Youth participation in policy advocacy: Examination of a multi-state former and current foster care youth coalition

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A B S T R A C T

In recent years, U.S. state and federal legislation reflect a deepening recognition of the need to engage youth in decision-making as a mechanism to enhance child welfare policy and practice. This study examined stakeholder views on the key elements and challenges of youth participation in policy advocacy in the context of a multi-state current and former foster care youth coalition. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations, and document review. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Key elements included a youth-adult partnership model, relationships and networking, having a voice and feeling heard, collective power, and reciprocity among states. Challenges included recruitment, attendance and retention of youth, staff workload issues, and the bureaucracy of child welfare. Findings are discussed in the context of the extent literature.

1. Introduction

The topic of youth participation in community decision-making and policy advocacy has received a great deal of attention in recent years. Youth participation has been defined as "a process of engaging young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives (Checkoway, 2011, p.341). Engaging youth in decision-making captures youths lived expertise, affords them rights as citizens, and can lead to a more just and inclusive society (Checkoway, 2011). Studies of youth participation in community decision-making report benefits including the development of knowledge and skills, enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy, opportunities for empowerment, access to educational and vocational opportunities, youth-adult partnerships, and enhanced social capital (Augsberger, Gecker, & Collins, 2019; Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson, & Shaw, 2014; Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010). The literature also reports benefits to communities and organizations when youth are provided opportunities to identify issues and problems and develop youth focused solutions (Collins, Augsberger, Gecker, & Lusk, 2017; Sprague-Martinez, Richards-Schuster, Teixeira, & Augsberger, 2018; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010).

There is limited research on civic participation among current and former foster care youth. Longitudinal studies of transition aged youth document low levels of engagement. The Midwest Study of former

foster care youth aged 21 found they were less likely than their same aged peers in the ADDHealth cohort to participate in community service or unpaid volunteer work in the past year (Courtney et al., 2007). Midwest study youth were also less likely than their ADDHealth peers to trust the government (Courtney et al., 2007). Similarly, the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH) of current and former foster care youth at 21, reported the majority (86%) of youth did not attend a local meeting of a council, board, or organization that addressed community issues in the past 12 months; and 72% of the sample did not vote in the previous national election (Courtney et al., 2018).

While research on civic participation among foster care youth is limited, there is a growing body of literature focused on youth participation in decision-making in the context of state-level youth advisory boards (YABs), also termed youth councils, youth commissions, youth coalitions, or youth leadership boards. Havlicek, Lin, and Villalpando (2015) conducted a web-based survey of foster care YABs in the U.S. and found they exist in the majority (*n* = 47) of states. Forenza (2016) reported the existence of foster YABs in every state and the District of Columbia. YABs were run through public agencies or a public/nonprofit agency partnership, and were a result of Chafee legislation mandates to include youth in the participation of case decision-making and the development and evaluation of programs and policy (Forenza, 2016). Havlicek et al. (2015) found that the structure and activities of YABs

differ among and between states, but common attributes include identifying issues and concerns, advising a state commissioner or director, youth-informed advocacy, and partnering with adults in decision-making (p. 115).

Research on the origin, structure, and activities of state-based foster YABs are largely from the perspective of adults who design and administer YABs. They include a review of website materials (Forenza & Happonen, 2015), surveys with agency representatives (Havlicek et al., 2015) and interviews with program staff, administrators and/or facilitators (Forenza, 2016; Havlicek, Curry, & Villalpando, 2018; Havlicek, Lin, & Braun, 2016). There are limited studies that capture the perceptions and experiences of current and former foster care youth. Forenza (2017) conducted interviews with 15 youth advisory board members between the ages of 18–23 years old from one state in the Northeastern U.S. Findings demonstrated an opportunity for the development of critical consciousness: critical refection, critical motivation and critical action (Forenza, 2017). In another manuscript, Forenza (2016) interviewed 14 Youth Advisory Board members between the ages of 18–23 years in New Jersey's statewide program and reported three themes, civic literacy, YAB as family, and privileged position, related to organizational empowerment. Havlicek and Samuels (2018) interviewed 33 current and former elected officers, aged 18–33 years old, from the Illinois state youth advisory board and found participation provided opportunities for relationship and identity development.

In this paper, we report on an in-depth case study of the New England Youth Coalition (NEYC), a group of current and former foster youth advocates and adult supporters from six New England states who advise the commissioners and directors of those states. To our knowledge, NEYC is the *only* multi-state foster care youth coalition in the U.S. NEYC differs from state run YABs in that it provides an opportunity for current and former foster youth and adult supporters from multiple states to meet across significant territory lines to identify and advocate for shared child welfare issues and policies. We examined the research question: What do stakeholders identify as key elements and challenges of youth participation in child welfare policy advocacy in the context of a multi-state foster care youth coalition? Federal legislation and models of youth participation are presented followed by a description of our method. The findings are then discussed in the context of the extent literature.

2. Literature review

In 2017, there were approximately 443,000 children and youth residing in foster care in the U.S. and about 17,000 youth emancipated or "aged out" of foster care due to age restrictions (U.S. DHHS, AFCARS, 2018). Prospective studies of current and former foster care youth consistently demonstrate negative outcomes in education, employment, housing, health and mental health, compared to their peers in the general population (Pecora et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2018). Studies report that foster care youth often feel disconnected, isolated and lack permanent connections to caring and committed adults (Samuels, 2008). Foster youth perceive limited opportunities to participate in case-related decision making focused on permanency planning and transitional plans (Cashmore, 2002; Freundlich, Avery, & Padgett, 2007) and describe an imbalance of power when provided opportunities for collaborative decision-making with adults (Augsberger, 2014).

In the past 20 years, U.S. state and federal legislation reflect a developing understanding of the need to incorporate youth voice in decision-making to develop the knowledge, skills and capacity of foster youth, and to improve child welfare policy and practice focused on permanency and transitional planning. For example, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L 106–109) required states to involve youth in the design of state independent living programs and developing their individual case plans. A decade later, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L.

110–351) required states to provide transition services as well as discharge planning for young adults in foster care 90 days prior to case closure. These transition plans must be directed by the youth, thus providing a space for youth voice in case-related permanency and transitional planning decision-making. While foster care youth advisory boards existed before the Chafee Legislation, the federal mandates set out by Chafee led to an increase in the development of foster care YABs in the U.S. to engage youth in the development and evaluation of independent living programs and policy (Collins, 2004; Forenza, 2016; Havlicek et al., 2015).

More recently, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (P.L. 113–183) addressed youth voice in permanency and transitional planning by requiring that youth, aged 14 and older, are consulted with prior to any creation, change, or revision to their case plans. The act also included a reasonable and prudent parent standard (RPPS), which allows foster parents and caregivers discretion in decision-making in daily activities of children and youth. The goal of the RPPS was to enhance the well-being of children and youth in foster care by providing "normalcy" in terms of participating in age appropriate and developmentally appropriate daily life activities without requiring permission from the child welfare agency.

2.1. Youth participation models and youth-adult partnerships (Y-AP)

There is a substantial body of literature focused on models of youth participation for youth in the general population, which are largely focused on the relationship between youth and adults in decision-making processes. Hart's (1997) ladder of participation consists of eight rungs moving from non-participation (tokenism), to increased participation (e.g., consultation with youth), to participation (e.g., youth-initiated and shared decision-making with adults). Shier (2001) adapted Hart's model and developed a model of participation labeled "Pathways to Participation" that included five levels of participation with the highest-level being youth and adults share power and responsibility for decision-making. Wong et al. (2010) advanced Hart and Shier's models of participation to include intergenerational linkages and degrees of youth-adult partnerships. The peak of the pyramid is labeled "pluralistic" meaning adults provide information, resources, support, and access to social networks, and share power with youth in decision-making.

Research on youth participation in program and community decision-making consistently highlights the importance of Y-AP in the development of youth agency, belonging, competency and community (Zeldin et al., 2013). Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, and Sulaiman (2014) report that Y-AP's are "characterized by the explicit expectation that youth and adults will collaborate in all aspects of group decision-making from visioning, to program planning, to evaluation and continuous improvement" (p.338.). Regarding youth participation in foster YABs, Havlicek et al. (2018) interviewed facilitators of foster care youth advisory boards in 34 states. The authors describe four approaches to youth participation: adult-led, adult driven youth input, youth-adult partnership, and youth-led. The majority ($n = 16$) of the YABs employed youth-adult partnerships, meaning that "youth and adults sharing in the planning and decision-making responsibilities in order to meet goals" (p.264). The second most frequent type of youth participation was adult-driven youth input ($n = 14$), "where youth have the opportunity to voice their preferences, but they do not have much power in driving decision-making" (p.262).

2.2. Benefits of participation

The strengths and assets of youth and young adults are often overlooked and they are seen as vulnerable members of the community, as opposed to active agents of change (Richards-Schuster, 2012). This has particularly been true in the case of youth in the foster care system as they were historically viewed as vulnerable and in need of protection

(Collins, 2015). Youth in foster care have a legal right to participate in decision-making that impacts them, including case-related decisions and the design and evaluation of programs and policy. However, there is scant research focused on strategies for engaging foster youth in case or community decision-making (Augsberger, 2014; Courtney et al., 2018).

There is a growing body of research demonstrating YABs provide a unique opportunity for current and former foster youth to participate civically. Foster youth engage in leadership opportunities, community decision-making and policy advocacy while adults provide access to resources, information and support (Forenza & Happonen, 2015; Havlicek et al., 2015; Hohenemser & Marshall, 2002). Youth participation may promote positive youth development and youth empowerment outcomes, including the development of skills (e.g., leadership, decision-making), knowledge of options and rights, and a sense of civic-efficacy (Forenza, 2016). Youth with lived experiences of foster care may have the opportunity to establish relationships with peers and adults with similar lived experiences (Forenza, 2016; Havlicek et al., 2016). They may also benefit from an opportunity to develop critical consciousness (Forenza, 2017), and experience a counterspace for well-being and identity development (Havlicek & Samuels, 2018).

While the research on community benefits is less developed, studies report opportunities for youth to identify child welfare issues and priorities and offer program and policy recommendations. For example, the California Youth Connection (2017) advocated for the passage of 19 pieces of legislation including: foster youth housing, higher education, health insurance, and sibling rights. New Jersey's YAB identified and developed a response to the practice of using garbage bags to pack clothes when moving children to a new foster care placement (Forenza, 2016). They believed it sent the message that the foster children and their belongings had little value and worked with key stakeholders to collect and donate 7000 duffle bags for foster children to use when moving between placements (Forenza, 2016).

2.3. Barriers of participation

Despite the benefits of youth participation, studies document barriers to civic engagement. Havlicek et al. (2015) surveyed YAB facilitators in 47 U.S. states and found the top three reported challenges included recruitment of members, high turnover of members and limited funding. Research shows the youth who are recruited and selected for YABs may be well-connected to adults and systems (Forenza, 2017; Havlicek et al., 2016). YABs do not always have formal decision-making authority which may lead YYA to believe their voice will not be heard or taken seriously by adults (Forenza & Happonen, 2015). Additionally, some YYA may experience a lack of power when adults attempt to regulate the agenda, processes, and political expression (Forenza & Happonen, 2015; Taft & Gordon, 2013).

Program logistics are another barrier to participation. Oftentimes, youth are required to provide their own transportation to meetings or rely on their worker, which may pose a challenge to youth who do not have access to transportation (Havlicek et al., 2016). Youth participation may also be hindered by other demands on their time, such as school, employment, parenting, and caregiving. Adult supporters may have similar workload demands (e.g., large caseloads, extensive paperwork, high turnover rates) with the YAB being one of their many responsibilites, and struggle to make time for the development of relationships that may require a higher level of investment (Hohenemser & Marshall, 2002).

2.4. Study rationale

There is a body of research focused on civic participation for youth in foster care in the context of youth advisory boards. Our study contributes to this literature in multiple ways. First, prior studies examine youth participation in state-based youth advisory boards. Our study expands these findings to describe the key elements of youth engagement in a regional youth coalition. The notion of foster care youth from six different states with different political priorities and administrations identifying and advocating for common issues that cut across each state is an important contribution of our findings. Second, prior studies do not include data on youth participation from high-level decision makers, such as commissioners and directors, who may act as gatekeepers in policy and program decision-making. We include interviews with commissioner and directors from multiple states to understand the opportunities for communication and collaborative decision-making. Finally, prior studies report data from one stakeholder perspective (e.g., adult staff or foster youth/young adults); our study reports data from multiple stakeholders including current and former foster youth, NEYC staff, adult supporters, and commissioners/directors.

3. Material and methods

We employed a case study design (Yin, 2018) to gain an in-depth understanding of the origin, structure, and activities of the New England Youth Coalition (NEYC). Multiple sources of data were collected including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations, and program documents. Our aim was to explore, from the perspective of multiple stakeholders, the key elements and challenges of engaging youth from six states in child welfare policy advocacy. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Boston University.

3.1. Study site

The New England Youth Coalition (NEYC) was established in 2008 under the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors (NEACWCD), a consortium of child welfare commissioners, directors and staff from the six New England states. Association members meet 3–4 times per year to discuss child welfare issues and priorities, share knowledge and expertise, and develop the capacity of states to promote positive change and improvements to child welfare policy, programs and practice. In 2008, as part of the Breakthrough Series on Adolescent Permanency Planning, the Association invited current and former foster youth to be team members with staff from their state agencies. Youth were asked to participate as the planners felt youth voice was critical to making decisions about improving permanency. At the conclusion of the Breakthrough Series the youth participants expressed a desire to have on-going conversations with youth and adults from across New England. As a result, the NEYC was established under the umbrella of the Association. Current and former foster youth and adult supporters developed their own mission: "The New England Youth Coalition consists of current and alumni foster youth and adult allies working together to better the quality of life for youth involved with the foster care system through education, advocacy, and improvement of policy and practice."

NEYC members engage in multiple activities including in-person meetings, leadership training, phone meetings, and policy advocacy. NEYC members meet in person 2–3 times a year. One of those meetings includes a Regional Youth Leadership Conference where youth have an opportunity to meet face- to-face with NEYC staff, youth advocates, adult supporters, and commissioners/directors from all six states. They participate in leadership training, identify and develop policy related issues, and present updates on policy work and recommendations to the commissioners/directors. To maintain momentum, NEYC members have a monthly conference call facilitated by a youth advocate from each state on a rotating basis. Youth advocates, in collaboration with the NEYC Program Manager, develop the agenda for the phone calls. The purpose is to update the full group on work being done by each subcommittee, to update each other on activities in each state, as well as personal accomplishments/news, and to plan for upcoming in-person meetings. There are 2–3 subcommittees focused on policy projects,

selected by NEYC youth, who meet on a monthly basis. Examples include Project Normalcy Implementation, which was focused on developing a normalcy definition and toolkit for how to implement normalcy legislation; Driving to Success, which is focused on getting access to driver's license for youth while they are still in care between the age of 16–18; and Project Story, focused on gathering information about the use of strategic sharing curriculums across states and providing recommendations to improve existing curriculum to address the needs of strategic sharing when communicating via social media.

3.2. Sampling

Adult supporters (herein referred to as "adult supporters") are selected by the commissioners and directors in each state to represent their state on the regional level. They are employed by the state child welfare agency or a provider agency, often as a youth development, youth outreach and/or youth permanency worker. Adult supporters facilitate the recruitment of youth advocates in their state and each state's recruitment structure is different. For example, Rhode Island, Vermont and Maine contract youth development work, including the work of NEYC, to a provider agency. New Hampshire, Connecticut and Massachusetts select foster youth and adult representatives from within the state child welfare agencies. NEYC offers technical assistance to each state by presenting workshops on multiple content areas (e.g., strategic sharing, normalcy implementation, sibing rights) at state and local youth conferences and YAB meetings, disseminating and creating recruitment materials, and responding to feedback from youth and adult supporters.

The NEYC staff (herein referred to as "NEYC staff") work for the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioner and Directors [NEACWCD]. The staff includes the NEYC Program Manager who works most closely with the youth advocates and adult supporters, the NEACWCD Program Director who supervises the Program Manager, and the NEACWCD Executive Director who works closely with the commissioners/directors and supervises the Program Director. There have been two NEYC Program Managers since 2008. Both have lived experience in foster care and participated as a youth advocate before they transitioned into a professional role.

3.3. Data collection

Between May 2018 and August 2018, semi-structured interviews ($n = 26$) were held with stakeholders from the New England states. Recruitment of participants was conducted in partnership between Boston University and NEYC staff. Researchers from Boston University attended a monthly phone meeting with NEYC staff, youth advocates and adult supporters, to discuss the study purpose and aims. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions, develop the research aims, and agree to participate in the study.

The NEYC Program Manager identified 14 potential youth advocates to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Inclusion criteria included participation in NEYC for at least a year. Six youth advocates (2 current members and 4 former members) aged 22–29 years old participated in the interviews. Their participation in NEYC ranged from 2 to 5.5 years.

The Executive Director of the NEACWCD assisted in the recruitment of 8 adult supporters and 8 current and former commissioners/directors, by contacting potential participants, describing the study and referring participants to the research team. All adults who were contacted agreed to participate. Informational interviews and discussions ($n = 4$) were conducted with the current and former NEYC Program Manager, the NEACWCD Program Director and NEACWCD Executive Director.

The interview instruments were developed using the following sources: an extensive review of the youth civic engagement literature, the research teams combined expertise in youth civic engagement, youth participatory action research, and youth councils, and

consultation with NEYC staff, adult supporters and youth advocates. The instruments included the following items: participants understanding of NEYC mission and goals; level of involvement; topics discussed; involvement in policy advocacy; perceived policy impact; barriers to impact; and recommendations for improving participation. Stakeholder interviews were held on the phone and lasted between 30 and 45 min. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Youth advocates were provided a $25 stipend for participation in the interview.

To supplement data from the youth advocates interviews and ensure multiple youth voices were included in the study, two focus groups were held with NEYC youth advocates ($n = 30$), aged 14 to 25 years old, from all six New England states, during the August 2018 Regional Youth Leadership Conference. All youth advocates in attendance agreed to participate in the focus groups. Youth advocates self-selected to participate in one of two groups, new members and veteran members, based on their time spent in the NEYC, which ranged from 1-day to 6-years. The focus groups, facilitated by the first and last author, were held in private conference rooms and lasted approximately 45 min. Topics included: youths' understanding of the mission and goals of NEYC, youth engagement in activities, perceptions and experience of participation, advocacy successes, and recommendations for improvement. Handwritten notes were recorded by a research assistant and were electronically transcribed for data analysis.

Two members of the research team conducted observations during the first two days of the 3-day Regional Youth Leadership Conference. The researchers independently documented information about the participants, agenda items, activities, key moments, level of youth engagement, and interactions among participants. Hand-written observation notes were electronically transcribed for data analysis. Additionally, the research team reviewed program documents including the NEYC mission statement, meeting agendas, website materials, training materials, and policy materials (i.e., sibling bill of rights, normalcy bill of rights).

3.4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed inductively using the steps of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data were reviewed by two members of the research team who developed initial codes based on the research question: What do stakeholders identify as the key elements and challenges of youth participation in child welfare policy advocacy in the context of a multi-state foster care youth? The researchers met regularly to discuss and agree upon their initial and expanded codes. Through an iterative and inductive coding process the researcher team determined the following themes: youth adult partnerships (Y-AP), relationships and networking, having a voice and feeling heard, collective power, and reciprocity among states. The themes were presented to current and former youth advocates, adult supporters and NEYC staff in an interactive session at the NEYC Regional Youth Leadership Conference. The session offered an opportunity for feedback from participants (e.g., member checking) and added depth to the themes. As an example, under "collective power" the engaged leadership of the commissioners and directors was discussed during the meeting as a key component of NEYC's sustainability and advocacy efforts.

Several steps were taken to ensure the credibility of findings. Multiple sources of data (interviews, focus groups, observations, documents) were triangulated during data analysis. Multiple researchers, with expertise in child welfare and youth civic engagement, participated in the analysis process. Member checking was used (e.g., reviewing findings with NEYC staff, youth advocates and adult supporters) to ensure that the findings were consistent with their experiences. Finally, the findings were compared and contrasted to the empirical literature on youth participation and foster care YABs.

4. Results

There's a lot of wisdom in having groups like this join together to talk about what's going on…share thoughts and ideas about how to make changes in the system that will be of benefit to a broader group.

Commissioner interviewee

Five themes were identified by the research team as elements of youth participation in child welfare policy advocacy in the context of the NEYC: youth-adult partnerships, relationships and networking, having a voice and feeling heard, collective power, and reciprocity among states. Challenges in engaging youth were also identified. The elements and challenges are discussed below.

4.1. Youth-adult partnership (Y-AP)

After an initial conversation with NEYC the research team perceived their model to be youth-led; however, the data revealed a cooperative approach that was more aligned with what has been described in the literature as the youth-adult partnership model (Y-AP), defined as youth and adults sharing responsibility in program planning and decision-making (Havlicek et al., 2018). In terms of the origin, the NEYC emerged from a series of meetings between foster care youth, foster parents, and child welfare professionals from pubic and nonprofit agencies across New England where youth were provided opportunities to hear from peers and adults in other states and provide recommendations regarding permanency planning for foster youth. The experience the youth had in this Breakthrough Series prompted them to ask the Executive Director of the NEACWCD to seek the support of the commissioners and directors to provide a forum for youth across New England to meet together on a regular basis to identify policy and program priorities and offer recommendations to enhance the child welfare system.

After getting this support, foster youth and adults from multiple states came together for over a year and a half to develop the structure of NEYC. They consulted with members of the California Youth Connection and a member of Foster Club about their youth engagement models. Staff from the National Resource Center for Youth Development (NRCYD) discussed other state and county models that existed, and assisted them with a strategic planning process. Youth advocates deliberately chose the term "youth coalition" rather than advisory board and decided not to have a president or chair-person, but to run meetings collectively with youth and adults from multiple states deciding on agenda items. The terms "youth advocate" and "adult supporter" were chosen by the youth and speak to the role of youth in driving the advocacy activities and adults serving in a supportive capacity.

Regarding the relationship between youth and adults, youth advocates and adult supporters discussed the importance of creating a supportive social context for youth to develop skills, knowledge and personal agency with the guidance and support of adults. Youth Advocate 6 said, "The adults understood the fine line between being able to support us, and at the same time allowing us to make mistakes. And they allowed us to drive the program, drive the results to where we want to go." Similarly, Youth Advocate 1 reported:

I can talk for years about how amazing the [NEYC Program Manager] is, I just think she's a wonderful inspiration who's so full of energy and passion, and I love that she has her own story to tell, I love that. And it's interesting because, although she is a spearhead for NEYC, or I would say like the face, she really tries not to run the group. And the same thing with the adult supporters; it was always very clear at all of our meetings that this group, these conferences, and these tasks, were youth-led. And the adults were really more of a supporting role; they were there to offer insight and resources and anything that they knew about current policy, anything that could

help. But when it came to the footwork, when it came to drafting or reaching to people we were trying to approach, policymakers, to get guest speakers, that was all really youth-led.

The NEYC Program Manager, with the support of other NEACWCD staff, was intentional in orienting and training adult supporters in their role and responsibilities. The Program Manager meets individually with each adult supporter when they begin in their role, and as needed when issues arise. The adult supporters meet at the NEYC in person meetings to discuss issues such as recruitment of youth, support of youth in decision-making, their role, and how to deal with issues that might arise. In addition, they attend the monthly phone meetings and self-select to participate in committees. Adult supporter interviews revealed that they were aware of their role in stepping back and allowing youth to lead. Adult supporter 8 said, "So, it's a really fine line between wanting to get things done as an adult supporter, but also knowing that you would…almost do everything if you didn't try to step back a little bit to get the young people to understand what needs to be done." Similarly, adult supporter 3 said, "…we might not always like that outcome. But the wonderful thing is, I've never heard anybody say to them 'Great idea, but this is the plan we're going with instead.'"

Regarding NEYC activities, youth advocates reported multiple opportunities for skills development including drafting meeting agendas, facilitating in person and monthly meetings, presenting workshops, and leading committees. Youth advocates come up with their own ideas for workshops and adults provide support to execute the workshop. Youth 5 reported:

We're able to not only suggest workshops by other people, but also suggest workshops of our own, like for us to lead. And I think that's really cool, because we're actually given the power to say, 'You know, there's this thing that I can do, that's a real awesome coping mechanism. I want to teach that to everyone else and maybe it will help them out.

During the in-person NEYC Regional Conference in August 2018, a youth advocate was observed facilitating an origami workshop. The youth advocate explained that origami was a therapeutic tool she used to cope with the uncertainty of foster care and moving among placements.

While the majority of NEYC activities are conducted in partnership between adults and youth, the recruitment and selection process for youth advocates was described by focus group members as adult-led. Youth advocates reported that the selection criteria were driven by adults in the individual states and included those youths who were mature and actively engaged in their state YAB over time. There was concern among youth advocates that such criteria excluded youth in foster care who may be disconnected from adults and programs.

4.2. Relationships and networking

Relationships and networking were a critical component of membership in the NEYC, as reported by all participants and observed by the research team. Several youth advocates described feeling "isolated" and "alone" in their foster care experiences. Having the opportunity to share their experiences with their peers with lived experiences on the NEYC allowed them to see that they were not alone. Adult Supporter 2 reported, "People after their first meeting will often say 'I didn't realize how many people had been through the same things that I've been through." Similarly, Youth Advocate 1 reported:

I got to meet with other people of my kind, and that's such a huge, huge deal to foster kids. You know all minority groups feel like they're alone, like there's no one around like them. And then when you get around other people like you, that feeling of alone, it vanishes, it really does!… It really is a family, and you get excited to see these people, not just because you get to know them as the wonderful people that they are, but you know these people are smart and

passionate, and you know you're going to accomplish your goals with these people.

Youth advocates in the veteran member focus group described increased confidence as a result of their NEYC participation. When they joined, they were nervous to talk to members from outside their home state or participate in the large group discussions. They eventually found their voice as they experienced increased trust in their fellow advocates. One youth advocate said, "these people aren't going to judge me if I say something stupid." Youth advocates reported being paired with veteran members at the NEYC in person meetings though a "buddy system" designed to help ease new advocates into the group. They credited the mentoring model, which was spearheded by a former youth advocate, with meeting new people and forming positive relationships.

Youth advocates also developed relationships with NEYC staff members and adult supporters. Youth advocates in the individual interviews and focus groups expressed admiration for the NEYC staff and adult supporters' level of commitment: "…the social workers that attended every meeting every time? I think that they're kind of the real heroes." Youth 1 said, "I had a better relationship with some adult supporters at the NEYC than I did with my own personal social worker."

Relationships and networking were an essential part of the experience of NEYC. Youth and adults develop networks of emotional support and shared information about state policies, and these networks help them further their advocacy goals. Commissioners and directors were similarly enthusiastic about networking with peers, adult supporters and youth advocates from multiple states. Commissioner 5 summarized, "…it's just a really unique opportunity to come together with people… grappling with similar issues, and to learn with them and from them."

4.3. Having a voice and feeling heard

Research demonstrates that youth in foster care do not perceive opportunities to have a voice in decision making that directly impacts their lives. Youth 1 reported, "…being a foster youth, you never really fully feel heard, and you never fully feel taken seriously." In contrast, youth in NEYC described the meetings with adult supporters, NEYC staff, and commissioners/directors as an empowering experience. Youth 6 said of NEYC, "…it gives the youth a voice and that voice stretches across many realms, on the state level, the regional level, and the national level." Similarly, Youth 3 said, "I was able to have my voice heard, and I was able to make a difference. That's something that I'll always be able to say… That's the thing about NEYC is that you are heard. No matter what, you are heard."

Youth advocates reported being trained by NEYC staff to share their story in a manner that is self-protective and allows them to share information strategically to educate and influence decision-makers. As reported by the NEYC Program Manager, the process of sharing can be therapeutic for some youth but needs to be done in a manner that is safe, so youth don't share too much personal information because once the information is out there they can't take it back. Adult Supporter 1 concurred, stating, "strategic sharing essentially helps youth to identify what their story is, and what is useful and safe to share, for the youth and for the audience." Commissioners and directors regularly cited strategic sharing by the youth as a deciding factor in whether or not they pursue an issue in their state. One commissioner said, "I think that having their lived experience and hearing from them paints a picture of the problems we really need to try to address for them."

Youth appreciated the scheduled opportunity to speak directly to commissioners/directors at the Regional Youth Leadership Conference. Following these meetings, some youth also had the opportunity through their state YABs to meet with their commissioner/director on a regular basis to discuss issues related foster care. Youth 2 described his experience:

In my state I'm considered the leader, I'm supposed to be running

things for the regional administrators and our 10 commissioner meetings. The commissioner and I will attend private meetings and talk about some of the things we've done and some of the things we want to accomplish before she leaves. This wouldn't have happened if I didn't have the knowledge developed through NEYC of being a leader, how to strategic share, the right time to speak, when should I advocate, how can I advocate, how do I contact my state legislator, senator.

The commissioners and directors valued the opportunity to hear directly from youth about their experiences (e.g., with permanency planning and normalcy). It provided them a context for decision-making and policy implementation. Commissioner 2 said, "I'm not sure we would have grappled with those issues in a substantive way if it had not been for their efforts." The receptiveness to youth voice does not go unnoticed by the youth themselves. A youth advocate described meeting with commissioners and directors at the NEYC Regional Youth Leadership Conference:

…they knew all the work we were doing, and they were truly able to come to a conference, check their egos at the door, and just come in and actually listen. Not only did they listen but they gave us feedback and they interacted with us. They asked us questions about why we feel this is important and why we feel this is the approach that we should take.

4.4. Collective power

I know a lot of the time when you're in a foster home, or a group home or residential facility, you just think that you're hopeless, and you can't do anything, and your life is decided for you. But we do have a voice and when given a platform we truly do have the power to make change.

Youth Advocate 6

Youth advocates discussed the empowerment they experienced when they met with youth from multiple states and realized that the issues and barriers they experienced were not unique to them. This focus on systemic barriers, as opposed to individual problems, was powerful to youth advocates. They became less likely to internalize institutional barriers and more focused on identifying systemic issues and finding solutions. A salient example is the development and public signing (in 5 of 6 states) of the Normalcy Bill of Rights. Youth advocates shared experiences of not being able to participate in normal activities due to the bureaucracy of child welfare and how this personally impacted them. Youth advocate 2 said, "I mean how embarrassing is it being on the football team, the guys get together and study the plays and I have to ask my friend like "do you mind if DCF does a background check on your family? Can I sleepover with you guys?"

The first step in the development of the Normalcy Bill of Rights was developing a definition of normalcy that was acceptable to all 6-member states. This was requested by the commissioners and directors at an in person NEYC meeting that they attended to hear about the work of the coalition and give feedback to them about the state's priorities. The normalcy legislation had just passed and the states leaders were thinking about "normalcy and the prudent parenting" elements. They wanted youth with lived experiences to shape the idea of what normalcy should mean. Youth responses were collected in a shared document and voted on by all members until they formed an agreed-upon definition. Some of the items in the NEYC definition include rights to "normal" adolescent experiences such as sleepovers, driver's education, driver's licenses, overnight school trips, etc. Following the presentation of the normalcy definition to the NEACWCD, the NEYC youth advocates were asked to create a Normalcy Bill of Rights to act as an executive summary to the normalcy definition and to add a normalcy citations page.

Youth Advocates highlighted the collaborative process of collecting

information from youth in multiple states, sharing information, developing definitions and practices, and presenting it to the commissioners/directors. Adult supporters and commissioners/directors concurred with the value of the collaborative development and implementation. Commissioner 3 reported:

> When the NEYC created a set of guidance documents, again going back to normalcy, my job was to help review those documents, make any suggestions or tweaks, not to completely edit their work, but to make sure we could align what they were recommending with what was reasonably implementable or executable by the department. So our partnership together resulted in a document that we could carry forward together … My job is to make sure our staff and our foster families, our group-care facilities, have these documents and are adhering to them.

The Sibling Bill of Rights, an earlier effort by the NEYC went through a similar process of gathering information from youth and adults in the 6 states, sharing best practices and with the assistance of one of the commissioners drafting the Bill of Rights. The Sibling Bill of Rights asserts that siblings should be placed together whenever possible, and that siblings who are not placed together had the right to visit with their siblings at least once a month. Participations discussed the public signings by the commissioners and directors in the individual states as public acknowledgement that they would adhere to the Bill. In addition to impacting the New England region, participants reported their work served as a national model. Youth advocate 2 stated:

> The Coalition doesn't just bring people from one state along. We collaborate with other states from outside the New England region. So, the more input, information we have from youth advocates and foster youths in general, the faster we can make things happen. And we actually see real change. People are implementing documents that we developed in the New England region, their own states, Nevada, Arizona. So, it's just amazing to see this work that is actually being implemented. We don't just touch the lives of the six states in the New England region, like the foster youth there. You know, we try to impact all over.

4.5. Reciprocity among states

Interviews and observations demonstrated the importance multiple states exchanging information, ideas and guidance regarding child welfare priorities and best practices. Comparisons between states served as a source of information as well as "positive peer pressure" to promote positive change. For example, when asked why each state publicly signed the Normalcy Bill of Rights, a participant in the Summer 2018 NEYC Regional Youth Leadership Conference reported "accountability" and "pressure from other states."

The networking and collaboration across states may lead states to examine their policies and practices and seek guidance from other states on promising practices. As an example, Adult Supporter 3 reported that while a neighboring state funds tuition for any youth in care who is accepted to a state school, her state only funds a set number of youths, "There are really critical things that (the state) needs to step up to," she said, "and looking at what's happening in other states helps me and gives me that guidance." Similarly. Adult Supporter 5 said: "We struggle with the same problems, and sometimes they come up with a solution before we do, so we try to get the other states to help us, or we try to help them implement different ways of doing things, to make things easier for foster youth."

Another key component of the reciprocity among states was gaining the buy-in from commissioner and directors to support state interest in youth voice. The NEACWCD meetings attended by all New England commissioners and directors, coupled with the in-person meetings with youth advocates at the NEYC Regional Youth Leadership Conference, provided up-to-date information on the collective work of the NEYC

and how it relates to the issues and priorities in each state. Commissioner 5 described these meetings as "a "really unique opportunity to come together with people dealing with, grappling with similar issues," respectively. The NEYC Program Manager indicated that ties between the commissioners/directors and the youth advocates are "getting stronger over the years, I think, because commissioners and directors are seeing more and more of what they gain from youth voice, so that their policies and their regulations are better."

4.6. Challenges to engagement

Youth involved in NEYC faced multiple demands on their time including employment, school, parenting, and other advocacy work. A common theme among youth advocates and adult supporters was that while youth were able to set aside time to attend the in-person leadership conferences, they struggled to attend monthly conference calls due to multiple time commitments. Adult Supporter 2 pointed out "everything that DCF does, all of the policy meetings, it's all done in that 9 to 5 schedule." During the focus group, a youth advocate described the lack of control she had over her own schedule while working in customer service, leading her to miss the monthly meetings. Each of these factors may limit how much time youth can devote to NEYC.

Supporting NEYC and local youth boards requires a significant emotional and time commitment from adult supporters, who tend to be child welfare staff with large workloads. An NEYC staff member described what adults do to support youth advisory boards, "People have families and lives, and are they driving out at 7pm to rural New Hampshire to pick somebody up and bring them to 8pm meeting, and then driving them back, driving themselves home and not getting home until 10:30. Yeah, they did that, but that's a lot to ask."

The lack of funding for child welfare programs was also identified as a barrier to youth engagement. Multiple participants pointed out that child welfare agencies are designed to fill the needs of younger children and can sometimes suffer from a "restrictive hypersensitivity to child safety," as described by Commissioner 4. This concern for safety is both the reason youth in care are so focused on changing rules (e.g., normalcy legislation), and the reason states may resist these changes. Another concern was bureaucracy of child welfare and the time it takes to make changes in child welfare policy and practice. Commissioner 2 said,

> I think probably the biggest challenge is grappling with how long it takes things to change in bureaucracies. The youth advocates would have an issue that was important to them, and they wanted to see something happen. And when you work in state government the pace of change sometimes the pace of change can be excruciatingly slow.

As noted earlier, the recruitment and selection of youth in the Coalition may also be a challenge in terms of representation of all voices. Due to the nature of the position, to represent your state on a regional level, youth selected to be NEYC youth advocates often had longevity in their state foster youth advisory board, positive relationships with adults, and/or were "ready" for participation. One (adult) participant reported:

> There's a selection bias problem when it comes to gathering up young people to do this kind of work. What drives the selection bias is that workers and agency leadership and middle management typically want to put forth young people who are success stories, and that's understandable. And/or young people who have a reasonably good relationship with the agency, who aren't super hostile, which also makes sense. But what that means is you're selecting out a bunch of the young people who have the most needs and/or the most grievances. So, it's difficult to make sure you have a representative voice that actually can speak from experience, with

empathy and lived expertise, about the full range of needs faced by young people in foster care.

5. Discussion

Prior research on participation in state-level foster youth advisory boards (YAB) report positive youth development and youth empowerment outcomes including the development of knowledge, civic-efficacy, critical-consciousness, relationships with peers and adults, and a counterspace for identity development (Forenza, 2016; Forenza, 2017; Havlicek & Samuels, 2018). This study supports and expands the extant research by documenting multiple stakeholder perspectives on the key elements and barriers of youth participation in a multi-state foster care youth coalition. Using Havlicek et al. (2018) models of youth participation as a guide, the present study found that NEYC functioned as a Y-AP. Youth and adults shared power in program planning and decision-making. Youth were provided opportunities to run trainings, workshops, meetings, and policy projects, and were trained and supported by adults throughout the process. The strength of this approach is that youth and adults benefit mutually from the relationships and youth experience a "supportive social context." However, the the notion of adults stepping back and allowing youth to share power in decision-making may be a new approach for adults working in child welfare. The adult supporters in NEYC were provided on-going training, consultation and guidance from the NEYC Program Manager, who have both been individuals with lived experience in foster care and prior participation in foster youth advisory boards. The NEACWCD staff also acted as a resource and sounding board for youth, adult supporters and commissioners/directors, providing information, training, and consultation.

Bringing together youth from multiple states and organizing advocacy efforts across the New England Region resulted in information sharing and recommendations for enhancing policy practice. Findings suggest that NEYC youth advocates perceived they had a voice and felt heard. They also developed critical consciousness regarding systemic issues and perceived "collective power" to make positive policy and practice changes. For example, participants reported that NEYC had a critical role in the development and public signing of the Normalcy Bill of Rights and the Sibling Bill of Rights. Unique to NEYC was the ability to make change across New England. NEYC members had the opportunity to share strategies and practices for creating change from their respective states. If one or more state(s) has a unique policy or program from which other states may benefit, youth advocates shared it with the larger group. If one or more state(s) achieved a shared goal before the others, youth advocates and adult supporters would discuss strategies and assist the other states in advocating for change. Through multiple communication channels and collaboration opportunities, the commissioners, directors, and adult supporters were kept apprised of the work of NEYC and were able to collaborate with youth advocates in developing policy projects. In addition, the affiliation with the NEYC provided "positive peer pressure" to encourage states to learn more about select policy and programs and determine the feasibility of adopting them into practice.

Regarding challenges to foster youth civic engagement, NEYC had some difficulty sustaining youth participation throughout the year as youth advocates schedules became busy. Meeting logistics, transportation and scheduling were prominent concerns in participant interviews. Another critical concern was the recruitment and selection of youth from the individual states, which tended to favor mature and well-connected youth, as opposed to youth who may be disconnected from adults and programs. Another important challenge was the funding and bureaucratic nature of child welfare which may result in youth becoming frustrated waiting for policy implementation.

5.1. Limitations

The limitations to this study are similar to other qualitative studies in that they are context (and region) specific; therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all foster YABs. The youth and adults who participated in the study were active members of the NEYC. Future research should capture the voices of youth who are not given the opportunity to participate in leadership opportunities such as NEYC, or those youth who do not maintain their participation. While the study was conceptualized in partnership with NEYC youth and adults, additional research is needed to determine the impact of policy advocacy on child welfare practice in each state. The preferred approach is youth-led participatory action research (Y-PAR), where youth determine the research questions, data collection methods and dissemination mechanisms.

5.2. Conclusions

The experiences of multiple stakeholders in this study underscore the importance of providing opportunities to elevate the expert voices of current and former foster youth in child welfare decision-making. The NEYC provides a unique opportunity to bring together youth and adults from multiple states across New England to discuss best practices and advocate for systems level change. The NEYC represents a positive example of a youth-adult partnership where adults and youth benefit mutually from participation and relationship development. Findings demonstrate the development of critical consciousness and "collective power" in policy advocacy on a state and regional level. Critical to the success of NEYC was the sustained support and engagement of the commissioners and directors and the reciprocity in sharing of information and strategies across states. The degree to which policy impacted practice in each state is beyond the scope of this study, but in need of further examination.

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