



Youth councils in municipal government: Examination of activities, impact and barriers



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ABSTRACT

This study reports on youth councils in 24 municipalities in one major metropolitan area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with one key adult stakeholder in each municipality in order to understand the scope, structure, functioning, activities, and impact of youth councils. These data were supplemented with review of documents and websites that described the councils. Findings indicated that youth councils were engaged in a wide-range of activities suggesting the model is fluid to meet the needs of both the youth and the community. Specific impacts were identified by participants some of which were directly related to the delivery of activities and others which influenced policy change. Among the barriers identified was the continuing need to identify a broader range of youth to participate in these initiatives. Despite a societal need for greater youth civic engagement and the generally positive attitude toward this idea, youth councils remain limited in practice and the research base is under-developed. Our study contributes to advancing both practice and research.

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1. Introduction

There is widespread consensus that avenues should be created for young people to have input into community decisions. There are many reasons why this is generally accepted to be a good idea. Youth, themselves, are believed to benefit from these processes. Often identified under the concepts of civic engagement and positive youth development, benefits that accrue to the young person include feelings of empowerment, competence, and connection (Zeldin, Camino & Calvert, 2007). Participation may also enhance young peoples' interests and propensity to engage in community service, political action, or other forms of public engagement (Bessant, 2004; Matthews, 2001a, b). Furthermore, youth engagement may foster more efficient and effective policy allowing communities to make lasting improvements that youth will support (Frank, 2006; Mitra, 2005). Yet, little is known about the real world functioning of youth in community decisions.

In this paper we examine youth councils at the municipal level. Youth councils are not the only means by which youth may contribute to decision-making but they are one potential mechanism. We describe the reported activities and impacts of several youth councils. Additionally, we identify barriers to councils' efforts to have community impact.

2. Literature review

Youth civic engagement takes many forms. Checkoway and Aldana (2013) recently provided some conceptual organization to this well-used idea and identified four forms: citizen participation, grassroots organizing, intergroup dialogue, and sociopolitical development. Although the forms overlap, our inquiry falls most clearly 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".

Besides youth councils there are other means by which youth can have input into community decision-making. Some of these methods include youth organizing – "a process that brings young people together to talk about the most pressing problems in their communities, conduct research on these problems and possible solutions, and follow through with social action to create community-level change" (Christens & Dolan, 2011); youth forums (e.g., Matthews, 2001a,b) in which groups of youth come together in committees to discuss issues relevant to their community; youth participatory research (e.g., Sprague Martinez et al., 2012) in which youth are engaged in forming and advancing the research agenda in service to improving programs, services, and community life; and, e-discussions and voting (Macintosh, Robson, Smith, & Whyte, 2003) which utilize technology to tap youth perspectives.

Youth councils are, generally, distinguished from these other forms of input by their connection to ongoing governmental institutions. There is, however, wide variation in the operations of youth councils and the extent to which they have a substantive rather than symbolic role in governance. Matthews and Limb (1998) report that the

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development of youth councils (and also youth forums) in England and Wales was largely “haphazard”; the form and character of youth councils depended on such factors as demography, politics and local traditions as well as existing institutional and organizational structures. Providing examples from three Michigan cities, Richards-Schuster and Checkoway (2009) found that youth participation via councils differed in its institutional structures: one council had advocates but temporary status, another had strong mayoral support and a formal charter, a third was affiliated with a community foundation. Taft and Gordon (2013, p.4) also note variation, but identify the following commonalities: youth councils connect young people to policymakers, participating youth are considered experts on youth issues, councils work on issues of policy related to youth (but not on other policy areas), they are formalized and usually part of the government structure, they are authorized by statute or executive order, have adult staff to support the work, and meet on a regular or semi-regular basis.

Individual youth who participate in councils may benefit through development of a variety of practical (e.g., participating in meetings, giving a presentation, planning an event) and social and emotional skills (working in groups, articulating a view point) (Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014). Additionally, there may be benefits related to civic engagement such as understanding how government works, how decisions are made, and how individuals and groups can engage with government. These benefits may socialize youth into becoming engaged citizens over the long term (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Miklosi, 2007). Youth may also receive more direct personal benefits such as experience or connections that lead to employment, college access, or other opportunities (Augsberger, Collins, & Gecker, 2016a).

The evidence for impact within municipal governments is less well understood. The extant research is largely comprised of qualitative descriptions of how the youth councils operate within a specific locality. For example, Checkoway, Allison, and Montoya (2005) studied the San Francisco Youth Commission and found that although youth and adults were positively impacted through participation, it was unclear the extent to which youth voice impacted policy decisions. Carlson (2005) reported on Hampton, Virginia's “Youth Planner initiative”. This report identifies that since 1996 young people have been employed in the Planning Department of the city. In this role, the young people have drafted policies, developed programs, and created the expectation that young people will have input into the city's governance. Two youth are employed as youth planners who regularly report to the city's Planning Commission but they also report to a 24 youth-member Hampton Youth Commission. One key report (Martin, Pittman, Ferber, & McMahan, 2007) provides several descriptive examples of a range of youth councils at city and state levels.

Youth participation in governance appears to be more commonplace in Europe. Shephard and Patrikios (2013), for example, report on youth parliaments in the European Union. Yet, challenges remain there as well. Faulkner (2009) distinguished “consultations”, in which young people's views are gathered to be used in decision making, and ongoing projects, in which there is a process that involves some discussion on decisions. She noted that the literature on involving young people in consultations is much better developed than that on ongoing projects. One observation was that policy makers can be impressed by youth participants in the political process but often assume that they are not representative of youth (Faulkner, 2009).

The practice of youth engagement in community decision-making has been slow to institutionalize (Head, 2011). Much of what we know about the impacts, or limitations, are derivative of the relationship (and perceptions held) among youth and adults. Sloam (2007) addresses common perceptions of youth as disinterested and instead asserts that “an agenda to increase youth participation must seek to reboot democracy in a form that is both relevant and accessible to young people today” (p.549). In other words, youth can feel that adults are not interested in their opinions and experiences, which translates into a disengagement in formal political participation (i.e., voting), but

says little about the passions and interests youth have towards politics more broadly.

There are several descriptions of adult perceptions of youth often portrayed in dichotomies (e.g., youth as victim or resources (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Specific to youth councils, Bessell (2009) assesses the claim that “adult attitudes are the greatest barrier to effective participation” of youth (pp. 299–300). While individual policy professionals may believe in the potential of youth voice and participation, there are prevailing cultural attitudes in four key areas that serve as barriers: “institutional context and procedural requirements; cultural and social norms; lack of clarity about children's participation; and concerns about negative consequences” (p. 313). Research on youth councils frequently acknowledges the imbalance of power between youth and adults that limits effectiveness and significant policy change (Matthews, 2001a,b, 2003).

Mixed messages about youth create an environment in which some adults see the capacities of young people while others (and the culture at-large) do not. Those adults that interpret the abilities of youth as potential resources reflect a positive youth development approach (Damon, 2004). Benson, Scales, Hamilton, and Sesma (2007) provide a synthesis of core principles of positive youth development: all youth have the inherent capacity for positive growth and development; a positive developmental trajectory is enabled when youth are embedded in contexts that nurture their development; the promotion of positive development is enabled when youth participate in multiple relationships, contexts, and ecologies; all youth benefit from these relationships; community is a critical vehicle for positive youth development; youth are major actors in their own development and are significant (and underutilized) resources for creating the kinds of communities that enable positive youth development. The positive youth development approach contrasts with the youth-deficit or problem-youth model that preceded it and still persists today (Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009). Several authors have identified principles to guide youth participation in order to be inclusive of youth. One example (Klindera & Menderweld, 2001) suggests these principles include: (1) viewing youth consumers as advocates and educators, (2) treating youth on advisory boards in the same way that other members are treated, (3) scheduling meetings at times convenient for youth, (4) valuing youth for their experience, and (5) promoting equal partnership and respect. The youth-adult relationship and the institutional or organizational context in which these activities take place are critical. Adults' capacity to view youth as capable of being partners and decision makers is seen as essential.

Given the numerous challenges facing young people in contemporary American society, youth councils may provide an opportunity to engage youth in their communities and tap their expertise. Yet, they are not widespread across municipalities. Also, there is little in the research literature to guide practice. The purpose of our study is to provide specific information about currently operating youth councils in several cities and towns in one metropolitan area.

3. Study rationale

Studies pertaining to youth engagement in public policy at the municipal level are typically limited to a single or multiple case study (e.g., Carlson, 2005; Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009). Our study expands the literature by interviewing adult stakeholders responsible for the operations of 24 distinct youth councils in one large metropolitan area. We address the research questions: 1) What are the attributes of youth councils? 2) What are the main activities? 3) What is their impact on communities? 4) What are the barriers to effectiveness? We compare and contrast stakeholder views on these questions. It is critical to explore the perspective of adult stakeholders; adults usually have the idea to start the council, they are typically gatekeepers in selecting youth for the councils, and, in contrast to youth members, adults are

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