CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE:

PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES OF A STATEWIDE INITIATIVE

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Civic Engagement among Youth Aging Out of Foster Care:

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Youth aging out of foster care constitute a vulnerable and understudied
population, for whom civic engagement opportunities are rare. In spite of evidence that
suggests civic engagement may be an empowering, developmental process for youth in
the general population, few empirical studies have investigated these phenomena among
youth aging out of care. This research utilized a qualitative approach to study the
intersection of aging out and civic engagement for the betterment of primary prevention
services and policy. Utilizing a targeted engagement initiative (Youth Advisory Board)
for youth aging out of care in New Jersey, this research analyzed: (1) in-depth
interviews/survey data from Youth Advisory Board leaders (who are themselves
somewhere in the process of aging out of foster care), (2) in-depth interviews/survey data
from civic youth workers (who are paid adults/employees of a local, nonprofit vendor
agency that performs work in the area of child welfare), and (3) non-participant
observation of Youth Advisory Board meetings, which occurred at five regional
memberships throughout the state. Emergent themes revealed that (1) service and

activism were discussed and approached in silo, even though both are dimensions of civic engagement; (2) youth reported very high levels of connection to their civic youth workers (adult coordinators who are also professional employees of a local nonprofit), though adults did not report similarly high levels; (3) perceptions of access to, and opportunity derived from, the New Jersey Department of Children and Families were also discussed, in tandem with the notion that (4) youth in this study perceived the Department positively, which may be attributed to the fact that youth in this study had personal connections to departmental officials and administrators. The final emergent theme (5) pertained to the professional goals of this youth sample, whereby activist-oriented and helping profession careers comprised future aspirations.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the diligence and insight of my committee members: Drs. N. Andrew Peterson (my very patient chair, who is himself an empowering organization), Cassandra Simmel (the enabler of this project and my direct supervisor for the past three years), Liliane Cambraia Windsor (who facilitated my first research internship and my first academic publication), and Brian Christens (who took a risk and joined this committee because of a mutual scholarly interest).

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Most of all: A resounding "THANK YOU!" to the individuals who participated in this study, specifically the 14 youth leaders you are about to hear from. They are unlikely to read this manuscript, but I applaud them—loudly and publicly—for helping to grow our state's capacity for inclusion, and for helping me to see the world a bit differently.

Off campus, I am forever grateful to my family and friends for their enduring support (Dashew, Dobias, Forenza, Gorga, Job, Karan, and Lemcke families… that means you!). I lovingly dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, Phyllis Kathleen Sansone, and to the memories of Robert Anton Dobias, Russell Lowell Forenza, James C. Reichert, and Helen Marion Vervoort. All are the embodiments of a truly civic generation, and all have indelibly left their marks on my heart. I know they will love this.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

Overview. Youth aging out of foster care constitute an underrepresented population with unique developmental needs (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009). They have also been described as a marginalized and disempowered group (Paul-Ward, 2009), assumed to lack relational and ecological permanence (Sanchez, 2004). To the extent that the empowerment processes may cultivate *more* control over one's life (Rappaport, 1981), empowering initiatives may be useful to moderate the potentially negative effects of socio-environmental risk on health and mental health outcomes for this population.

Civic engagement, which broadly encompasses both activism and service (Boyte, 2005; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Malone & Julian, 2005; Walker, 2000; Watts & Flanagan, 2007), represents one type of empowering initiative that may be helpful to embed foster youth in their communities (Kahne & Sporte, 2008), and give them a voice in the democratic process (Checkoway, 2010; Putnam, 1995 & 2000; Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011). Yet opportunities to civically engage are not readily available to these youth as they are in the general population (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Mahoney, et al., 2005). Social welfare professionals would benefit from descriptive studies of existing initiatives.

Erikson (1968) detailed the myriad conflicts of youth, where young people struggle to place themselves in a broader, societal context, often calling into question who they are, who they can become, and what ideologies they might adopt. As a construct, "youth" is rarely defined in scholarship or media; we understand it to mean

"the young person in everyday life" (Roholt, Baizeman & Hildreth, 2013, p.160), though

the term is generally constructed around middle class Caucasians (Checkoway, 2012).

This research shall focus specifically on diverse youth who are 18-23 years old and aging

out of foster care. Foster care—sometimes known as "out-of-home care"—encompasses

the following placement scenarios: Non-biological Family Foster Care, Kinship Care,

Treatment Foster Care, Residential/Group Care, Emergency Care, and Shared Family

Care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012).

As of July 2013, there were approximately 399,546 children living in foster care

nationwide (Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). They are a heterogeneous

group, comprised of males (52%) and females (48%); whites (42%), blacks (26%), and

Hispanics (21%). Their average age is 9.1 years old and their average time-in-care is 22.7

months, though more than 30% of them vest beyond that norm. In New Jersey (the focal

state for this study), approximately 7,484 children live in out-of-home placements (New

Jersey Department of Children and Families, 2014). They, too, are a diverse group

comprised of males and females (50% to 49%, respectively); blacks (33%); whites

(27%), and Hispanics (21%). The largest age bracket represented in New Jersey's foster

care system is 6-9 years old (23%) and the median New Jersey placement is 9.9 months

long.

Foster care intends to provide all youth with stability (Christiansen, Havik &

Anderssen, 2010; Osgood, Foster & Courtney, 2010), yet no foster placement is without

inherent challenges (Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Simmel, Morton & Cucinotta, 2012).

Because the coming of age process is marked by change and transition (Peterson &

Leffert, 1995), youth in care are assumed to be in "double jeopardy." Because of their

unique social locations, those who grow up in foster care systems are perpetually linked throughout the child welfare literature with risk factors like: difficulty pursuing or completing higher education (Osgood, Foster & Courtney, 2010; Pecora, et al., 2006), emotional and/or behavioral problems (Pecora, et al., 2009; Simmel, 2011), poverty and/or homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Fowler, Toro & Miles, 2009; Pecora, et al., 2006; Zlotnick, 2009), and much else.

  In a sample of foster youth, Kools (1997) found that overall identity development was negatively affected by self-stigmatization from one's foster care involvement. Kools' finding collides with Erikson's (1968) fifth stage of development: Identity versus Role Confusion. If a foster youth is self-stigmatizing, he or she is assumed to experience role ambiguity, which may cause the adoption of a disordered identity during the transition to adulthood. Indeed, many foster youth transition to adulthood with the emotional baggage (and potential stigma) of involuntary removal from their primary homes, placement instability, and a history of child abuse and/or neglect (Munson & McMillen, 2009; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). This process of transitioning from foster care to independence is colloquially known as "aging out:" the period when youth are discharged or emancipated from state care (Atkinson, 2008).

  Aging out. While the majority of youth in care nationwide (53% of them) had permanency goals of "reunification," five percent had permanency goals of emancipation from the system (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Report, 2013). These youth transitioned to independent adulthood with mere perfunctory safety nets (Bellamy, 2008; Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Shirk & Stangler, 2004; Simmel, Shpiegel & Murshid, 2012), despite a sustained need for support (Avery & Freundlich,

2009; Osgood, Foster & Courtney, 2010), and seemingly insurmountable odds against

them. Youth aging out of care have historic difficulty transitioning to independence

(Courtney & Heuring, 2005). Many youth in their final years of care have low rates of

academic achievement and high risk of adversity (Goodkind, Schelbe & Shook, 2011;

Keller, Cusick & Courtney, 2007). Similarly, youth emancipated from care have

generally spent more years in the system, and—consequently—may have encountered

more placement disruptions than a youth who was ultimately reunited (Leathers, 2006).

The notion of placement disruption pertains to the physical moving of foster

youth between homes and/or placement scenarios. Encountering placement disruption

may prohibit a foster youth transitioning to adulthood from ever having experienced a

sense of belonging in his or her community, and may contribute to Sanchez's (2004)

assumption that foster youth lack relational and ecological permanence. Underlying all of

these adversities is loss of control (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and powerlessness (Ross &

Mirowsky, 2013) over an individual situation. Powerlessness happens when an institution

unwittingly oppresses its constituents through systematic constraints (Young, 1990).

When youth in care are not included in decision-making processes that affect them, they

are considered powerless (Bruskas, 2008). Consequently, many foster youth elect to leave

the system at age 18 merely to regain autonomy (Goodkind, Schlebe & Shook, 2011). As

a dimension of oppression, powerlessness through loss of control can yield anomie—the

breakdown of connections between an individual and his or her community (Durkheim,

1951)—among an already disempowered group (Paul-Ward, 2009).

For the general population of youth, hallmarks of transitioning to adulthood have

traditionally included moving away from one's parents, getting married, having children,

and buying a home; assuming adult responsibilities and gaining a sense of self

sufficiency. As upwardly mobile youth take longer to reach those milestones, and

adulthood is assumed to emerge over a longer period—a process that Arnett (2000/2007)

calls "emerging adulthood"—the aging out process for youth in care is devoid of a

similar buffer (Atkinson, 2008; Checkoway, 2012; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009;

Goodkind, Schelbe & Shook, 2011). Coming of age in a foster care system, without an

intrinsic network to fall back on or feel part of, is decidedly harder (Avery & Freundlich,

2009). Yet how one fares during this inevitable transition will have lifelong impact

(Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010), with implications for both the individual and

society.

        As a result of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program,

emancipation may be elective when a foster youth reaches 18 years old in a given state,

but it may not become mandatory until that youth reaches 21 or older, as the age at which

one must emancipate from care varies according to state law. Chafee Independence

Programs were enacted through federal legislation that recognized youth in care were

being denied an emerging adulthood. Chafee funding gave credence to the notion that

positive foster youth development necessitates a gradual process toward self-sufficiency,

as opposed to an abrupt one.

        Nationally, 240,923 youth exited the foster care system in 2013. 51% of them

(122,173 youth) were actually reunited with parents or primary caretakers and 10%

(23,396) were actually emancipated (AFCARS, 2013). While this data represents a cross

section of distinct groups (children in care versus children exiting care), it is noteworthy

that a five-percentage point disparity exits between emancipation-as-permanency-goal

and emancipation-as-reality. While the AFCARS presents demographics on youth exiting care in composite fashion, we assume that National Youth in Transition Data (2012) on youth receiving Chafee services is at least *partially* reflective of emancipated (or emancipating) youth. In fiscal year 2011—the last year of publically accessible reports—98,561 youth received at least one independent living service, such as academic support, career preparation, financial management, etc. (NYTD, 2012). Those who received services were 52% female and 48% male; 52% white and 32% black (Hispanic was not expressly reported). In New Jersey, approximately 411 youth were emancipated from the state's child welfare system (Kids Count, 2014), though specific demographic data is not publically available. Empirical research does not specifically illuminate the myriad complexities that this small but noteworthy population experiences in New Jersey, the most densely populated state, and among the wealthiest states, in the nation.

Chafee Independence Programs are one illustration of an evolving federal framework to better include aging out youth in policy and practice. Other national programs serving this population include: The Chafee Education and Training Voucher Program, which awards up to $5,000 per youth for those attending qualified higher education programs; the Family Unification Program, which provides transitional housing assistance through the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development; and Youthbuild, which awards competitive grants to local entities assisting "high risk youth" to learn the construction trade while also working toward a high school diploma or GED (National Association of Counties, 2008).

In New Jersey, the Foster Care Scholars Program provides additional financial assistance to foster youth attending qualified institutions. Through a multi-service

agency, New Jersey also funds a statewide Youth Advisory Board (YAB), where this study recruited its sample. YAB has a presence in 12 of 21 counties throughout New Jersey. Its purpose is to allow youth aging out of care to develop relationships with mentoring adults, to effect change in the Department of Children and Families (DCF), and to inform policy and planning by executing at least four youth-directed projects per year (Youth Advisory Board, 2013). Youth Advisory Boards grew out of a necessity to engage the perspectives of young people served by state public child welfare systems. New Jersey YABs are implemented through a government-university-nonprofit partnership. States with similar engagement and leadership opportunities for this population may adhere to similar models, or they may be more autonomous. For example: Michigan's State Youth Policy Board is implemented similarly to New Jersey's YAB model, with 13 local boards throughout that state, advising the Michigan Department of Human Services. California adheres to a similar model, and its Youth Advisory Board also includes young people served by the criminal justice system. In Tennessee, Youth Advisory Council is a singular statewide body (Oldmixon, 2007). All three examples incorporate the voices and experiences of participating foster youth into civil discourse around child welfare policy and services. The Child Welfare League of America is home to National Foster Youth Advisory Council. The council is comprised of current and former foster youth, and its purpose is "to empower youth to get involved in decision making that affects their lives" (CWLA, 2014). While national in scope, it should be noted that this council is autonomous from the federal government.

  Civic Development. Erikson's (1968) assertion that sociopolitical development is central to the identity formation of youth is still illustrated throughout the contemporary

literature (see Russell, et al., 2009; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1998).

Sociopolitical development is a process assumed to yield the capacity for action in

political and social spheres (Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003). This process has been

demonstrated in the general population of youth through targeted engagement initiatives

seen as conduits or precursors to civic action (Dallago, et al., 2010; Smith, 1999). Myriad

research has investigated youth councils (Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009;

Wyness, 2009), student government associations (Russell, et al., 2009; Wyness, 2009b),

and other forms of pro-social involvement (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Flanagan & Levine,

2010; Janzen, 2010; Malone & Julian, 2005; Stoneman, 2002; Yates & Youniss, 1998)

designed for youth in the general population. Less attention has focused on similar

opportunities for oppressed youth (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; McBride, Sherraden &

Pritzker, 2006). Kieffer's (1984) landmark study with community activists reminds us

that civic competence is a developmental process. Kieffer explicated a developmental

trajectory comprised of four stages: Entry (becoming involved with activism),

advancement (forming relationships and collective efficacy), incorporation (developing

political consciousness), and commitment (applying participatory competence). In the 30

years since his landmark study, there is a continued need to extend Kieffer's framework

to other settings and populations, including youth aging out of foster care.

Civic engagement is broadly defined by two dimensions: Activism and service

(Boyte, 2005; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Malone & Julian, 2005; Walker, 2000; Watts &

Flanagan, 2007), both of which can result in personal and community outcomes. Civic

engagement has been shown to produce civic literacy (Kahne & Sporte, 2008), as well as

social justice (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Zeldin, Camino & Calvert, 2003), which can

benefit democratic society (Checkoway, 2010; Putnam, 1995 & 2000). To this end, the opportunity role structures (discussed more in the literature review) afforded by YAB creates insular democracies, complete with elected governance and sustained political dialog.

Civic engagement can also yield a sense of belonging (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010) and empowerment (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Zeldin, Camino & Calvert, 2003) within the individual. Yet opportunities to engage are neither evenly distributed by race, ethnicity, or social class (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Mahoney, et al., 2005), nor are they as accessible to oppressed populations as they are to general populations. To the extent that civic engagement is capable of producing valuable processes and outcomes for youth aging out of care, this research embodies an innovative contribution to both literatures. We assume that YAB was designed as both an empowering and an empowered organization (two constructs that the author will define further in the literature review). YAB utilizes a positive youth development framework, which assumes a strengths-based approach to foster youth development; it also affects the macro community through service and activism. These actions are stated to expedite the general population's entry into the macro civic sphere (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009; Wyness, 2009).

Theoretical Rationale and Framework

Promoting social justice with and on behalf of clients is an expected competency of social workers (Abramovitz, 1998; Hardina, 2005; Itzhaky & Bustin, 2008; NASW, 2008), whose chosen profession is historically linked with advocating distributive justice

(Hardina, 2005; Levy-Simon, 1994; Wakefield, 1988) so that every member of society

may have a basic provision of wellbeing. Similarly, the Council on Social Work

Education (2013) lists the advancement of human rights and social/economic justice as

one component of its explicit curriculum. Levy-Simon (1994) links the profession with

activist democracy and its pursuit of equitable conditions for all people. She posits that

such pursuit, in tandem with clients, is an assumption of the empowerment perspective.

To the extent that activism—the process of understanding, contextualizing, and

negotiating issues with and on behalf of a "have-not" community (Alinsky, 1971)—

demonstrates one's propensity to effect change, it may constitute an empowering process.

Robert Huish (2013, p. 1) recently defined activism as "a skill of effective engagement

with those in authority and with fellow citizens, thus enhancing democracy." To this end,

empowerment through activism is an individual outcome facilitated by participation in an

empowering organization (see Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004) en route to more equitable

conditions and power relations.

Civic engagement is only partially defined by activism; it is also comprised of

service and the informal ties that people acquire through associational membership

(Putnam, 2000). These informal ties are known as social capital. Putnam's (2000)

assertion that social capital is intrinsically valuable is shared by empowerment theorists

(see Christens, 2012; Speer, Jackson & Peterson, 2001), who note that social cohesion

and relational solidarity facilitate individual empowerment. Though empowerment and

social capital describe different phenomena, the theories are similar. Both are illustrated

throughout the youth engagement literature (see Checkoway, Allison & Montoya, 2005;

Roholt, Baizeman & Hildreth, 2013; Russell, et al., 2009; Wyness, 2009). As can be seen

in **Figure 1**, these theories predict that: (1) participating in an empowering organization,

and (2) cultivating social capital, are processes through which a civically-engaged youth

may develop individual (empowerment) and collective (social change) outcomes.
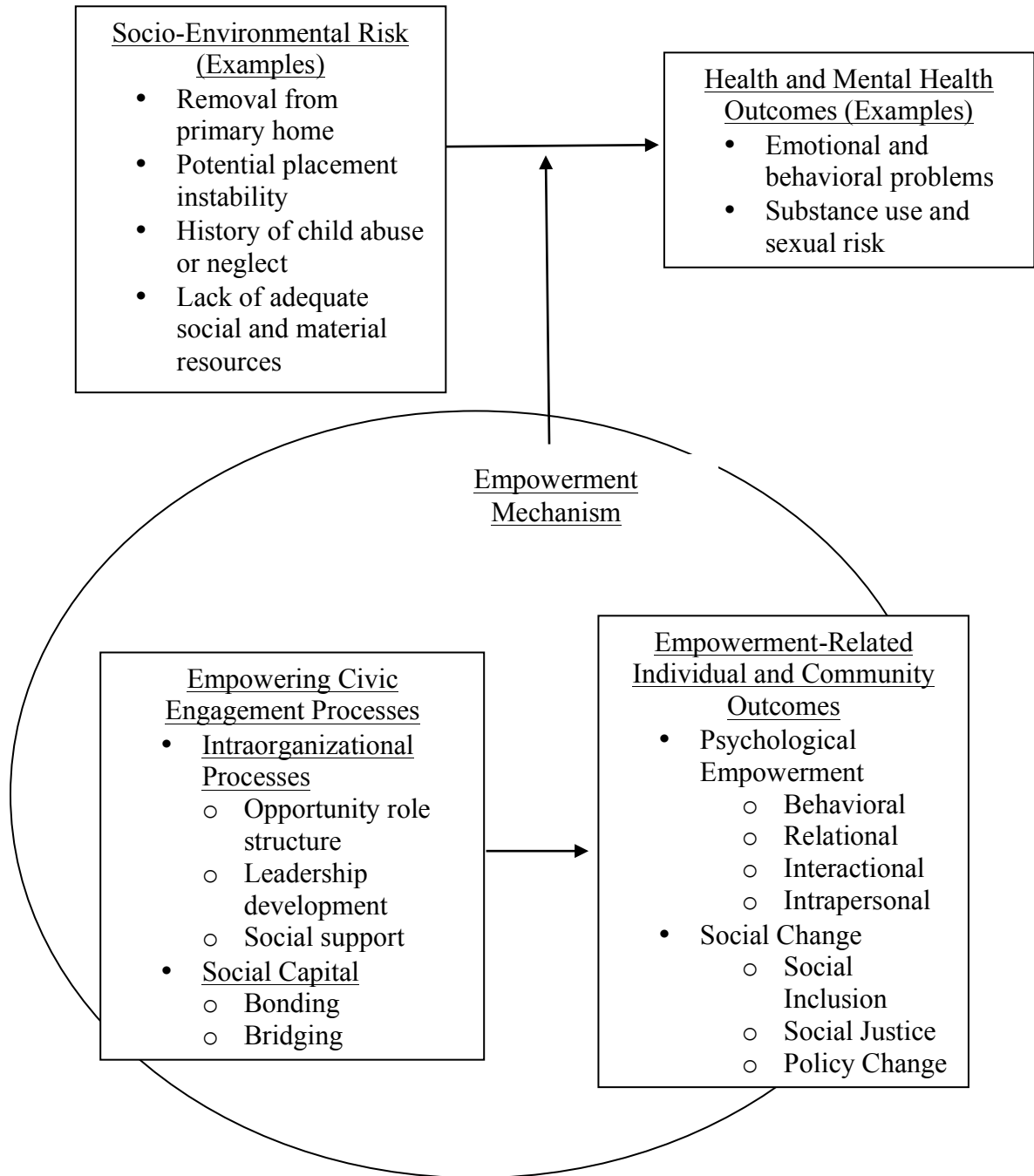
Figure 1. **Theoretical Framework**

As illustrated by **Figure 1**, the literature associates aging out of foster care with myriad socio-environmental risks, including lack of engagement opportunities. When said youth participate in a targeted engagement initiative like YAB, they are assumed to encounter empowering processes. Empowering processes—like opportunity role structure, leadership development, and social support/social capital—may, in turn, yield pro-social individual and community outcomes like psychological empowerment and the pursuit of social change.

Implications for Social Work

While the needs of children and youth *in* foster care are perennial concerns for social workers (see McGowan, 2005), less is known about youth in long term care (Simmel, Morton & Cucinotta, 2012), or those aging *out* of the system. Yet aging out youth constitute a special population, whose developmental needs deserve equity in policy and practice (Goodkind, Schelbe & Shook, 2011; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). As the changing context of youth evolves, so too does our understanding of the aging out process. In accordance with social work's organizing value of social justice, this research offers parity in scholarship; it distinguishes "aging out" as a special developmental trajectory. Similarly, much child welfare research focuses on presenting problems and risk (Checkoway, 2012; Fisher, Burraston & Pears, 2005). When young people are conceptualized as risks, their strengths are de-emphasized (Checkoway, 2012). As social welfare professionals strive to reclaim their commitment to social justice, this research adopts a positive youth development framework to explore civic engagement among youth aging out of foster care. Positive youth development views young people as

potential resources as opposed to underdeveloped citizens (Roholt, Baizeman & Hildreth, 2013). The framework assumes young people have the capacity to be resilient; they can rebound from contextual risk factors like placement in foster care (Ocasio, Staats, VanAlst, 2009). In spite of potential adversity, these youth can become social agents in their communities. To this end, this research lends a much-needed strengths-based perspective to the child welfare knowledge base.

Research Questions and Aims

This study is organized according to two sensitizing concepts, and addresses the following research questions and aims **(Figure 2):**

Research Questions and Aims	Sensitizing Concept	Guiding Theories	Data
Question #1: Why do foster youth participate in engagement activities? Aim #1: To explore pathways toward foster youth engagement Question #2: What is the essence of the foster youth engagement experience? Aim #2: To understand the social processes that foster youth encounter through engagement	Processes	Organizational Empowerment Social Capital	Qualitative Data: Content Analysis (youth/worker interviews) Quantitative Data: Univariate Analysis (youth DCF history; youth/ worker social relationship questions) Anecdotal Illustration (non-participant observation)
Question #3: What outcomes can foster youth engagement produce? Aim #3: To identify individual and community outcomes of a foster youth engagement initiative	Outcomes	Psychological Empowerment	Qualitative Data: Content Analysis (youth/worker interviews) Quantitative Data: Univariate Analysis (youth/ worker YAB perceptions) Anecdotal Illustration (non-participant observation)

Figure 2. **Research Questions and Aims**

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review is compartmentalized according to processes (organizational empowerment and social capital) and individual/community outcomes (psychological empowerment and social change, respectively) that the literature identifies with civic engagement. As previously conceptualized in **figure 1** (page 11), targeted engagement initiatives like YAB are assumed to facilitate empowering processes. Empowering processes—like opportunity role structure, leadership development, and social support/social capital—may, in turn, yield pro-social individual and community outcomes like psychological empowerment and the pursuit of social change.

Processes

Organizational Empowerment. Organizational empowerment refers to "organizational efforts that generate psychological empowerment among members and organizational effectiveness needed for goal achievement" (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, pg. 130). Specifically, the literature distinguishes between empowering and empowered organizations. While empowering organizations are assumed to yield psychological empowerment for individual members, empowered organizations are assumed to influence the macro system that they are part of. It is possible to be an empowering organization without being an empowered one. While three dimensions comprise organizational empowerment (see Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004), this study focuses exclusively on the intraorganizational dimension, and focuses on three internal processes of that dimension: opportunity role structure, leadership development, and social support.

Opportunity role structure refers to an organization's internal capacity to facilitate the empowerment process (Maton & Salem, 1995; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Research (Jarrett, Sullivan & Watkins, 2005; Stoneman, 2002) suggests that young people need these structures to make their voices heard. Youth aging out of foster care may have ideas as to how to improve child welfare systems, but may not find structures willing to support their input. In general, young people have opinions: They have perspective on policies that affect them like education, housing, and public safety (Checkoway, 2012), though they are more inclined to engage as volunteers, merely because existing structures facilitate service-oriented pathways over political ones (Yates & Youniss, 1999). In addition to domicile, socioeconomic and—in many cases—racial/ethnic disadvantage, many youth aging out of care are not 18; they cannot vote: They are viewed as passive beneficiaries of the government as opposed to citizens capable of changing it (Checkoway, et al., 2003; Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009; Stoneman, 2002).

A second dimension of intraorganizational empowerment is leadership. In their seminal article, Maton & Salem (1995) note that leadership is a process that may facilitate empowerment through (1) the direct action of a leader, and (2) a leader's indirect effect on organizational members. Leadership may refer to a mentoring adult who oversees a civic engagement initiative. He or she is likely a professional (perhaps a caseworker or educator), whose job is to encourage young people to become active citizens (Roholt, Baizeman & Hildreth, 2013, p. 168) and treat them as potential resources (Checkoway, 2012). Leadership may also refer to the elected governance of an associational membership. Larson (2000) notes that structured, voluntary participation in associational memberships provide bedrock for developing initiative, one dimension of

leadership. Initiative, in turn, is partially defined by one's concentrated engagement in his or her social environment. Russell and colleagues (2009) interviewed 15 high school leaders of gay-straight alliances throughout California and found that being an adolescent activist/leader elicited heightened engagement in community and social concerns. Like all civic endeavors, the literature indicates that the more involved an individual becomes in an associational membership, the more he or she will assume leadership responsibilities (Putnam, 2000).

The third process of intraorganizational empowerment is social support, which refers—specifically—to the social context of an organization (Maton & Salem, 1995). Like opportunity role structure and leadership, social support is a process that may facilitate empowerment. YAB creates an organizational context for social support by (1) connecting foster youth with similarly situated youth, as well as (2) connecting foster youth with adult stakeholders (civic youth workers, local and state officials, community leaders, etc.) from other social locations. The empirical literature (Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin, Petrokubi & MacNeil, 2008) refers to the latter connection as a youth-adult partnership—a partnership assumed vital to youth engagement in the civic sphere. The role of a mentoring adult is assumed to promote resilience in the lives of foster youth (Leve, Fisher & Chamberlain, 2009). While social welfare practitioners must be wary of the utopic outcomes that mentoring claims, they must also recognize their potential for good—especially when mentoring is accompanied by efforts to promote broader, systemic change (Spencer, et al., 2010). To this end, youth-adult partnerships can yield positive psychological outcomes for youth transitioning out of care (Munson & McMillen, 2009). Each intraorganizational process (opportunity role structure,

leadership, and social support) coalesces and builds to substantiate an empowering and empowered organization that youth will pass through en route to individual and community outcomes associated with civic engagement.

      Social Capital. Social capital is a phenomenon that describes the intrinsic value of social networks (Putnam, 2000). Canadian Urbanist Jane Jacobs is credited with popularizing the term in her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), though Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam are widely known to have substantiated social capital's theoretical underpinnings (Edwards, 2013). Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, did significant empirical research in the area of cultural analysis; his interest in describing social structures drew heavily on the work of Karl Marx, Emile Durkhiem, Max Weber, and other influential thinkers (Schwartz, 1997). Expanding upon their theories, Bourdieu saw social capital as something that maintained the status quo; Bourdieu's work implies that people rise to personal and professional prominence as a result of benefiting from—or capitalizing on—their own social networks (Bourdieu, 1971). While acknowledging Bourdieu's critique, Putnam (1995, 2000) conceives social capital as something capable of creating intra and inter-network ties, as well as broad social change. In *Bowling Alone* (2000), he chronicles the benefits of voluntary, civic engagement, which he assumes is the cornerstone of American democracy. When individuals—like youth aging out of care—are systemically disengaged or disconnected from their communities, Putnam asserts that both society and the individual suffer: Disengagement represents a loss of network, opportunity, and mobility (Putnam, 2000).

      Specifically, Putnam differentiates between two types of social capital: Bonding and bridging; cultivating both is assumed to yield personal and societal benefits. Bonding

social capital refers to intra-network solidarity (Putnam, 2000), which youth transitioning

out of care are assumed to lack (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Even if these youth share a

common experience, in the absence of bonding social capital, they are likely to feel

isolated in their emotions. The community organizing literature (Speer & Hughey, 1995;

Speer, Jackson & Peterson, 2001; Zimmerman, 1990) links bonding social capital/social

cohesion with the relational component of psychological empowerment, which posits that

social power is derived through social relationships (Christens, 2010/2012). To this end,

social capital and psychological empowerment constitute individual processes that are

embedded in the collective experience of civic engagement. Bridging social capital—for

example, youth-adult partnerships—refers to inter-network ties, perhaps between YAB

participants and civic youth workers; or, participants and policy makers; or, participants

and community leaders. Bridging social capital is a process that is assumed useful for

linking foster youth to external resources that supersede the civic sphere (Janzen, et al.,

2010). "External resources" may include career advice, an entry into a mentoring or

allied adult's professional network, or a letter of recommendation that would otherwise

have gone unwritten.

Outcomes

   Individual Outcome: Psychological Empowerment. Empowerment is a process

whereby an individual or community seeks to gain control of an external environment

(Zimmerman, 1995) through its psychological propensity to effect change (Speer &

Peterson, 2000); it is generally associated with voluntary participation in civil society

(Maton & Salem, 1995; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Zimmerman, 1990). To the

extent that civic engagement necessitates interfacing with macro, sociopolitical forces, it constitutes an empowering process. While the colloquial usage of "empowerment" appears malleable from context to context (Zippay, 1995), the theoretical definition of psychological empowerment refers to one's behavioral, relational, cognitive (interactional), and emotional (intrapersonal) interactions with macro forces (Christens, 2012; Speer, 2000; Zimmerman, Israel, Schultz & Checkoway, 1992).

Behavioral empowerment pertains to exercising influence in the civic sphere. It is comprised of individual acts that influence the social and political environment (Russell, 2009; Zimmerman, 1990). By nature of their participation in YAB—a voluntary association—it is logical that youth in this study posses the initiative to participate; they are "joiners," a hallmark of good citizenry (Putnam, 2000). The relational component of psychological empowerment is an evolving body of literature that pertains to the cultivation of social power through such relationships. Relational empowerment draws on social capital, social support, sense of community, and social network literatures; however, it is differentiated from its allied constructs by its ability to facilitate the empowerment of others over time (Christens, 2012). A demonstration of relational empowerment may involve seasoned YAB leaders working with new members to cultivate some kind of longitudinal change agenda pertaining to child welfare policy.

The cognitive/interactional component of psychological empowerment refers to one's *mastery of understanding* about the civic domain (Speer, 2000; Zimmerman, Israel, Schultz & Checkoway, 1992). Despite lack of structural opportunities, some disadvantaged youth may benefit from the sociopolitical engagement or knowledge of a parent (McIntosh, Hart & Youniss, 2007). This transfer of knowledge is less likely,

however, when youth live in foster care. Numerous dimensions of oppression (Windsor, Benoit & Dunlap, 2010) impose themselves on youth aging out of care. As they mature and attempt to place themselves in a broader societal context, these youth will inevitably question systemic injustices, a turning point known as critical consciousness (see Freire, 1973). Critical consciousness encourages individuals to understand, analyze, and take action against oppressive forces. For youth aging out of care, a demonstration of interactional empowerment may involve a foster youth cultivating a heightened awareness of the myriad oppressions he or she faces, as well as the civic competence and knowledge base to pursue change.

Finally, the intrapersonal/emotional component of psychological empowerment refers to one's belief in his or her capacity to effect change (Christens, Speer & Peterson, 2011; Zimmerman, et al., 1992). Sociopolitical control—the extent that youth aging out of care *feel* personally capable of making structural change—is a vital part of intrapersonal empowerment (Jennings, et al., 2006; Christens & Peterson, 2012; Peterson, et al., 2011; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). The community practice literature (see Fisher & Corciullo, 2011; Gamble, 2011; Pray, 2003) associates the cultivation of client sociopolitical control with the primary aims of social work. Peterson and colleagues (2011) postulate that, among youth, sociopolitical control constitutes a bi-dimensional construct that includes leadership competence and policy control. We assume that intrapersonally empowered youth in this study will *perceive* themselves capable of changing the status quo for other youth in care.

Community Outcome: Social Change. When youth aging out of care participate in civic endeavors—either through activism or service—society as a whole benefits, just

like the youth themselves. It is imperative to have all voices heard at the proverbial democratic table (Putnam, 1995). Including oppressed youth in the democratic process can only make government more responsive to their needs and private citizens more aware of the dimensions of oppression they face (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). Youth in general are assumed to be apolitical (Males, 1999) and passive in both civic life and responsibilities (Checkoway, et al., 2003; Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009); consequently, they are not conceptualized as full citizens (Roholt, Maizerman, Hildreth, 2013). These assumptions are likely more pervasive regarding oppressed youth.

Youth aging out of foster care may fall into the least desirable quadrant of Schneider and Ingram's (1993) social construction framework, which political scientists use to conceptualize the agenda setting phase of policy formation. The least desirable quadrant embodies weak political power and negative public perception, while the most desirable confers political prestige and an enviable public rapport. Empowering organizations that adhere to a positive youth development framework are changing popular conceptions of what youth are capable of (Roholt, Maizerman, Hildreth, 2013). The empirical literature details measurable individual outcomes—chief among them psychological empowerment—associated with youth civic engagement (see Checkoway et al., 2005; Christens & Dolan, 2011), though justice-oriented perspectives like empowerment are also capable of producing social change (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Wakefield, 1988). Systemic change in the foster care delivery system as a result of YAB activism exemplifies a macro community outcome with overt programmatic and policy implications for New Jersey's child welfare system. However, Speer (2008) notes that community interventions are rarely successful at producing substantial social change. He

expands upon Prilleltensky's (2008) notion that social change is the desired outcome of social power. To this end, we may conceptualize youth in this study as "in pursuit" of social change, since the extent to which change through power has been achieved is only anecdotally measured. Through the collection and analysis of original qualitative and quantitative research from a targeted engagement initiative, this project will describe the processes and outcomes of foster youth civic engagement, a population for whom such opportunities are rare.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional, qualitative study was employed to investigate the processes and outcomes of civic engagement among youth aging out of foster care. Exploring processes and outcomes required a phenomenological approach, whereby the researcher's primary modes of data collection were in-depth interviewing and non-participant observation. Recall the aforementioned research questions: (1) Why do youth aging-out of foster care participate in engagement activities?; (2) What is the essence of that experience?; and, (3) What are the outcomes? These questions probe for an empirical depth that questions the objectivity of lived experiences, and seeks to explain how people make sense of such experiences.

Empowerment and social capital have been tested deductively in myriad prior studies, but not expressly with aging out foster youth. Ergo, this study also utilized two surveys (one drawing from the empowerment literature and one from the social capital literature), while the qualitative questionnaire provided us inductive, narrative information about a less explored phenomena: the intersection of aging out and civic engagement. This approach was employed in an effort to triangulate the overwhelmingly qualitative nature of this research with a smaller quantitative component. This type of approach to data collection and analysis enables the researcher to probe whether participant outcomes actually resonate with perceptions of process (Creswell, 2012). For example: Much of this research focuses on processes and outcomes associated with participation in an empowering initiative. In one of the study's quantitative measures, survey items have been derived from existing empowerment scales. To this end, this

research is testing theory with a new population. The complement to those scales, however, is the in-depth interview that probed for perceptions of the extent to which leaders have—or have not—been able to affect change in their lives and the lives of other children in care.

Sample and Data Collection

Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is facilitated through Transitions for Youth, a multi-service agency for youth aging out of care in New Jersey. Transitions for Youth has a centralized administrative staff, operating from one county in the state. YAB is the targeted initiative that this research shall focus on. Its mission is to "empower youth for a better future" (Youth Advisory Board, 2013). It is implemented through local vendor agencies throughout the state, and has a presence in 12 of 21 counties. Local memberships are comprised of any foster care alumna/alumnus who has recently "aged out" or is in the process of aging out. Participants self-select to join the regional memberships, which are led by elected bodies of youth (President, etc.) under the auspices of a paid adult coordinator from the local, vendor agency. The literature refers to these adult coordinators as "civic youth workers" (Roholt, Baizeman & Hildreth, 2013).

Like many associational memberships, youth pick-and-choose when to attend YAB meetings. Consequently, the literature suggests that commitment to associational membership varies at the individual level (Speer, Jackson & Peterson, 2001). We assume, however, that members of leadership constitute a recurring organizational commitment (Russell, et al., 2009). For this reason, a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2001) was

employed to secure 14 YAB leaders (President, Vice President, Secretary, or Treasurer) from the 12 regional memberships for in-depth interviewing and survey research.

In theory, the sampling frame of YAB leaders should have consisted of 48 names (12 sites x four leadership positions per site = 48 YAB leaders statewide). However, the sampling frame—a list of leaders provided by centralized staff—was outdated and incomplete. Of names that were accurate, about half were younger than 18 years old, and barred from participating as per IRB agreement. All eligible leaders received a recruitment flyer (see appendix) via email to respond to. The recruitment flyer was emailed to non-responding youth an additional two times during a single academic year. Eventually, YAB alumni who had once been leaders were also invited into the study, until saturation was reached at 14 participants.

Leaders were interviewed at a single point in time at the location of their choice (most often: their residence or local vendor agency), where informed consent was explained and secured, and interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes. Ten leaders were female, four were male; they varied in age from 18 through 23; they identified as black, Hispanic, or interracial. All leaders were in the aging out process; some had active cases with DCF, others had closed cases. As per IRB agreement, the author took electronic notes during interview sessions. No audio or video recording was allowed. Each leader received $25 for his or her time **(Table 1).**

Table 1. Characteristics of YAB Leaders (N=14)

		Frequency	Percent
GENDER	Female	10	71.4
	Male	4	28.6
RACE/ETHNICITY	Black/African American	10	71.4
	Interracial	2	14.3
	Hispanic/Latino	1	7.1
	Does not identify	1	7.1
AGE BRACKET	18-23	14	100.0
LEADERSHIP POSITION	Vice President	5	35.7
	President	4	28.6
	Past President or V.P.	3	21.4
	Secretary	2	14.3

A link to an online questionnaire (facilitated via Survey Monkey) that featured

both closed- and open-ended questions was emailed to 12 civic youth workers who

coordinated each regional membership; the link was re-sent a week later. The online

questionnaire yielded four responses from civic youth workers: One was in his or her 40s

while the remaining were in their 30s. Two men and two women participated; three were

Caucasian and one was African American. Workers also gave electronic consent before

participating in the confidential questionnaire. Workers were not compensated for their

time **(Table 2).**

Table 2. Characteristics of Civic Youth Workers (N=4)

		Frequency	Percent
GENDER	Female	2	50.0
	Male	2	50.0
RACE/ETHNICITY	White/non-Hispanic	3	75.0
	Black/African American	1	25.0
AGE BRACKET	30-39	3	75.0
	40-49	1	25.0

Finally, the author observed five regional membership meetings (one observation

at five distinct sites) throughout the state, to observe processes in action until saturation

was reached at five observations. In the tradition of classic ethnographic research, it was

the investigator's intent to gain an in-depth understanding of the culture of YABs. As

such, attention to inter-member interactions (leader-leader and leader-member) and

external network interactions (leader/member-civic youth worker, leader/member-

community leader/DCF official), as well as attention to the structure and procedure of

each group guided the recording of field notes. Observation sites were selected through a

convenience sample based on the researcher's access to local memberships, as per

connection to civic youth workers. Three observations took place in high-density urban

areas, and two in suburban areas **(Table 3).**

Table 3. Characteristics of Non-participant Observation (N=5)

		Frequency	Percent
YAB CONTEXT	Urban (> 50,000 residents)	3	60.0
	Suburban (< 30,000 residents)	2	40.0

Both YAB leaders and civic youth workers were affiliated with YAB for

approximately two years and three months prior to the interview (27 months). For youth,

this time period refers to the months he or she was a YAB member (leader or otherwise);

for workers, this refers to the months he or she had overseen YAB **(Table 4).**

Table 4. Months Involved with YAB

	Sample	
	YAB Leaders (N=14)	Civic Youth Workers (N=4)
Mean	27.0	27.3
Median	22.5	33.0
Mode	22.0	36.0
Range	48.0	29.0

Instrumentation and Data Analysis

The YAB leader and civic youth worker questionnaires—created in concert with

methodological and subject matter (child welfare and psychological empowerment)

experts—were guided by two sensitizing concepts: processes of, and outcomes from,

foster youth civic engagement. Sensitizing concepts are assumed to provide a starting

point for qualitative research; they provide a framework for themes to emerge from the data inductively (Bowen, 2006). **Appendix A** includes the YAB leader questionnaire, while **Appendix B** was administered to civic youth workers (**Appendix C** is the recruitment flyer for YAB leaders). The qualitative interview questionnaire asked 11 open-ended questions pertaining to processes and outcomes of foster alumni engagement. Probes included: How one got involved in YAB, why one stayed involved, what YAB involvement accomplished, etc. Two surveys measured (1) the strength of relationships derived through YAB, and (2) perceptions of one's ability to effect change.

Directed content analysis of questionnaire data was conducted using ATLAS.ti software. Directed content analysis is useful for descriptive research and is a process whereby the questionnaire, initial coding schemas, and results are organized according to existing theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), while findings are comprised of emergent themes that may support, extend, or refute a theoretical framework. With respect to univariate analysis of quantitative data, Microsoft Excel produced descriptive statistics and measures of central tendency. Field notes of non-participant observation offer anecdotal contextualization of qualitative and quantitative data.

Trustworthiness

Truly rigorous qualitative inquiry hinges on the researcher's ability to be reflexive—to be critical about his or her self-involvement in the study and the lens through which he or she sees the world. Since no researcher can completely divorce him or herself from prior experience, it is important to disclose a little about the researcher, who is both part of the research instrument and the conduit for data analysis. The

researcher in question is an adult doctoral candidate at the Rutgers University School of Social Work, whose research foci include social policy, civil society, and youth development. The researcher was adopted at birth and spent *his* emerging adulthood participating in civil society initiatives like political canvassing and volunteering for a child welfare organization, a youth bureau, and several after school programs, among much else. The researcher has also been a professional political aide, where his job functions included sustained interface with public and private child welfare/human service stakeholders.

To the extent that the researcher has a personal investment in the focal population of youth aging out of care, this research may classify as semi heuristic inquiry (Patton, 2001), which—the researcher hopes—may lend this study some inherent credibility. When possible, the researcher has deliberately sought credibility through academic rigor. This is especially evident in the triangulation of data collection (in-depth interviews with youth and adults, survey research with youth and adults, and non-participant observation of YAB meetings). To this end, the researcher adheres to Patton's (2001) belief that establishing and maintaining credibility and confirmability is the bedrock for trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Chapter 4: Results

Results are organized under three broad headings: (1) Pathways toward

Engagement, which further contextualizes the sample in a substantial (non-demographic)

way and pertains to a YAB leader's child welfare involvement; (2) Processes allied with

civic engagement; and, (3) Outcomes allied with civic engagement. Processes of civic

engagement include dimensions of organizational empowerment and social capital, while

individual/community outcomes include psychological empowerment and the pursuit of

social change.

Pathways toward Engagement

In New Jersey, the focal state, a foster youth may elect to leave care at 18 years

old, which makes him or her ineligible for subsequent services. More than half of YAB

leaders in this sample had open cases with the New Jersey Department of Children and

Families (DCF) at the time of interview; similarly, more than half lived in supportive

housing at the time of interview. Traditional (non-kinship) foster homes were the most

common previous placement type. The age at which a young person first lived apart from

his or her parents was approximately 10.3; it should be noted, however, that participants

might have had open DCF cases prior to removal from the home. On average, young

people in this study lived in 11.3 foster homes, with one participant having identified 35

traditional foster placements (**Tables 5 and 6**).

Table 5. YAB Leader DCF History (N=14)

		Frequency	Percent
CURRENT CASE STATUS[a]	Open Case	8	61.5
	Closed Case	5	38.5
CURRENT LIVING ARRANGEMENT[b]	Group/Supportive housing	8	61.5
	Independent Living	2	15.4
	College Campus	2	15.4
	With a relative	1	7.7
PREVIOUS PLACEMENTS[c]	Traditional foster home	12	85.7
	Group/Supportive housing	6	42.9
	Kinship care	4	28.6
	Homeless shelter	3	21.4

[a] One participant was eligible for DCF services exclusively through homelessness, and never had a traditional case
[b] One participant did not disclose current living arrangements
[c] Nine youth had more than one placement type; percentages total more than 100.0%

Table 6. Measures of Central Tendency regarding YAB Leader DCF History

	Age when first lived apart from parents? (n=13)[a]	How many foster homes? (n=9)[b]
Mean	10.3	11.3
Median	13.0	8.0
Mode	15.0	2.0
Range	16.0	33.0

[a] One participant was eligible for DCF services exclusively through homelessness, and never had a traditional case
[b] "Number of foster homes" emerged from the data inductively; consequently, only nine of the twelve having lived in traditional foster homes volunteered this information

Participants were not asked how or why they were initially placed in foster care, though some volunteered this information regardless: "My mother died and my dad wasn't fit to take care of a child," said one. "My mom was on drugs and my dad was not present; my brother stole fruit for us to eat, and when the cops came to our house, they saw my mom's drugs all over," said another. One youth identified having been removed from her home, then reunited with her mother, only to voluntarily re-enter care six years later when her mother moved in with an "abusive boyfriend." At least two participants had been adopted at the time of interview.

Interpersonally, each youth was aware of his or her story and—with one exception—open to sharing it. This self-awareness and comfort with one's personal history was best illustrated at a YAB meeting that took place in a renovated silk mill in a former manufacturing town. There—beneath exposed pipes and in front of large factory

windows—a new addition to that county's YAB was formally introduced by one of two

civic youth workers. When the newest member addressed the group himself, he offered

his foster care history with ease: "I've been in care for about 15 years," he told the group,

"And this program was recommended to me by a former caseworker." Others in this

sample of leaders also joined YAB as per the recommendation of a mentoring adult:

> I found out (about YAB) from (civic youth worker)… I wanted to give my
>
> feedback about DCF[1] and what I've been through and how they need to
>
> work on more programs for DCF children, so I joined.

> I was a member in a life skills class with (instructor's name) and she
>
> recommended that I join because I have good communication skills and I
>
> know how to talk for other people. I know how to advocate—not for
>
> everyone—but for kids my age who are scared to speak about their
>
> situation.

Other participants learned about YAB through circumstance: "I was

having visitation with my biological father… and YAB was meeting in the next

room," said one. Another joined after having attended a YAB-sponsored art show;

a third joined after reading a recruitment flyer; a fourth noted she was enticed by

the prospect of free food in exchange for attendance. For most, however, it was

the recommendation of a friend that prompted initial YAB exploration:

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[1] "DCF" refers to the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, a cabinet-level agency charged with child and family wellbeing. Often, YAB leaders in this study referred expressly to "DCF," but—equally often—they referred to one of its divisions, programs, or pseudonyms. For consistency and confidentiality, DCF—the governing agency—is the umbrella term used throughout the results sections. Similarly, parentheticals are used to clarify statements or maintain confidentiality. Elipses indicate the omission of words or phrases. All other punctuation captures cadence to the greatest extent possible.

I was living in a residential and one of the girls was going. I was a couch

potato and one of the other girls was like, 'Let's go to that; we can help

people.' And I decided to go with her.

The people that live in (agency name) told me about it and said it was a

good thing. I went to one meeting and liked it because I realized that it

was an opportunity to help, and give back to people in similar situations.

With respect to why leaders in this sample have stayed involved with

YAB, most mentioned the spirit of "giving back" to the community of foster

children still growing up in the system. Some identified the explicit goal of

making systemic change on their behalf. One participant packaged his answer in

intrapersonal terms: "After being in the system for so long, people ask questions

and we might as well just tell our story… You can't be afraid of your past… You

always think you're alone until you meet others in the same position."

Pathways to Engagement explores the "how" and "why" an individual

joined YAB, in an effort to uncover a deeper understanding of what may motivate

a foster youth to participate in such an initiative. Analysis of quantitative data

suggests that youth in this sample have, indeed, been in care for a length of time

and have, indeed, experienced placement instability. Analysis of qualitative data

suggest that youth involve themselves in YAB for myriad reasons, though the

dominant themes revealed that most youth were recruited into the group and were

retained by the prospect of "doing good for" or helping other children in care.

Processes of Engagement

Opportunity Role Structure. Opportunity role structure refers to an organization's internal capacity to facilitate the empowerment process (Maton & Salem, 1995; Watts & Flanagan, 2007) by providing roles and niches to be filled by members of the organization. Without an opportunity role structure, young people aging out of care may not have an outlet to support their civic engagement. When asked to chronicle a typical YAB meeting—or how the group works—YAB leaders described organizational processes similar to other civil society memberships. One indicated "the group works like standard government. We have a President and Vice President, and it trickles down from there." Adherence to an agenda—usually created by a group's President—was emphasized in all interviews:

> We come in, we have a de-stressor and talk about what is going on in our lives. My perspective is usually about classes and other people may be talking about independent living. Then we go over the agenda and make sure everyone followed up on tasks (from our last meeting) and from there we go into old and new projects and status updates.

> We have food and an agenda. We review minutes from the last meeting and then we talk about what projects we want to do. If we need positions filled, we vote on that. If we have a project going on like our youth summit, we talk about that.

Academic discourse indicates that young people's civic engagement is often confined to service and devoid of activism (Checkoway, 2012), though—as one civic youth worker noted, "The central purpose of YAB is to make youth aware of what is going on with the services that are offered to them statewide. This is an opportunity for them to help change policies and procedures." Nevertheless, volunteerism and community service were identified as active components of YAB participation; in fact, most youth identified service-oriented projects before activist-oriented ones: "One of the last community service projects we did was Operation Cover in Camden. We worked with (a local nonprofit) to provide hats scarves, gloves, and we gave everything out to the homeless."

> We make care packages for youth who aged out of care. They receive
> boxes with toiletries, comforters, food—canned and boxed food—you
> name it. For Christmas… we sit on the floor in one big room and just wrap
> gifts for the kids who have aged out as well as the kids still in care.

Deciding what population should be the recipients of volunteer services was observed at a YAB meeting in the northern part of New Jersey. It was nearing Valentine's Day, and half of the membership wanted to volunteer its time at a local nursing home, while the other half wanted to create gift baskets for teen mothers. After lengthy discussion led by the group's president, it was decided that teen mothers would benefit, as the YAB had previously volunteered at the same nursing home and teen mothers were assumed the more "needy" population. The conversation of what

constitutes "need" is illustrative of a political savvy that may not always permeate

volunteer youth service. While youth in this study were not expressly asked to discuss the

dichotomy between service and activism, they separated the constructs nevertheless. "In

general, I think YAB is about advocacy and community service," said one youth. For

YAB to constitute an opportunity role structure that truly facilitates the empowerment

process, activist-oriented projects must occur in tandem with service-oriented ones, as

described below:

> YAB is run by actual youth. Our president comes up with crazy ideas, I
>
> come up with crazy ideas, and we pursue them. We get information from
>
> all over about helping youth out… we want youth to know the importance
>
> of how DCF rules and regulations affect them.

> We have set goals and projects that we work on for the year. Everyone
>
> throws in an idea. Some we vote on; some are unanimous… Soon, we're
>
> meeting with the commissioner of DCF… We had to choose three people
>
> to meet with her. I'm one of the ones going… The commissioner impacts
>
> my life. I want to give her positive feedback as well as constructive
>
> feedback.

At one YAB meeting, a member with a vibrant personality suggested that the

group write Oprah Winfrey, who might be best positioned to bring awareness to issues

surrounding foster care. "Everyone asks Oprah for stuff. We should write to Obama

because he could actually get things done for us… not just give us stuff," another youth

responded. The group's president quickly redirected the conversation, noting that every

YAB is tasked with producing "tangible outcomes," like an activist-oriented initiative the

group had pursued a year earlier: That initiative resulted in the state of New Jersey

moving a child's belongings from a respondent family's home in duffle bags as opposed

to garbage bags, which had been the prior policy.

Leadership. The primary participants of this study are YAB leaders; all civic

youth workers work hand-in-hand with YAB leadership to fulfill the YAB mission of

"empowering youth for a better future" (Youth Advisory Board, 2013). A second

intraorganizational process of organizational empowerment is leadership development.

Research suggests that leaders exhibit heightened engagement in community and social

concerns (Russell et al., 2009). Less consensus exists around what makes one become a

leader, though Larson (2000) associates leadership development with initiative. How and

why YAB leaders in this study pursued their elected positions varies greatly, with some

offering rational and succinct motivation (for example: "I like to be in charge"), and

others offering a more nuanced explanation (for example: "I want to be heard… as long

as my voice is getting across, people can choose to listen or not"). Some paths to

leadership were calculated and deliberate. "It was important for me to be president. I

always remember what my dad told me: That it was better to be a leader than a follower,"

said one participant. Others only realized their leadership aspirations after having spent

time in the general membership:

When I started (YAB), I didn't want to be anything. Eventually, I thought

'I could be secretary' and then I started to get really involved… I wanted

to speak up… I wanted to be president, but I never got it. But I got to be

Vice President and I got to speak up and tell our problems to DCF. I was

at every conference meeting we ever went to. I should have been

president; I have no problem speaking and I did all the work anyway.

The third path to leadership was least common, but equally reflective of elective

office holding: It occurred when participants were appointed to positions in the absence

of the formally elected leader:

Me and (the president) have been through hell with getting everything in

order with our YAB. We really put our hearts into it. We didn't have a

title for the longest time and we were doing so much work, so we went on

strike for a while… then the old president and vice president just randomly

left, so (civic youth worker) let us take over.

Two of the five observed meetings featured elections: In one scenario, a crowded

field of candidates—equally comprised of males and females—was given two minutes

each to make statements. In the second scenario, a more narrow candidate pool was

hampered by a snowstorm. Initially, only two candidates were present: a male candidate

for treasurer (an incumbent, running unopposed) and a female candidate for president (a

challenger, and the only female running for any office). Time passed, and—as more

members and candidates filled the room—the incumbent president remained a no-show;

his phone had also gone unanswered. Ultimately, the civic youth worker declared that—

by default—the female candidate had won the presidency (she joked privately about

limits of democracy).

Within broad guidelines, the president and vice president chart a course for their

YAB; they create agendas that are project-oriented. Secretaries, treasurers, and civic

youth workers help facilitate the agenda; therefore, the scope of YAB projects varies

from county-to-county and leader-to-leader. Even within focal groups, the experiences of

a leader are likely to differ from the experiences of lay members: "When (civic youth

worker) wants people to represent (agency name), it's usually me and my vice president.

A couple months ago, (our civic youth worker) had us talk to a parenting group."

> As the leader, I attend the statewide YAB coordinator meetings… I've
>
> spoken at conferences… I was on the search committee for the (division
>
> director's position at DCF)… I'm facilitating the youth summit… I'm on
>
> the taskforce for helping youth with placement issues... I attend the child-
>
> in-court improvement committee… the list goes on and on.

Leadership is a process that may facilitate empowerment through (1) the direct

action of a leader, and (2) a leader's indirect effect on organizational members (Maton &

Salem, 1995). This may be achieved by a YAB leader's actual ability to manage and

execute change-oriented projects, but also by his or her ability to create a legacy for other

youth:

I feel as though it was important for me to be a leader because it was

important to set an example for the younger guys. If I can help some of

them—the ones that are just entering the system—I am very glad to do

that.

As Putnam (2000) and others have noted, however: Being a leader is arduous. To

quote one YAB leader in this study: "The difference between being president and a

member is that—even though all of this is volunteer—it's not volunteer for the leaders.

It's work." The "incorporation" stage of Kieffer's (1984) participatory competence

framework refers to the civic leader experiencing struggle and exercising strategic ability.

These processes were observed at a local YAB meeting when a member expressed her

displeasure with the executive board for arranging a discussion with DCF officials about

targeted services for LGBTQ youth in care. The young woman argued that time spent

with DCF officials should have been better utilized.

The president retorted, saying "A lot of people don't know there are LGBTQ

youth in care because a lot of us haven't been given the opportunity to talk about those

issues, and tonight we have an opportunity to talk with DCF, and we're going to take one

step at a time." As the young woman walked toward the exit, the president noted: "I

respect your decision to leave, but please remember that—as a member of YAB—you

made a commitment to helping all kids in care, whether you like them or not."

Social Support and Social Capital. The start of any YAB meeting is not unlike

other associational memberships: it begins with leaders and members trickling into the

conference room of a vendor agency, and catching up on their time apart. There may or

may not be food to snack on, but—regardless—it is apparent that one is in a cordial,

friendly atmosphere. As one civic youth worker said: "YAB is a community where foster youth find others who can relate to their experiences." Social support—another intraorganizational process of organizational empowerment—refers to the social context of an organization (Maton & Salem, 1995), which may facilitate psychological empowerment. Social capital refers to the intrinsic value of social networks (Putnam, 2000) and is identified by two broad types: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital refers to building intra-network solidarity and is allied with the relational component of psychological empowerment (Christens, 2010/2011); bridging social capital is about inter-network ties, perhaps between YAB participants and civic youth workers or YAB participants and other allied adults.

YAB leaders in this study corroborated Russell and colleagues' (2009) assumption that leadership demonstrates a heightened organizational commitment, by implying that general members were often lax about YAB attendance. As such, leaders in this study universally recognized that their perceptions of intra and inter network ties likely differed from lay members' perceptions. As one leader noted, "We see the bigger picture; they see what's up the block." A majority of leaders stated that positional leadership—at face value—is what separated them from general members, who were often described as "younger" and perceived to depend on leaders for project-oriented direction and personal advice. Nevertheless, YAB leaders enjoyed their relationships with general members: "I feel like—before I sit down with members—we already have a relationship… We have a common experience to relate to," said one leader. The description of YAB as a "family" was pervasive throughout all interviews: "I think that through working with them—the YAB—we've grown into a family. Whether we have

individual problems or not doesn't matter. At YAB, it's like 'Hey girl, we gotta get this done.'"

>My relationship with everyone involved with YAB is not procedural:
>We're family… I've hung with a couple of them—the older ones—we go
>out for drinks; the younger ones, I go bowling with… We're a family first,
>colleagues second.

>My relationship with other YAB folks is—they all drive me crazy—but I
>love them more than anything… they're like little knucklehead brothers
>and sisters… I'm one of the older kids there, so I do a lot of the
>leadership… We all work close together.

Some leaders discussed service- and activist-oriented initiatives that incorporated other YAB boards, which—to the extent that those collaborations built intra-network solidarity—is further evidence of bonding social capital and relational empowerment. "I serve on (a statewide committee) with (a YAB leader from another county), so we've started facilitating things together and supporting each other's events," said one YAB president. "We invite Essex County's YAB to come visit us all the time. We stay in touch. We're like a family," said another. The notion that "YAB is a family" extended to leaders' perceptions of inter-network ties (bridging social capital), as illustrated by their relationships with their civic youth workers: "My coordinator (civic youth worker) is the only man in my life that I have called my dad. He has been there forever. He's the only person who came to my high school graduation; he's always there for me."

Definitely the adults are like a second family to me. They work with me in

a group setting and they bring me aside as an individual. They tell me

what I'm good at and build my skills to be the best advocate I can be with

the other kids.

There's a need for those adult relationships… You know how an adult will

tell a kid what they want to hear? They don't do that; they're real. (One of

our civic youth workers) is more nurturing, (the other) is more of a 'that's

not realistic' type. They are like our mother and father; that's why we're a

family.

Here again, leaders in this study indicated the uniqueness of their youth-adult

partnerships. Most leaders in this study described their relationships with civic youth

workers as collegial, while perceiving the worker-general member to have a more

"teacher-student" dynamic. "We're with these adults all the time. We have personal

meetings with them… The adults and the regular members don't have that," said one

leader. "We've gotten good at talking with the adults," said another leader, "but I know

that's not true for the regular members." Leaders also perceived access to state and local

officials, as well as community leaders, as unique to their elected positions: "One

particular person—the Director of (DCF division)—she helped me out in getting some

things that I needed, and I wouldn't have had access to her without YAB."

Because of YAB, I had a great relationship with the mayor and his

assistant and some of their local program coordinators in (the town where

I used to live)… I would also say I have a relationship with the people

from Trenton … They're good relationships.

The lady from (division of DCF)… she is absolutely amazing in getting us

information about Medicaid and the New Jersey Foster Care Scholars

program and the other laws—even the marijuana law—she just goes

through a lot for us.

The notion of "access" transcended the data and extended to tangible and

intangible benefits for leaders in this study. One leader noted that a relationship with a

caseworker got better because of his access to DCF through YAB; another indicated

that—when her civic youth worker was prohibited from doing so—she was able to secure

a professional letter of recommendation from the statewide YAB coordinator; a third

leader recalled her civic youth worker having personally purchased school supplies for

her to attend community college with. Perhaps the most palpable illustration of a tangible

benefit from a youth-adult partnership, however, came from a YAB alumna who aged out

of foster care and is currently living with a resource parent and community leader she

first met through YAB.

When asked to quantify the importance of seven categories of social relationships,

YAB leaders—as a composite—ranked their civic youth worker (the YAB coordinator)

and allied adults (community leaders) as most important (**Table 7**). When civic youth

workers were asked to quantify the frequency with which they helped YAB participants

(leaders and general members) in five pre-determined areas, their composite results

suggest that workers are "sometimes" asked to provide assistance unrelated to YAB

(**Table 8**). When asked to discuss types of assistance provided, one civic youth worker

indicated, "I have done everything from buy and drop off diapers, give rides to work,

wait while the results of a pregnancy test came back… and help secure housing."

Table 7. Youth Relationships: "On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being 'not important' and 5 being 'very important'—please indicate the value you place on your relationships with the following…" (N=14)

	M
Your YAB Coordinator (Civic Youth Worker)	4.9
Community leaders you've met through YAB	4.8
Other YAB leaders	4.6
Other YAB members	4.4
YAB Alumni	4.2
Your family[a]	4.2
Friends from school	3.2

[a] *One participant declined to answer this question*

Table 8. Civic Youth Worker Assistance: "On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being 'never' and 5 being 'very often'—indicate the extent to which you may assist YAB participants in the following…" (N=4)

	M
YAB alumni stay in contact with me	3.8
I help YAB participants in areas of life that are unrelated to YAB	3.8
I mentor YAB participants in areas of life that are unrelated to YAB	3.3
I am asked to write letters of reference for YAB participants, for educational purposes (scholarships, college admission, etc.)	2.5
I am asked to write letters of reference for YAB participants, for professional purposes (employment, etc.)	2.3

The notion of civic youth workers serving as resources was observed firsthand

when—at a local women's history event—a YAB leader in this sample was to receive a

commendation from the state legislature in recognition of her foster care activism. Other

women were also being honored—a county surrogate, the founding pastor of a church,

and an immigration lawyer among them. All honorees received five free tickets to the

event, but the focal leader brought only her civic youth worker. When accepting the

award, the focal leader said "Most of all, I want thank (civic youth worker's name),

because—without her, I wouldn't be here," the audience clapped and then the leader

quipped, "No… really… without her, I wouldn't have had a ride tonight."

Exploring processes of engagement—opportunity role structure, leadership

development, social support, and social capital—suggests that what happens within YAB

is as important as what it is capable of producing. Curiously, service- and activist-

oriented projects are often discussed and approached in silo, even though both are the

operational dimensions of civic engagement. Also: With respect to bridging social

capital, YAB leaders in this study reported more significant interpersonal bonds with

their civic youth workers than their civic youth workers reported having with them (it

should be noted, however, that youth and adults were given different instruments from

which to rank relationships). Perhaps the most significant finding from this section

pertains to the qualitative perception among youth that they have access to, and

opportunities from, their relationships with DCF officials that they would not have had in

the absence of YAB.

Individual and Community Outcomes

   Psychological Empowerment. Psychological empowerment is an assumed

outcome of voluntary participation in the civic sphere. In this study, behavioral

empowerment is best exemplified by the pro-social projects initiated and directed by

YAB leaders themselves. Projects described included service-oriented initiatives with

specified populations, but—also—activist-oriented projects like a YAB-written theatrical

skit, which is performed locally to recruit foster, adoptive, and resource parents; an

annual conference, which was created to inform DCF and state legislators about

perceived caseworker inaction; and, as described by one civic youth worker, "A hip-hop summit" to inspire youth through music.

YAB leaders also demonstrated a propensity to civically engage through their mentoring of general members—typically described as younger—and their desire to "give something back" to the larger population of children in care. This notion is illustrative of psychological empowerment's relational dimension, which is differentiated from social support and social capital by its ability to facilitate the empowerment of others over time (Christens, 2012). YAB leaders in this study best illustrated relational empowerment when they described propensities to pursue longitudinal change on behalf of other children in foster care: "I'm very passionate about changing the system… to be able to help other people so they don't have to go through the mess I went through is why I stay involved."

> Most people don't know what YAB is, but people in the same situation do know. And we are helping them. We are helping our own… other youth… might not remember our names, but they know we're always there to help them.

> When you're younger, you think you can only sell drugs; you're not smart enough; you don't have everything that you *think* everyone else has. We show the younger kids that you can be successful and happy and have a productive life; you can work hard. We were all in the same place… we give them hope.

The cognitive/interactional component of psychological empowerment is about mastery of understanding in the civic sphere (Speer, 2000; Zimmerman, et al., 1992). Research (Christens, Speer & Peterson, 2011) suggests that it is possible to understand how to pursue social change (interactional psychological empowerment), without actually feeling capable of making change (intrapersonal psychological empowerment). This premise was illustrated by a YAB leader who said, "We do projects to change the system, but we can't change the system; we can only give opinions; we can only give facts and experiences. Only DCF can change the system." Nevertheless, most leaders in this study described interactional knowledge that was tandem to intrapersonal feelings about affecting micro or macro change. For example: "I've learned the chain of command at DCF—who to talk to and who to go over," said one. Perhaps the best example of interactional knowledge yielding an individual outcome is illustrated below:

> Over winter break, DCF told me I would have to move to Camden, but when I brought this up to (administrator's name), he helped me get a better placement. When you know how the system works, you're able to better your situation… Just because you're an 'at risk' teen doesn't mean you're a throw away.

The intrapersonal/emotional component of psychological empowerment refers to one's belief in his or her capacity to affect change (Christens, Speer & Peterson, 2011; Zimmerman, et al., 1992). This trait was observed in a majority of YAB leader interviews, when youth described the impact that their YAB participation has made. One leader expressed his perception that DCF—as a whole—had "gotten better" throughout

his tenure of YAB involvement. Another stated "I can actively see change at DCF… it

makes me feel like I've done something right." A third illustrated intrapersonal

psychological empowerment when she stated, "If you want something, you have to work

for it yourself… not DCF, not your mom, not your dad…. you have to work for it

yourself." The perception of intrapersonal empowerment through personal accountability

was reiterated by a civic youth worker, who noted his role in "assisting youth in learning

what being an adult is about and learning how to be responsible, and responsible for

individual actions." As illustrated by **Table 9**, YAB leaders and civic youth workers

affirmed that YAB may constitute an empowering process, to the extent that YAB is

perceived capable of effecting change.

Table 9. Youth and Civic Youth Worker Perspectives: "On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 5 being 'strongly agree'—please indicate the extent to which you affirm the following…" (average indication)

	Sample	
	YAB Leaders (N=14)	Civic Youth Workers (N=4)
YAB has allowed me/youth to pursue change on behalf of New Jersey's youth in foster care	4.6	4.5
YAB has allowed me/youth to pursue change in my/their local neighborhood	3.9	3.5
YAB has allowed me/youth to work with others to ensure that change happens	4.7	4.3
YAB has helped me/youth to acquire the knowledge needed to affect change	4.9	4.5
Because of YAB, I feel that I can affect change	4.9	NA
Because of YAB, I am effective at making change in my community	4.9	NA

It should be noted that the singular question pertaining to service-oriented projects

("YAB has allowed me/youth to pursue change in my/their local neighborhood")

received the lowest ranking from both YAB leaders and civic youth workers, thus

reiterating the dichotomy between service and activist-oriented projects. While leaders in

this study generally recalled the service-oriented projects before the activist-oriented

ones, not a single leader made a strong connection between service and the pursuit of

social change.

      Social Change. In July 2011, YAB leaders joined New Jersey's First Lady, New

Jersey's DCF Commissioner, and representatives from the private sector to announce the

donation of 7,000 pieces of luggage to DCF. The luggage was to be used for moving a

child's belongings from a respondent home, as well as between placements. A child's

belongings had previously been moved via the cheapest means possible: garbage bags.

But through the efforts of a local YAB, the message that foster children and their

belongings had value and worth resonated throughout the state. "We thought that kids

deserved more than garbage bags," the focal President explained at a subsequent YAB

meeting, "Garbage bags sent the wrong message and we let the state know that." At the

conclusion of her explanation, silence befell the meeting room, as each member nodded

in agreement. Thanks to the focal YAB's efficacy, DCF protocol now stipulates "the use

of garbage bags is never appropriate" when moving children (Office of the N.J. First

Lady, 2011).

      The luggage initiative illustrates systemic social change in the foster care delivery

system as a result of YAB activism. When such change occurs, both youth and society

are assumed to benefit. Including foster youth in the democratic process makes

government more responsive to their needs and private citizens more aware of the myriad

oppressions they face. As leaders in this study participate in empowering engagement

initiatives like YAB, they are simultaneously challenging the status quo and forcing the

larger community to re-conceptualize their perceptions of foster youth and their

capabilities. Similarly—perhaps attributed to their access to DCF and their positive

experiences affecting it—another emergent theme pertains to the fact that leaders in this

study had generally positive perceptions of DCF: "Some kids don't know a lot about

DCF. I talk to a lot of kids about how DCF doesn't destroy your life… there are so many

opportunities. I'm staying in (DCF care) until I'm 21."

> DCF changed my life in good and bad ways; good, in that I found out
>
> what I'm going to do with my life. I've met so many people who shaped
>
> me and helped me and supported me. If I get angry, I always have
>
> something to do with myself.
>
> It's really cool for me to sit and watch other people in the system grow
>
> and overcome—and in some cases, not overcome—adversity. YAB has
>
> broadened my education and knowledge. I'm much more acceptant of life
>
> circumstances. I'm less judgmental of DCF outcomes. Kids can make it.
>
> They do make it, in different ways.

When asked to discuss "goals for the future," and longitudinal YAB influence,

leaders in this study were universally quick to identify a link between YAB or foster care

involvement and their future career choice, where the notions of "helping others" and

"making a difference" were pervasive throughout: "I want to be a nurse. I want to help

people—especially people in the same situation that I'm in. I've learned to be more

helpful; I've learned how to step up," said one. "Before YAB… I wanted to be a cop.

Then I got into YAB and, while being a cop would be good, they only take care of the

bad guys. Helping youth allows you to be part of a bigger solution," said another. "As a

future social worker, I hope to hone in my advocacy skills. And who better to advocate

for youth in care than those who were previously in care?" echoed a third.

All participants indicated that they had professional aspirations, and all

participants described a desire to continue helping those in care. When asked to offer

concluding thoughts, leaders in this study reiterated their appreciation for the "family"

(community) dynamic of YAB, but also reflected on their assumed reasons for staying

involved: "YAB is like a family. We go through it. We argue. But the outcome is so

beautiful when we get our points across and when we get our problems addressed… The

support you get from certain people is outstanding."

> YAB has saved me from the streets, has helped me identify my career
>
> choice… YAB is like—it's just been—the support system I needed for a
>
> really long time. It helped me get rid of that feeling that I was by myself.

> The purpose of YAB is not only to give youth a chance to advocate for
>
> themselves and have a direct connection to DCF, but also to give youth
>
> who feel isolated the opportunity to come together... As foster care youth,
>
> we may not have the same advantages as others – (YAB) helps us develop
>
> as a person; we develop as leaders and get a better sense of ourselves.

In his seminal article on empowerment through activism, Kieffer (1984) used a

participatory competence framework to describe empowerment through activism as a

sustained developmental process. As illustrated by their activist-oriented efforts, YAB

leaders in this study—through choice or circumstance—typify such a life course

commitment to the pursuit of social change. As evidenced by this section, foster youth

engagement is capable of producing individual and community outcomes like

psychological empowerment and policy change. Emergent themes in this section pertain

to youths' positive perceptions of DCF, as well as their sustained commitment to activism

and foster youth advocacy through their desired career choices.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Youth aging out of foster care are assumed to constitute a marginalized and disempowered group (Paul-Ward, 2009). They may not benefit from the traditional civic engagement pathways that are available to upwardly mobile youth. Empowering organizations that provide opportunity role structure, leadership, and social support/social capital are needed to help facilitate a foster youth's engagement process, in the hope of yielding individual (psychological empowerment) and community (social change) outcomes. An example of an organization designed to be both empowering and empowered is Youth Advisory Board (YAB), a statewide council in New Jersey, through which aging out youth participate in service- and activist-oriented projects, and have direct access to the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF), the agency responsible for the care and well being of foster youth. The YABs, while adhering to a statewide model, are facilitated locally by a civic youth worker/adult coordinator from one of 12 vendor agencies; however, YAB workflow are directed by an elected foster youth leadership, comprised of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer.

This phenomenological study analyzed data from YAB leader/civic youth worker interviews and survey research, as well as non-participant observation at five local YAB meetings. Directed content analysis illustrated concepts from the study's theoretical framework (organizational empowerment, social capital, psychological empowerment, and social change). Additionally, five emergent themes transcended the data inductively (**Table 10**).

Table 10. Emergent Themes

Theme	Summation
SERVICE AND ACTIVISM	Both YAB leaders and civic youth workers discussed service and activism in silo, in spite of civic engagement's bi-dimensionality
YAB IS A FAMILY	YAB leaders described their YAB-oriented relationships in overwhelming positive terms, though civic youth workers did not report the same intensity
OPPORTUNITY THROUGH ACCESS	YAB leaders illustrated opportunities they were able to secure because of their affiliations with DCF officials
POSITIVE CONCEPTIONS OF DCF	YAB leaders described an overwhelmingly positive rapport with DCF officials and the agency as a whole
PARTICIPATORY COMPETENCE	YAB leaders explicated a desire to continue their activist efforts throughout their adult developments

Emergent themes are further explored below, organized by research question. Theoretical concepts—illustrated at length in the results section—are also reiterated and discussed.

Research Question #1: Why do Foster Youth Participate in Engagement Activities?

Analysis of data suggests that leaders in this sample came to YAB with myriad foster care placement experiences, though out-of-home, non-kinship, "traditional" foster care placements were most common. Corroborating the notion that youth in extended care experience myriad placement disruptions (Leathers, 2006) and lack relational/ecological permanence (Sanchez, 2004), the mean number of placements for this sample of youth leaders was 11.3; the median was eight. It should be noted that leaders were not expressly asked about number of placements, though over two-thirds offered placement history regardless. While some leaders encountered YAB circumstantially, most were referred (or recruited) by an adult or other YAB member. It should be noted that the literature identifies many service-oriented outlets for young people, though activist-oriented outlets are less frequent. As such, YAB constitutes a

unique venture in the lives of these youth, whom Checkoway (2012) notes are assumed to be apolitical.

Research Question #2: What is the essence of their engagement experience?

Organizational empowerment (OE) refers to "organizational efforts that generate psychological empowerment among members and organizational effectiveness needed for goal achievement" (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, pg. 130). This study focuses exclusively on the intraorganizational dimension of OE, and emphasizes three internal processes of that dimension: opportunity role structure, leadership development, and social support. While **opportunity role structure** refers to niches that must be filled within an organization, **leadership development** may refer, in part, to the direct action of a leader or his/her indirect effect on organizational members, as well as his or her initiative to lead. Directed content analysis revealed illustrations of both these concepts, when youth participants discussed how they first immersed themselves in YAB and why they pursued their elected position. Leaders in this study described a desire to talk with DCF or to "advocate" for other youth as their motivation to join or stay involved with YAB. At the time of interview, both YAB leaders and civic youth workers in this study had been involved with YAB for an average of 27 months. While facilitating YAB was a professional function for civic youth workers, YAB leaders generally pursued their elected positions because they were inherently compelled to (for example: "I like to be in charge,") or because—through participating in YAB as a general member—these individuals felt they could be more effective in an elected position.

Service and Activism. YAB was described by leaders and civic youth workers, and observed to be, reminiscent of other associational memberships. As one leader noted,

"The group functions like standard government." Indeed, all YAB meetings began

official business by having the group's secretary read prior meeting minutes and then the

larger group voting to accept or amend them. To this end, YAB functions as a micro-

democracy (Roholt, Baizeman & Hildreth, 2013) capable of socializing YAB leaders for

participation in the civic sphere and political dialog, as they place themselves in a

broader, societal context (Erikson, 1968). One emergent theme regarding the execution of

YAB pertains to the dichotomy between service- and activist-oriented projects. As

expressed in the literature, activist-oriented projects are often de-emphasized in the field

of youth development. Leaders in this study were not asked to make an explicit

distinction between service and activism, though—in each of their interviews, and in

interviews with civic youth workers—the constructs were discussed separately. Also: In a

quantitative ranking of perceived change derived through YAB involvement, both leaders

and civic youth workers ranked service-oriented projects lowest (for example: "YAB has

allowed me/youth to pursue change in my/their local neighborhood").

     YAB is a Family. Like the larger civic sphere, leaders in this study hinted at intra-

network discordance (for example: "Whether we have individual problems or not doesn't

matter. At YAB, it's like 'Hey girl, we gotta get this done'"), which is illustrative of

Kieffer's (1984) "incorporation" stage of participatory competence, whereby civic

leaders are assumed to identify and address potential roadblocks to progress. However, in

describing fellow leaders and regular members, the notion that "YAB is a family"

transcended the data loudly (a second emergent theme). Interviews with leaders and civic

youth workers—as well as non-participant observation of YAB meetings—confirmed

that the group is a source of **social support** for both YAB leaders and regular members.

As one civic youth worker noted, "YAB is a community where foster youth find others who can relate to their experiences." This notion is illustrative of **bonding social capital** (Putnam, 2000), which refers to intra-network solidarity. The solidarity that a YAB leader acquires through his or her affiliation with the group may mitigate the isolation that foster youth are assumed to feel.

Equally important were leaders' descriptions of—as well as observations of—youth-adult partnerships (Zeldin, Petrokubi & MacNeil, 2008). Such partnerships are assumed to constitute **bridging social capital** or inter-network ties, and are best illustrated by leaders' descriptions of—and observed interactions with—their civic youth workers. At one observed YAB meeting, the elected leadership brought snacks for the regular membership in honor of a civic youth worker's marital commitment; at a local women's history event, a YAB leader (and an honoree at the event) brought her civic youth worker as her only guest. DCF personnel and allied community stakeholders were also identified as resources for leaders in this study, though YAB leaders were apt to note the distinction between the caliber of *their* relationships with adults (perceived as collegial) and the *perceived* relationships of regular members to adults (perceived as more formal). Leaders in this study also perceived general members as "young" (observationally, this appears to be a figurative assessment), and perceived themselves as mentors to general members, while simultaneously conceptualizing civic youth workers as mentors to the leaders (for example: "They're like our mother and father"). Contradictorily, civic youth workers did not express the same perceptions (note: civic youth workers were asked to discuss YAB leaders and members as a composite, and were asked to respond to a different scale than was administered to the YAB leaders).

Research Question #3: What outcomes can foster youth engagement produce?

Opportunity through Access. The notion of opportunity through access—as it relates to a YAB leader's experience—also emerged from the data. While no leader in this study expressly pursued his or her elected position to derive a personal benefit, some leaders—without prompt—provided illustration of a time when their case received individual attention (not necessarily preferential treatment) because they had access to people inside DCF—people beyond their caseworker. In one instance, a leader in this study avoided placement in an emergency shelter during her semester break from college, which may have been the appropriate procedural fix to her situation, but not necessarily a practical one. Herein lies a quintessential illustration of Putnam's (2000) assertion that social networks are inherently valuable, and—perhaps—the most palpable illustration of **psychological empowerment**, as this young woman effected change in a situation that may otherwise have been perceived to be out of her control.

Positive Conceptions of DCF. A fourth emergent theme was the positive conception of DCF by YAB leaders (for example: "I'm less judgmental of DCF outcomes"). Leaders in this study—through interview and observation—demonstrated a desire to bring general members and non-members closer to the agency charged with their care. In one instance, the author observed YAB leaders working alongside DCF to present information on services for LGBTQ youth in care; in another instance, a focal leader described helping DCF create a public service announcement encouraging youth to stay in care until they reached 21 years old. Directed content analysis of interview data suggested that YAB leaders gave presentations regularly with—and often for—DCF officials. To this end, one is left to wonder if, in fact, YAB may function as a mouthpiece

for DCF, and the processes and outcomes of YAB are, de facto, orchestrated by the

agency. Or; convergently, it is equally plausible that DCF and its constituents (in this

case: children and youth in foster care) have similar goals, and YAB leaders—in spite of

myriad geographical, positional, educational, age-related, and socioeconomic

differences—are the best conduits to achieve them.

  Participatory Competence. When discussing future professional goals, leaders in

this study expressed a desire to "help people," including those in care. This notion of

sustained activism parlayed into YAB leaders' explication of their career goals, which

were unanimously allied with helping professions like social work and law. This

sustained commitment is most illustrative of Kieffer's (1984) participatory competence

framework, which may promote a sense of psychological empowerment throughout a

YAB leader's continued coming of age and adult development. Cultivating participatory

competence is assumed to afford such a leader more control of (or the perception of

control of) socio-environmental forces that are generally disempowering for youth aging

out of care. As illustrated by the luggage policy, whereby a focal YAB was successful in

lobbying DCF to change their protocol regarding the removal of a child's belongings

from placement to placement (perhaps the most tangible of **social change** outcomes in

this study), it is possible for those aging out to make a sustained difference in the lives of

children still in care, and it is possible for society to re-conceptualize those aging out as

civic actors capable of effecting government policy, as opposed to the mere passive

beneficiaries of it.

  In describing why they stayed involved with YAB, leaders in this study

overwhelming expressed a desire to do good for—and "give back" to—other youth in

care. This desire to help extended to general YAB member, but—also—to foster youth who had never attended YAB (for example: "Other youth… might not remember our names, but they know we're always there to help them"). Since social change is incremental and the pursuit of it takes time, this notion of "giving back" extends to infants and children in New Jersey's care who are too young to participate. To borrow a phrase from the economics literature: The theme of "giving back" may illustrate a positive externality, whereby the maximum benefit of YAB efficacy is not felt by the leaders themselves, but rather, is a benefit to the larger population of children in care and society as a whole.

Implications

  Research. Future research should further explore the intersection of civic engagement and aging out by measuring the aforementioned processes and outcomes with larger samples and validated survey instruments. Larger, quantitative samples have potential to yield data that is generalizable and broadly useful for the creation and maintenance of allied engagement initiatives. Future longitudinal research may also examine the extent to which such initiatives facilitate the cultivation of participatory competence, or feelings of empowerment through the life course. Additionally: As more engagement initiatives are created and assessed, program evaluators must agree on what constitutes success for such initiatives. For example: Do we measure the efficacy of such initiatives according to how many policies have been created or modified as a result of foster youth activism, or do we give more weight to individual outcomes like the cultivation of psychological empowerment? Psychological empowerment at the

individual level is presumably more common than policy change is at the macro level, but—also—it is harder to measure, since doing so would rely heavily on participant self reports of a multi-dimensional construct.

Practice. In the absence of a national YAB model, comprehensive, large-scale intervention research will be difficult. As such, the author advocates the creation of a uniform, national YAB model, which can be implemented through the states. Locally, regional/county-wide memberships must exhibit fidelity to the national model. In the absence of fidelity, there will be variance with respect to how such boards are implemented. Similarly, without fidelity to the model, the processes and outcomes that one experiences from participating in a local board may not be congruent with processes and outcomes encountered by members of another board. The prospective national YAB must have clearly operationalized parameters for participation (age, population served, etc.) as well as clearly operationalized goals and objectives (for example: "Every local board must execute at least six projects per year that incorporate both service and activism"). Subsequent operationalization must specify how service and activism are linked, so that they do not occur in silo, as separately executed projects. The author believes that such a model can serve social work practitioners well, as the profession— through its governing and accrediting bodies—continually calls upon social workers to facilitate partnerships with clients in pursuit of social change.

Policy. Policymakers will benefit from this in-depth understanding of constituent voices that are often oppressed or silenced in civic and political discourse. As these 14 young people are heard, however, the author hopes that policymakers will be responsive to their needs and to the notion that targeted engagement initiatives can build capacity for

a potentially disempowered group. Broadly speaking, young people are assumed to be apolitical; they benefit from government services like child welfare, education, community development, and public safety, though they are rarely conceptualized as capable of effecting any of those domains. The author believes that this project is an innovative contribution to the positive youth development literature, which suggests that young people are, in fact, strengths-based, and should be perceived and treated as such (as opposed to deficits based). Many young people do care about the policies that effect them, and—through targeted channels and pathways for engagement that include activism (not just service-oriented pathways)—they can be capable of making their voices heard and, perhaps, making a difference in the lives of others.

Limitations

This study recruited leaders from 12 regional memberships of YAB, a statewide foster youth engagement initiative. In an effort to capture a homogenously involved experience, this study adheres to Russell and colleagues' (2009) inference that leadership is a dimension of organizational commitment; however, this study excludes lay members who may, in fact, be more involved in YAB than some elected leaders. In the absence of a sampling frame that includes measures of involvement, this study relied on organizational leadership as a proxy. However, not all leaders were invited to participate: IRB agreement stipulated that minors (leaders under 18 years old) could not be invited into the study; similarly, access to leaders was established after making initial contact with the civic youth worker in charge of each membership.

This study is not representative of all youth aging out of care, or even all of New Jersey's aging out youth. Like all qualitative research, this study is generalizeable only to its primary participants: YAB leaders over 18 years old, which constitutes a self-selecting, high achieving sample. Qualitative research is not context-free. Each participant experiences reality differently; as such, the lens each brings to the engagement experience differs; the processes they encounter also differ, as well as their perceptions of outcomes. The themes uncovered here do not yield a quantifiable summation of whether engagement actually makes a difference for this traditionally disempowered group. Instead, through a triangulation of data collection and analysis methods, this study presents the essence of the civic engagement experience for youth participating in this study.

Conclusion

This phenomenological research utilized in-depth interviewing and survey research with both foster youth leaders and civic youth workers, as well as non-participant observation, to illustrate processes (organizational empowerment and social capital) and outcomes (psychological empowerment and the pursuit of social change) of a targeted, engagement initiative serving young people aging out of New Jersey's foster care system. Directed content analysis provided illustration of the aforementioned theoretical constructs, while five themes emerged from the data inductively: (1) Service and Activism, whereby both YAB leaders and civic youth workers discussed service and activism in silo, in spite of civic engagement's bi-dimensionality; (2) YAB is a Family, whereby YAB leaders described their YAB-oriented relationships in overwhelming

positive terms, though civic youth workers did not report the same intensity; (3)

Opportunity through Access, whereby YAB leaders illustrated opportunities they were

able to secure because of their affiliations with DCF officials; (4) Positive Concepts of

DCF, whereby YAB leaders described an overwhelmingly positive rapport with DCF

officials and the agency as a whole; and, (5) Participatory Competence, whereby YAB

leaders explicated a desire to continue their activist efforts throughout their adult

developments. The author believes that this research has profound implications for future

research, practice, and policy for this population. The author also believes that this

research makes an innovative and (much needed) strengths-based contribution to the

child welfare literature, as well as the civil society, social capital, social change, and

empowerment disciplines.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire for YAB Leaders (Youth)

<u>Part 1. Why do Youth Participate in YAB?</u>
The first set of questions pertains to how you got involved with YAB and what—specifically—you and the group do.
- What is your role in YAB (President, V.P., etc.)?
- How many years have you been involved? What month/year did you join?
- How did you find out about YAB and decide to join? Why did you want to participate?
- Can you tell me how the group works? Walk me through a typical meeting.
- Now can you tell me what you do—or what you've done—as a leader? Why did you want to be part of the YAB leadership?

<u>Part 2. What is the Essence of Experience?</u>
These questions pertains to things you've experienced and people you've met through YAB.
- Can you tell me about your relationship with the other YAB leaders, members, and alumni? To what extent are you friendly with them?
- Do you think your experiences are the same as most YAB participants? Why or why not?
- Now I'd like to hear about the adults you've met through YAB—people like your (adult) YAB Coordinator and other community leaders. What are those relationships like?
- Do you think your experiences are the same as most YAB participants? Why or why not?

On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being "not important" and 5 being "very important"—please indicate the value you place on your relationships with the following…

	Not Important 1	2	3	4	Very Important 5
Other YAB leaders	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
Other YAB members	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
Friends from school	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
Your family	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
YAB Alumni	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
Your (adult) YAB Coordinator	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
Community leaders you've met through YAB	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ

<u>Part 3: Individual and Community Outcomes</u>
The next set of questions pertains to the outcomes that YAB may have had in your life and in the life of your community.
- In what ways has YAB had an impact on your life? What—if anything—have you learned from it? Why do you stay involved?
- In what ways has YAB had an impact on your community or in the lives of other youth in foster care?

On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree"— please indicate the extent to which you affirm the following statements…

	Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
YAB has allowed me to pursue change on behalf of New Jersey's youth in foster care	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
YAB has allowed me to pursue change in my local neighborhood	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
YAB has allowed me to work with others to ensure that change happens	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
YAB has helped me acquire the knowledge needed to affect change	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
Because of YAB, I feel that I can affect change	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
Because of YAB, I am effective at making change in my community	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ

Part 4: DYFS History
It's great that you are working on behalf of New Jersey's youth in foster care; the next set of questions asks about your personal experiences with DYFS. Remember: you can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable.

- When did you—personally—become involved with the DYFS system?
- How old were you when that happened?
- Did you ever live away from your parents?
    - o IF YES: Where did you live?
    - o IF YES: How long did that last?
- Where do you currently live?
- Do you know if you have an active or closed case with DYFS?
- Is there anything else you care to share about your DYFS experience?

Part 5: Demographics and Concluding Questions
The last set of questions asks about your future goals, as well as some demographic areas that we did not get to discuss earlier.

- How old are you?
- What gender do you identify as?
- What race/ethnicity best describes you?
- What are your goals for the future?
- Has your participation in YAB influenced where you see yourself?
- Is there anything else that you would like to mention about your participation in YAB?

Appendix B: Questionnaire for Civic Youth Workers

Part 1. YAB and Youth-Adult Partnerships
These questions pertain to your relationship with youth—specifically youth leaders—who participate in Youth Advisory Board (YAB), as well as YAB in general…
- In what month/year did you become the YAB Coordinator for your county?
- Can you tell me how YAB works? What would you say is its central purpose?
- What are some of the most memorable projects that your YAB has executed?

On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree"— please indicate the extent to which you affirm the following statements…

	Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
YAB allows participating youth to pursue change on behalf of other youth in foster care	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
YAB allows participating youth to pursue change in their local neighborhood	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
YAB allows participating youth to work with others to ensure that change happens	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
YAB helps participating youth acquire the knowledge needed to affect change	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ

On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being "never" and 5 being "very often"—please indicate the frequency that the following occur in your professional life…

	Never 1	2	Some-times 3	4	Very Often 5
I am asked to write letters of recommendation for YAB participants	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
I am asked to write professional letters of recommendation for YAB participants	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
YAB alumni stay in contact with me	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
I mentor YAB participants in areas of life that are unrelated to YAB	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ
I help YAB participants in areas of life that are unrelated to YAB	θ	θ	θ	θ	θ

- If you answered "yes" to the previous two questions (mentoring/helping participants in non-YAB areas), please share the types of support you provide.
- Can you provide any additional insight into the youth-adult partnership that you share with YAB participants?

Part 2. Demographics
- If you are comfortable sharing your exact age, please do so; otherwise, please indicate your age bracket (for example: 20s, 30s, 40s, etc.).
- What gender do you identify as?
- What race/ethnicity best describes you?

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

Are you a Current or Former
YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD LEADER, who is
at least 18 years-old?

Would you like to **HELP OTHER YOUTH**
by sharing your YAB experiences?

Would you like to **EARN $25** for doing so?

If you answered "YES" to these questions,
contact Brad Forenza(bforenza@ssw.rutgers.edu) to...

PARTICIPATE IN A
30 MINUTE INTERVIEW
AND RECEIVE $25 FOR YOUR TIME!