraints. However, there is still a paucity of research that has examined how leadership develops in practice while facing such circumstances. In response, this study explores how participation in the Youth Citizens Action Programme (YCAP) in South African schools contributes to the development of leadership for social justice among young people, adopting a micro-macro lens. A qualitative, exploratory, and contextual design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with nine purposively selected YCAP alumni. The results show that youth leadership for social justice emerges through young people's responses to macro-level institutional inequalities as they must identify and address local social justice challenges. As a result, they develop a leadership identity at the micro level and the application of leadership skills as a micro-bridge. Furthermore, enabling and restricting macro-level conditions determine the extent to which youth leadership can be sustained. The results advance the idea that organised programmes such as YCAP may support meaningful youth participation and provide insight into how such initiatives can enable young people to address social justice challenges as leaders within their communities.

**Keywords:** community engagement; institutional inequalities; leadership identity; micro-bridge; social justice; South Africa; youth leadership

## 1. Introduction

Youth leadership is increasingly being recognised as an important factor across institutions in various domains, ranging from higher education institutions to localised school settings (Oyedare et al., 2025; Bennett & Hays, 2023; Pule & Gibney, 2023). While formal instruction is often provided through roles such as school councils or course representatives, there remains a need for research to be conducted into how these roles translate into leadership skills necessary for broader social responsibility (Luo et al., 2025; Rammbuda & Mafukata, 2025; Mvuyana, 2024; Mathebula, 2005). Recent scholarship in youth civic engagement indicates that participation in structured community-based programmes contributes to the development of civic skills. Leadership capacities, social capital, and forms of civic agency during programme participation (Ballard et al., 2021; Alegría et al., 2022; Bastable et al., 2023; Martini et al., 2023; Beukes, 2024; Boat et al., 2024). These studies emphasise that such competencies are most effectively developed through active, participatory,



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and contextually situated learning experiences that engage learners with real-world social challenges. However, although the development of these competencies during programme participation is increasingly well documented, the emerging research highlights that the longer-term trajectories of such outcomes remain less well understood. In particular, studies of youth development and civic learning suggest that while programmes can generate measurable gains in skills, agency, and participation during structured engagement, there is limited empirical insight into how these capacities are sustained, adapted, and mobilised once young people transition out of formal programme environments and re-enter structurally constrained social contexts (Alegria et al., 2022; Bastable et al., 2023; Martini et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2025). This gap is particularly significant in contexts characterised by persistent inequality, where youth are expected to exercise civic responsibility and leadership despite uneven access to resources, networks, and institutional support. Within this context, the relationship between post-programme civic agency remains underexplored. In this light, there is a lack of research on the long-term development of civic agency among youth, despite increasing scholarship on youth development in South Africa that emphasises employability, health, and psychosocial outcomes (Beukes, 2019, 2024; Chowa et al., 2026; Shirima et al., 2026).

This study responds to this gap by exploring how youth leadership shapes policy and practice at both the micro and macro levels by examining the long-term impact of the Youth Citizens Action Programme (YCAP) and addresses the following research question: How do YCAP alumni's accounts of their post-participation experiences illuminate the programme's function as a micro-bridge between youth leadership development in contexts characterised by structural constraints?

Although YCAP participation occurs within the school context, with learners in Grades 7 and 10 engaging in structured civic action during the programme, this study examines the outcomes of that participation through alumni interviews with former YCAP participants who have since completed schooling. The school context therefore constitutes the site of initial leadership development, while the alumni data illuminate how those competencies persist, transfer, and manifest in civic leadership and social and institutional entrepreneurship beyond the programme.

Throughout this article, the macro-level conditions refer to the broader structural, institutional, and socioeconomic landscape within which young people are situated, encompassing the systemic inequalities and governance structures that shape the possibilities and constraints of youth civic participation in South Africa (Coleman, 1990; Biesta, 2010). Micro-level development refers to the individual civic capacities and agency that young people develop through structured participatory experience (Scott, 2014; Haniff & Daya, 2023). The micro-bridge is a concept that refers to the programmatic mechanism, in this instance, the YCAP process, through which the youth develop civic leadership capabilities, despite the macro-level challenges they face.

### *1.1. Youth Citizens Action Programme (YCAP) as a Mechanism for Collaboration Facilitation*

The South African youth landscape is defined by a profound paradox. While the nation possesses one of the most progressive constitutional frameworks for social justice, it simultaneously faces some of the highest global rates of youth unemployment and social exclusion (Phungwayo, 2024). In the three decades since the transition to democracy, the State has implemented various macro-level instruments, such as the National Youth Policy (NYP) 2023 and the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI), to integrate young citizens into the socio-economic mainstream. However, these efforts often succumb to policy decoupling, where high-level legislative intent fails to penetrate the "regulative" barriers of local bureaucracy (National Planning Commission, 2024).

For most of the South African youth, particularly those in underserved communities, the institutional environment is characterised by institutional voids, where formal government support is either absent or rendered ineffective by administrative inertia (Mair & Marti, 2009; Mosia, 2026). In these voids, the “red tape” of municipal and provincial governance often stifles grassroots initiatives, leading to a pervasive sense of apathy and systemic distrust (Mosia, 2026). This background of exclusion necessitates a move beyond traditional “school leadership” roles, which, Oyedare et al. (2025) note, often remain ceremonial, towards a model of “institutional entrepreneurship” that can function within these gaps (Battilana et al., 2009). While traditional school leadership roles may be limited in scope, YCAP provides a structured co-curricular framework where students identify and mitigate community-level social justice issues. By analysing the perspectives of YCAP alumni, this research provides evidence on how such interventions enhance systems that affect youth’s lives.

In the South African context, YCAP acts as a “micro-institutional” bridge. In social theory, a micro-bridge is a localised mechanism that allows individual agents to navigate, renegotiate, or bypass the restrictive structures of the macro-environment to achieve a specific goal. Rather than viewing leadership as an isolated trait, the participants’ experiences suggest that impact is achieved through a micro-macro transition where individual purposive action is aggregated into systemic change (Coleman, 1990). The structural integrity of this micro-bridge is sustained through the mobilisation of social capital, which is the relational resources that facilitate collective action (Coleman, 1990; Beukes, 2024). In the context of YCAP, this refers to the networks of trust, reciprocity, and community relationships that alumni developed through YCAP participation and continue to draw on as they navigate institutional constraints and exercise civic leadership.

### 1.2. *The Institutional Landscape of Youth Leadership*

Youth leadership is a critical driver across social, educational, and digital domains (Oyedare et al., 2025; Njokweni & Mzangwa, 2022; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022a, 2022b). In South Africa, the transition from theoretical leadership to practical civic agency is governed by a complex set of regulative and normative structures. While the NYP 2030 establishes a formal framework, a significant gap remains between macro-level policy and grassroots implementation (National Planning Commission, 2024). This research examined YCAP as a specialised intervention designed to foster leadership within these voids. Unlike State-led programmes that prioritise top-down integration, YCAP targets the normative and cultural-cognitive pillars of institutions (Scott, 2014). This study focuses on the post-programme trajectories of YCAP alumni to understand how structured socialisation facilitates a permanent shift in institutional agency.

### 1.3. *Analytical Scales of Leadership: Macro, Micro, and the Micro-Bridge*

To gain insight into the efficacy of youth leadership interventions, this research employed a multi-scalar framework centred on the interaction between individual agency and systemic structures. At the macro level, which Scott (2014) refers to as the regulative pillar that encompasses the formal rules and bureaucratic hurdles that define the South African public sector, focuses on the broad political-administrative environment, including national legislation and the Department of Basic Education’s (DBE) protocols, where youth leadership is frequently rendered tokenistic by policy frameworks. Conversely, the micro level pertains to the development of the individual’s internal leadership identity, self-efficacy, and the specifics of engagement developed within social and educational contexts (Scott, 2014; Haniff & Daya, 2023).

Bridging these scales, this study introduces the concept of the “micro-bridge” to describe localised leadership mechanisms, such as YCAP, that facilitate the link between personal agency and the wider systemic landscape. A micro-bridge acts as a collaboration facilitator between formal institutions, such as schools, and the communities they serve (Atogenzoya et al., 2026). It provides the practical framework of proactive habits and “rules of engagement” that allow youth to navigate systemic barriers and administrative inertia to achieve tangible social justice initiatives. In Coleman’s (1990) model, these conditions provide the initial “macro-to-micro” transition, setting out the constraints within which youth leaders operate. These factors act as either the imposing institutional and contextual restrictions at the regulative macro level or as the crucial supportive structures in the form of mentorship, guidance, and stakeholder backing necessary for leadership to transition from a ceremonial to a functional capability. According to Sethono (2025), an enabling environment must move beyond the mere symbolic visibility of youth towards their structural inclusion within governance and economic frameworks. When schools, businesses, external partners, and alumni networks move from passive approval to active collaboration, they provide the facilitative infrastructure that allows youth to bypass the administrative inertia typical of the South African public sector.

Central to this bridging capacity is the ability to act resourcefully within resource-constrained environments, which Mair and Marti (2009) refer to as “bricolage”. Bricolage involves drawing on and repurposing available resources, relationships, and institutional arrangements in contexts where formal support is absent or inadequate. In other words, making do with what is at hand rather than waiting for ideal conditions.

#### *1.4. The Youth Citizens Action Programme Catalyst: Transitioning from Symbolic Participation to Social Justice Agency*

While traditional school leadership roles often rely on less formalised instruction and focus narrowly on internal governance, YCAP provides a highly structured, co-curricular framework that serves as formal leadership development (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2026; UNESCO, 2026). By utilising a 10-step toolkit, participants move beyond “ceremonial” school council roles to identify local social challenges and implement sustainable solutions, thereby developing the specific competencies required to discharge significant social responsibilities (Oyedare et al., 2025; Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2026). This process facilitates a fundamental shift in leadership logics, moving the youth from a state of dependency to a position of active agency where they recognise their capacity to create social value despite existing systemic voids.

However, despite a proliferation of youth initiatives in South Africa, a critical gap remains in the evidence regarding how these programmes enhance the systems affecting the lives of youth in the long term (Oyedare et al., 2025; Chauke, 2026). Many interventions continue to treat youth as passive “beneficiaries” of development rather than active agents of change. This study argues that the efficacy of the YCAP model lies in its ability to foster individuals who can navigate, bypass or renegotiate bureaucratic obstacles to fulfil social justice objectives (Atogenzoya et al., 2026). By analysing the perspectives of YCAP alumni, this research explores the micro-processes through which the programme acts as a “micro-bridge” by facilitating a permanent shift in a leader’s trajectory and providing the empirical evidence needed to enhance the collaborative systems between institutions and the communities they serve.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

Guided by a constructivist worldview, the study emphasises the co-construction of meaning through interaction and the exploration of individual experiences (Pilarska, 2021).

An exploratory, descriptive, and contextual qualitative research design was adopted to gain in-depth insights into how South African youth develop and demonstrate leadership for social justice within school and community contexts through participation in the YCAP. A qualitative exploratory design was considered appropriate because the study examined young people as active agents of change rather than passive recipients of guided youth interventions. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to reflect on how they identified social justice challenges, made decisions, applied leadership, and translated personal experiences into actions that benefit their community.

This design was therefore appropriate for the study's focus on understanding how former participants interpreted and applied their leadership for social justice within their communities after having left school. It also enabled the researchers to explore complex phenomena such as leadership identity and community engagement, which are developed through personal experiences and social interaction. Rather than having measured responses numerically, the study focused on gathering detailed, context-rich explanations that provided insight into learners' lived leadership experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

The participants were selected by using purposive sampling, focusing on alumni who had participated in YCAP between 2015 and 2021. Purposive sampling is a non-probability type of sampling during which participants are selected based on specific criteria to address the research questions of a study (Campbell et al., 2020). The inclusion criteria required the participants to be willing, accessible via telephone, and to have participated in the programme between 2015 and 2021. The exclusion criteria included a lack of programme participation during the specified years, unwillingness to participate, and/or inaccessibility via telephone. Ten participants were initially recruited for participation based on the available information and their perceived compliance with the inclusion criteria. During one interview, it became evident that the participant had participated in YCAP in the capacity of a mentor rather than as a YCAP alumni. Since the study focused on the experiences of YCAP alumni, the interview was discontinued because the participant did not meet the inclusion criteria. Consequently, the final sample consisted of nine participants.

The final sample was considered adequate for this exploratory qualitative study because qualitative sample adequacy is determined by data richness and saturation rather than statistical representativeness (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Hennink and Kaiser (2022) in a systematic review of empirical studies assessing saturation, found that saturation in qualitative studies using interviews was commonly reached within a well-defined range of 9 to 17 interviews, particularly among studies with relatively homogeneous populations and focused research questions. Since participants in the present study shared their experiences as YCAP alumni and the study had a clearly defined focus on youth leadership development, the sample was considered sufficient. Data collection and analysis occurred iteratively, and by the ninth interview, no substantially new codes, concepts, or perspectives emerged, indicating thematic saturation.

Unlike current learners, the alumni were able to reflect not only on their experiences during participation, but also on how these experiences informed the development of their sustained leadership competencies for social justice after having left school. In doing so, the alumni's responses therefore revealed how participation in YCAP supports the development and demonstration of leadership for social justice.

The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 27 years, of whom four ( $n = 4$ ) were female, and five ( $n = 5$ ) were male. During the data collection stage, all the participants were engaged in higher education either at a national college or university. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' characteristics.

**Table 1.** Participants' Characteristics.

| Participant Code | Age | Gender | Year in Youth Citizens Action Programme (YCAP) | Employment Status                      |
|------------------|-----|--------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| P-1-F-22         | 22  | F      | 2018                                           | Family business                        |
| P-2-M-23         | 23  | M      | 2016                                           | YCAP support team                      |
| P-3-F-22         | 22  | F      | 2021                                           | Student                                |
| P-4-F-22         | 22  | F      | 2020                                           | Trainee auditor at the Auditor-General |
| P-6-M-27         | 27  | M      | 2016                                           | Employed at a car plant                |
| P-7-M-26         | 26  | M      | 2016                                           | Human resources practitioner           |
| P-8-M-19         | 19  | M      | 2019                                           | Student                                |
| P-9-F-27         | 27  | F      | 2015                                           | Educator and student                   |
| P-10-M-24        | 24  | M      | 2016                                           | Electrician                            |

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used and pre-tested during a test interview, with ambiguous items being revised. The researchers established rapport, obtained informed consent, and scheduled one-on-one telephonic interviews at convenient times, often in the evenings or on weekends. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, using Microsoft Teams, from May to September 2024. No identifying information was collected, and the participants were assigned numerical codes to ensure anonymity. Transcripts generated through artificial intelligence (AI) were cross-checked against the audio recordings and field notes for accuracy to ensure truthful transcriptions. In addition, some interviews were manually transcribed where AI transcripts could not be generated. The study received institutional ethics approval as a four-year project until December 2026 (115685\_CRECHS\_2021).

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Three researchers independently coded the transcripts, identified initial codes and final themes, and engaged in an iterative manual process of refining codes through intracoder and intercoder checks to ensure accuracy, coherence, and reliability. The final themes were validated collaboratively and supported with participant quotes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened by aligning the interview questions with the study's theoretical framework and maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process. Transferability was supported through rich, detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences, which provided insights that could be compared across youth development contexts. Dependability was ensured through consistent data collection procedures, meticulous documentation, and careful management of the interview process to minimise variations. Confirmability was established by actively addressing potential researcher bias and required the researchers to cross-check data sources to maintain an accurate and authentic representation of the participants' perspectives.

### 3. Results

Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis that illustrated how participants developed and demonstrated leadership for social justice through their involvement in

YCAP as active agents of change who identified, responded to and addressed social justice challenges within their communities, namely (1) addressing social justice challenges, (2) leadership identity for social justice, (3) leadership skills for advancing social justice, and (4) enabling and restrictive circumstances.

The themes are explained in more detail below Table 2, which presents the themes, theoretical link, subthemes, and codes.

**Table 2.** Themes, theoretical link, subthemes, and codes after thematic analysis.

| Themes and Theoretical Link                                                                                                         |     | Subthemes                                           | Codes                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Addressing social justice challenges (youth leadership for social justice in response to macro-level institutional inequalities) | 1.1 | Identifying social justice issues in local contexts | 1.1 Literacy gaps, gender-based violence, poverty, unsafe school environments         |
|                                                                                                                                     | 1.2 | Initiating community participation                  | 1.2 Library projects, awareness campaigns, school clean-ups, feeding schemes          |
|                                                                                                                                     | 1.3 | Responding to inequality and limited resources      | 1.3 Lack of infrastructure, lack of access to information, unstable home environments |
| 2. Leadership identity for social justice (micro-level development of leadership identity)                                          | 2.1 | Identifying personal leadership ability             | 2.1 Self-awareness                                                                    |
|                                                                                                                                     | 2.2 | Developing a sense of social responsibility         | 2.2 Desire to help others, active citizenship                                         |
|                                                                                                                                     | 2.3 | Building confidence                                 | 2.3 Public speaking, overcoming self-doubt, problem-solving, conflict resolution      |
|                                                                                                                                     | 2.4 | Leadership skills for career                        | 2.4 Career choices, continued community engagement, mentorship roles                  |
| 3. Leadership skills for advancing social justice (micro-bridge)                                                                    | 3.1 | Project planning and implementation                 | 3.1 Organising activities, managing teams, implementing solutions                     |
|                                                                                                                                     | 3.2 | Financial accountability                            | 3.2 Fundraising, budgeting, sponsorship                                               |
|                                                                                                                                     | 3.3 | Stakeholder engagement and collaboration            | 3.3 Schools, community members, businesses, government                                |
| 4. Enabling and restricting circumstances for youth leadership (macro-level conditions influencing youth leadership)                | 4.1 | Mentorship and guidance                             | 4.1 Role of mentors, alumni support                                                   |
|                                                                                                                                     | 4.2 | Institutional and stakeholder support               | 4.2 Schools, businesses, external partnerships                                        |
|                                                                                                                                     | 4.3 | Institutional and contextual restrictions           | 4.3 Bureaucracy, lack of resources, community resistance                              |

### 3.1. Addressing Social Justice Challenges

This theme explains and demonstrates how youth leadership emerged from identifying social justice issues in local contexts, initiating community participation, and responding to inequality and limited resources.

By following the instructions in the YCAP toolkit, learners identified social justice issues in local contexts such as literacy gaps, gender-based violence, poverty, and unsafe school environments. As an example, regarding literacy gaps, Participant 10 (M-24) stated: “Then we go to a realisation that we have a library that was not functional, that was dirty, and was not attended to. So, we based our topic to say, let’s renew the school library. Let’s ask for donations. Let’s go to our tribal office”. In addition, YCAP participation also initiated community action: “...it was through doing YCAP that I enjoyed working with other people, seeing that I love it. As a result, I found myself in the midst of COVID-19

helping about five families in my community with food parcels and food gardening projects which I also started there.” (P2-M-26). Participant 3 (F-22) also reflected on inequality and limited resources within the community, noting that “so many of the issues that the learners were experiencing ... were not actually the root causes ... but rather the results of one main problem”. This observation points to the presence of institutional inequalities—a macro-level problem—that defines the South African landscape.

This theme therefore demonstrates that youth leadership for social justice develops because of how participants interpret and respond to institutional inequalities. In this regard, participation in YCAP did not only result in action but in greater awareness of the underlying social and institutional circumstances that affect communities. As participants became more involved in their communities, they became aware that issues such as illiteracy and lack of resources were not isolated problems, but symptoms of inequalities that they navigated, bypassed, and renegotiated (Atogenzoya et al., 2026). It can therefore be argued that YCAP operates at the normative and cultural-cognitive level of institutions where changes occur in values, beliefs, and mutual understanding (Scott, 2014). Through participation, learners therefore developed new ways of interpreting social challenges, which informed how they addressed them.

### 3.2. Leadership Identity for Social Justice

This theme reflects how the participants developed a leadership identity for social justice at the micro level. It highlights how participation in YCAP contributed to more self-awareness, a sense of social responsibility, increased confidence, and the integration of leadership into future endeavours. Participants’ leadership identities were strengthened through increased self-awareness and reflection on their roles within their communities. Self-awareness was evident in participants recognising their strengths, values, and personal aspirations. One participant (P-2-M-26) described how participation in YCAP contributed to greater self-understanding and purpose: “I would say that it had a role in helping me in fact in the sense of character development. That is where I realised that I had passion in working with people and I wanted to give more, whether I am giving my time or I am contributing financially in any way to see someone else happy.” Another participant (P-4-F-22) reflected on becoming more conscious of community needs and their potential role in addressing them: “So I believe that by being part of Y-CAP it has made me an eye-opener to see in my community what is lacking and how I can help.” Participants also engaged in self-reflection and reassessed their personal journeys and future direction. One participant (P-9-F-27) stated: “I just sat down one day and I’d ask myself, like, have you lost yourself? I truly lost myself in such a way.”

Many participants reflected on how they built more confidence because of their participation in YCAP, for example, public speaking, overcoming self-doubt, and being able to solve problems and conflicts. As an example, Participant 9 (F-27) stated: “I was the leader, so ... it really taught me a lot about conflict resolution.”

Leadership skills continued beyond participation in YCAP, as alumni applied their skills within their communities. For example, Participant 8 (M-19) demonstrated initiative and community leadership by stating: “I’ve also started a Youth Orchestra from my neighbourhood, just with some people around here, some young people who want to learn how to play instruments.” This example illustrates how leadership skills developed through YCAP extended beyond the programme and were applied to needs in the community.

This theme demonstrates the development of youth leadership on the micro level within social and educational contexts (Scott, 2014; Haniff & Daya, 2023). More specifically, the results show that the participants developed a leadership identity for social justice by participating in their communities, through self-reflection, and engagement with real-world

challenges, where they gained more insight into themselves as being capable of making a difference.

### 3.3. *Leadership Skills for Advancing Social Justice*

To understand how alumni moved from personal growth to systemic impact, this theme utilises the concept of the micro-bridge emerging through project planning and implementation, financial accountability, and stakeholder engagement and collaboration. In this study, the participants' narratives identified their role as boundary spanners between the participating team and the broader regulative pillar of society. By facilitating stakeholder engagement and collaboration with community members, businesses, and government officials, the alumni moved beyond ceremonial student roles to overcome the macro-level administrative inertia. This relational bridge was operationalised by the YCAP toolkit, which provided the technical guidelines for project planning and implementation. Skills such as managing teams and implementing solutions were reinforced by a focus on financial accountability, where alumni engaged in fundraising, budgeting, and securing sponsorships. This is evident in Participant 2's (M-23) chronicle when he stated: "... and I wanted to extend a hand through the help of sponsors to cater for orphans and old age homes, and then to also assist the people who are in dire need".

As a point in case, Participant 1 (F-22) mentioned that learning to collaborate with external stakeholders was a valuable lifelong leadership skill: "Another entrepreneurial skill that I feel like I have learned is how to approach businesses and other organisations for collaborations for fundraising. I've also learned how to organise events, so that has really been helpful in me coming up with ideas of how I can get people who would assist me in my adventure to come on board and to convince them to be part of what I am trying to build."

Moreover, Participant 3's (F-22) account highlights the importance of functional inclusion in social justice efforts at the grassroots level: "So this project has really helped me a lot in being an active citizen in my community and making sure that I become a part of the solution instead of being someone who just recognizes that there's a problem and folding your arms without doing anything about that specific problem."

This theoretical lens also reframes the participants' focus on financial accountability and starting business ventures not as vocational exercises, but as technical foundations of the micro-bridge. By generating independent project funding, the alumni bypassed the restricting circumstances of government budget failures, effectively bridging the gap between their limited micro-power and the macro-level societal needs. Their ability to manage resources independently allowed them to convert a burgeoning leadership identity into a tangible social justice outcome, proving that the micro-macro transition is possible even when the formal system remains stagnant (Chowa et al., 2026; Coleman, 1990).

### 3.4. *Enabling and Restricting Circumstances for Youth Leadership*

Theme 4 describes the enabling and restricting circumstances for youth leadership, which emerged through mentorship and guidance, institutional and stakeholder support, and institutional and contextual restrictions. This theme examines the institutional landscape and the facilitative support structures that shape the boundaries of youth leadership. It deals specifically with the tension between enabling support structures and restrictive systemic barriers. The data reveal that micro-level civic efficacies were shaped, enabled, and at times constrained by the macro-level conditions of their specific community and institutional contexts.

The participants identified institutional and contextual restrictions such as bureaucracy, resource scarcity, and community resistance as primary barriers. These macro-conditions

create “institutional voids” where leadership is expected but is structurally unsupported. Within this restrictive environment, youth action is often relegated to a ceremonial status, where the cost of navigating bureaucratic hurdles becomes a deterrent to systemic action.

Ultimately, the participants overcame these systemic hurdles by utilising their micro-bridge skills, particularly resource bricolage and stakeholder engagement, creating independent pathways that secured the resources the formal system failed to provide (Mair & Marti, 2009). The participants’ narratives iterate the development of the micro-bridge through the YCAP project by acknowledging that “there are certain topics that have also come along, such as the SDGs, sustainable goals of which one of them is poverty eradication, so we are trying to sort such problems at that school as part of sustainability” (P-2-M-23). Participant 3’s (F-22) account also reflects overcoming administrative inertia in the South African public sector in terms of social justice efforts with functional action: “So the problem that we identified is that other learners are not able to study when they’re at home, because maybe you may find that they’re coming from disruptive homes, they are coming from abusive homes or sometimes the learners are not able to complete their homework or do their group projects while on the school grounds, because you find that the classes have to be locked and closed around the school . . . . So, this project has really helped me a lot in being an active citizen in my community and making sure that I become a part of the solution instead of being someone who just recognizes that there’s a problem and folding your arms without doing anything about that specific problem.”

#### 4. Discussion

By adopting a descriptive and contextual qualitative research design, the study aimed to gain in-depth insights into how South African youth develop and demonstrate leadership for social justice within school and community contexts through participation in YCAP. The results show that youth leadership for social justice emerges from the youth’s responses to institutional inequalities at the macro level, the formation of leadership identity at the micro level, and the use of leadership skills as a micro-bridge between personal engagement and contextual lived experiences, despite enabling and restricting circumstances.

The results from this study therefore demonstrate that YCAP functions as a critical mechanism for the micro–macro transition within the South African social landscape. By analysing the reflections of YCAP alumni, this discussion interprets the micro-bridge as a learned capacity that enables youth to translate individual agency into systemic social justice outcomes, even when faced with structural friction. The participants’ reflections indicate that YCAP functions as an incubator for institutional entrepreneurship that allowed alumni to navigate deep institutional voids (Battilana et al., 2009). A critical contribution to this study is the observation of how the youth manage these institutional voids. In the South African context, these voids are not merely “empty spaces”, they are characterised by administrative inertia, bureaucratic constraints, and resource scarcity. While Mair and Marti (2009) highlight the onerous challenges of overcoming resource scarcity, the findings of this study indicate that YCAP alumni judiciously utilised resource bricolage as a form of institutional resistance to address the social challenges they identified in their communities and schools.

The narratives provided by the YCAP alumni revealed a sophisticated process of micro-macro transition (Coleman, 1990), wherein individual agency is systematically aggregated into community impact. This process begins with the alumni addressing social justice challenges (Theme 1) as a direct response to institutional voids (Mair & Marti, 2009) that characterise the South African service delivery landscape. Rather than succumbing to the disillusionment typical of their demographic (Hoffmeester, 2025), these youth utilise their leadership to fill gaps where formal infrastructure and regulative architecture have

failed. This proactive stance is rooted in the development of a leadership identity for social justice (Theme 2), which serves as the micro-level foundation for their agency. This identity shift allows youth to transition from passive recipients of policy directives to institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana et al., 2009) who initiate divergent change. This internal development is not merely psychological, but the prerequisite for disrupting the ceremonial myths of youth participation that often satisfy normative expectations without granting functional power.

The actualisation of this agency is made possible through the leadership skills for advancing social justice (Theme 3), which constitute the micro-bridge. Within the context of South African institutional inequalities, this bridge is operationalised through resource bricolage (Mair & Marti, 2009), particularly the mastery of financial accounting, fundraising, and team leadership roles. This micro-bridge enabled the alumni to bypass the high cost of purposive action (Coleman, 1990) associated with bureaucratic friction. Moreover, by functioning as boundary spanners through strategic stakeholder engagement, alumni mobilise social capital (Coleman, 1990) to secure legitimacy from external networks. These interactions constitute leadership roles. By negotiating with businesses, community leaders, and other external stakeholders, the alumni described their roles as functional agents of change. This skilful negotiation is what transformed leadership from a learner exercise into a form of distributed leadership (Haniff & Daya, 2023). Therefore, in the context of this study, alumni narratives indicated how their participation in YCAP allowed them to collectively author their own authority through stakeholder negotiation and resource bricolage to bypass municipal inertia.

However, the structural integrity of this bridge is constantly tested by the restricting circumstances that define the macro-level environment and are strengthened through enabling circumstances in the micro setting (Themes 1 and 4). The institutional and contextual restrictions encountered in the data, such as administrative inertia and community resistance, highlight the structural barriers that prevent youth-led social justice initiatives from becoming permanent features of the social governance hierarchy. In these restrictive settings, the sustainability of leadership requires an enabling environment of mentorship to prevent agency from reverting to a purely symbolic status. Aligning with Sethono (2025) and UNESCO (2026), the study confirms that social justice impact is “built, not born” (Allan Gray Orbis Foundation, 2024) through structural inclusion. The YCAP toolkit provides the structural anchor within an enabling environment of mentorship, ensuring that youth emerge as central actors in the pursuit of community development and social justice (Zwane, 2025; Mosia, 2026). Rather than merely offering soft skills, the toolkit provides a formal technical logic that mimics the administrative rigour of the public sector, without the red tape and administrative inertia.

By adopting standardised project management steps, from research and budgeting to impact analysis, the alumni adopted a rationalised structure that gave the youth leadership confidence to identify and address social issues strategically. This aligns with Atogenzoya et al.’s (2026) observation that agency in institutional voids requires supportive structures and tools to manage external resistance. According to the alumni’s narratives, the toolkit therefore effectively bridged the gap between their social justice goals and the macro-level constraints by providing a roadmap for resilient leadership. Therefore, it has been established that structured youth leadership programmes, such as YCAP, have the potential to advance social justice initiatives at the grassroots level.

The significance of this study extends beyond YCAP itself. At a time when there is growing institutional investment in youth development and leadership initiatives in South Africa through government and multi-stakeholder partnerships (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022a, 2022b), research into whether such programmes

produce lasting capacities for civic agency, leadership, and community action beyond the immediate programme context is limited. By showing how alumni continue to draw upon competencies, networks, and civic identities developed through YCAP, this study suggests that youth development programmes can serve as important mediating spaces between structural constraints and civic action. The value of such programmes therefore lies not only in the projects completed during participation, but in their capacity to cultivate young people who continue to exercise leadership, build social capital, and contribute to community change long after the programme has ended.

The findings also suggest that youth leadership programmes such as YCAP do not merely develop leadership competencies. Rather, they equip young people to identify social justice challenges, mobilise resources, engage stakeholders, and implement solutions within their communities. Where institutional responses are limited or delayed, young people may play an important role in addressing local social justice challenges through their own initiatives and leadership. In doing so, youth interventions such as YCAP may serve as a micro-bridge between youth leadership and social justice action. Anchored in the YCAP toolkit, this micro-bridge enables youth to navigate macro-friction, transforming leadership from a ceremonial ideal into a resilient force for constitutional social justice.

This study also has theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study advances micro-macro transition literature, demonstrating how youth agency and leadership allow them to navigate and fill institutional voids. Practically, the findings suggest that youth leadership programmes should move beyond passive participation and provide opportunities for young people to identify social justice challenges, engage stakeholders, mobilise resources and implement solutions within their communities.

## 5. Conclusions

This study examined the transformative trajectory of YCAP alumni as they navigated the complex interplay between individual agency and the challenges posed by the administrative inertia of the South African public sector landscape. The study highlighted the transition of the youth who participated in YCAP from disillusionment to institutional entrepreneurship. This study also showed that youth-led social justice is not merely a byproduct of participation but a deliberate construction or “micro-bridge” built through the mastery of specific leadership competencies, which can be acquired through supportive structures and tools.

The findings also underscore that participants developed a deep sense of social justice issues, associated with the leadership skills required to address these issues (Theme 1) while institutional voids and administrative inertia (Theme 4) pose significant barriers, the development of a leadership identity for social justice (Theme 2) and the development of the micro-bridge (Theme 3) allow youth to bypass structural constraints effectively. Most importantly, the YCAP toolkit served as more than a pedagogical guide, but as a scaffold that enabled youth to develop the relevant leadership competencies to actualise social justice efforts amid a constraining regulative environment.

The study was not without limitations. The small sample limited the generalisation of the results to only alumni who participated in YCAP during the period 2015 to 2021. Nevertheless, although the findings are relevant in the South African context with limited generalisation, some implications may extend beyond this setting. Guided youth development programmes such as YCAP that combine mentorship, experiential learning, leadership opportunities and community engagement may support youth leadership development in other contexts where young people experience social and institutional challenges. Thus, while the findings cannot be generalised, they nevertheless provide meaningful insights into youth leadership for social justice within school and commu-

nity contexts. Although the alumni sample was purposively selected and small in scale, this is consistent with the epistemological logic of qualitative enquiry, which prioritises depth of understanding over breadth of representation. Purposive sampling is appropriate precisely when the goal is to select information-rich cases that most illuminate the phenomenon under study. In this instance, the persistence and manifestation of civic agency and sustainability competencies in youth leadership beyond programme completion. The credibility of these insights does not rest on sample size but on the theoretical coherence of the alumni accounts and what they reveal about the resource bricolage of the micro-bridge that structures the analysis.

Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of the micro-bridge, specifically examining whether the leadership competencies developed through YCAP facilitate long-term structural inclusion or broader social entrepreneurial impact. Additionally, comparative studies across different South African provinces could investigate how varying levels of macro-level administrative decoherence influence the scalability of youth-led social justice initiatives.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

|        |                                                                  |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| DBE    | Department of Basic Education                                    |
| NYP    | National Youth Policy                                            |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| SDGs   | Sustainable Development Goals                                    |
| YCAP   | Youth Citizens Action Programme                                  |

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