Youth Civic Engagement and Social Inequality: The Potential of Municipal Youth Councils

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**Introduction**

Evidence demonstrates that social inequality is widening in the U.S. (Saez, 2010) and that the impacts are numerous and damaging particularly for those in the lower social classes who are increasingly unable to obtain needed resources and opportunities (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Life chances for adolescents and young adults are particularly affected; social disadvantage in an unequal society can place young people on a trajectory that may be especially difficult to alter later in life. Targeting opportunities in education, employment, and community life are foundational approaches to influencing life trajectories. Yet, youth engagement in community and political process is not often examined through a lens focused on social inequality. Potentially this engagement may reduce social inequality, but it may reinforce existing inequality.

Youth participation in government has the potential to benefit both youth and the community. Yet, some forms of youth civic engagement are related to social class and race (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Hence the benefits may accrue to some youth and some communities – but not to other youth and communities, thus influencing a longer-term trajectory of privilege or marginalization.

**Overview of Youth Councils**

Youth civic engagement takes many forms; Checkoway and Aldana (2013) identified four: citizen participation, grassroots organizing, intergroup dialogue, and sociopolitical development. Our inquiry falls most within “citizen participation” in which the basic strategy is to “participate through formal political and governmental institutions” (p.1896). Youth councils are identified by Checkoway and Aldana as one of the engagement activities within “citizen participation” and are the focus of our study.
According to the National League of Cities (NLC), in 2007 there were 120 local youth councils in 19 states (Martin, Pittman, Ferber, & McMahon, 2007). The NLC defined youth councils as “formal bodies made up of youth (typically ages 16-18) who advise high-level decision makers and elected officials” (p.8). The report highlighted the importance of youth engagement in government in order to bring understanding and effective solutions to community and state level issues that impact youth. Additional rationales for youth engagement in government include positive outcomes for youth development (Finlay, 2010; Hart, 1997; Akiva et al., 2014) and an overall enhancement of democracy (Nairn et al., 2006).

Some authors have addressed the issue of inequitable representation of youth participating on councils (Nairn, Sligo, & Freeman, 2006; Matthews, 2001; Freeman et al., 2003; Wyness, 2009). The main criticism of representation stems from the recruitment and selection of particular youth for participation, which creates a misrepresentation of the voices of youth within a community. Wyness (2009) believes that governmental engagement strategies often reinforce inequalities by missing the voices of marginalized youth. The work of My Brother’s Keeper, which targets engagement efforts towards young men of color to participate in local decision-making, recognizes that key populations of disenfranchised youth are being left out of community participation (Ferber & Matthew, 2015). When high performing young people are provided the majority of opportunities to engage, youth councils reproduce patterns of inequality and misrepresent the voices of one group of youth to be indicative for youth at-large (Matthews, 2001).

Nairn, Sligo, and Freeman (2006) found that youth engagement in rural and urban spaces targets either “troublemakers” or “achievers” leaving out many youth. The authors reported that the majority of youth (“the excluded middle”) were uninterested in participation, or viewed
involvement with local government as “unattractive or inconvenient” (Nairn et al., 2006, p. 262). Efforts of local governments that target youth through other formal institutions, such as schools, are “universaliz[ing] young people on the basis of “achievement” (or lack thereof) and denies the other social categories they occupy” (p.260). The “excluded middle” are often unaware of opportunities to engage with local government or do not believe these efforts to be important or relevant (Nairn et al., 2006).

While guides offering ways to be more inclusive are available (Klindera & Menderweld, 2001), meaningful engagement and representation is often lacking (Matthews 2001). The selection and recruitment of youth illustrate the influence of adult stakeholders and reinforce Bessell’s (2009) claim that “adult attitudes are the greatest barrier to effective participation” (pp. 299-300). In fact, Nairn and colleagues (2006) noted that, “middle-class adults, although well-meaning, may contribute to the (re)production of class inequalities via their assumptions about who has the “right” dispositions for making appropriate contributions to local government” (p.260).

**Theoretical Framework**

The study is informed by theories of social capital and civic engagement. Social capital has been defined as the acquisition of resources that result from membership in a social network or access to relationships with certain people (Bourdieu, 1984). These networks of relationships must be constructed and maintained in order to secure their benefits, and they must be activated in order to use the potential resources. Investments into these networks of relationships will result in dividends just as economic investments in human capital through education and training result in economic benefits (Lin, 2008). The more social connections that people have, the more likely it is that their social capital will grow (Portes, 1988). Unfortunately, the opposite may also
be true. In this way, social capital (or its absence) becomes another instrument by which advantage (or disadvantage) accumulates. Although the positive effects of social capital receive extensive attention, these positive effects are not apparent in all cases, or for all individuals. Portes (1998) referred to the “exclusion of outsiders” as a disadvantageous consequence.

Because social capital involves social connections, it also has a conceptual relationship to engagement with civic issues and government systems. Concerns have been identified regarding a generational decline in civic engagement (Putnam, 2000) but also the recognition that young people today may be civically engaged but in a different manner than their predecessors (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Social class plays a key role. This is partly attributed to cumulative disadvantage over the course of childhood and adolescence and is exacerbated by unequal opportunities to practice civic engagement (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). High school students attending higher socio-economic schools, those who are college-bound, and white students get more of these opportunities than low-income students, those not heading to college, and students of color (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

Additionally, researchers have suggested that changes in civic engagement reflect broader macro sociological trends related to postindustrial life, greater individualization, and more private assumption of social risks (Hacker, 2008). Increasing social and economic disparities are identified to be a consequence of this as youth must individually navigate civil society and rely on their own resources to engage in civic life and benefit from it (Morimoto & Friedland, 2011; Morimoto & Friedland, 2013). In their examination, Morimoto and Friedland (2013) identify four broad types of youth: the relevance of their social class position, social and cultural capital, their civic engagement habitus, and effects on achievement orientation. The
findings suggest multiple ways in which social class advantage and disadvantage may influence (and are influenced by) civic engagement.

**Framework for Research**

Youth councils provide a realistic opportunity for enhancing social equality for young people at the community level. Many municipalities engage in this work in one form or another (Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016). They offer a potential mechanism to increase youth engagement in civic life and to garner benefits from this engagement. Yet, there is the possibility that they may also reinforce social inequalities, if more privileged youth have access to this opportunity and the opportunity facilitates the cultivation of further positive networks that lead to college access and employment.

The present study contributes to the limited empirical literature pertaining to social equality by providing an in-depth exploration of the recruitment, selection and activities of a large youth council in an urban area in the Northeastern United States. It captures the perspectives and experiences of youth on the council as well as select adult allies and answers the research question: How do youth councils act as a mechanism to reduce and/or reinforce social inequality among young people at the city level?

**Methods**

The study used multiple methods including: in-person interviews with 27 youth and four adults involved in one large youth council in a major metropolitan area; observations of six youth council meetings; and review of documents such as mission statements, agendas, and reports. A second component of the study also involved interviews with adult stakeholders of 24 municipal youth councils in the region.
Sample Participants

Youth council members are selected through a formal application process, appointed by the mayor, and charged with representing youth across the city. As members of the youth council they are engaged in several activities: attendance at monthly youth council meetings, attendance at monthly sub-committee meetings, attendance at office hours one afternoon per month, and conducting outreach to their community once per month. Additionally, youth council members are informed of and invited to attend numerous city-sponsored activities.

The youth sample consisted of 27 council members, aged 14-18 years old, with a mean age of 16. Ten participants were male and seventeen were female. Eleven participants identified as White, seven as Asian, five as Black, two as Hispanic/Latino, and two as multiracial. Fifteen participants were in the 11th grade, six were in 10th grade, five were in 12th grade, and one was in 9th grade.

The adult sample consisted of four adult stakeholders involved in the design and operations of the youth council. Participants included the former mayor, the former youth council manager, the current youth council manager, and the director of youth services for the city.

Data Collection

The three authors attended the initial youth council meeting at the start of the academic year (September) to discuss the study, answer questions, and distribute consent forms. In-person interviews were then held during scheduled office hours approximately three days a week from October 2015-December 2015. Interviews were conducted in-person in a private room at the City Hall by one of the authors. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. The authors used a semi-structured interview guide; topics included: reasons and processes for joining the council,
experiences participating in council activities, impact of participation on youth, and perceptions of city government. All interviews were audio recorded and electronically transcribed for analysis. Youth interview transcripts were given numeric codes (1-27) for confidentiality purposes.

The interviews with youth were supplemented by interviews with four adult allies involved in the design and operation of the youth council. The interviews were held in-person and focused on the origin, scope, structure, and functioning of the youth council. The authors took handwritten notes, which were then electronically transcribed for analysis.

Six observations of youth council meetings were conducted from October 2015 to April 2016. The meetings took place at City Hall and were scheduled from 5:30-7:30pm. The authors designed an observation guide to document information such as: number of participants, content of the meeting, the level and style of youth engagement, barriers to youth participation, and strategies used by the leader to engage youth. In addition, the authors took detailed handwritten notes related to the physical space and actors, interactions among council members, and process of the meeting. The notes were electronically transcribed for analysis.

Throughout the study, the research team also collected a variety of documents related to the council, its history, and operations. This included reports, agenda, minutes, forms, as well as a review of website content.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). The authors began by reviewing all interview transcripts and independently devising initial codes primarily based on core themes from the interview guide (e.g., application process, activities of the council, and benefits to youth). The initial codes were reviewed and discussed by all authors during multiple
research meetings. The authors then applied the initial codes to additional data (interviews, observations and records) and expanded upon the codes, developing further sub-categories based on the data. Through this inductive coding process, social (in)equality emerged as an integral theme in the recruitment, selection and activities of the council. Once identified and agreed upon in a research meeting, the authors independently returned to the transcripts coding for the specific ways in which the operation and activities of the council reduce and/or perpetuate social inequality. The second author compiled the codes documented by each individual author and identified three overarching themes related to social equality: member representation, community engagement, and social networks. The themes were reviewed, discussed at length and agreed upon by all authors during a team research meeting.

Several steps were taken to reduce the potential for researcher bias and, consequently, improve validity of results. The use of a research team, with multiple data collectors and analysts protected against specific researcher bias. Regular debriefing sessions with the research team where study findings were compared and contrasted were held throughout data collection and analysis. Use of multiple data sources (interviews, observations, documents) allowed for triangulation of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Finally, the use of analytic memos allowed for ongoing refinement of codes and categories and comparison to existing theoretical and empirical literature (Charmaz, 2006).

Findings

Three key themes related to social inequality were identified: member representation, community engagement, social networks. The data related to these themes are presented below.

Member Representation
The youth council aims to be representative of the youth population in the city. Members (n=85) of the council are selected based on proportional representation meaning that the number of representatives in each neighborhood is proportionate to the population of youth aged 11-18 in the neighborhood they represent. Thus, larger neighborhoods have more council representatives than smaller neighborhoods. The council also reserves slots for individuals from sub-neighborhoods (smaller neighborhoods within a larger neighborhood), such as economic and/or residential areas with their own unique culture and/or identity (e.g., Chinatown).

Although council members are selected to represent different neighborhoods, the recruitment and selection process does not appear to account for representation related to school attended. All interview participants reported being in high school at the time of their interview and attended academically-oriented schools. As reported by participant 22, “the exam schools have a very heavy presence on the council.” Similarly, participant 17 said, “I wish there was way more diversity amongst people like from the schools, and like we tried to like fix that this year, tried to go to other schools and get people to join, but like I said before, not a lot of youth want to, and like I feel like the only reason the exam kids do it is cause they’re like offered it and they have nothing else to do.” In addition to attending academically-oriented schools, youth consistently reported being college bound, with several stating that they applied to be on the council so they could enhance their resume for college and/or complete community service hours.

Participants reported mixed perspectives as to whether youth council members represented the youth population in their neighborhood. Some believed the council adequately represented the diversity of youth in the neighborhoods. Participant 13 said, “My neighborhood
has about nine reps, and there, and I know it sounds weird but there are different parts of [the neighborhood], so we’re all from different parts.” Similarly, participant 5 reported:

I think they do a really good job of representing just the general ethnic, racial diversity of [the city], socioeconomic, school differences, stuff like that. Lots of kids from charter schools, there’s kids from exam schools, kids from normal public schools, Catholic schools, etc., they do a really good job of kind of trying to encapsulate the youth experience for every kid. Like I feel if you had a kid in Boston that wasn’t on the youth council, they could find someone on the youth council they could identify with, which I think is really important, especially in terms of representation.

In contrast, some participants did not view council members as representative of youth in their neighborhood. Participant 17 reported, “We don’t really represent our neighborhoods because we’re just youth that happen to live in that neighborhood, so our perspective is different. And our perspective is of that neighborhood, but like everyone in that neighborhood doesn’t have the same perspective.” Participant 11, who self-identified as Asian, said, “Honestly? I don’t think many people know about [the youth council] in my neighborhood. It is mainly a Hispanic community and so that might have an impact. Maybe we should have more Hispanic [youth council] members from my neighborhood so that there’s this connect between [the youth council] and the neighborhood.” Participant 16 disagreed with speaking for youth in his neighborhood: “Like speaking for my neighborhood is not something that I feel in the position to do, and I just don’t think that it would make sense.” When probed further as to why, he said, “Well, I feel like I’m not connected with the entire youth population of [my neighborhood].”
Observations of youth council meetings found that youth on the council are provided opportunities to learn about social equality and reflect on personal aspects of social advantage or disadvantage. In one meeting a youth council member ran an activity called the privilege walk. She asked youth to form two lines and noted that she would make general statements and youth should step forward or backward as appropriate. Her statements addressed items related to race, gender, sexual orientation, educational opportunities, immigration status, family income, and neighborhood crime. The statements were followed by a brief discussion regarding the importance of being aware of individual privilege and steps youth can take to address social inequality.

Participant interviews supported the observation findings that youth council members are provided education regarding social issues facing city youth. Participant 5 discussed a meeting where immigrant youths spoke about the challenges they faced due to their undocumented status:

I think it’s arguably one of my most powerful experiences on the youth council, was talking to these kids who were my age, and like talking about going to college and how they couldn’t go to college ‘cause they couldn’t afford it, or like they couldn’t travel ‘cause they didn’t have a passport, and they couldn’t work, or drive, or get their license, and they’re just like, it was intense, but it was really cool. And, I never even heard about that before. And so it was like very eye opening.

In sum, while efforts were made to reduce social inequality through proportional representation of neighborhoods, disproportionate representation was identified in regards to academic achievement. There were no non-traditional students (e.g., home school, vocational school) in our sample. All participants reported being academically-oriented and college bound.
There were mixed perspectives as to whether they perceived that they represented the voices of youth in their neighborhood; some believed the youth council was very diverse and representative, while others felt out of touch with the diverse needs of youth in their neighborhood. Both observation and interview data found that youth on the council were provided education focused on social equality and given opportunities to reflect on aspects of individual privilege.

**Community Engagement**

Good governance requires extensive connection to and communication with communities. Outreach work, when done well, can promote good governance. Youth on the council are required to outreach to youth in their neighborhood. Outreach was described as visiting local youth organizations (e.g., YMCA, Boys and Girls Club) and providing information verbally or through written communication about the efforts of the council. Observations and interviews demonstrated that participants supported the idea of outreach and genuinely wanted youth to be aware of the opportunities available to them in the city. For example, participant 20 stated, “I want to make people feel like in all the neighborhoods, they feel like they have more access to things.” Similarly, participant 26 said, “we’re tryin’ to get ways to get the youth council out there to the youth, ‘cause we realize a lot of people don’t really necessarily know about it…I think that if more people did, they would want to have a say and want to help the youth in [our city] succeed.”

While participants supported the notion of outreach, they acknowledged that they could do a better job of reaching youth in the city. Participants addressed various challenges associated with outreach efforts including, focusing on organizations rather than individuals, meeting with
adult stakeholders rather than youth, and the need to include more at-risk youth -- such as homeless youth, under-privileged youth, and youth from non-exam high schools.

Participants reported that they did not receive enough guidance on how to conduct community outreach. When visiting neighborhood organizations they were prompted to hand out a flyer, ask about organizational activities, and report back to the council. There was little focus on establishing meaningful relationships and often this form of outreach was done infrequently or by different youth each time. Participants discussed the need for more education and structure when conducting neighborhood outreach. Participant 10 said, “The basic idea of outreach is thrown out there. There are no specific jobs for specific people.” Participant 10 recommended that council members be provided with “set responsibilities and deadlines”.

In council meetings, the council manager stressed social media as an important tool for reaching young people quickly, easily, and where they are actively engaged. Participants reported mixed views on the social media efforts of the council. Some participants perceived Facebook, snapchat, instagram and twitter to be appropriate mechanisms to distribute youth council messages and updates to a wider audience. However, the use of social media was not unanimously praised. Participant 7 received multiple texts, tweets, and snapchats from the youth council that he was encouraged to pass on to his network. He expressed doubt as to whether this was an effective mechanism of communication, “I don’t know if anyone’s really actually paying attention to it as much, ‘cause like, if I’m on social media, I’m kind of just looking for my friends and stuff. I’m not really looking for [youth council] stuff there.” Observations of youth council meetings confirmed that social media outreach training was focused more on encouraging youth to post messages and retweet, rather than teaching youth the basics of such
work (e.g., why it matters, the objectives behind the practice, and ways to communicate effectively).

In sum, participants had positive intentions in terms of engaging youth in their neighborhoods; yet, there was evidence of youth having little training or understanding for how to conduct outreach. Additionally, participants reported challenges in terms of reaching all city youth. They identified the need to target socially disadvantaged youth and address deeper issues facing youth in the city. Although well-intentioned, the data suggests that youth would benefit from additional education and guidance in order to effectively connect with youth in their neighborhoods.

Social Networks

A consistent theme in participant interviews was the importance of social networks in regards to learning about and applying to be on the youth council. Thirteen participants learned about the council from friends who were previously or currently on the council, eight participants learned about the council from family members, six participants learned about it through school, and three participants learned about it through an internship with the city. As reported by Participant 17, “I was part of a program called Summer of Opportunity, and last year, I got an internship to help run the youth council, so this year I decided to apply for the youth council.”

In two instances participants did not go through the formal application process. Instead, they contacted the manager of the council after the deadline. Participant 11 requested to join after their school guidance counselor contacted students about an open spot on the youth council in their neighborhood. Participant 4 learned about the council after the deadline via an email from their guidance counselor, and emailed the manager of the youth council to see if they could
join. These two examples raise questions about the fairness of the recruitment and selection process.

Although most participants discussed familial support, there was evidence that at least one participant came from limited privilege. Participant 4 stated that it is hard to discuss their experiences of the council with their parents due to a language barrier:

Well, it’s very hard to explain to them what I do with the youth council ‘cause they don’t really speak English. So, there’s a language barrier there. Not really sure the right way to properly explain it to them ‘cause they just don’t understand the concept of youth being engaged in government.

Participant 4 reflected on how experiences on the council gave them a new perspective on the different cultures of the city: “I grew up in like in public housing, like government subsidized, so I grew up around a different culture, you know, with the way people talk - it’s different. So, I feel like the way I behave now is changed…my eyes have been opened by the youth council.”

A consistent theme reported by all participants and observed in youth council meetings was the importance of building social networks through the council, including other youth council members, City Hall officials, community leaders, and the mayor. Participant 5 noted that the youth council exposed her to “the most amazing kids that I never would have gotten a chance to meet otherwise.” Similarly, Participant 10 stated, “I’ve met a lot of new people from different neighborhoods, which is always fun. Got in closer with the friends I already had. I learned more about what the government is doing for youth in the city.”

During one observation of a youth council meeting, the mayor was in attendance. His overall goal appeared to be to educate youth about having a voice in government as well as to
inspire them to have educational and career goals. He began with a short speech reflecting on his own educational and career trajectory, then asked youth if they had a goal for the future, and then answered questions. It was a very engaged discussion and youth council members appeared excited to have the opportunity to meet the mayor in person. Participant 1 reported:

[The mayor] was talking about how we need to believe that we as young people have the power to make to change, especially here in the Mayor’s Youth Council. And he was asking people what their dreams were. And, that’s been really the governmental experience I have had on the Mayor’s Youth Council, is just meeting the mayor and him motivating us.

In addition to expanding social networks through meeting people, youth on the council received enhanced access to information and resources. The manager of the council regularly informed council members in meetings and via social media about events happening in the city and employment/internship opportunities. Participant 8 stated, “there are events that I go to, that I wouldn’t have heard about if I wasn’t here, and like there’s also occasions where [the manager] takes me to meet city officials or to sit on hearings and stuff like that.” Similarly, Participant 5 learned about a related governmental internship through her work on the council. She stated, “I’d go into those optional meetings and then like my work on [the youth council], I got an internship at the governor’s office this summer.”

In sum, although participants reported strong social networks upon joining the youth council, they were expanded to include other youth, city officials, community leaders, and the mayor. Membership on the council also provided youth with enhanced access to information and resources, such as attending events in the city and learning about employment/internship
opportunities. As reflected by participant 5, “I mean, I wasn’t a super un-empowered youth before I got to Mayor’s Youth Council, but it’s opened up so many doors for me and for my friends.”

**Discussion**

Previous scholarship has suggested that youth participation in government offers multiple benefits to both youth and community (e.g., youth feelings of empowerment [Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson, & Shaw, 2014] and more youth-informed policy [Cashmore, 2011]). In our study, we have examined whether a particular form of youth participation – municipal youth councils – might also be a mechanism for furthering social equality. An alternative view, articulated by Wyness (2009), for example, suggested that youth councils reinforce existing inequalities, primarily because they can lack the voices of socially excluded groups. Our data inform this debate and identify various mechanisms that can perpetuate or alleviate social inequality.

The youth council is well established in the city, it is large (up to 85 members), it has infrastructure to support its work (staff positions, budget, space at city hall), and several adult allies including former youth council members who work in city government and community settings. Commitment to diversity and authentic youth engagement are visible. Our multiple observations of youth council meetings determined that youth with various demographic attributes worked as a cohesive unit to address issues of importance to young people in the city. Yet, our data indicate caution is needed to avoid reproduction of social inequality. Moreover, the data suggest steps might be taken to affirmatively act to utilize the council to reduce social inequality.

In regard to representation, and whether the youth on the council reflected the youth population, the evidence was convincing that the youth council represented diverse youth on
many relevant criteria (race, ethnicity, gender). Furthermore, it is built into the membership process that each neighborhood is represented proportional to the youth population in the neighborhood. Pure statistical representation of various categories of youth demographics is not practically possible, nor is it desirable. Rather, ongoing reflection in terms of groups that are represented well and those that are not should guide continuing commitment to adequate and effective representation of youth. In other words, there is the suggestion that youth will not inherently represent one another, but there can be the development of purposeful adult leadership and facilitation to guide youth into their power as community decision-makers.

As we noted, the most apparent discrepancy between reality and ideal was in regard to educational privilege. The character and context of our case is integral to understanding the relevance of school segregation. Like most northern U.S. cities, our case-city witnessed a period of governmentally forced integration efforts that sparked deep class-based and racial divides. The current day school system is rooted in exam-based secondary school admissions, created to encourage affluent families to commit to the institutions to the detriment of students who are ill-prepared or under-resourced enough to compete, and thus this inequality is perpetuated in our findings. How to get “other” types of youth to engage in this opportunity remains a challenge that is acknowledged by the adult stakeholders. Pathways via social networks (discussed further below) narrow the entry portals to joining the council and, therefore, should be examined.

Adult stakeholders need to possess the political and social finesse to support a diverse array of teenagers. Often the best way to empower youth is through co-facilitation, which means political resources are necessary to enhance the abilities of a diverse, and culturally representative, youth council. Examining the specifics of youth actively engaged versus passively engaged versus dropping out of engagement was beyond the scope of this study but
requires further attention. Longitudinal studies of youth councils could help us better examine factors that contribute to disinterest among young people and motivations for participation.

Community engagement strategies, focused on reaching out to and representing the interests of other youth in the community, require further attention. Demographic representation can be of less importance when the representative youth successfully engages a wide range of youth and effectively connects the youth population to the city. In this arena we identified significant potential. Very clearly, youth members of the council wanted the role of voicing their interests and facilitating change on behalf of youth populations. Questions remain, however, regarding their effectiveness and adequate training to do so. Multiple lessons from the literature on positive youth development (Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009) articulate the need to train youth in strategies of engagement. Outreach activities appeared to be a weak element of the youth council model. Many youth expressed confusion about this role. Thus, there is little evidence that the community engagement strategies of the youth council can be effective in reducing social inequality for youth in the city.

Finally, we identified the central role of social networks and their role in building social capital. Our study uncovered strong evidence that networks were important for entry into the council and that networks were developed during the course of council membership. We also had some evidence that networks were useful to later educational and career steps. The role of social networks in the development of social capital is powerful. This might be accentuating further operational norms of government and politics which are based largely on “who you know” rather than more objective criteria. Access to important people – certainly the mayor, but other city hall staff as well – had a significant influence on the young people, according to their self-report. At one level this is largely symbolic; meeting the mayor at city hall encourages
youths’ own sense of importance in the world. These interactions do not directly result in tangible education or employment benefits, but the relationships that underlay these opportunities do appear to facilitate potential pathways for real professional gains.

Limitations

Our study was designed to examine the structure and functioning of one youth council in a large urban area. Social inequality emerged inductively during data analysis. Thus, we were somewhat limited by the exploratory data we collected. That said, without specific questions pertaining to social inequality, several of our participants discussed it as an important issue. Another limitation, common to qualitative research, is geographic. Since our study occurred in a city with a large and well-established youth council, the applicability of our findings may be limited to such settings. Future research should use multiple methods (e.g. qualitative methods, mixed methods, quantitative methods) to examine social inequality in the recruitment, selection, and activities of youth councils in diverse settings. Longitudinal studies that identify the changing patterns of interactions and opportunities would be particularly useful.

Implications

Our findings have important practice and research implications. Although genuine efforts were made to recruit and select a diverse and representative group of young people, our data suggests that there was disproportionate representation in terms of academic achievement. Greater attention should be placed on recruiting an educationally diverse group of youth, including non-traditional students who attend vocational schools, are home schooled and are at risk for dropping out of school. While this phenomenon has been documented in previous studies (Wyness, 2009), empirical research is scarce. The field would benefit from studies examining effective strategies for recruiting and retaining diverse youth on youth councils.
Our data suggest that council members genuinely want to reach out to other youth in the community and provide them with information and resources; however, they do not feel they have the skills to effectively do so. Greater emphasis should be placed on training and supporting youth in community engagement strategies. Our participants offered mixed perceptions as to the effectiveness of social media in engaging youth in municipal government. Additional research should focus on the use of social media as a strategy for engaging youth in municipal government.

Finally, our data overwhelmingly demonstrated that youth joined the council with strong social networks and these networks grew while on the council. While it is important for all youth to have opportunities to engage in municipal government, extra efforts should be targeted at engaging socially excluded groups, with the goal of engaging them in governmental decision making and enhancing their social networks.
References


