

A Pilot Assessment of a School-Based Youth Court in a Resource-Poor African-American Urban School District: Lessons Learned From Youth Court Volunteers

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the benefits of youth court participation for volunteers (N = 14) serving as jurors in an urban school-based youth court. Focus group and questionnaire data indicate that volunteers are capable of providing more effective sanctioning decisions than adults. Volunteers reported developing citizenship skills including learning about the law and decision-making skills. The youth court leaders developed self-confidence and maturity while learning the conflict resolution skills necessary for rendering dispositions and conducting trials. We interpret our findings within the context of the youth court literature, the issue of the school-to-prison pipeline, and Elijah Anderson's analysis of the Code of the Street.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, we examine the perspectives, attitudes, and learning experiences of volunteer youth jurors in a school-based youth court located in a resource-poor African-American urban school district during the first year of the program's life.¹ Youth court programs offer an alternative to traditional juvenile justice and school disciplinary systems. These programs empower youths to play a major role in judging youthful offenders by serving as jurors and rendering dispositions (Pearson & Jurich, 2005). In some courts, youths also serve as judge, attorneys, bailiff, and clerk. The goals of youth court are to reduce the backlog of cases in the juvenile justice system, reduce court costs, lower recidivism rates, and provide opportunities for offenders and volunteers to learn law-related citizenship and personal skills (Lyles & Knepper, 1997, cited in Forgays, DeMilio, & Schuster, 2004; Maloney & Holcomb, 2001, cited in Forgays et al., 2004; Pearson & Jurich, 2005; Schneider, 2008). Dispositions are based on the restorative justice model, and are designed to educate offenders, discourage future crime, and encourage pro-social behavior.

Youth courts have been in existence for 30 years, and during the last decade have been the most replicated juvenile justice program for non-violent offenses (Schneider, 2008). The number of youth courts increased from 78 nationwide in 1994 to over 1,250 in 2006. Each year these courts serve between 110,000-125,000 offenders and 100,000 youth volunteers (Schneider, 2008). Despite the critical role of the volunteer peer jury, relatively few studies have examined the impact of the youth court experience on jurors who sentence their peers (Forgays et al., 2004). The focus of youth court research has been on recidivism among youth court offenders (see reviews by Butts & Buck, 2000 and Povitsky, 2005). Explanations for decreases in recidivism have focused on the power of the peer jury to influence respondents (Forgays & Demilio, 2005). Social control theorists claim that offenders are more likely to adhere to sanctions rendered by peers than by adults, and social learning theorists emphasize that for adolescents, peers are powerful role models who promote not only negative but pro-social behavior (see Forgays & DeMilio, 2005). The degree to which youth volunteers effectively perform their functions impacts the respondents' youth court experiences and their risk of recidivating.

Approximately 42% of youth court programs are juvenile justice system-based programs, 36% are school-based, and 22% are community-based and incorporated as, or operated by, private nonprofit organizations (National Association of Youth Courts, 2008). In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of school-based youth courts (also referred to in the literature as student courts).² In March 2004, only 7% of the estimated 930 youth court programs were identified as school-based (Vickers,

1 These results are part of a larger quantitative and qualitative longitudinal evaluation of offender and volunteer outcomes including educational performance, recidivism, law-related knowledge, and attitudinal change toward the justice system.

2 While part of this increase may be attributed to better recording of youth courts, the school mandates to increase service-learning opportunities and commitment to civic education have led to an increase in the number of school-based youth courts (Karen Green, Coordinator for Placer County Peer Court, personal communication, October 3, 2008).

2004), compared with 36% of the estimated 1,127 in October 2006 (National Association of Youth Courts, 2008). Notwithstanding this increase, we are aware of no empirical assessments of school-based youth courts in the United States,³ whereas juvenile justice diversionary youth courts have been the subject of study. Educators are increasingly interested in school-based youth courts and their role in improving students' citizenship skills and reducing problematic behavior (Nessel, 2000).

DESCRIPTION OF CHESTER HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH COURT

Youth Court Operations

During its first year, the CHS Youth Court (Chester High School, Chester, Pennsylvania) was an extracurricular activity at school. Youth volunteers served as judge, jury, bailiff, clerk, and both prosecuting and defense attorneys. The court met after school three days a week. Two days were reserved for training or organizational issues and one for hearings.

The CHS Youth Court's jurisdiction is limited to school disciplinary offenses including truancy, lateness to class, hall-walking/class cutting, classroom disruptions, carrying/using a cell phone, and dress code violations. As with most youth courts, to be eligible for participation offending youths must admit guilt (National Association of Youth Courts, 2008). Offenders (referred to as respondents at CHS) who successfully complete the disposition have violations erased from their academic records. Failure to complete the disposition results in referral to administration for suspension.

Volunteer Eligibility, Recruitment, and Training

Any student could volunteer to be part of the court. Student volunteers participated in after-school weekly 1-2 hour trainings during the school year. Two law students who were members of the Black Law Student Association and an experienced local poverty attorney conducted the trainings. Instructional content areas included but were not limited to the youth court's philosophy of restorative justice, the roles and responsibilities of the courtroom players, and the importance of positive peer pressure as a way to teach youths to reform their behavior. Process areas focused on how to ask questions in a disciplined way, how to handle conflict within the jury itself, and the importance of confidentiality. The main vehicle for training was to give the students mock exercises and then critique them after the mock exercise was over.

Youth Court Productivity: Year One

CHS Youth Court began training sessions with students on November 3, 2007 and heard its first case on November 15, 2007. From November 15, 2007 through May 1, 2008,

³ We identified one empirical study of a British school-based youth court referred to as bully court (Mahdavi & Smith, 2002).

approximately 60 cases were referred to the court. Of those cases, 34 hearings were held, and 16 were referred to school administration as outside the scope of the court's jurisdiction. The remaining cases were considered pending at the close of the school year. Twenty-four students who participated in the hearing and disposition process as respondents completed their dispositions. Four of the respondents joined the court as volunteers.

Ninety students logged over 1,400 hours of volunteer service to the court. Twenty of those students functioned as the leadership core of the organization, and were responsible for over 1,000 of those hours.

METHODS

Research Focus

The focus of this study is to enumerate and categorize the benefits of youth court participation. Data are elicited from volunteers' self-reports. Our goal is to compare the benefits of court participation elicited from the volunteers with the benefits derived from a content analysis of the youth court literature.

Program Site

Prior to deindustrialization, Chester was a booming city well known for its industry, shopping, and culture. Since then, Chester has become the prototype of what ails urban America. Since 1970, the percentage of single-parent families with children almost tripled from 26% to 68% (State of the Cities Data Systems, 2004). The population is predominantly African American/Black (76%), with 19% white and 5% Latino or Hispanic. Of the residents over 25, only 8% have a college or professional degree (U.S. Census, 2000a). The average household income is \$25,429 (U.S. Census, 2000a) which is half the county average (U.S. Census, 2000b). Chester accounts for 67% of all homicides and 35% of all violent crime in Delaware County, but includes only 8% of the county's population (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007).

Chester High School typifies an under-resourced school. Only 57% of the students who began 9th grade in 2005 were enrolled at CHS as juniors in 2007 (City-Data.com). In 2008, the Chester-Upland school district ranked 104th out of 105 districts using classroom quality indicators (e.g., standardized scores and graduation rates; Sweeney, 2008). In 2007, most students (86% for math and 76% for reading) scored below the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) basic scores compared with state averages of less than 16% (City-Data.com). Aside from sports, the school has few extracurricular activities. There is no drama club or school newspaper. Eight high school principals have held office over a four-year period.

Interface between Community and Court

CHS students operate in a difficult school environment characterized by high rates of violence and few resources. Inner-city youths, including volunteers, bring many

problematic issues to the court, including feuds that arise on the streets, problems within their classrooms, and competition for attention and recognition. The Youth Court volunteers are no different from the respondents they sentence. The adults who oversee the court frequently have to deal with issues the volunteers bring to the court, including rivalry among males for a female's attention and competition among the students for authority and power within the Youth Court itself.

Data Collection and Strategy for Analysis

All study procedures were approved by the Widener University Institutional Review Board. A triangulation mixed-methods design was used to evaluate the impact of the court experience on youth volunteers. Simultaneously collecting data from multiple sources and merging the results to understand the problem under investigation contributes to the reliability of the study findings (Creswell, 2005). We collected data from three different sources: (1) focus groups with volunteers; (2) respondent and parent surveys; (3) and respondent and parent post-hearing interview responses.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted to assess the benefits for volunteers. The purpose was to document the quality of their experiences and ways in which volunteers benefitted. Sample questions follow: *In what way(s) do you think the Youth Court helps youth at Chester High? If so, why? Why not? In what way(s) has being a juror been a positive experience for you? In what ways does the Youth Court have the potential to improve the environment within the high school?* The focus group questions were broad, and probes were offered based on responses. The final questions, therefore, varied somewhat across groups.

Two sets of focus groups were conducted. The first set (N = 12) includes three focus groups consisting of between three and five youth jurors each. They were conducted during February and March 2008. The second set of focus groups (N = 9) includes two discussions conducted with Youth Court volunteers who had risen to leadership positions. One took place in May (N = 4) and one in July 2008 (N = 5). Seven students who participated in the earlier focus groups (see set one above) rose to leadership positions and participated in the second set as well.

To recruit volunteers, a researcher attended Youth Court training sessions and explained the study to potential volunteers. The groups were conducted in a private classroom and were audiotaped and transcribed. Subsequently, two independent coders separately analyzed the data. Inconsistencies between coders were discussed and resolved.

Respondent and Parent Surveys

The *Evaluation of Teen Court Survey* (Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall, 2002) was self-administered to each respondent and his or her parent/guardian as part of the larger

evaluation study conducted by these authors.⁴ In this study, the surveys serve as an alternate source of data that provide information on Youth Court volunteers from the perspectives of the respondents and their parents/guardians. The survey measures attitudes and opinions prior to exposure to the Youth Court, after the Youth Court, and any changes in perceptions that may have been associated with the Youth Court participation (Butts et al., 2002, p. 24). For this pilot project, we include only an analysis of respondent and parent perceptions of Youth Court immediately after their court session. Attitudes assessed focus on perceptions of Youth Court members and fairness of treatment received. Statements assessed are: “*I think I was treated fairly by the youth court,*” “*Youth court people were not really interested in me,*” “*The kids working in youth court were o.k.,*” “*Youth court people care about my rights.*” Questions were asked using a four-category Likert scale with categories including strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

Respondent and Parent Post-Hearing Interviews

Immediately following the hearing, respondents and their parent/guardian (if present) participated in a post-hearing interview with the Youth Court Faculty Advisor. The Advisor asked the parents and respondents the following open-ended questions: *What was most helpful about Youth Court? Do you feel the members of the courtroom acted in a professional manner? Why? Do you feel the constructive disposition the jury gave was fair? Do you feel the Youth Court disposition will be more helpful than the consequences offered by the Assistant Principal and if yes, why?*

Description of Sample

Focus Group Participants

Of the 14 Youth Court volunteers, 8 were male and 6 female. All were African American. Most were freshmen (N = 9). One was a sophomore, two were juniors, and two were seniors. Seven attended summer school in 2008 due to failing grades.

Survey and Interview Participants

All respondents (N = 16) and parents (N = 7) who were approached for consent in the larger evaluation study agreed to complete the *Evaluation of Teen Court Survey* and participated in the post-interview questions. All respondents were African American and 10 were male. Ages ranged from 14 to 17, with a mean and median age of 15. There were eight freshman, three sophomores, four juniors, and one senior.

All parents/guardians were African American and female. Four worked full-time. One parent was under 30, one between 30-39, two between 40-49, two between 50-59, and one was older than 60. One parent had less than a high school degree, three graduated from high school, and three had more than a high school education.

⁴ Results focusing on respondents will be published in a forthcoming article.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESULTS: FOCUS GROUP DATA

The conceptual framework developed from the content analysis comprises five categories: (1) whether volunteers develop perspectives consistent with the youth court philosophy; (2) citizenship and civic development; (3) personal development; (4) motivation to excel in school; and (5) perceived improvements to the CHS learning environment. Each category listed below includes benefits identified from the content analysis as important for volunteers.

Typical responses are presented from the first set of focus groups as illustrations. Responses are presented from the second set to illustrate additional themes. Quotes are followed by the student and focus group's identification numbers. The first three focus groups (numbered 1-3) were conducted with Youth Court volunteers and the second set (numbered 4-5) with volunteers who rose to leadership positions.

I. Socialization with respect to the court process and youth court goals focuses on whether the volunteers' motivation for youth court participation and their understanding of the youth court philosophy demonstrates support for the theoretically stated youth court process or goals.

A. Wanting to help respondents. This goal reflects the youth court's emphasis on dispositions that provide positive youth development and help respondents understand the negative consequences of their behavior (Fisher, 2002; Pearson & Jurich, 2005). Consistent with this goal is the finding that youth volunteers are motivated to help their peers or make a difference in a person's life (Knepper, 1995; Mahdavi & Smith, 2002; Skaruppa, LeBlanc, & Lacey, 2001).

Thirteen of the fourteen volunteers offered at least one example demonstrating support for the youth court process or goals. The most frequent response ($N = 13$) focused on the volunteers' interest in helping respondents or providing constructive dispositions. This reflects the underlying philosophy of the court as a helping institution that works with rather than against the respondents. One student (ID2, FG3) explained: "*You don't get suspended . . . If you don't want to do the time that you get from the jury then it gets referred back to the administrator and then you really get suspended, so it's like giving you a chance to make the right decision.*" Another student (ID1, FG2) said: "*You actually take a formal responsibility . . . Their disposition is teaching them {the respondents} that they can stay out of trouble.*"

B. The belief that youth court provides a more effective/fair response than the school administration or adults more generally. Social control and social learning theories argue that offending youths are more responsive to their peers than to adults. In a study by Forgays et al. (2004), volunteers stated that offenders value their dispositions because they care about their peers' opinions, and the youth court process is fairer than juvenile court because the jury is comprised of their peers. Ex-offender volunteers described their dispositions as fair and were motivated to give other defendants fair dispositions (Greene & Weber, 2008; Harrison, Maupin, & Mays, 2001). Offenders and their parents reported that they were treated fairly and with respect by the youth court members (Weisz, Lott, & Thai, 2002).

Eight students stressed the advantage of having a jury of one's peers. One student (ID3, FG1) summarized distrust of the traditional system when suggesting that his peers ("certain people") are dissatisfied with the way the criminal justice system works ("real trials"), where the law is unfairly applied and out of touch with the African-American community perspective. The student then contrasts this system with the Youth Court, a system largely designed and operated by youths and for youths:

I think it has helped for people who was in Youth Court and people who have to come to Youth Court for the trials. Because certain people have been to a regular trial at a real court and they see the law one way, but when they come to Youth Court they see it a different way and that can change their mind because if an adult that tells you this, that and the other they'll just take it as 'he don't know nothing,' but if he gets it from his peers he can have a different attitude.

Responses also reflect the frequently cited notion that as compared to adults, peers are better able to understand and empathize with the respondent. The Youth Court incorporates and adopts as its foundation the experiences, views, and insights of youth. It is this mutual understanding shared by volunteers and respondents that contributes to the Court's potential to be viewed as an equitable justice system. One student (ID3, FG3) said:

. . . I just think it's just better bearing it from someone you own age because when someone's older telling you, that it's like a different time now. Like we're saying that we understand you where you're coming from cause we go through the same thing everyday.

For the Court to be effective, the respondents must identify with and respect their peer jurors. During the last leader focus group, however, all members (N = 5) admitted feeling skeptical about joining Youth Court for fear of tarnishing their reputations. They all said their friends considered Youth Court members nerds or snitches. In this community, becoming a member of Youth Court may be a fast way for volunteers to lose respect in their peer group. If the volunteers are viewed as voices of the administration rather than as peers, the youth court experience may stigmatize rather than positively influence the offender (Weisz et al., p. 391).

C. *The belief that participation in youth court is an empowering experience* (Godwin, Steinhart, & Fulton, 1998). Research indicates that jurors enjoy the responsibility of sentencing their peers and take pride in assuming adult roles and contributing to the community (Forgays et al., 2004; Mahdavi & Smith, 2002).

Six students described the Youth Court as a motivating experience with the potential to lead to change within CHS. Students expressed the importance of assuming adult responsibilities, having a voice, and working to overcome the negative reputation of CHS. The following students focused on their perceived importance of having a voice within the school: "Youth Court showed me that I can make a difference for people I know . . . When we come together we can make a bigger voice that people need to hear." (ID4, FG1); ". . . {The voices say} its time for a change" (ID1, FG1).

Volunteers described negative perceptions of Chester High School's image and how the Youth Court should be used to improve the image of the students and school. Adopting this negativity inhibits opportunity for students to live up to their potential,

in contrast to Youth Court which provides an empowering environment as a basis for positive development.

Whenever Chester High School is in the news it's never about anything good. It's always about somebody getting shot or somebody playing basketball (ID5, FG1). . . . It {should be} about Chester High has a new Youth Court program, Chester High has wonderful students who care. Because so many people, even the people that work in Chester City offices have the mentality that these Chester kids they don't care (ID1, FG1).

D. *The belief that youth court is a positive after-school activity* especially given the paucity of after-school activities available to CHS students. Nine students focused on Youth Court as a way for volunteers to stay out of trouble, to spend productive time after school or to make friends. The students' comments point to the Youth Court as a worthwhile program that addresses the scarcity of positive role models in the students' lives and the need for alternative after-school activities and connections to pro-social peers that have the potential to increase the youths' self esteem. According to one student (ID2, FG2): *"It helps us out because it teaches us in the Youth Court what not to do, what people do so we won't repeat their actions again and get ourselves in trouble . . . Youth Court helps me actually do something and learn, after school, that's good."*

Students also described Youth Court as a place to make new friends, feel accepted, and spend time with youths who care. One (ID1, FG2) said: *"{When I don't do Youth Court} I . . . go to sleep and go outside and all that I wanted to do something else . . . I just wanted to become a part of something you know."*

II. Development of citizenship and civics skills

A. *Volunteers will learn about the law through law-related education (LRE).* LRE provides youths with the opportunity to understand their legal rights and responsibilities, to confront and resolve disputes, and to discuss and analyze public issues (Fisher, 2002, pp. 12-13). Youth court participants receive LRE through training programs that prepare them to carry out court hearings and render dispositions. LRE is based on the idea that when youths understand and respect the laws, they are less likely to violate the law.

Eight volunteers reported learning about the law or legal process. They accurately described the roles of the prosecutor, defense attorney, bailiff, and judge. Additionally they reported learning that being a legal professional takes hard work and about the realities of law compared to the television version. A related theme emerged that points to the students' increased interest in law (N = 4). One student (ID1, FG1) said: *"Youth court opened my mind to different things. I never was into law. I could care less about it . . . but now I'm a whole different person."*

B. & C. *Volunteers will develop skills in decision making* (Pearson & Jurich, 2005) *and conflict resolution* (Povitsky, 2005) as a consequence of experiencing the process of rendering a decision at the end of the deliberation phase. This process requires discussion, analysis, and weighing of alternatives necessary for arriving at consensus-based disposition.

Ten students said they improved their decision-making skills. The most common theme focused on trying to make objective decisions during the deliberation phase. One

student (ID3, FG2) explained: “I definitely developed a knack {for decision making} because I used to be like choosing sides . . . based on friendship. I do it evenly. So now I’m fair when I decide something.”

During the first set of focus groups, nine students described conflict among jury members that emerged during the deliberation process. Students described negative energy on the jury that started with jurors who did not take the process seriously. One student (ID3, FG1) said:

If you don't come up in here ready to make a decision being the best juror you can be, you're going to be sucked right in because you're going to be bearing the kids bickering behind you, going to force you to turn around and tell them to shut up too. . . . And then when you are ready to decision make and they come up with a silly answer like I want him {the respondent} to have 28 hours {of jury duty} that throws us off. Then we have to go into a big argument . . .

For this first set of focus groups, most students agreed that they had not learned how to come to a consensus decision. Seven of the nine students commented on sources of conflict, including arguments brought in from outside Youth Court and disagreements with the school code (e.g., cell phone policies). When asked how they handle the tension and manage to come up with a decision eventually, one student (ID2, FG1) explained: “We try to just shut everything down. Then just have a vote. Basically save the argument until after the person gives their disposition. Usually it’s right back on again after it calms down.”

All members in the last leader group focused on what it has taken to grow as a group. All (N = 5) agreed that they had experienced conflict among themselves, but within this context had learned to share power, listen, be patient, compromise, respect others, and be open-minded. There also was the general consensus that they learned how to relate to people different from themselves. One (ID2, FG5) said:

I think the Youth Court it brung different people together that you would never thought it to because before I started the Youth Court I like wouldn't hang with certain people 'cause they wasn't cool but then you hang out in Youth Court and find out theys is cool . . .

When asked what changed in terms of their ability to handle conflict, they all agreed that the field trip to Philadelphia, where they served as presenters at a national conference in front of 300 judges and attorneys, gave them the opportunity and confidence to come together as a cohesive group. One student (ID3, FG5) said:

It was the trip to Philadelphia that really connected everyone . . . when we was on the bus nobody was talking on are way . . . We got to the conference, we worked really well, everyone was congratulating us and we started talking together . . . We talked and then we bonded outside and we got on the bus, and everybody was cool ever since. At the same time little conflicts happened after that, but we still kind a kept inside with each other. You know bonded.

III. Personal development focuses on skills learned while assisting with program creation, collaborating with peers and faculty, questioning respondents and parents, and public speaking during hearings and rendering decisions.

A. *Pro-social leadership skills* (Fisher, 2002; Schneider, 2008). Two students in the last leadership focus group had experienced a power struggle during the year and through this process had begun to develop leadership skills. As one (ID1, FG5) described:

Like this was just a great example, just now because before if I wanted a turn and Number 3 had the microphone and he just had a turn I'd be like no you just had a turn. It's my turn now you need to learn how to take turns. But I said just go ahead cause I learned how to share more . . . we had a lot of conflict problems because . . . before I came {to Youth Court} he was in a lot of like leadership, and he was like the easy going type of guy, and I'm more like strict. Because I'm like when like we're like doing something it has to be professional, but after that it's ok and we can like goof around and play . . . I learned to lighten up a bit and he learned to be more strict about things. So it was kinda like a give and take thing. And we helped each other a lot.

B. *Communication skills* include listening (Pearson & Jurich, 2005) and public speaking (Pearson & Jurich, 2005; Schneider, 2008). Six students reported that Youth Court helped improve their public communication skills. Examples follow: “*Speak loudly and clearly*” (ID2, FG3); “*I used to talk over people, but now I don't do it anymore*” (ID2, FG2); “*Youth Court helped me a lot by like I could practice standing up in front of my peers, and it help me in class when I'm presenting projects*” (ID4, FG3).

C. *Self-confidence* (Pearson & Jurich, 2005). Five students reported an increase in confidence and self esteem from Youth Court participation. The students have to overcome not only the negative image of Chester High more generally, but also their own negative self-perceptions. For example, one (ID5, FG1) said:

It's like everyone you see its like, he goes to Chester High. He lives in Chester so all he is about is standing on the corner selling drugs and that kind of put everyone down. Then you come to Youth Court and you judge in front of your peers. It boosts your confidence that I'm not just a drug dealer on the street . . .

IV. Motivation to excel in school. Through the LRE trainings and exposure to positive role models (law school students and adult advisors), the program opens the volunteers' eyes to the value of education. Four students said that participation as a volunteer motivates them to do well in school. Two student leaders said they had put so much time into Youth Court at the expense of their school work, but during the process had learned to balance their time. One (ID3, FG5) said:

Youth Court impacts you . . . It's like video games, you don't got time for your work when you're playing video games . . . Youth Court is just that interesting . . . I didn't have time for school work 'cause I put my effort in Youth Court . . . that interfered with my work but now I like having a mind set that I want to have time for my work and Youth Court so I can manage to have time for both.

V. Improvements to the CHS learning environment. During the summer of 2007, we conducted a focus group with eight students from the Chester-Upland school district to elicit their feedback on the idea of a youth court program and how it might address problems at the school. All students agreed that the school environment is characterized by violence, negative peer pressure, and inconsistent and overly harsh punishments

(suspension for minor offenses). The goals of the Youth Court are to reduce rule-violating or anti-social behaviors, render constructive dispositions, and carry out fair and impartial justice respected by the students.

Eleven students said the Court has improved or will improve the environment at CHS. Responses focused on more appropriate punishments given by peers who understand the respondents, an improved reputation of CHS with fewer fights, fewer students walking the halls, and keeping students learning in school rather than suspending them. One (ID1, FG2) said:

There's gonna be less drama between students and adults (with the Youth Court) because a lot of the students have problems with administrators because administrators just say they're in trouble and don't really explain why . . . you're suppose to explain yourself. And I feel that the Youth Court has mostly taken the faults of administrators and making the whole process of a school better . . . So the Youth Court is changing that whole state of mind.

Three students advocated expanding the Youth Court to the middle schools and involving more students. The volunteers shared the sentiment that involving younger children in Youth Court will serve as a mechanism to address problems at the middle schools and improve the image and larger culture of CHS. It is likely that earlier intervention could reduce some of the current issues and violations faced by the Youth Court and by CHS.

Survey Results: Perceptions of Youth Court Reported by Respondents and Parents

According to the *Evaluation of Teen Court Surveys*, respondent and parent/guardian attitudes toward Youth Court and the volunteers were overwhelmingly positive. Of the 16 respondents, most answered agree or strongly agree that they were “*treated fairly by the youth court*” (N = 14), “*the kids working in youth court were o.k.*” (N = 14), and the youth court people “*cared about my rights*” (N = 12).

All parents (N = 7) reported that their child was “*treated fairly*,” that the “*kids working in youth court seem o.k.*,” and that they are “*grateful for youth court for trying to help us*.” No parents answered agree or strongly agree to the following statements: “*No one really cared about my children's rights*,” and “*I think the youth court sees my child as a bad kid*.”

Most respondents (N = 13) and parents (N = 6) said yes when asked, “*Do you feel that the members of the court room acted in a professional manner?*” A few youths (N = 3) and one parent commented that some jurors did not take it seriously because they were talking or laughing when others were speaking during the hearing.

Post-Hearing Interview Results Reported by Respondents and Parents

Thirteen respondents and six parents offered at least one response to the open-ended questions asked by the Youth Court Faculty Advisor immediately after the hearing. In response to the question, “*What was most helpful about Youth Court?*,” eight students and three parents said respondents were able to avoid suspension by coming to Youth Court.

One said that Youth Court “*gives students a second chance instead of brutally punishing them and a chance to explain.*” Similarly, one parent described that Youth Court volunteers “*are willing to look at what the student did and adjust accordingly.*” Three youths and two parents said the jury asked good questions. One parent explained, “*I was impressed, really and truly, the questions were very knowledgeable.*” One parent said, “*peers understand both sides and gives the respondent a second chance*” and another parent said she was able “*to see how kids work together and take responsibility.*”

When asked, “*Do you feel the constructive disposition the jury gave was fair?*,” ten respondents answered yes, two respondents did not answer and four said no. Of these four, three disagreed with the requirement to write a letter of apology, and one said, “*I didn’t do nothing.*”

In response to the question, “*Do you feel the Youth Court disposition will be more helpful than the consequences offered by the Assistant Principal?*,” all respondents (N = 13) who answered this question said yes. Most focused on Youth Court as a positive alternative to suspension. One respondent said, “*The Principal sees it as the student is bad. Half the time they won’t even listen,*” and another said, “*The Assistant Principal doesn’t care what you have to say.*” Two students focused on the benefit of staying in school. One said the Youth Court disposition is more helpful “*Because this way I won’t miss anything in my classes,*” and the other said yes, “*because it’s more better to do work than be suspended.*”

DISCUSSION

Study Findings and Previous Research

Our results are consistent with previous findings and offer additional insights about developing a Youth Court within an under-resourced urban school district. Volunteers in our study developed perspectives consistent with the youth court philosophy and goals. Volunteers were motivated to give respondents a second chance and believed that youths provide a more effective and fair response than adults. Over one-third of the volunteers described youth court participation as an important responsibility and empowering experience that can lead to change at CHS. Consistent with the focus group data, respondents and their parents rated the dispositions as fair, reported that jurors maintained positive attitudes toward the respondents, and acted professionally during the hearings. Respondents and parents also reported valuing the opportunity to avoid suspension.

Volunteers reported developing citizenship and civic skills. Skills include learning about the law and legal process, the importance of voting, and the ability to make decisions. During the year, Youth Court leaders began to develop conflict resolution skills necessary for rendering dispositions and conducting trials. Volunteers also experienced personal development. Two students who emerged as leaders described learning how to lead and share power and control. Half of the volunteers reported gaining confidence or learning communication skills. A group of CHS Youth Court leaders demonstrated the responsibility and maturity required to make presentations to potential funders and to legal professionals at a national conference.

In contrast to our group of volunteers who described frequent disagreement and arguments during the deliberation phase, Forgays and colleagues (2004) found that the majority of jurors described general agreement with each other during this phase. The difference in findings between the two studies may be explained, in part, by the paucity of training (at home and school) in areas of interpersonal, communication, and conflict resolution skills received by some youths living in low-income urban communities and attending resource-poor school districts.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

Our findings point to the Youth Court as a promising mechanism to minimize, by reducing the incidence of school failures, what has become known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” This phrase refers to punitive policies such as suspension and expulsion that “push children out of school and hasten their entry into the juvenile, and eventually the adult criminal justice system, where prison is the end of the road” (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 2005, p.1). This benefit extends to youth jurors who are exposed to the same troubled environment and are at-risk themselves for experiencing the pipeline.

African-American youths are overrepresented among those suspended or expelled (see review by Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). These researchers found that African-American students were referred to the administration for less serious and more subjective reasons than youths of other race/ethnicities. Children in the school-to-prison pipeline comprise a large percentage of justice-involved youths; 75% of youths under the age of 18 who have been sentenced to adult prison have not successfully passed 10th grade. Approximately 70% of the juvenile justice population have learning disabilities, and 33% read below the 4th grade level. The “single largest predictor” of later arrest among adolescent females is having been suspended, expelled, or held back during the middle school years (see review by the NAACP, 2005).

Often suspensions and expulsions are for minor violations such as throwing food or disobeying a teacher. School violence, however, is the justification voiced for harsh disciplinary responses (NAACP, 2005). CHS students are suspended for relatively minor offenses including carrying or using a cell phone, lateness to class, and hall walking. Rates of removal of students from school have more than doubled since 1974 with the increase in zero-tolerance policies toward violations of school rules (Wald & Losen, 2003). In 2000, there were over three million suspensions and over 97,000 expulsions nationwide (NAACP, 2005). Short-term suspensions of only a few days can hinder learning and increase the availability of free time for getting into trouble. Youths who are suspended are more likely to be left back, to drop out, to commit a crime, or to be incarcerated as an adult (NAACP, 2005).

With the absence of an in-school or after-school detention program at CHS, the only remedy available has been suspension. Our study suggests that suspension over minor violations contributes to student alienation at CHS. The focus group and post-hearing interviews underscore the students’ feelings of mistreatment by administrators who “*won’t even listen,*” perceive the students as “*bad,*” and do not “*keep kids in school to learn.*”

Code of the Street

Our results point to the Youth Court as a program with the long-term potential to contribute to normative change within CHS by giving students an alternative to the “Code of the Street,” the value system that justifies and legitimizes interpersonal violence as a means of grievance resolution in the inner city (Anderson, 1999). A core element of the code is the mandate for violence in retaliation for a perceived slight or expression of disrespect.

Through LRE trainings and exposure to positive youth and adult role models, the Youth Court has the capacity to teach youths to resolve conflict peacefully and productively as an alternative to the interpersonal violence mandated by a street-coded value system. The focus group results demonstrate the Court’s capacity to teach youths to manage conflict productively. Most students in the first set of focus groups described ongoing conflict within the jury itself and agreed they had not learned how to handle arguments. In contrast, the volunteers in the second set of focus groups, conducted about three months later, exhibited an interest and capacity to learn how to resolve conflict by sharing power, listening, and remaining open to different points of view.

Anderson (1999) proposes that the “code of the street” prevalent in the African-American inner city is an adaptation to a lack of faith in the institutions which provide personal security and safety (also see Hagan, Shedd, & Payne, 2005). These institutions include the police and the courts, which are regarded by residents as protectors of white society and neglectful of the needs of the African-American community. As a result, an inner city resident cannot rely on criminal justice institutions and must learn to “take care of himself” and take matters into his own hands. Donald Black (1983), in his theory of crime and social control, asserts that much of the conduct classified as crime is attributable to “self-help,” which he defines as the expression of a grievance by initiating a violent response as an alternative to seeking help from authorities.

Our results show that most respondents and parents respected the Youth Court volunteers and experience, and perceived the dispositions as just. If the Youth Court continues to be perceived as an equitable justice mechanism, over the long-term CHS students may turn to the Court for help and slowly begin to trust the justice system rather than relying on street-coded rules to settle disputes. For the Youth Court to operate effectively and contribute to a reduction of violence at CHS, it will be important for the volunteers to be perceived as peers (rather than “nerds” or “snitches”) by the students more generally. This perception will require recruiting, and maintaining as volunteers, students who are representative of those disenfranchised youths most alienated from the educational and justice systems.

In addition, LRE seeks to enhance volunteers’ understanding of the law, legal process, and respect of the legal system, which in turn should reduce the likelihood of school code and law violations (Harrison et al., 2001). CHS Youth Court has the potential to serve as a long-term solution for bringing about a sense of personal and psychological safety among volunteers, respondents, and the larger high school community. In this sense, the Court has the potential to serve as a positive alternative to the traditional system, one that both volunteers and respondents can trust and rely on to understand their perspectives, culture, and needs.

Limitations and directions for future research

The results should be viewed in light of a few key limitations. First, the small number of youth volunteers, respondents, and parents/guardians limits our ability to generalize the results to other participants. Second, focus group data are potentially limited or distorted by peer pressure experienced during the discussions, or by sources of bias such as lying and misrepresentation. Future research plans include replicating this study with a larger sample to increase the generalizability of findings. To increase the reliability of findings, a longitudinal assessment of objective measures of skill development, alienation from the justice and educational systems, academic achievement, and recidivism will be incorporated. Notwithstanding the limitations, our study, one of the first devoted to a school-based urban youth court, adds to the research on youth court volunteers and points to the court's long-term potential to minimize the negative impact of the school-to-prison pipeline and to serve as a mechanism for increasing trust in the justice system among CHS students.

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