Pushing the Boundaries
What Youth Organizers at Boston's Hyde Square Task Force Have to Teach Us About Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Across the United States, researchers and youth workers alike have identified an increasing number of civically engaged youth who are organizing to improve their communities and schools. By taking an action-oriented approach, these youth are speaking back to the notion that they are uninvolved in society. This interview-based study explores the meaning-making experiences of youth organizers at Boston's Hyde Square Task Force (HSTF) to better understand how they engage. Findings suggest that HSTF is engaging two broad groups of youth by focusing on both their personal development and their sense of community awareness. The study introduces an organizing model of youth engagement at the HSTF and calls on educators to consider organizing as an effective approach to civic engagement.

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ACROSS THE UNITED STATES today, a movement of civically engaged youth is building. Since the turn of the 21st century, researchers and youth workers alike have been identifying an increasing number of youth involved in youth organizing efforts to improve their communities and their schools (Delgado & Staples, 2008; Shah & Mediratta, 2008; Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008). By taking an action-oriented approach, these youth are speaking back to the notion that they are uninvolved in society and are painting a new picture of what young people are capable of achieving (Putnam, 2001). Youth organizing intends predominately to teach marginalized youth to examine and challenge their own life situations in relation to the sociopolitical context surrounding them, forefronting the idea that youth are in the best position to understand and advocate for their community's needs (Checkoway, 2005; Ginwright, 2003; Yates & Youniss, 1999). Because youth organizing has the dual purpose of developing youth as individuals while simultaneously teaching them the knowledge and skills they need to take collective community-based action, I argue that it is an ideal venue within which to study youth civic engagement (see also Christens & Dolan, 2011).

Traditionally, research defines youth civic engagement as youth having the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to participate politically in the community (CIRCLE, 2003; Niemi & Junn, 1998). This type of engagement is measured via school-based tests that assess civic knowledge about the fundamental processes of American government, leaving out the participation component that is part and parcel of civic engagement (Gibson, 2001).[1] This knowledge-based approach tends to set apart White, privileged students who are taught civics in school as being engaged, and students of color, who are less likely to receive civic education, as being inherently disengaged. This idea undergirds two recent studies that have identified a civic opportunity or empowerment gap between youth who are poor, ethnic/racial minorities, or immigrants and those who are middle-class, White, and native-born citizens (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2010). If we limit our civic engagement research to knowledge-based efforts in schools, I contend that we will continue creating a skewed sense that youth of color are disproportionately disengaged and a narrow conception of civic engagement that ignores alternative forms of involvement that forefront an action orientation.

By studying youth organizing, I am instead joining other researchers who are working to extend the discussion of civic

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engagement by questioning narrow definitions and offering alternative examples of political socialization and social responsibility (Yates & Youniss, 1999). As Haste (2007) aptly stated, we need to expand our definition of a competent citizen by creating a "more fruitful and realistic picture of the nature and goals of citizenship" that moves "beyond the conventional boundaries of civic engagement" (p. 21).[2] Paying heed to Haste's advice, in this study I explore what it takes to develop a civically engaged young person in the United States by interviewing youth organizers at Boston's Hyde Square Task Force (HSTF). To guide the interviews, I asked the following research questions:

1. What elements of the HSTF do the Youth Community Organizers (YCOs) highlight as being defining features of their experience?
2. When talking about those features, how do the YCOs frame their personal development, and what patterns and variations emerge?
3. Based on those patterns and variations, what do we learn about youth organizing as a form of civic engagement, and what might this suggest about more traditional approaches?

Based on my analysis, I argue that the HSTF's youth organizing approach, with its dual focus on personal and community development, has an ability to effectively respond to a wide spectrum of youth and provides a solid basis upon which we can build an effective model of youth civic engagement. To explore this argument, I first present the background of the study. Next, I situate the study in its relevant literature regarding civic education, positive youth development, and youth organizing. I then present the theoretical framework that guided my data analysis followed by my research design, methodology, and limitations section. After that, I turn to my findings, which are broken into three thematic parts. I conclude by presenting a model of youth civic engagement at the HSTF that builds upon the study's theoretical framework.

Background of the Study

Since its inception in 1991, the HSTF has served as a revitalizing force for its neighborhood, which includes over 48,000 predominately low-income Latino residents (Hyde Square Task Force, 2008). The organization is dedicated to increasing youth voice in an effort to better the community, the Boston Public Schools, and the young people themselves. They do this through their leadership approach—the youth community development model, which attempts to blend individual youth development with an understanding of the macrolevel issues involved in community development. Along a spectrum from youth-led to adult-led community organizing, the HSTF falls somewhere in the middle, with the adults structuring the learning environment and the youth identifying the issues they would like to address. The following quotations, taken from interviews I conducted with YCOs at the HSTF, represent this dual approach of personal and community development. Here 17-year-old Stephany, 18-year-old Cynthia, and 17-year-old Oscar introduce who they are, what they do, and why it is so important for youth voices to be heard, thereby challenging the stereotypes regarding the capabilities of youth:

A youth community organizer is a youth who is an advocate for its community. It's basically the liaison between two bodies, and whatever issue we come around, we know that we can find the solution. We take it on, and that's our campaign, and we fight and work for it until we get it done.

We are one of the main [youth] voices to the government and the politicians, and we're the ones that are going to the mayor and going to the superintendent and saying this is what we want, this is what we need, this is what our community wants.

I feel like my voice is being heard [at the HSTF], and I am just showing people that every teenager is not the same, and you actually need to pay attention to us because we are not all about just going to school, going home, or staying on the street. We are actually trying to make a difference.

The YCOs' experiences highlight the fact that these youth *do* have a voice and important insight into their schools and communities; it also calls attention to the fact that they are not often listened to nor do they have many spaces within which they can act upon their insights. These quotations exemplify the fact that the HSTF gives the YCOs a voice in their communities, acknowledging that "youth hold important knowledge about their social conditions and about social change" and have the right as "disenfranchised members of society to participate in public life and to contribute their knowledge to the public sphere" (Fox et al., 2010, p. 632). This research intends to give the YCOs a voice in the debate about civic engagement. In doing so, they get the opportunity to talk about what it means to be civically engaged from their perspective and how the HSTF is filling a gap that would otherwise exist in their lives.

Reviewing the Literature

While the youth organizing literature forms the basis for my research, the field is directly informed by the civic education and positive youth development literature. I briefly explore each area, ultimately building the case for why we need to consider youth organizing as an important form of youth civic engagement.

CIVIC EDUCATION

The most recent civic education studies (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006) established a positive correlation between civic education, political knowledge, and predicted civic engagement later in life. Specifically, Delli Carpini & Keeter's (1996) study of political knowledge contended that factual knowledge about topics like government processes and political leaders' perspectives of current economic and social issues is important because the more you know, the more likely you are to be an effective participant in our democracy. Relatedly, a report by CIRCLE (2003) argued that schools are important venues for civic education because, more than any other institution in this country, they have the capacity to reach almost every young person.

While many researchers and educators support the idea of schools having a civic mission, there is less agreement regarding how to effectively teach civic education and what should be

included in the curriculum (CIRCLE, 2003). Specifically, McDonnell (2000) noted that most civics courses teach more about the structure and function of government rather than focusing on the skills students will need in order to become active participants in their government. Kahne and Westheimer (2003) argued that most civics classes ignore the political and social climates and focus purely on character development. Other studies have found that civic education courses tend to ignore issues of societal inequity and disconnect students' lived experiences from the larger social context within which they operate (Banks, 2007; Fuller & Rasiah, 2005; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). This limits schools' ability "to serve as sites of apprenticeship for democracy" (Nieto & Bode, 2003, p. 53) and decreases the likelihood that students will gain the skills necessary to address social inequity.

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Although schools are an obvious venue for the engagement of young people, in response to the wave of negativity that patholo-gized youth in the early nineties, youth workers began providing opportunities for youth to develop outside of schools (Ginwright, 2003; Hosang, 2003). Instead of labeling young people as problems that needed to be fixed, these organizations began defining youth as assets that could be developed—an idea that came to be termed positive youth development (PYD) (Listen, Inc., 2003). According to Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, and Lerner (2005), PYD is a "strength-based vision and vocabulary for discussing America's young people" that is "beginning to replace long-held beliefs of the inevitable so-called storm and stress of adolescence and the predictable engagement by youth in risky or destructive behaviors" (p. 10).

The PYD approach attempts to cultivate what Lerner et al. initially called the *Five Cs of PYD*, which are competence, confi-dence, character, connection, and caring, by providing opportuni-ties for youth engagement and supportive, nurturing relationships with caring adults. While PYD was a shift in the right direction, its exclusive focus on the development of the individual left out an important component; namely, the relationship between individu-als and communities (Ginwright, 2003). As Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) noted, the PYD model "overcompensates by promoting supports and opportunities as the only factors necessary for positive and healthy development of youth, and does not examine thoroughly the ways in which social and community forces limit and create opportunities for youth" (p. 84).

Since that time, a sixth *C* has been developed that stands for contribution to self, family, community, and civil society (Zarrett & Lerner, 2008). In addition, several other positive youth develop-ment frameworks have been created that incorporate a community component. These include the notion of the *fully functioning adult* (Witt, 2012), who has the ability to work, build relationships with other adults, and be a good community citizen; the *community action framework* (Gambone & Connell, 2004), which sees community groups and meaningful involvement opportunities as crucial to the development of young people; and the *40 develop-mental assets model* (Search Institute, 2012), which includes the concept of youth empowerment, or youth feeling valued by adults

and partaking in service to community members. While each of these models consider community involvement to be an important part of youth development, their ultimate purpose is still about the healthy development of young people and not about helping them gain a larger understanding of how social and political realities affect them or how they can challenge injustice—two things that are central to a youth organizing approach (Ginwright & James, 2002).

YOUTH ORGANIZING

Contemporary youth organizing in the United States has its primary roots in the progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and in the long tradition of community organizing driven by the work of Saul Alinsky on the South Side of Chicago during the Great Depression era (Warren et al., 2008). Like PYD, youth organizing was resurrected in the late 1980s in response to the negative forces that labeled youth as problems (Ginwright, 2003); however, it took the PYD approach one step further by "actively engaging young people as partners in organizational and public decision making" (O'Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 19). In other words, youth organizing has a focus on political action and power that PYD does not.

Researchers find youth organizing to be associated with positive youth development, greater sociopolitical awareness, and increased civic engagement (Ginwright, 2003; Listen, Inc., 2003; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). It uses leadership development and social justice strategies to help young people identify an issue that personally affects their lives, to conduct action-based research to uncover the root cause of that issue, and then to take collective action in order to address the issue, thereby altering power relations in their community and increasing youth civic capacity (Fox et al., 2010; Listen, Inc., 2003). It also helps youth, especially those who are marginalized, realize that many of their personal problems have larger political implications that can be addressed by building power and acting together with others.

Overall, youth organizing provides young people with real opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and authentic roles where they can be meaningful decision makers (Lewis-Charp, Yu, & Soukamneuth, 2006). Although youth organizing runs along a spectrum from adult -led, to youth-led, to a combined intergen-erational approach (Delgado & Staples, 2008; Listen, Inc., 2003), there are several commonalities across groups. First, all groups believe that youth voice is fundamental to solving important social issues, especially in realms such as education reform where they have a special stake (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006). Furthermore, because youth organizing typically engages more marginalized youth, identity often becomes an important factor around which youth organize (Lewis-Charp et al., 2006); however, as this paper suggests, identity is not always the central organizing focus. Next, organizing provides young people with a safe space in which they can critically analyze and collectively problem-solve a situation (Kirshner, 2007; O'Donoghue, 2006). Finally, because youth organizing is done in the name of addressing injustice and social oppression, it has the dual goal of shifting policy that results in real institutional change and creating a counternarrative

regarding the potential of youth as civic actors (Noguera & Cannella, 2006). Combined, these attributes help make the case for youth organizing as a compelling approach to youth civic engagement.

Theoretical Framework

To guide my analysis of the YCOs' experiences, I turn to Watts, Williams, and Jager's (2003) theory of sociopolitical development (SPD) among adolescents. SPD is defined as a "process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and the capacity for action in political and social systems necessary to interpret and resist oppression" (p. 185). In 2006, Watts and Guessous offered a framework for empirical research on the development of SPD among youth involved in organizing and activist venues. The framework is rooted in the following four research-based propositions, which I build upon at the conclusion of the paper:

An analysis of authority and power is central. Watts and Guessous (2006) stated that conducting a critical analysis of power enables youth to address power inequities, which helps them gain a sense of what Freire (1970) called "critical consciousness" and what they called a "social analysis." Citing Ginwright (2003), they argued that a social analysis helps youth make connections between their lived experiences and larger social issues; this enables them to see that inequality is not necessarily a problem caused by personal circumstances. This can help young people change their worldview, which exists along a spectrum running from an individualistic view, where personal capabilities are the cause of your fate, to a societal view, where social institutions are considered the source of the problem.

A sense of agency is essential. In order to act on this newly acquired consciousness, youth need to believe that they are capable of doing something to address those issues (Watts & Guessous, 2006). Bandura (2001) said that agency is the ability to "intentionally make things happen" through choice making and action plans (p. 2). However, in order for individuals or groups to become agents of change, they have to believe that their actions make a difference, which Bandura referred to as self- (or collective-) efficacy. If people do not think that their actions have an effect, then it is less likely that they will make the choice to act.

Action requires opportunity. Citing Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins (2002), Watts and Guessous (2006) argue that youth need opportunity structures that are accessible and desirable in order to become involved in society. And, as O'Donoghue (2006) argued, community-based youth organizations provide the kind of spaces where youth can come together and take action around issues of importance to them.

Commitment and action are sociopolitical development outcomes. Watts and Guessous (2006) concluded that the outcome of analysis, opportunity, and agency is a commitment to social involvement and action, which are sociopolitical development outcomes. They noted that this process is not necessarily linear and that each piece can have an impact on the other. As I show in the findings below, youth organizing at the HSTF enables the development of the first three propositions, which in turn supports a

commitment to action and social involvement, the fourth proposition. What I ultimately argue is that the SPD framework is flexible enough to help youth with differently developed senses of agency and social awareness gain a more robust sense of sociopolitical awareness regardless of their initial worldview.

Research Design and Methodology

RESEARCH SITE

When Mark Pedulla, then-manager of Organizing and Policy Initiatives at the HSTF, talked to me about what he hoped the YCOs would gain from the organization, he stressed three things, all of which align with the theoretical framework above. First, he wants the YCOs to gain a sense of agency as "protagonists in their own lives" and to have a set of skills to analyze their circumstances, determine where they want to go, and create a strategy to help them get there. Second is the ability to think critically in order to successfully maneuver within "structures that are going to limit their set of circumstances." The HSTF helps youth develop this way of thinking through a series of trainings about facilitation, power analysis, and oppression, all of which are situated in their neighborhood context. Third, Pedulla wants youth to have an opportunity to develop as individuals within a space that is contextualized by society's larger structural frames. This is not something he saw the YCOs getting from their schools; however, he did emphasize that the HSTF has more freedom than a school and more time and space to engage youth one-on-one in ongoing projects related to their lived experiences. In sum, Pedulla said he was looking for "individual change in terms of perspective and worldview and the ability to think about agency of the individual and agency of the community, as well as envisioning what alternatives might look like."

DATA COLLECTION

To account for the fact that I am trying to "make sense of the young people's world within [my] own analytical frameworks" (Elder, 1995, cited in Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 5), before beginning the data collection process, I conducted a preliminary focus group with three YCOs in order to co-create the semi-structured interview protocol (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). Using the refined protocol, I then conducted one-hour interviews with six YCOs selected because they had all been with the HSTF for at least one year and had participated in several trainings and at least one campaign. Conducting the interviews allowed me to hear the YCOs actively construct their own story regarding their preparation and ability to change their communities, thereby giving them the opportunity to make meaning of their own experience through dialogue with me (Haste, 2004). I tape recorded and transcribed all of the interviews in order to stay true to the participants' words and wrote memos throughout the data collection process in order to capture my analytic thinking and to stimulate any initial insights (Maxwell, 1996).

I also acted as a participant observer during the YCO meetings once a week for three months in order to see multiple versions of their social experiences at the HSTF, including both the positive and the negative aspects of their day-to-day activities (Mehan,

1992). Although the data from my participant observations did not directly inform the writing of this article, the observations did give me the opportunity to build trust with the YCOs and to ask more nuanced interview questions in order to capture all sides of their experiences.

INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS

The YCOs I interviewed grew up in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston; however, due to Boston's open-choice school policy, they all attended different schools outside of their neighborhood. Although I did not observe the YCOs in their school setting or track their grades, based on my analysis, a relationship surfaced between the YCOs' descriptions of their schools and what they reported gaining from the HSTF. This suggests that their schools might serve as a proxy for understanding each YCO's associated life opportunities coming into the HSTF, making this an important line of analysis.

Based on my analysis, I found that the YCOs were distributed along a spectrum that indicated their level of personal development and community awareness. One end of the spectrum represented YCOs who had a stronger sense of personal development but less community awareness; the other end represented YCOs with a weaker sense of personal development but more community awareness. For this paper, I highlight four YCOs, selected because they were at opposite ends of the spectrum and most clearly conveyed the pattern I was discerning.[3] I introduce them here, including their name, age, school, and how they got connected to the HSTF:

Gabi is 17 years old and a junior at Boston Latin Academy, a high-performing public exam school in Boston with 97% of its students at or above proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA) and 99% at or above proficiency in math.[4] She identifies as Latin American; her father is from Chile and her mother was born in the United States. Gabi has been with the HSTF since the beginning of her freshman year and is now a Change Maker—the highest-level award for an organizer's ability to display leadership in campaigns and to enable others to become leaders as well. In eighth grade, Gabi started to get into trouble in school and her grades suffered. Because of her father's background in community organizing, he decided it would be good for Gabi to apply for a job at the HSTF in order to get back on the right path. Gabi was familiar with the HSTF, having seen the YCOs participate in protests and other youth programs during her younger years. Through those observations, she also learned that adults were saying negative things about young people in her community. Although it was her father's idea to apply, she said she wanted to get involved in order to change those perceptions. While she has learned a great deal about community change, she says the most valuable part of her experience has been taking the information she has learned, applying it to herself, and changing for the better.

Melissa is 16 years old and is also a junior at Boston Latin Academy; she identifies as Dominican. She is currently a Teacher, which is one level below a Change Maker, indicating that she has volunteered to take on leadership roles and has mastered certain skills such as public speaking. Melissa was initially exposed to the HSTF through an afterschool literacy program at her elementary school. Following that experience, she became more aware of the activities of the HSTF, but it was not until her sophomore year that she decided to apply. While she reports having grown a great deal because of her experiences, she initially joined the HSTF because she was looking for a job that was relatively flexible and would not interfere with her academics—two attributes she saw in the HSTF. Melissa stated that nobody in her family has ever been involved with community organizing or politics, so it was a steep and exciting learning curve for her. Because of her work at the HSTF, Melissa has not only learned a great deal about her community, but she has also learned how to respect other perspectives and to become a more thoughtful and reflective person.

Odelis is 18 years old and a junior at the Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Dorchester—a low-performing public school with 30% of its students at or above proficiency in ELA and 27% at or above proficiency in math. He identifies as Hispanic; his mother is from the Dominican Republic. He got connected to the HSTF through an ex-girlfriend. She was initially working at another Boston-based youth organizing group and because Odelis needed a job, he joined her there. Through a series of cosponsored events, they learned more about the HSTF, and it seemed like a better fit. As Odelis said, the other organizing group was "kind of strict—we couldn't chew gum, listen to music, wear hats, speak of our personal life with our friends, and basically be ourselves." Because of that, his ex-girlfriend decided to get a summer job at the HSTF and Odelis followed her. Although Odelis joined the HSTF to make money, he says that is not why he stays. Just a few months earlier, his friend, Lewis, was shot and killed in his neighborhood. Exactly a month before Lewis died, he told Odelis how proud he was of him for what he was becoming; he asked Odelis to stay in school for him. Odelis feels like it is now his mission to help stop the violence that happens not only in his neighborhood but also in his school, where he says there is always someone with a gun, drugs, or a knife. He feels like the HSTF is helping him do that. He is not certain what level YCO he is, but he feels like everyone is a leader.

Oscar is 17 years old and a senior at the Muriel S. Snowden International School at Copley in downtown Boston—a lower performing public school with 53% of its students attaining proficiency in ELA and 50% at or above proficiency in math. He considers himself Hispanic and lived in the Dominican Republic until he was seven years old. Oscar is a Change Maker. Prior to coming to the HSTF, Oscar worked at two other community-based organizations that a friend introduced him to; one focused on tutoring young children during the school year and the other developed outdoor activities for kids during the summer. Although he thought those were important jobs, he wanted something that paid him year-round where he worked with young adults instead of taking care of children. One of his supervisors told him that the HSTF was hiring and suggested he apply. He says that he appreciates the work at the HSTF much more than his previous work because of the community involvement. He sees his job as mobilizing community members to come together, to make them aware of what is going on in the world, and to address violence in his

neighborhood. Two of his cousins followed in his footsteps and also work at the HSTF.

Overall, when analyzing the YCOs' interview data, I took an interpretive phenomenological approach with a focus on "gain[ing] a better understanding of the nature and quality" of the YCOs' engagement experiences (Willig, 2001, p. 56). In doing so, I was trying to get as close to the YCOs' experiences as possible while realizing that the resulting analysis would ultimately be my own interpretation of their experiences. I conducted preliminary analysis of the interview data using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) in order to identify patterns related to how the YCOs were conceiving of their own engagement with a particular focus on the SPD framework outlined above. Following Willig's (2001) phenomenological method, I then wrote a memo for each theme and included relevant quotations from each YCO. While analyzing each theme, I began to see variation among the YCOs, which seemed to be related to their schooling and life experiences. As such, I took the phenomenological method to its second level of interpretation, where I moved "beyond the participant's own words and understanding(s)" (Willig, 2001, p. 63) and generated my own insights about the different types of youth the HSTF was engaging. As a result of this analysis, I was able to capture both the common experiences that the HSTF provided the YCOs along with the variation in experiences they reported.

In order to give the study participants a chance to read and comment on my manuscript, I emailed an electronic copy to the adult organizers and asked them to forward it to the YCOs, all of whom had graduated from high school and left the HSTF at that point. I received positive feedback from the adult organizers but did not get any feedback from the YCOs.

LIMITATIONS
As a White woman who comes from a racial, socioeconomic, and geographical background different from that of these young people, I could not be certain that they would openly share their stories with me. For this reason, I co-constructed the protocol, spent several weeks at the site observing prior to the interviews, and led one session that considered the role of youth in research; this seemed to enhance the level of trust between the YCOs and me and increase their willingness to share their experiences with me. That said, because my analysis of the interview data is my own "construction of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to . . ." (Geertz, 1973, p. 9), while coding the data, I separated my own analytic thinking from their words by bracketing my musings and critically examining my own ways of knowing through conversations with my writing group and faculty advisors (Willig, 2001).

As an outside adult researching their organizing group, I realized it was likely that the YCOs would want to represent their experiences at the HSTF in a positive light, possibly skewing the data I was gathering. To address this challenge and capture the complexity of their experiences, I used probing questions to move the YCOs beyond any abbreviated, overly positive answers and

into the why and how of their work. Ultimately, however, I was in fact attempting to capture the "goodness" of their experience as YCOs to see what we could learn from them about youth engagement. Borrowing from Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), goodness is an "approach to inquiry that resists the more typical social science preoccupation with documenting pathology and suggesting remedies" and instead begins by asking, "What is happening here, what is working, and why?" (pp. 141–142). My purpose was not to ignore the YCOs' negative experiences but rather to emphasize the positive ones they shared in order to see what we could learn from them.

I am also aware of the limitations that such a small sample size has when a researcher is trying to make broader arguments. Overall, my attempt is not to generalize the experiences of the four YCOs to all youth organizers, youth organizing groups, or youth more widely. Instead, I purposefully selected these youth *because* they are engaged in community change efforts in order to see what their self-reported experiences at the HSTF might be able to teach us about civic engagement and how, if at all, this understanding could modify Watts and Guessous's (2006) SPD framework. This modified framework could then be tested in other youth organizing settings, altered, and further developed in order to help us better understand the elements related to successful youth engagement in an organizing setting.

Finally, given that the YCOs self-select into the HSTF, it is likely that many of them have had outside experiences that might contribute to their sociopolitical development and action orientation. However, because the purpose of my study is to capture a self-reported description of the YCOs' experiences rather than to make a causal claim about who joins the HSTF and how the organization impacts each YCO's sociopolitical development, this is rendered a nonissue.

Findings

A core tenet of youth organizing is that it helps marginalized youth develop a sense of collective identity, which enables them see their personal problems as larger political realities, motivating them towards collective action (Lewis-Charp et al., 2006). While the YCOs at the HSTF came from a similar ethnic identity group, their lived experiences were notably different from one another; as such, their identity group did not emerge as an important aspect of their organizing experience in their interviews with me. What became more evident is that the HSTF was able to meet the YCOs where they were—as individuals within a larger identity group—and move them toward a different level of social understanding all while working together as a collective.

In particular, although the YCOs valued common aspects of their experience at the HSTF, what they reported gaining from those experiences was divided among two broad groups. The first set of YCOs, both of whom were females, seemed to have a variety of choices at their fingertips given their life experiences, including their high-performing schools; however, those same YCOs had a less developed understanding of the inequities plaguing their communities. The second set, both of whom were males, attended average-to-lower-performing

schools and appeared to have fewer options within their schools and in their lives more broadly; however, they had a stronger sense of the inequities in their community and the problems that needed resolution. Because of the flexibility of their approach, the HSTF was able to help the YCOs who had more life choices learn more about their communities while simultaneously helping the YCOs who were fully aware of their communities realize that they did have life choices.[5] This highlights the fact that the same organizational approach can engage young people with different backgrounds and life opportunities in productive ways, suggesting that there might be some universal engagement ideas that are effective even with heterogeneous populations. To present my analysis, I outline the three common ways that the YCOs valued their work at the HSTF and then identify the differences that emerged within each of those commonalities.[6]

"ACADEMIC" SCHOOL VERSUS "FOCUSED ON LIFE" HSTF
While there was variation among the YCOs regarding the type of schools they attended, they each referenced their schools using similar phrases such as "just academics" and "pointless" as opposed to the HSTF, where they said it is "personal," you get an "opportunity to speak," and it is "focused on life." Despite these descriptive similarities, in this section, I explore the two different ways that the YCOs framed their HSTF experience and how that varied by school type.

There's more to life than school. Gabi and Melissa both attended the same high-performing high school with many curricular and extracurricular options. While both of them saw that their schools were teaching them a useful way of thinking, they also felt that the content of their courses was typically disconnected from life. The HSTF was helping them gain an understanding of the community and the idea that being a "good student" was not the only important attribute for a young person to have.

Specifically, Gabi noted that most of her schooling was "kind of pointless" but it did teach her how to "think in a certain way":

I am not going to say everything I learn in school isn't useful because there are some of my classes, like my international relations elective, for example—I learn a lot there that is useful to my life. But, overall, I think what I learn in school isn't.

Melissa felt that school only teaches you "what they have to teach you" while the HSTF was teaching her skills that are "useful to you" and "to your life"—two things she argued would help students do much better in school. However, like Gabi, she recognized that some of her teachers made her think, which she noted was important:

In school they care more about—I have to get this and this into the curriculum; whereas here they don't have to do anything, so they teach you stuff that they know is going to benefit us. It depends, too, what class you are taking, who your teachers are, because one of my teachers is always making me think. And my other teacher, she was talking about why we are in an economic crisis—that is something

that I didn't know all about, and now I do. I am living in it. That is my reality, so that's useful to me. The rest of the stuff that I am learning isn't.

Importantly, when Melissa was at the HSTF, she did not feel judged by the staff, whereas at school she felt like she had to act in a particular way that conveyed that she was a "good student." Though being a good student may have been an important aspect of Melissa's identity, it was not the only part, suggesting that her school was not allowing her to be who she wanted to be. Similarly, Gabi felt like teachers and other adults often gave her looks that conveyed that they were "smarter than I am," which suggested that Gabi also felt judged by her teachers. As such, Gabi wished that her teachers would be more like the adults at the HSTF, who she feels are supportive, play a mentorship role, listen, and learn from the YCOs.

Overall, the HSTF taught both Gabi and Melissa that they could be more than just "good students." While their initial worldview and early life socialization experiences may have been focused on getting good grades, the HSTF helped them shift their worldview to include a focus on community as well. As Melissa said, "It's not all about getting good grades in school—you have to be someone else besides a good student. And I feel like the Task Force gives people a chance to do that."

There are life choices. While Gabi and Melissa's experience of the HSTF helped them realize that there was more to life than school, Oscar and Odelis, who attended lower performing public schools, realized that despite their schools, they did have life choices and a safe place to go where adults care. Specifically, Odelis's school was riddled with violence, drugs, and a negative atmosphere in which he felt unsafe and unwelcome. He identified the HSTF as a comfortable place that was safe, felt like home, and where people actually cared about each other:

I feel that work is a better place than school, not because of homework or anything. The kind of school I go to, it's not good at all. I mean, there is not one day that there is not some kind of feud going on there. Someone either has a gun on them, drugs, a knife. There is a fight. There is an argument. There is always something.

Odelis's experience was quite different from Gabi's and Melissa's; they may not have been gaining community awareness from their school, but they at least felt safe and as though they were learning helpful ways of thinking. Odelis already had a strong sense of community awareness based on his challenging school and life experiences; he was looking to the HSTF for something else: safety, warmth, and a caring atmosphere. In his experience, HSTF adults cared a lot more than the teachers at his school and were stricter because of it. Unlike at school, when Odelis walked in the door of the HSTF, he said that "it's just love off the rib" and that "nobody is nasty to anyone." He said there was not a day when he left the HSTF when he was not smiling: "It's just the warmth. As soon as I come in, it's straight love from everyone. There's nobody that's rude to you. No one has negative comments. If you treat others with respect, they treat you with respect back."

While Oscar did not talk about such extreme experiences at his school, he said that he stayed at the HSTF because he saw things that needed to change within his school:

Basically, I just want my sister to have a different life growing up. [As] YCOs, we try to do a lot of things with the schools and change school policies and all that; I'd like my sister to have a different experience and to be a role model for her.

Oscar was compelled to work at the HSTF in order to change his schools and improve things for his sister. He did not need the HSTF to teach him about the challenges his school was facing; he already knew and experienced them firsthand. What he found in the HSTF was a place where he had "somebody to talk to" and where he felt "safe":

[The HSTF is] a place where you can be stressed or mad and just come here and know that you can sit down and air out what you have in your head with somebody. Also, it's a place I feel safe. I can just come here, and I wouldn't feel threatened by anything.

HSTF: A "SPECIAL JOB"

When I asked the YCOs to describe the HSTF, they each talked about the organization in very similar ways. They called it a "productive" place where you "actually do something" that was "more than a job." It was a "special job" in which you "grow" and where "change is possible." Through these descriptions, we see that the HSTF was providing a similar opportunity structure to each YCO that helped them feel like they had a space in which to act. However, as I discuss next, their reasons for acting differed, running along a spectrum from community driven to skill driven.

Developing community. Oscar and Odelis reported that their main motivation for developing as leaders was to respond to the challenges facing their communities. When asked what kept him coming back to the HSTF, Oscar said that he was making a "positive difference in the community" as opposed to "being in the street doing nothing." Framing the alternative possibility as being in the street suggests that Oscar did not see other opportunities, school or otherwise, that would help him improve his community. Since arriving at the HSTF, Oscar felt he had changed by becoming more mature, less worried about himself, and more focused on life:

[Now I think about] a lot of people around and how I just need to succeed to make an impact on other people's lives. I think that's important because that's why the world is not such a good place right now. It's all about violence and money, but there has to be some difference of just trying to help somebody out . . . everybody here helped me out and I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for them.

While Oscar used to be focused more on self, being around adults and other YCOs who cared about him enough to give back to him made him realize that life is not all about individual success. This change in worldview might not have happened if Oscar had not been given an opportunity to collectively act with others. As he jokingly stated, "Before I just thought about getting a good job and being wealthy. And now, I want to have a good job, be wealthy, and give back to the people."

As seen in the previous section, Odelis was already steeped in challenges of violence in his school. As such, staying at the HSTF, though an explicit choice, seemed more like a response to a need than a chance to grow and develop like it was for some of the YCOs. He called his work at the HSTF an occupation or "a job" but said "there's more to it"—it was a response to all of the violence he saw in the community, with particular homage to the tragic shooting of his friend, Lewis:

I look at this more like an occupation. We have basically a job, but there's more to it. I am not just here for the money, because to be honest, the money is not all that good . . . I don't really care about the money. I've seen so much that has happened in this community. My boy, Lewis, was killed in April. He was shot in the mouth, in the back on Boylston in Jamaica Plain. That just made me want it more. That's just determination to want to do more to stop the violence.

As evidenced by the death of his friend, Odelis was already quite aware of why he needed to act to improve the community; however, the HSTF gave him the training and a venue within which he could act: "They [the staff] organize us so we can organize the community . . . they help us out on what to do. After that, we expand on the community to make sure everything is good." Overall, the HSTF was giving Odelis a venue within which he could act against the violence on the streets instead of joining it. And although Oscar's experience was thankfully not as tragic, he too saw his purpose at the HSTF as acting to improve his community while simultaneously growing as an individual.

Developing self. While Gabi and Melissa were both interested in improving their communities, they talked more about the skills that the HSTF provided them instead of the community change that they had been able to make. This suggests that the YCOs stay at the HSTF for different reasons; while some may stay in response to community needs, others, like Gabi and Melissa, may stay in order to further develop their own leadership skills.

Melissa said the HSTF is a place where you can be productive and "actually do something" to make a difference. It is also a place where people improve themselves by learning and growing:

It's not just a job. We say it's a special job. I feel like you come and you work, but you don't do as many hours as you would standing somewhere else trying to be a sales associate or something. This is the place where you get the opportunity to show whatever skills you have and what you are strong at. And not only do you have a place to do that, but they actually help you better that and do a lot more.

While Melissa appreciated that she was getting an opportunity to be a productive person in her community, she placed more emphasis on the programmatic aspects of the HSTF as opposed to her community work. She felt like she was using her skills to make

a difference, but she also hoped to use those same skills to leave her community, suggesting a different level of investment:

> I'm one of the people that is trying to make a difference for this community. I am one of those youth that are leading. But I think I am just an example of what you can do with your life. You don't have to be that person that everybody is judging. You can get out, which is basically what I am trying to do. I am trying to move on from here.

When Gabi talked about the purpose of the HSTF, she emphasized the way that it "empowers youth" and "gives them an alternative lifestyle," again keeping the focus on what youth gain rather than the community transformation that occurs. When asked what it means to be a YCO, Gabi said that it was an "opportunity to gain experience" and to learn "how the city works," highlighting the important skills that she was learning and the connections she was making:

> It means having the opportunity to gain experience doing community organizing, to get the opportunity to go to the State House, City Hall, to meet with the mayor, talk to city councilors . . . it's getting the experience that other people don't get and also finding out how the city works [so that when] I do eventually leave and go and take on other things, [I will know] how to work around the government or with the government.

Like Melissa, Gabi referenced how these skills would help her when she left her community, bolstering the argument that she was using the experiences at the HSTF to build her own skills, with community improvement as a secondary benefit.

DEVELOPING SOCIOPOLITICAL AWARENESS
Given the fact that these YCOs came to the HSTF with different schooling experiences, different life opportunities, and a different sense of community awareness, it is no surprise that the sociopolitical awareness they said they were developing was also different. Importantly, however, they all said they were gaining something that was helping them grow and develop in ways that suited their needs, which kept them coming back day after day in order to learn and do more. Gabi and Melissa reported that the HSTF serves as an opportunity to meet people who are coming from inherently different backgrounds, thereby opening their eyes to their own life privileges and to the capabilities of individuals across their community. Odelis and Oscar said that the HSTF was teaching them that they did have a voice that mattered and different options available for their life path. Perhaps what is most significant about this differentiated learning they said they were gaining is that they gained it by working as a collective. In this section, I explore the two categories of awareness the YCOs reported gaining, both of which aligned with the areas of their lives that were previously less developed.

Perspective-taking. Both Gabi and Melissa had life opportunities both in and outside of school that gave them a chance to learn about the world in an "academic" sense. By being at the HSTF, they said that they met individuals who came from different

backgrounds with many fewer choices, thereby opening their eyes to their own life privileges and false assumptions they may have made in the past. Through these experiences, both Gabi and Melissa reported gaining an understanding of the misconceptions that existed regarding their very own neighborhoods, thus changing their worldview and ideas about how to achieve equality in society.

In particular, Gabi said she came to the realization that change cannot happen without a large group of people working together. In addition, although she already had an awareness of the challenges facing her neighborhood, she learned that it was perceived more negatively than she thought:

> I've learned that in order to make any kind of change or impact, you need to have a large group of people; you can't just make it by yourself. I have [also] learned that this part of Boston in particular doesn't get paid attention to as much by elected officials because of the voting rate. Even where I live, we don't have as nice of streets—they are not as clean. And for a while they wouldn't even deliver the newspaper where I lived.

Although Gabi grew up in this neighborhood, working to address inequities at the HSTF helped her realize how much more serious the problems were, noting, "When I am at the Hyde Square Task Force, I feel as though my problems are insignificant compared to those of the community." She said that the HSTF also opened her eyes to the way that people were incorrectly viewing her community: "People think bad things happen there, bad people live there, and it's not really the case . . . it's not like you are living in a war zone." By seeing this gap between the way things are and the way others perceive them to be, Gabi said that she gained a better understanding of the community politics happening in her own neighborhood, thereby shifting the way she looked at community perceptions.

Similarly, Melissa said she had learned a great deal more about "community matters" since arriving at the HSTF; this helped her understand the "importance of where you are standing":

> I've learned a lot. I was not involved with community matters before here. And I have learned a lot about our political structure, who has the power and ways that you can go about fixing that—who to contact and who not to and all of that. So it's pretty cool, seeing where you are compared to the big picture.

By seeing that bigger picture, Melissa said that she was becoming a "more well-rounded person" who could go about making a difference for, and feeling like a part of, her community. When asked why she had not learned this perspective before, Melissa answered by saying that she simply was not being taught about these issues: "It's hard to learn about something if you don't have the opportunity to."

Both Gabi and Melissa said that meeting diverse others opened their eyes and helped them recognize previous judgments they had made. They also said that it helped them see how much they could learn by meeting people outside of their typical path.

Specifically, Gabi said that the "opportunity to meet people from different walks of life and learn from them" helped her rethink previous assumptions she had made. Similarly, Melissa said she became more "open-minded" to the idea that everyone has his or her own opinion that is equally valuable and important to learn. Overall, because of their team-based work, both Gabi and Melissa said that they had become more patient, mature, and better able to handle situations where people disagree with one another.

Life choices. While Gabi and Melissa said that the HSTF gave them a new way of looking at their community, Odelis and Oscar already had a relatively high level of community awareness because of their life and school experiences. They said that the HSTF had helped them realize that they did, indeed, have life choices and, through examples, showed them how their future path was determined by their current decisions. When Oscar arrived at the HSTF, he said that his grades were falling and he "just wasn't interested in school"; however, he reported that the HSTF helped him make a change:

> *Basically, my freshman year, I was just—I don't know—I just wasn't interested in school, and I saw my grades were bad, and I really wasn't going anywhere. Something clicked off when I came over here and it made me realize, "Hey, I need to shape up and start doing better."*

When I asked Oscar what the staff at the HSTF did to shift his actions, he said they taught him through example:

> *Hyde Square lets you know, hey, this is going to change your life if you don't shape up. This is life. If you don't shape up now, what is going to happen in your future is going to be too late. You need your education.*

Similarly, Odelis said that the HSTF helped him choose to walk away from his previous gang life and to go down a more positive path that included doing well in school, staying off of the streets, and helping others:

> *[The HSTF] will convince you to stay out of trouble and to help out with people. Basically, anything good. A teenager shouldn't be staying out on the streets. Like some people sell [drugs], some are in gangs and—we aren't that. We are the opposite of that. We want to be part of something. We want to make ourselves something in life. We want to stay in school. Go to college. Get a career. Do something we want to do.*

Odelis talked about the fact that, by giving him an example of what life could look like if he continued with the gang, the staff at the HSTF helped him choose to walk a different way:

> *They put it in an example. Like, if you are in a gang, you can die, you can get locked up. I already knew that, but they made it clearer to me. Because they said, "Why join a gang?" . . . [I did it because] I liked it a lot. I wasn't really close to them, but I was young. I wanted to be known. As I got older, I was like, I don't need to be in a gang to be known. I could be known and respected over fear. Now [at the HSTF], I am known and respected over good.*

Not only did the HSTF give Odelis an example of what could happen by staying in a gang, the organization also gave him an alternative community and a place where he could take action to make positive change. By filling this void, Odelis did not need to stay in a gang in order to have a sense of community. The HSTF also "inspired" and "motivated" him to stay in school:

> *When I was a freshman, I used to cut class a lot . . . it was a routine. I would come to school and give my teachers attitude. It was really bad. Right here [at the HSTF], they showed me that if you don't go to school, if you don't go to college, they really showed me what can happen. And they inspired me and motivated me.*

Odelis and Oscar both reported that the HSTF gave them a choice they could make in their lives and a reason to make a choice for the better. The staff did this not only by showing them examples but also by giving them an opportunity structure that enabled them to be agents of change for themselves and others.

In sum, between gaining new perspectives and realizing life choices, all four YCOs said that they were able to gain something useful from the HSTF to help them in their own lives. This highlights the fact that the adult staff has a close working relationship with each YCO, meeting each youth at their current level of community understanding and moving him or her toward a place where they can maximize their life opportunities. More broadly, this hints at the idea that the HSTF's youth organizing approach has something to teach a wide spectrum of youth.

Discussion and Conclusion

By illuminating the YCOs' personal experiences, this study has helped us gain more perspective on what engages youth, including those who are marginalized, and how we should think about youth engagement moving forward. Although many youth organizing groups coalesce around identity issues (Lewis-Charp et al., 2006), because the youth at the HSTF had different life and school experiences, their ethnic identity was not made central to their efforts. This highlights my study's first key finding, which is the idea that youth organizing, and the SPD framework more broadly, is flexible enough to accommodate the complexity that exists among groups of youth. According to the well-known organizer-turned-academic Marshall Ganz, organizing is able to do this because its process is the same regardless of the content around which youth organize or the context within which the organizing occurs (personal communication, February 5, 2010). In other words, he argued that organizing is a set of tools that can be used to engage any sort of context; as such, it is portable. This means that an organizing approach could be used in a variety of places with more heterogeneous populations.

This leads to the study's second finding, regarding more traditional forms of civic engagement. By authorizing the YCOs to share their perspectives about the types of things that move them to action (Cook-Sather, 2002), we can begin to inject new ideas into the conversation about improving civic education. As the analysis made clear, the YCOs were not having the same types of engagement experiences in their schools as they were at the HSTF.

While the reasons varied, including attending low-performing schools or going to schools that the YCOs said were detached from society and overly focused on grades, it was clear that the schools were not engaging the YCOs in ways they thought were meaningful. They consistently said that the things they learned in school were not useful to their lives, whereas the HSTF taught them skills they could apply to their lives and gave them space to practice them. These findings indicate that we need to reconsider what constitutes civic engagement and think about moving away from more customary forms, which privilege civic knowledge, and toward those approaches that favor civic knowledge, social analysis, and action. To be clear, the types of campaigns that the YCOs undertake outside of school, including those that aim to change particular aspects of their schools, would not be the types of projects that a school-based civic education class could engage. However, there are other ways of taking action that are less political yet still address students' lived experiences.

Revisiting Watts and Guessous's (2006) theoretical framework regarding the development of sociopolitical awareness among youth, we see that youth organizing at the HSTF maps closely to it. In particular, the YCOs reported that the HSTF helps youth develop a sense of agency, provides them with an opportunity to critically analyze community issues, and gives them a safe space within which they can take collective action to address those issues. The outcomes of this work are more engaged youth with expanded worldviews who are becoming equipped to address the complex challenges facing their communities in the 21st century. Based on the interviews with the YCOs, we also learned that civic engagement at the HSTF requires two things: personal development along with community awareness, and that each YCO receive more development in one area than the other.

Based on this finding, I have created a new framework (see Figure 1 below) that shows what happens when Watts and Guessous's (2006) framework is applied to the HSTF context. I have also added two areas that were absent from Watts and Guessous's

framework: namely, skill building and relationships. Overall, by combining the skills and knowledge needed for personal development along with those needed for community awareness, the youth at the HSTF gain the tools necessary to become actively engaged problem solvers in their communities.

To describe how the model works, I consider the two groups of YCOs presented above. First, Gabi and Melissa arrived at the HSTF with a sense of agency and a belief that they had life choices because of previous life experiences; however, they had a limited social analysis of inequality along with a worldview that probably conveyed that life was fair if you worked hard enough. By being given an opportunity to do a social analysis and a way to become involved in their community, they each reported gaining a stronger sense of community awareness and a different understanding of the challenges facing their neighborhood. As such, both became more committed to developing themselves in order to address issues of social inequality within their communities, which shifted their worldview.

Odelis and Oscar went to lower performing schools and appeared to have fewer life opportunities outside of school. Upon their arrival at the HSTF, they were each aware of the social inequities challenging their communities, and their worldview likely said that things were unfair. However, based on their previous life experiences, they had a weaker sense of agency and, as such, did not feel that they had as many life choices. Because the HSTF gave them an opportunity structure within which to act and supportive adults who showed them the life choices they had, they gained a stronger sense of agency and a belief that they could make a difference. Both came to see themselves as individuals who could make a positive future for themselves and their community; as such, they committed themselves to staying involved.

In sum, the HSTF gave both groups an opportunity structure. Through that structure, Gabi and Melissa gained a stronger social analysis. Odelis and Oscar gained a stronger sense of agency. Both groups reported moving toward a more robust
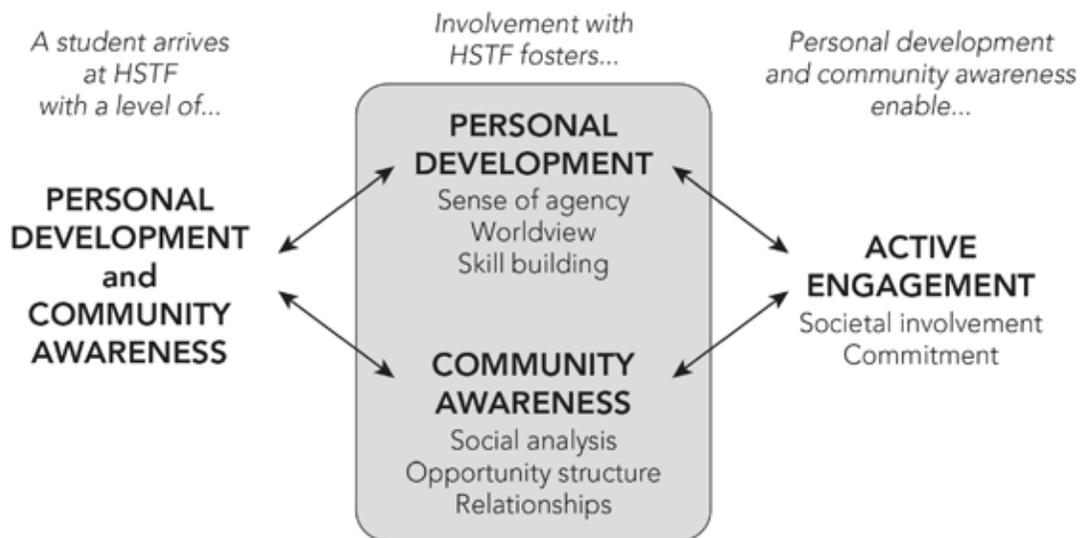
Figure 1. The Relationship Between Personal Development, Community Awareness, and Active Engagement at the HSTF

understanding of the relationship between themselves, their community, and the greater social structure. This changed their outlook on their community and, more importantly, what they could do about it, helping them develop a commitment to social involvement and action.

By highlighting youth voice, this study has captured the experience of a small group of young people engaged in a youth organizing context and has helped challenge the notion that youth—especially those who are marginalized due to their ethnic background—are disengaged. What is more, the ideas embedded within the new framework have the potential to move us "beyond the conventional boundaries of civic engagement" (Haste, 2007, p. 21) and therefore present some exciting possibilities regarding the direction of youth engagement research. Not only could the framework be examined in different youth organizing settings, it could also be used by youth workers and civic educators as a way to think about new engagement strategies. The study also raises questions about the relationship between gender, socioeconomic status, school environment, and youth development in a youth organizing setting. In addition, findings seem to suggest that the YCOs' development is related to the adult organizers' ability to help them grow in their underdeveloped areas along with their peer-to-peer interactions with their fellow organizers and community members. All of these questions were outside the scope of this study and would provide fruitful areas for further investigation here.

Overall, this study helps us understand how the YCOs develop their personal civic capacity along with a sense of community awareness and an ability to take collective action. With these new insights, we can begin pushing the boundaries of what constitutes civic engagement, illuminating the elements that might lead youth toward a life committed to social change.

Notes

1. In this paper, I use the American Psychological Association's (2010) definition of a civically engaged person, who they define as a person who is individually or collectively taking action in order to identify and address issues of public concern.
2. Haste's (2007) concept of moving beyond conventional boundaries informs the title of this paper.
3. The other two YCOs had views that fell in between these two extremes and combined features found on both ends of the spectrum.
4. I have chosen to look at state standardized tests as a measure of overall school performance. While I recognize that state tests do not present the whole picture of a school, they are indicative of general trends. All data were retrieved from http://www.boston-publicschools.org.
5. Strobel, Osberg, and McLaughlin (2006) found a similar distinction in their study, *Participation in Social Change: Shifting Adolescents' Developmental Pathways.*
6. While gender was correlated with these three themes, with the two young women on one side of the spectrum and the two young men on the other, an analysis of gender was outside the scope of this study.

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