



**Fostering a Critical Consciousness for Social and Political
Change: A Case Study of Youth-led Organizing in The
Netherlands**

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Megan Baker
(United States of America)

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Members of the Examining Committee:

Sarah Hardus (Supervisor)
Wendy Harcourt (Second Reader)

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Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

Inquiries:

Postal address:

Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

Location:

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

Telephone: +31 70 426 0460

Fax: +31 70 426 0799

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List of Acronyms

EU	European Union
CC	Critical Consciousness
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
HYA	Hague Youth Ambassadors
PAR	Participatory Action Research
YPAR	Youth Participatory Action Research

Abstract

While youth policy in the Netherlands has conventionally been characterized by a problem-oriented approach to youth development, the contemporary shift towards a positive approach presents a noteworthy moment for reevaluating how policy makers and practitioners can more effectively work for and *with* youth in their communities. Viewing youth development from a social justice perspective, this study argues for approaches to youth development that aim to support youth in the process of identifying, navigating, and combating the social and political conditions in their lives and communities. Youth-led organizing is explored in this research as a possible approach for doing so.

Through a case study of youth-led organizing in Netherlands, this research draws on Paulo Freire's notions of critical consciousness and reflects on the potential of youth-led organizing in supporting Dutch youth in the process of recognizing, and taking action upon, the inequitable social and political conditions in their lives and communities. The study reflects on the key processes and features within the organizing process that support the process of critical consciousness development among youth members, as well as their limitations. It furthermore reflects on the complex relationships that exist between youth organizers and adults in the context of youth-led organizing.

Keywords

critical consciousness, Netherlands, Paulo Freire, social justice, youth development, youth organizing,

Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Strategy

1.1 Setting the Stage

Young people are trapped in the paradigm of being portrayed either as trouble-makers, with an emphasis on ‘youth problems’ such as drugs, violence, and teenage pregnancy *or* as upcoming leaders capable of making changes in the future: Youth are rarely assumed to be making positive contributions to their communities in the present moment (Roger 2007: 469). Myths about youth and ‘youth problems’ are perpetuated by media, politicians, and researchers alike who promote notions of immaturity, instability, self-destructiveness and impulsiveness as defining adolescent behaviors, and as a result “the value of young people is often overlooked and replaced with harsh stereotypes and scapegoating” (Ardizzone 2003: 424). Instead of demanding a deeper analysis and discussion regarding the ways in which adults and social structures can impede the well-being of youth, the negative framing of young people creates a situation where adult-intervention is understood as necessary to prevent the problematic behaviors of youth from manifesting.

When speaking about teenagers, we sometimes uncritically accept as truth terms that would easily be seen as derogatory stereotypes if applied to other social groups—terms such as immature, impulsive, self-centered, naïve, reckless, and silly. Although it is obvious that derogatory stereotypes provide a rationale for racism, sexism, and the like, it can be more difficult to see our views about young people as the basis of “adulthood”—a word that is not yet in English dictionaries.” (Watts & Flanagan 2007: 782)

Adulthood, as highlighted here, can be thought of as “the inherent belief that adults are the ultimate experts on young people- their issues, dreams, anxieties, and abilities” (Delgado & Staples 2008: 37). This belief, reinforced by the negative framing of youth, legitimizes adults as the decision makers of policies, programs, and services *for* young people, and furthermore puts adults in the position to decide which social issues are legitimate (Ibid). Asymmetrical power relations between adult decision-makers/power-holders and youth, in combination with the various barriers to sociopolitical participation that often face young people (e.g. unemployment, voting age, lack of transportation and financial resources) create a social situation that effectively marginalizes young people.

The marginalized position of youth is further compounded as age intersects with other oppressive forces in the lives of young people: racism, classism, sexism, ableism, etc. (Akom et al. 2008: 3, Delgado & Staples 2008: 38-39). In The Netherlands, for example, age discrimination is particularly linked with ethnic origin, which follows age as the second most cited grounds of perceived discrimination in the country (Andriessen et al. 2014: 15). To illustrate this point, youth living in The Netherlands with a Turkish or Moroccan family background are more likely to live in depressed urban neighborhoods with lower quality schools (Kelley & Morgenstern 2006), and report lower education attainment rates, lower economic status, higher unemployment rates, and increased likelihood of being questioned by the police than their native Dutch counterparts (Statistics Netherlands 2010). The following passage illustrates how an already

challenging situation for many Dutch youth, finding a job, is compounded with other marginalizing identities.

The media, and also the politics, have very negative ideas about Islamic and people who aren't Dutch, especially Turkish and Moroccan. And that's why we, because we are living in our own mixed¹ neighborhood, don't really get out of our comfort zone with Dutch people before. But that makes you scared. Because remember when I told you 3 years there was a boy who was refused a job because he was negro, and they accidentally sent him the wrong letter saying he wasn't hired because he was black? That makes you scared; because you have to make yourself *so* different that they *have* to take you, because there is no other better than you. So you have the feeling that you have to struggle twice as the regular person. (Niek)

Unfortunately, however, age is often overlooked as being a marginalizing identity, and it's only more recently that children and youth have been recognized as a disempowered group (Delgado & Staples 2008: 30). This is inevitably influenced by the fact that age is different than other identities (e.g. gender or race) due to its unique temporary nature, and the reality that all adults were naturally 'young' at one point; characteristics which serve to legitimize adulthood and the temporarily disempowered position of young people. However, if we acknowledge that "discrimination of any kind, regardless of its transitory or temporary state, never should be tolerated in a democratic society that embraces values and principle of social and economic justice" (Delgado & Staples 2008: 38), then we can acknowledge the importance of integrating a social justice perspective to youth development which acknowledges these asymmetries of power that typically dwell at the margins of youth development discussions and initiatives, and further push for approaches which aim to instead empower and increase the inclusion of young people who have been historically disempowered (Delgado & Staples 2008: 6, Flanagan & Christens 2011: 6, Ginwright & Cammarota 2002/2007, Skinner & French 2012).

Youth-led organizing (including youth-led community organizing) is a particular approach to working with youth that is aligned with this thinking due to its emphasis on increasing the power of young people in organizing for community and institutional change (Delgado & Staples 2008; Grantmakers for Children, Youth & Families 2003; Watts & Flanagan 2007). Instead of viewing youth as reckless or out of control, the youth-led model represents an essential paradigm shift towards appreciating youth "as resources, social capital, citizens, and partners with adults" (Delgado & Staples 2008: 42). Through this organizing model, youth are in a central position for their own change initiatives, and are provided opportunities to exercise power, influence policy decisions, and create proactive realities (Youth Action as cited in Delgado and Staples 2008: 8), and therefore youth-led organizing is recognized as "a vehicle for marginalized young people to act collectively with peers to challenge the policies and procedures of mainstream institutions that negatively impact their lives" (Ibid: 132).

It is against this backdrop that the following case study reflects on youth-led organizing in The Netherlands as a possible empowering approach to working for and *with* Dutch youth; reflecting the current shift in the country away from youth policy emphasizing the prevention of youth problems, towards an emphasis on creating empowering opportunities for Dutch youth (Coussée et al. 2011). From a social justice perspective

¹ The term 'mixed', as used here, refers to areas in The Hague where residents come from diverse

this study aims to better understand how Dutch youth, through their involvement in youth-led organizing, might be supported in the process of identifying, navigating, and combating the social and political conditions in their lives and communities.

1.2 The Dutch Context: Youth Development in the Netherlands

In terms of youth policy, the Dutch Government uses an age-normative conceptualization of ‘youth’ as all children and young people between the age of 0-24; an age group currently consisting of around 5 million individuals representing 30% of the country’s total population (Darwish et al. 2012: 5). While the proportion of youth in the country has been slightly declining overall, conversely the proportion of young people living in The Hague has been increasing over the past 15 years (Statistics Netherlands 2011). Furthermore, the share of people with a ‘foreign background’ living in The Hague has been increasing over the past decade, and currently stands around 50% (Statistics Netherlands 2011), making it significantly more ethnically diverse than the overall population comprised of 80% ethnic Dutch background (CIA 2008).

Additionally, mirroring the conceptual shift being promoted at the EU level, the Netherlands is in the process of a significant shift from a prevention/problem-focused approach to youth development, to a positive approach emphasizing the ‘well-being’ rather than ‘well-becoming’ of youth (Hoogendoorn et al. 2012: 3). Despite decades of prevention approaches to youth development, significant efforts are being made in The Netherlands to “transform a risk-oriented youth policy to a policy focused on positive youth development” (Coussée et al. 2011: 6). In other words, there is increased recognition in The Netherlands that youth policy should focus on *all* children and youth, not just the 15% that “has problems and need support” (Darwish et al. 2012: 3, Hoogendoorn et al. 2012: 5). As summarized by Hoogendoorn et al.

“For decades youth policy has started from a (negative), risk-oriented, individual approach in supporting children and young people at risk. Now youth policy is trending towards a more development-oriented and demand-driven (positive) approach in working with and for all children and young people. Not starting by questioning ‘What is the matter with you?’ but by asking ‘What do you need to feel well?’” (2012: 4)

While it’s evident that stated intentions are to break from a legacy of problem-oriented policy, in practice the implementation of positive youth policies in the Netherlands remains in its infancy (Coussée et al. 2011: 4).

The shift towards a positive approach to youth policy, however, inevitably comes with consequences which cannot be overlooked. While the previous prevention model has negative implications for the framing of youth in society, and perpetuates youth development approaches which are adult-led and focused on ‘fixing’ youth problems, at the same time this policy focus allows policy makers and practitioners to concentrate resources and opportunities on youth who are in fact in more vulnerable situations. In reality, participation in community affairs is not a widespread phenomenon, but is linked with income, education, and socioeconomic status not representative of the overall population (Checkoway 1998: 769). While the growing positive approach to

youth policy leads to an increased emphasis on providing opportunities for participation, volunteering, and youth work (Darwish et al. 2012: 23), this new focus and expanded scope to include *all* youth can run the consequence of diverting resources and attention from the most vulnerable Dutch youth as it's redirected into initiatives that better match the new positive paradigm, such as the observed case study.

In their review of Dutch youth care systems Coussée et al. indeed warn that while the shift is 'impressive' and 'important', it runs a risk that policies will "only reach out to the children and young people who potentially feel at home in the existing system" (2011: 23). It should be acknowledged that youth councils typically attract young people already well-equipped to participate in community affairs, and in The Netherlands "the participation of young people in all their diversity is still a huge challenge" (Coussée et al. 2011: 19). While the group embodies a highly diverse group of young people, it undeniably still largely appeals to youth *already* engaged in community affairs and often actively seeking a platform to enhance their opportunities, as well as to youth already active in their schools. I have decided to include the following exchange with Aaron, a current youth member, to illustrate this point:

M: Do you have members of the ambassadors that come from these more marginalized neighborhoods?

A: Yeah, most of them.

M: Really? I didn't know that.

A: Yeah most of them, but these people here they are like a selection of... well some of them might have had problems in the past, but they all really have a strong opinion. They have a strong view about their future. They are not really representative of the other youth in their area, but you know they're important for their... yeah.

M: Are you saying on one hand they represent their neighborhood, but on the other hand they are a particular subgroup of this neighborhood?

A: Yeah, they are. Definitely.

Beyond a conceptual shift, the country is in the process of significant reforms towards the decentralization of youth policy. While the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport is the national ministry responsible for overall youth policy in the Netherlands, the 'New Youth Act', adopted by Dutch parliament in February 2014, officially granted the decentralization of both administrative and financial responsibilities related to youth policy; shifting responsibility from the national and regional government to the local government (Bosscher 2014). This shift in power means youth policy decisions will increasingly be made at the local level.

The contemporary pedagogical and structural changes occurring in The Netherlands denote a crucial moment in rethinking how municipal governments can best support the young people they serve. As policy makers and politicians navigate these new changes they must constantly evaluate and re-evaluate how to effectively work for and *with* youth in their communities. Hopefully this case study adds to this ongoing discussion.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions:

This research presents a single case study of a youth-led organization in the Netherlands with two main objectives in mind. Firstly, to explore and better understand how youth-led organizing can serve to empower young people in recognizing and taking action upon the unjust conditions in their lives and communities. In analyzing this, Paulo Freire's (2002) theoretical notions of critical consciousness (CC) frame the discussion and provide a lens for exploring if/how youth members involved in the organization might be supported through an empowerment building process of awareness raising and action enhancing opportunities- together increasing the capacity of Dutch youth to recognize and respond to the sociopolitical conditions which work at their disadvantage.

Secondly, this research provides the stories and voices of Dutch youth who are making positive contributions in their communities in the *present* moment. Studies of youth, especially regarding urban youth of color, disproportionately focus on 'problem' adolescent behaviors such as violence, crime, and delinquency (Ginwright & Cammarota 2007: 693) rather than on the positive contributions young people are making and their agency in navigating and resisting injustices, perpetuating the tendency to view youth from a problem or deficit perspective. Recognizing youth-led organizing, and the positive contributions young people are making today, is an important aspect of rectifying this tendency (Delgado & Staples 2008: 80). This study adds to a counter-narrative recognizing young people as vital social and political actors working towards more just communities.

QUESTION:

How does youth-led organizing in the Netherlands facilitate the development of a critical consciousness for social and political change among youth members?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

- How does involvement in the organization facilitate an increased awareness of social and political conditions among youth members?
- How does involvement in the organization enhance the capacity of youth members to enact social change in their community?

1.4 Case Description

The chosen case (and holistic site of analysis) is the youth-led organization The Hague Youth Ambassadors² (HYA) located in The Hague, Netherlands. The organization-initiated in 2005 and celebrating its 10th anniversary this year- currently consists of 18 active youth members and one adult supervisor, Alan.

² Translated from the Dutch term *Haagse Jongerenambassadors*

1.4a Who are the ambassadors?

Since its origin, the intention of the HYA has been to bring young people together from diverse backgrounds and areas in The Hague representing various social and political interests. While the overarching goal of the group is linked with increasing youth political participation, youth members are not chosen on their political affiliation or interests, but rather on their distinct social interests and lived experiences. This is demonstrated by the fact each member has a unique specialty area or *'portfile'* that he/she is knowledgeable about (e.g. education, nightlife, health, youth care, emancipation, entrepreneurship). They each share their expertise and passion in this area with other group members, as well as those who seek the group for advice.

Beyond diverse interests and experiences, the ambassadors are highly diverse in terms of neighborhood affiliation, gender, religion, education, socioeconomic class, and ethnic origin. The 11 members interviewed alone embody Dutch, Caribbean Dutch, Surinamese, Turkish, Moroccan, Indian, Croatian, and German origin, representing the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of The Hague. While all members were born and raised in The Netherlands, they represent various levels of immigration status: first, second, third generation Dutch youth (and beyond). While initially I thought to include the backgrounds of individual members when telling the stories told throughout the paper, I have purposely decided not to do this. This reflects the explanations and stories shared with me by youth members regarding their concerns that in The Hague (and Netherlands more broadly) that these labels have a tendency to perpetuate a system of distinction and segregation where it's expressed to youth of non-native origin they are not *really* Dutch, and where terms like 'allochtoon' and 'autochtoon' are perceived as indicators of a social ranking system³.

I think that's the problem in society that we project certain labels on certain people, and because of that people in society also label those people. 'Oh those *allochtoons* are the ones who are causing problems. Oh the Moroccan people are causing problems' [...] for me my identity is not Moroccan, that's the identity of my parents I am the second generation and my identity is Dutch. (Esmee)

It's really weird. I'm actually Dutch, but they call me foreigner because I was the first generation that was born here. So when you are second generation yes you will be Dutch, but in the eye of many people you will stay a foreigner because you don't look Dutch or have a Dutch name. So it isn't like America where you have African-American, or Latino American. No, we don't have that. It's not like you are American and I'm also American. No. I'm Dutch, you... you are something else. (Nick)

In different ways, and through different stories, it became clear that whether it is media, politicians, or researchers these labels have created feelings of exclusion and ultimately 'otherness' among Dutch youth. So while the rich diversity of the group is a defining characteristic and strength of the HYA, I have purposefully written this paper in a way that avoids these or similar labels when telling the stories of youth members.

³ Bishop (2004) provides a historical and contextual overview of these classifications and their discriminatory implications

Figure 1- Photo of Hague Youth Ambassadors



Source: *Haagse Jongerenambassadeurs* official website . Uploaded March 2010

1.4b What do the ambassadors do?

While the organization is thought of as a youth council with the aim of increasing a youth voice in the city's political arena, in reality the group's reach and activities go far beyond this. In addition to the group's political focus (i.e. advising politicians on youth-related issues, spreading political information to the city's youth before an election, and more generally acting as the link between Dutch youth and the local political arena) involved youth members or 'ambassadors' also collaborate with business and community leaders external from the political arena to provide a youth perspective to a wide-range of issues and projects. They might advise a business group organizing an event on the most appropriate marketing for appealing to youth participants, an NGO on how to better engage with youth volunteers, a youth care worker interested in improving foster care arrangements, or community leaders concerned about the radicalization of Dutch youth. Beyond weekly group meetings, each year the group is involved in at least 10 'big advice' sessions with the municipality and other social, cultural and civil organizations. During these advice sessions youth members discuss with the attendee the issue at hand, bringing their own lived experiences and knowledge to the table. Beyond giving advice and spreading information, the group is action oriented. Each year the group organizes or participates in 3-5 larger scale youth-related events occurring in the community.⁴

Multiple members have additionally taken the knowledge, experience, and networks developed within the group to develop their own projects addressing social issues in their community they feel passionate about. While technically these are labeled as separate from HYA sponsored projects as they fall outside the main aim of the group, they are undeniably intimately linked with the group and are therefore included in the analysis.

⁴ See page 47

1.4c Alan and the role of the city council

Before the HYA there had been two other youth councils backed by The Hague City Council, which had been unsuccessful for various reasons, lasting only a year or two before dismantling. Upon learning the previous youth council would not continue, Alan reached out to the City Council and proposed a new initiative- what is now the HYA. After pitching his idea he was given a one year stipend to conduct research and formally design the project, including the opportunity to travel around the country to learn from other initiatives taking place at that time (Personal Interview, Alan).

While youth members are at the center of the initiative, Alan's role is pivotal in regards to facilitating the group experience. While youth members are responsible for providing all advice and participating in the various youth-related events, it is Alan who ultimately maintains the day-to-day functioning of the group. He is not only in charge of maintaining relations with the city council, including the availability of the meeting space and necessary financial contributions, but he is responsible for various secretarial tasks (e.g. contacting youth members about upcoming meetings and events, scheduling advice sessions with interested parties, typing up and sending out meeting summary notes). Additionally, he plays a notable role regarding networking the youth with the people who ultimately support their initiatives. As explained by one youth member:

Now I think that the role of Alan is paramount. Very important. Not because he actually is contributing to our opinion, because that is something that we do solely our own, but to create the circumstances for us to give our opinions, and to reach to people who work for governments, policy makers, organizations, to maybe even politicians sometimes. You need someone who knows the government, and knows about participation, and knows all these things. And also has the network to make it done. To connect these people like 'us' and 'them'. And I think it's very important what Alan does. He makes that we are heard, that we are known within the government. (Lars)

While initially uncertain whether the group would fulfill the criteria of a being a youth-led organization due to the prominent role of an adult supervisor, it was clarified that the youth members are indeed at the center of their initiative. Alan's role as an ally in achieving the group's goals, and supporting opportunities for youth to exercise power, influence policy decisions, and create proactive realities is well aligned with the ally role an adult might play within this type of organizing model (Delgado and Staples 2008: 8). Ultimately, as highlighted above, Alan's main task is 'to create the circumstances' for youth members to successfully carry out their work. This organizing model of the HYA where "young people are in charge, and adults play supportive roles as needed and defined by youth," (Ibid: 79) directly aligns with the youth-led model⁵ and further allows the opportunity to reflect on (and problematize further) how power relations between youth members and adult supporters play out in practice in youth-led organizing initiatives.

Additionally, The Hague City Council has an overarching presence in that it provides Alan's salary, promotional materials such as the group's new logo, and the room where the group meets once a week for two hours. While one might question the autonomy of the youth organization within this adult-dominated political structure, in reality the role

⁵ More information about Alan's role is described in Chapter 4 regarding authentic adult partnerships.

of the city council in the day-to-day running of the group is nearly non-existent. Group members explain that although the city council supports the organization financially, and provides the space for the group to meet and carry out their objective, they do not oversee the advice they give or dictate the activities they are involved in. This is in line with Delgado & Staple's explanation that "While adult organizations sometimes may provide space, technical assistance, administrative support, or even a degree of fiscal sponsorship, significant autonomy must be carved out and preserved in order for the initiative to meet the criteria for youth-led organizing" (2008: 230-231). Furthermore, in practice the group works more closely with the city's NGOs, business groups, youth-workers, and various public departments than the city council or politicians themselves.

1.4d Case selection process

Spending a year in The Hague previous to conducting research was valuable in that it provided me with a greater contextual lens for analyzing the phenomenon of interest. For example, providing an increased understanding the various neighborhoods mentioned and the projects youth members have been engaged in. However, budget restrictions and proximity were also pragmatic considerations in preference towards choosing the HYA over youth-led initiatives occurring in other municipal regions as The Hague provided the opportunity to engage in a longer span of fieldwork.

Ultimately the HYA was selected among other youth-led organizations due to various factors that were in-line with both the aim and design of the project: (1) diversity among youth members (2) proximity making it feasible to carry out qualitative field work design (3) a high degree of English spoken by participants to carry out interviews and build rapport, and of course (4) permission to access the site and conduct research by youth members. After all, in reality the ideal case is not always accessible, and there is great importance in choosing a case you are able to access and collect data from (Yin 2014: 28).

1.4e But what is it actually a case of?

A case study approach is characterized by the intensive study of a single unit or small number of units, with the purpose of shedding light on a larger class of similar cases or population (Gerring 2007: 37). This research illustrates a particular youth-led organizing initiative occurring in the Netherlands, and local circumstances such as political climate, cultural features, and the characteristics of participants inevitably shape the findings. However, by connecting the experience of youth-led organizing in The Hague with theoretical understandings of youth development and critical consciousness (CC), the study is applicable at a higher conceptual level with implications for countries embodying a similar youth development approach and sociopolitical context. Notably, other neighboring EU countries currently shifting towards positive youth policies in response to the EU level agenda (e.g. France, Belgium, Italy) can benefit from a recognition of how youth organizations in The Netherlands are embracing positive youth policies and empowering (or failing to empower) youth members.

1.5 Research Strategy:

Qualitative case study methodology was used for this study. This approach allows researchers “opportunities to explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources” (Baxter & Jack 2008: 544). Considering my interest in exploring the phenomenon of CC development among youth involved in youth-led organizing within its contemporary real-life context, and the ‘how’ based nature of the question, this approach is well-suited for the investigation (Baxter & Jack 2008: 545, Yin 2009: 10-11).

While case study research is a methodology that can take a qualitative or quantitative approach, this study engages with qualitative analysis informed by a constructivist approach to knowledge creation that acknowledges the subjective and contextual creation of meaning, and has the advantage of allowing participants to tell their stories and describe their view of reality (Baxter & Jack 2008: 545). Correspondingly, the decision to choose a single case was shaped by my preference towards ‘depth’, or thick description of the phenomenon, and the desire to engage with qualitative methodology and analysis, both having an affinity with single case design (Gerring 2007: 48-49, 29).

Sources of Data Collection

This research relies predominantly on primary data gathered during fieldwork between June-August, 2015. The use of multiple data sources, and data collection occurring concurrently with the analysis process, are characteristic of qualitative case study research (Baxter & Jack 2008: 554), and this study is no exception. While the paper relies heavily on the voices and stories of youth attained through in-depth semi-structured interviews in shaping the central message, data collected through observation and survey methods additionally serve to support, and provide context to, the analysis. Program documentation/literature, gathered from the HYA’s official website and Facebook pages, also served as important secondary data in the analysis process.

Table 1- Data Collection Methods

Employed Method	
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews with youth members • 1 semi-structured interview with adult supervisor
Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 group meetings held at the City Council
Organizational Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HYA website • Organizational Facebook page • Published list of group activities and advice sessions occurring between 2011-2015
Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplementary survey distributed to active youth members

Source: Created by author

Interviews:

Conceptualizing interviews as “a conversation that has a structure and a purpose” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 3), I used semi-structured in-depth interviews as the predominant method of data collection. This method was chosen for its ability to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest through the views and experiences of youth participants within their lived context. While flexibility is a key condition of qualitative interviewing (King & Horrocks 2010: 35), I opted for semi-structured interviews aided by a pre-designed ‘interview guide’ as a tool for adding structure to the interview, especially relevant considering the limited timespan for fieldwork and inability to meet with participants on multiple separate occasions throughout fieldwork (Bernard 2011: 157-158). Rather than consisting of fixed and pre-determined questions, this guide served to outline the main topics I hoped to cover based on my engagement with the literature on CC and youth development. It allowed not only for flexibility regarding the phrasing and ordering of questions, but plenty of space for participants to lead the interaction in unanticipated directions (King & Horrocks 2010: 35). Additionally, because data collection and analysis occurred concurrently, as new understandings and directions surfaced through these interviews, the interview guide was adjusted to incorporate these new avenues of exploration. Fortunately, I also had the opportunity to meet with two of the interviewees more than once, allowing for follow-up conversations based on the ongoing interpretive process. Upon receiving consent, all interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed. While the analysis was heavily guided by theoretical understandings of CC, coding categories were not pre-determined and rather emerged through my interaction with the collected data suggesting a more inductive category development (Mayring 2000).

Interviews were carried out with 11 youth members, as well as with the supervisor of the group, lasting between 45 min to 2 hours in length. Due to the small size of the organization, in-group sampling did not occur. All 19 active members were invited, and the 11 who responded positively were interviewed. While the ages of interviewed participants range from 17–25, the median age of all interviewed participants is 22.5 years, with an average length of involvement of 4.4 years. All interviews occurred in non-formal spaces including cafés, restaurants, and public plazas where drinks were shared. Despite a large computer recorder and interview guide on my lap reminding us of the research intentions of these discussions, I’d ultimately hoped to create an environment where the feeling of ‘research’ (including interpersonal dynamics of researcher/participant) felt minimalized to encourage more sociable dialogue.

Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants *except* when referring to the individual projects initiated by members. In their support of more ‘sociable’ research methods, Sinha and Back challenge the presumption that good ethical practice requires ‘automatic anonymity’, and instead argue that sometimes this practice serves to take away credit or authorship to that individual (2014: 483-484). When discussing the unique projects being initiated by youth members, real names are used. These sections⁶ were shared with participating youth members as a tool for cross-checking findings and adding internal validity to the study, while stimulating further discussion and ensuring consent regarding the way I’ve used members’ names.

⁶ 1.4, 3.2, 3.3, 4.2a, 4.2b

Table 2- Profiles of Interviewed Youth Members

	Gender	Age	Length of Involvement (years)
1	Female	17	<1
2	Female	20	2
3	Female	22	<1
4	Female	24	7
5	Female	24	8
6	Female	25	4
7	Male	20	2
8	Male	24	<1
9	Male	24	6
10	Male	24	7
11	Male	24	9

Source: Created by author

Observation:

I attended 4 of the group's weekly meetings at the City Hall, lasting approximately 2 hours each. While my inability to speak Dutch prevented me from comprehending the majority of spoken dialogue, it provided a unique opportunity to observe the group dynamics in actions (e.g. how members interact with one another, body language, Alan's role as group mediator) and provided added contextual understanding for grounding the analysis. Equally important, it played a vital role in the rapport building process among youth members. Field notes were collected through note taking.

Supplementary Survey:

Following interviews and observation methods, a supplementary online survey was sent to the 19 active members. The intended purpose of this survey was to substantiate and provide further insight on the findings that were emerging from the analysis process. 8 members completed the survey, all of whom I'd previously interviewed, and while this information served a negligible role in the analysis process it did provide a method for crosschecking emerging findings.

1.5a Role as Researcher

Instead of claiming 'objective' knowledge, this project recognizes knowledge as situated: partial, socially produced, embedded in power hierarchies, and produced within specific circumstances and contexts (Cerwonka & Malkki 2008, Haraway 1998, Rose 1997). As explained by Gadamer, the process of understanding in the human sciences is not

relevant to the inductive logic of the scientific method, and therefore cannot be reduced to a process of standardized steps. Rather, understanding is “a non-scripted process wherein the researcher responds to the particularities of what he or she is examining” and understands that these interpretations/findings will be influenced by his or her own historical and cultural situatedness (as cited in Cerwonka & Malkki 2008: 22-23).

Positionality is therefore the idea that the researcher has an identity that is shaped by countless factors (e.g. background, disciplinary particularities, unique motivations), which ‘position’ the researcher in a particular way. Because I, as the researcher, cannot be erased from the knowledge production process, recognizing my own position through a process of reflexivity and writing it into the paper can help in understanding how this has positioning has influenced the production of knowledge (Cerwonka & Malkki 2008: 30, Rose 1997: 305). My own personal involvement in youth organizations between the age of 16-21, and my future interest in working within the youth development field, inevitably shape the way I understand the positive potential of youth organizing in this study. Additionally, personal motivations have driven my interest in engaging with the work of Paulo Freire, and further shape the way I conceptualize critical consciousness as empowerment in the research. Annex 1 contains a more a detailed version of these driving motivations for further reference.

When it comes to power relations within the research process, unequal relations of power between adult researchers and young respondents in the knowledge production can create a serious dilemma (Huijsmans 2010: 58). However, I feel this project provided an opportunity to conduct research with participants similar in age and engaged in a similar life phase as myself, helping to minimize these imbalances. For example, at times participants would give me suggestions for completing my research project or conducting interviews based on their own recent experiences conducting a research project. And when I offered to pay for coffee/drinks following an interview I was frequently denied, the justification generally being “you’re just a student yourself.” Such interactions indicated a feeling of sameness between myself and the youth ambassadors.

However, one major difference is that in this relationship I am the one asking the questions and ultimately in a position of authority in interpreting these interactions and sharing the ‘knowledge’. As Delgado & Staples explain, “Adults can conduct research, write scholarly articles and books, gather and report the news, and generally are in positions of authority regarding aspects affecting the lives of young people” (2010: 36-37). Even though we may be equal in relative age, these power dynamics between research and participant are present. In reality “the research interview is not a conversation between equal partners, because the researcher defines and controls the situation” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 3). Ultimately power and knowledge are inextricably connected (Haraway 1998, Rose 1997), and in this situation I am the one who get to write the report.

1.5b Limitations

English was spoken during interviews. While all interviewed participants had a high level of English, for the youth members who denied an interview, it’s possible language

was a reason for this hesitation. This was mentioned directly to me by two of the participants, and may have shaped the sampling, as members agreeing to meet may be those most confident in the language, likely further linked with education level and age as members who are older and studying in higher education institutes may have a higher level of English.

Additionally, not incorporating participatory methods was a limitation. Considering CC is the result of a participatory journey of consciousness raising, and is just as important as the conclusions drawn (Delgado & Staples, 2008: 26), I feel the research could have been enhanced incorporating such principles. While the emancipative characteristics of participatory action research (PAR) methods are often linked to CC development aims (Akom et al. 2008: 4-6, Bautista 2012, Cammarota 2011, Cammarota & Fine 2008, Foster-Fishman et al. 2010, Montero 2009: 74-76) they were not utilized in this research. Further research incorporating PAR methods in drawing conclusions would make the process itself more in-line with the aims of CC raising.

Chapter 2: Analytical Framework, theories and concepts

Motivated by a social justice approach to youth development, this research is framed within an analytical framework that emphasizes the development of CC as an element in the empowerment process underlying successful youth development initiatives.

Because it is necessary to clarify the use of concepts that shape the research, this section begins by defining youth, as well as various existing approaches to youth development, to situate the case study and research project within youth development thinking. Following this is an explanation of how Freire's theoretical notions of CC are applied, and inform the research as a tool for analyzing how youth-led organizations might further support a social justice approach to youth development.

2.1 Youth and Approaches to Youth Development

Youth

Youth is conceptualized in various ways including a state of mind, a legal age, a developmental stage, and a cultural phenomenon (Delgado & Staples 2008: 21). I therefore asked youth members how *they* understand 'youth':

Yeah, it's hard to define because different topics have different boundaries. So you can talk about either 0-18, or 0-24, or 12-30... it's like *ugh* where do you start? (Sara)

The Hague council has an age of youth between 15 and 25, but also there are organizations that say until 30, some until 31. So it's how you see it. And well, age is just a number [...] I consider 'youth' people who haven't settled yet. But nowadays people don't really settle with their jobs and lifestyles. I think there used to be a line in the old days. But really I think whether people feel young themselves, that's the relevant thing. (Aaron)

I define it by moments in your life. I think you stop being a youngster when you have a full time job. When you've accomplished what you want to accomplish. (Esmee)

What is certain is that *youth* remains an elusive concept. While Dutch youth policy adheres to a chronological distinction of 0-24 years of age, this study appreciates a more fluid conceptualization. The term 'youth' often falsely assumes young people as a homogenous group (Del Felice & Wisler 2007: 7), overlooking the reality that the experience of 'youth' is extremely heterogeneous. The participants in this study not only range in chronological age (17-25), but ethnic background, religious upbringing, racial and gender identity, socioeconomic class, educational experience and general personal interests. These various identities interplay within the lives of the participants, defining their lived experience both within, and outside, the organization.

Perhaps most importantly, this study avoids understandings that perpetuate the idea that youth are a distinct group of 'becoming' or 'adults to be' (Wyn & White as cited in Noguera et al. 2006: xx). Recognizing that the meaningful contributions made in society by young people requires a shift from thinking about youth as 'future citizens' to

thinking about youth as ‘present civic actors’ (Ibid: xx), this study appreciates youth as vital present day agents of social and political change who are often confronted by unjust social structures, yet are active and capable participants in shaping and changing these conditions (Finn & Checkoway 1998: 336, Ginwright & Cammarota 2007: 694).

Approaches to youth development: Towards a social justice approach

Youth as ‘at risk’: A prevention approach

A prevention or problem approach to youth development stems from the view that youth are “threats to be feared, problems to be solved, or victims to be treated” (Finn & Checkoway 1998: 343). This approach, taking hold during the 1950’s-60’s in the US, emphasizes the importance of creating a successful transition to adulthood, and calls for adult-initiated services and policies designed to prevent problematic ‘youth behaviors’ from occurring (e.g. preventing drug use, violence, school failure, precarious sexual activity) (Catalano et al. 2004: 98-100). Between 1985-1995, nearly 70% of articles published in youth/adolescent-based research journals were focused on the prevention of problems that needed to be fixed in order for ‘at risk’ young people to successfully develop into ‘healthy’ adult, and disproportionately concerning youth of color (Cammarota 2011: 830, Ginwright & Cammarota 2002: 83-84).

Youth as assets: A positive approach

A shift towards a positive youth development approach in the 1990’s challenged the prevailing prevention model. Through this model youth are acknowledged as agents with self-worth and self-awareness, and rather than focusing on preventing or fixing problems, this approach emphasizes “developing young people through skill and asset building” (Ginwright & Cammarota 2002: 84), and providing young people opportunities for participation (Watts & Flanagan 2007: 780). As summarized by Checkoway, this approach “aims to create environments in which youth can strengthen their confidence and competencies to meet their needs, prepare for adulthood, and live productive lives” (1998: 772).

Youth as change agents: A youth-led approach

“It always is so much easier for adults to view youth as victims- needy, reckless, and out of control- and also as a market for goods and services. Considering youth as resources, social capital, citizens, and partners with adults represents a radical departure from the existing nom. In effect, this latter position requires a shift in paradigm” (Delgado & Staples 2008: 41).

Expanding from a positive youth development approach, there has more recently been a growing recognition that youth can be change agents themselves. Youth-led initiatives differ from adult-led initiatives by recognizing the role young people can play in organizing themselves as their own best advocates. The term ‘youth-led’ emphasizes the control young people have in defining the direction of their interventions, and indicates that young people are at the center of their initiatives. While adults can (and should) act

as allies to youth under this model, it is ultimately youth who are choosing their own interests to pursue, and deciding the level of adult-engagement they desire (Delgado & Staples 2008: 22-23). While youth-led organizing initiatives vary greatly in their driving goals and means of achieving them, ultimately the fundamental distinction between the youth-led organizing model and other approaches to working with young people is “the central role of youth as decision makers and leaders in collective efforts to gain greater control over the conditions that impact their lives” (Ibid: 228), and recognition that youth are the experts in the issues that shape their lives (Skinner & French 2012: 4-5).

Youth-led community organizing is a particular model within the youth-led organizing movement that involves collective action by members in order to achieve shared goals. Community organizing is the “process through which people sharing similar concerns can unite to achieve positive change, community betterment, and political empowerment” (Delgado & Staples 2008: 23). A fundamental distinction between youth-led community organizing and youth-led organizing is the recognition of the larger political context individuals are embedded in, and a sociopolitical analysis that intends to change power relationships (Ibid: 65-67). While I have elected to use the broader terminology of youth-led organizing in this paper, this case study has clear implications for youth-led community organizing as the chosen case exemplifies key characteristics of this model. Most notably, youth working collectively at the community level to increase their decision-making power in the local political process, while fostering both personal growth and community transformation (Skinner & French 2012: 6).

Despite its positive characteristics, Zimmerman warns against over romanticizing this model as youth-led groups traditionally face a multitude of challenges which often lead to their inability to function properly including staff management, inability to create sustaining guidelines, continuous leadership transitions, a lack of experience and professional training, burnout, difficulties fundraising, challenges navigating legal contracts, dealing with complicated terminology or processes foreign to youth, and a lack of fiscal independence (as cited in Delgado & Staples 2008: 77-78). Furthermore, Checkoway (1998: 785) warns that youth who organize themselves often question their legitimacy, lack technical information regarding community systems, and have fewer resources than their adult counterparts. After all, even the most accomplished attempts at increasing the participation of youth inevitably confront an adultist society (Ibid: 792).

Youth as embedded in oppressive structures: A social justice approach

While Ginwright and Cammarota (2002: 84) praise the shift from a prevention-oriented approach to a positive/assets-based approach to youth development, they argue it still remains too limited in that it does not pay adequate attention to the oppressive conditions that impact the lives of young people. They argue that approaches to youth development must be expanded to acknowledge, and address, the larger structural forces at play in the lives of young people: poverty, police violence, discrimination, etc. They stress that refusing to acknowledge the conditions that limit the opportunities of youth maintains the status quo, and leads to youth development approaches based on

the assumption that young people themselves should change, instead of the oppressive structures they are embedded in (Ardizzone 2003: 424, Ginwright & Cammarota 2002: 85, Watts & Flanagan 2007: 781).

Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) therefore propose a social justice approach emphasizing the importance of teaching youth to recognize power structures and how their own life chances are constrained by these forces, and supporting young people in addressing them. This thinking does not suggest that youth are solely responsible for changing the oppressive conditions in their communities, but rather that “seeking justice to address conditions of social and economic oppression no longer is the exclusive domain of adults” (Delgado & Staples 2008: 80), and recognizing that youth should be supported in advocating for their own causes and agendas.

A social justice approach to youth development informs the research, motivated by the belief that a more complete model of youth development entails not only recognizing the positive contributions of young people, but also supporting young people in recognizing and addressing the oppressive structures they are embedded in.

2.2 Critical Consciousness

CC theory was developed in the 1960's by Paulo Freire as a pedagogical method to empower Brazilian peasants to challenge the inequitable social conditions they faced. It was theorized that as peasants learned to read and critically analyze their social conditions they would feel compelled to make change, and would be more capable in doing so (Freire 2002). It was proposed that fostering CC involves reflection and action that together develop a deeper understanding of injustices, and an ability to formulate plans to deal with these problems (Christens et al. 2013: 170).

Freire originally used theories of CC in regards to teaching literacy to the oppressed rural poor in Latin America through a cyclical process of awareness (i.e. learning to read and gaining knowledge that their oppressed position was based on structural inequalities) and action. However, diverging from its original use theoretical underpinnings of CC have been applied in diverse ways to research aimed at understanding how oppressed groups identify, navigate, and combat unjust structural barriers (Diemer et al. 2014: 15). As elucidated by Richard Shaull, “the work of Freire is not only relevant to illiterate adults in the Third World, but this struggle to participate in the transformation of society is similar to the struggles of other groups such as blacks and Mexican-American, but also of middle class young people in the USA” (as cited in Freire 2002: 29). Watts et al. therefore argue CC theory is relevant to the structural injustices faced by to young people today, and can help them “to understand themselves in a sociopolitical context as it did for the disenfranchised of Brazil” (2011: 44).

Mirroring this fact, notions of CC have been applied to analyze various youth-related phenomena such as HIV peer education programs in South Africa (Campbell & MacPhail 2002), voting behavior and political participation among marginalized youth (Diemer & Li 2011), career development among urban youth of color (Deimer & Blustein 2006), and PAR methods within in youth projects (Foster-Fishman et al. 2010).

This research is particularly motivated, however, by the work of Ginwright and Cammarota (2002, 2007, 2011) who examine how urban youth in the USA develop a consciousness of, and act to change, the inequitable conditions in their communities.

Empowerment, understood as “the process through which people and groups gain greater control over their lives and acquire rights and reduced marginalization” (Christens et al. 2013: 171), is a useful concept for understanding CC in this project. Empowerment occurs as the ability for youth to challenge/overcome structural barriers and improve their conditions is enhanced.

Applying notions of critical consciousness to the Hague Youth Ambassadors

While choosing a project that intentionally focuses on awareness building and action principles, and emphasizes the involvement of the most marginalized or ‘at risk’ Dutch youth would naturally be seen as the ideal case for applying notions of CC, the decision to apply this thinking within the context of the HYA is not only valid, but presents an opportunity for new theoretical contributions to the field.

Formal schooling/classroom environments are often the location of CC inspired research and projects due to its theoretical origins as a pedagogical tool. However, the research allows for analysis of how non-formal learning spaces can support CC aims. Since the start of the 21st century there has been increased recognition and emphasis regarding the importance of non-formal (and informal) learning spaces; recognized as crucial to lifelong learning strategies that have become a focal point promoted at both the EU and Dutch policy levels⁷. In other words, learning is increasingly recognized and supported as something that should occur throughout an individual’s lifetime- through formal, non-formal, and informal opportunities. Thinking beyond formal teaching environments, “youth need new kinds of spaces where resistance and resiliency can be developed through formal (and informal) processes, pedagogical structures, and youth cultural practices” (Akomo et al. 2008: 2). My decision to choose a youth-led organization reflects this thinking, and that of other contemporary scholars and youth workers who emphasize the potential of non-formal youth spaces, in particular community-based youth organizing groups, in developing a CC that supports young people in recognizing, developing, and acting upon their sense of agency and resistance (Akomo et al. 2008, Campell & MacPhail 2002, Delgado & Staples 2008, Ginwright & Cammarota 2007, Moya 2012: 10-11, Watts et al. 2011, Watts & Flanagan 2007).

Additionally, while contemporary research applying notions of CC to youth development has a tendency to focus on specific marginalized youth groups⁸, the chosen case study differs in that the chosen youth organization represents a highly

⁷ For more information on Lifelong Learning policy initiatives in the EU see (Colardyn & Bjornabold 2004) or more specifically within the Dutch context (Caniëls & Kirschner 2010)

⁸ More or less understood as “poor and working class youth and/or youth of color, who experience socioeconomic or radicalized forms of domination and marginalization” (Diemer & Li, 2011: 1815).

diverse group of young people with a range of privileges and oppressions. Firstly, I would argue that Dutch youth (regardless of personal characteristics beyond age) generally remain in a marginalized position to adult decision-makers and resource-holders. Secondly, youth from privileged backgrounds also gain from developing a CC. As explained by Watts et al. “although privileged youth have many more opportunities than those who are marginalized, they too can benefit from learning how social injustice operates and ways they can promote a more just society” (2011: 44). In other words, learning about sociopolitical inequalities, and increasing one’s ability to take action, is relevant and valuable to *all* young people. Lastly, the opportunity to study a group of young people that is as diverse as the HYA provides unique insight on how the group dynamic itself plays a role in the CC development process. This is something that has been less explored in academic literature, and can provide valuable insight, especially considering the highly multicultural nature of The Hague.

The chosen case study presents an opportunity to analyze and reflect on how youth-led organizing in the Netherlands can support the CC development process among youth members. Because CC informs the analysis, the following section defines how CC is conceptualized and applied in this project as a form of empowerment.

Conceptualizing Critical Consciousness: Awareness & Action Components

Reflecting on what Freire called ‘*conscientizacão*’, the awareness component of CC can be understood as an intellectual reflection and understanding of the ways in which sociopolitical conditions have fostered peoples’ situations of disadvantage (Campbell & MacPhail 2002: 833), or “an awareness of how institutional, historical, and systemic forces limit and promote the life opportunities for particular groups” (Ginwright & Cammarota 2002: 87). In this research this would include youth members developing an enhanced understanding of sociopolitical conditions, and conditions that constrain their well-being. Awareness building is theorized to occur as youth members are provided the opportunity and support to learn about social conditions and structural oppressions⁹ in their lives, communities, and beyond (Bautista 2012: 18-19).

The second dimension, action, is theorized to occur as people (individually or collectively) take action in order to change the conditions they perceive to be unjust. Due to the difficulty in measuring the *actual* ability of youth to change social and political conditions, Diemer & Li (2011: 1816) conceptualize action rather as the *perceived* ability to make change among youth members, as well as direct participation opportunities that exist for youth members to engage in action: Opportunities in which youth members can challenge or change social and political conditions in their community. It is theorized that as youth engage in the real world issues that shape their lives (e.g. unemployment, police brutality, school safety, racial profiling), they further

⁹ Such as social, economic, and political conditions that limit access to opportunity and perpetuate injustice (Diemer & Li 2011: 1815). This could include an analysis of power structures and societal inequities such as social, economic, racial/ethnic, and gender inequities that constrain well-being and human agency (Watts et al. 2011)

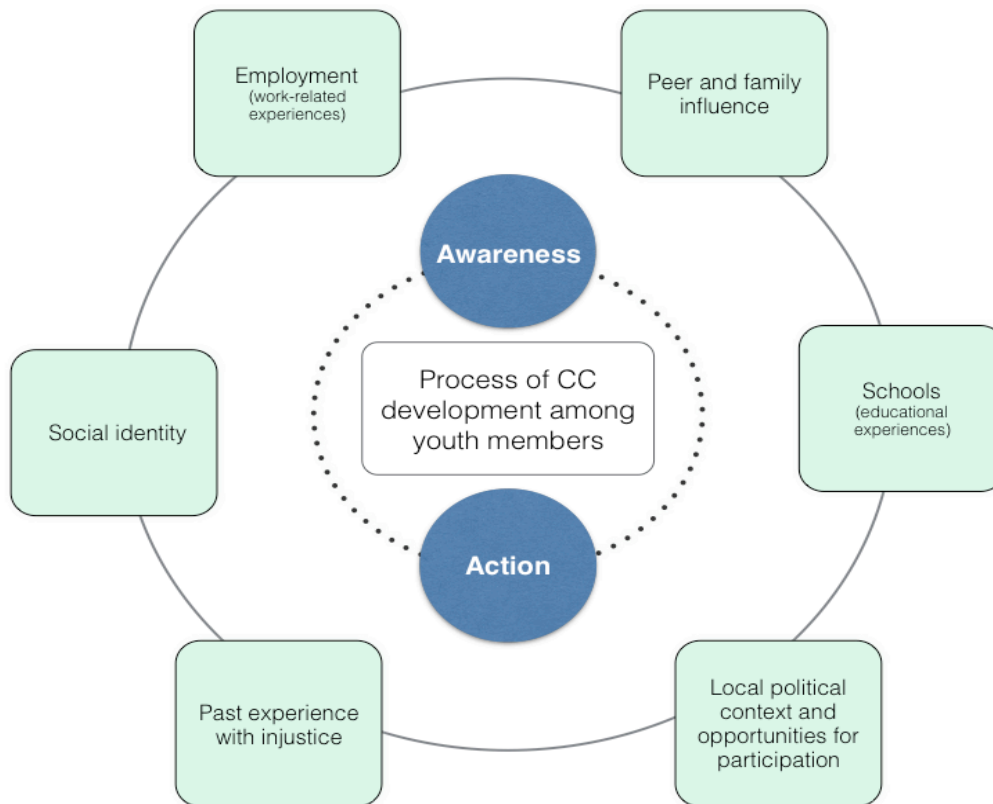
increase their understanding of how to confront these conditions (Akom, et al. 2008: 10).

Originally, Freire (2002) considered reflection, or in this paper ‘awareness’, a precursor to action based on the belief that people would not act to change conditions if they were unaware such conditions were unjust. It was further believed that once people took action they would further increase their awareness of oppressive conditions, thus leading to more action. Therefore, CC was theorized by Freire as a cyclical and reciprocal process. However, the link between the two dimensions is often seen as problematic in doing CC-inspired research due to the difficulties in understanding where awareness ends and action begins (and so on), as they naturally inform each other and are not necessarily distinct processes (Watts et al. 2011: 47). The objective of this study is *not* to create clear distinctions between the two components, but rather to analyze CC as a holistic empowerment process of awareness building and action enhancing processes. While separating these two components is a tool for organizing the paper and supporting the process of analyzing the question of interest, they should not be thought of as binaries working separately from one another, but rather in constant interaction and at times even occurring simultaneously. This is represented in the circle that binds them (Figure 2).

Additionally, while exploring CC development within youth-led organizing is the aim of this research, in reality it is a constantly evolving process occurring in multiple arenas. While the chosen case study observes a single space/organization, where this development process occurs, a more complete analysis would require an ecological lens recognizing the ways in which larger sociopolitical, economic and cultural factors are also at play in the process. For example, Watts et al. (2011: 49) highlight the ways in which family, positive social identity¹⁰, and personal experience with injustice impact critical reflection and an individual’s interest in social justice. The outer ring of the diagram therefore highlights some of the external factors particularly relevant to this project that are likely to play a role in the development of CC beyond a young person’s involvement in the organization.

¹⁰ Social identity to refer to an individual’s sense of belonging to a group, and can take various forms (e.g. Dutch, female, youth, Jewish). These identities shape the lived experience of an individual, and their perceptions of social justice realities.

Figure 2- Conceptualizing Critical Consciousness in the Research



Source: Created by author

Chapter 3: Analysis of Awareness Building Processes

This empirical chapter engages with the collected data and reflects on how involvement in The HYA supports the development of a critical awareness among youth members through two key mechanisms: dialogue within the diverse group context, and the self-investigation of youth-related issues in the community.

3.1 Opportunities for dialogue within a diverse group

During weekly meetings youth members have the opportunity to sit around a round table and discuss various sociopolitical topics pertinent to their lives: Racism, sexism, migration, radicalization, ethnic profiling, financial debt, and educational inequality were underscored as the main issues discussed during these meetings. According to Freirian pedagogy, individuals learn through dialogue as their existing ideas are shared, challenged, and ultimately new knowledge is created, and therefore dialogue is recognized as a fundamental component of the process of both learning and knowing (Freire 2002: 17). Whether these discussions are initiated by external individuals seeking the group's advice, or prompted by the youth members themselves, they appear to play a fundamental role in the awareness building process among youth members.

M: Do you talk about things like social inequalities within The Hague, topics such as racism or gender inequality?

A: All the time. At the youth ambassadors, all the time. It's like the main subject. Like for example *Sinterklaas* we have every year the 5th of December. The helpers are black, and half of the population basically says it's racist, and the other half says it's not racist, it's tradition. And there are a lot of people in between, and nobody really knows what to do in the moment...
(Aaron)

Considering the highly multi-racial nature of The Hague, racism is a contemporary and relevant issue. I therefore expand on Aaron's example of racial discrimination through the 'Sinterklaas'¹¹ debate to help demonstrate how this intra-group dialogue plays a role in the awareness building process within this youth organizing space. As highlighted above, youth members stand divided on the issues mirroring the debate occurring at the national level. While some believe it's a long-standing Dutch tradition with important cultural value and 'all in good fun', others believe it's a racist and discriminatory practice reflecting the country's colonial past and legacy of slavery, while perpetuating unjust racial stereotypes and power relations between whites and blacks in the country today (Wout 2014). Despite these contrasting understandings, Aaron perceives that the 'orchestrated' nature of the group discussions prevents them from being divisive. More specifically, he perceives that being together in a familiar space, and choosing to focus on a specific designated topic, enhances the depth and openness of these 'heavy' discussions. Echoing the perceptions of other youth members [Lisa, Denise, Lars,

¹¹ During this annual celebration a white *Sinterklaas* 'Santa Clause' figure is aided by his helper *Zwarte Piet* 'Black Pete' who delivers gifts to children. Individuals celebrating the tradition often paint themselves black and wear a wig to represent *Zwarte Piet*. Wout (2014: 11-18) provides an overview of the national tradition and opposing discourses surrounding the debate and can be referenced for additional context.

Esmee, Sara], he additionally made reference to Alan's role as being essential in facilitating the dialogue process (i.e. stepping in when the discussion digressed from the topic or was no longer constructive), shedding light on the potential role of an adult ally in enabling constructive intra-group dialogue.

When I asked whether this discussion had influenced his understanding of the issue, Aaron answered:

Yeah definitely, because I heard one very good argument in the discussion and it changed my vision 180 degrees about it. Because I was like 'the helpers have to be black'. Because I know it's racist, but it's tradition and we should not forget but forgive. But then someone used the argument, 'if we were sitting here and we were 40 years old, and we were talking about Sinterklaas and his helpers and they were all like red, yellow and blue instead of black we wouldn't say wait a minute isn't something wrong? Shouldn't they all be black?' So then I thought, yeah if you discard the black helpers and turn them into rainbow colors, or whatever, kids in 20 years *will* think it's normal...

While this response clearly demonstrates a rethinking of his original understanding of the issue, and perhaps an acknowledgement that Zwarte Piet's representation as a black person is problematic, the extent to which the discussion actually increased his understanding of why the tradition is problematic remains unclear.

An open environment in which youth reflect on sociopolitical issues from multiple perspectives, and form their own opinions, is theorized to support CC development (Diemer & Li 2011: 1816), and it appears that the group's high level of diversity among youth members plays a significant role in this process. Youth members frequently made reference to The Hague as a segregated city where individuals from different neighborhoods and ethnic groups seldom interact, and especially not to discuss sociopolitical conditions. Youth members therefore perceived that the HYA was a rare opportunity to interact, and have these discussions, with individuals outside their standard social environment [Robert, Sara, Denise, Lars, Aaron, Niek]. Or as summarized by Niek, "each week you are sitting there with 20 people whom in your normal lifestyle you wouldn't even cross paths with or speak to, and you are learning to communicate." The supplementary survey echoes this finding as all respondents agreed that discussions and debates during group meetings encouraged them to think about social and political problems in their community from a new perspective: 2 members felt 'somewhat', 4 members felt 'quite a lot', and 2 members felt 'greatly' (Survey Question 3).

Referring to the *Sinterklass* debate, Niek explained how youth members from African and Caribbean background had shared their perceptions and lived experiences regarding racial discrimination with the group, providing a new perspective in which he (and others) could reflect on the debate.

Interestingly, I found that members rarely expected to change the opinions of other, but rather expected *acknowledgement*. In fact, Niek perceived that this attitude was something he had developed as a direct result of his involvement in the organization. He explained how previously he avoided discussions, especially regarding religion and ethnic/racial profiling, because he would get too upset trying to convince them of his opinion.

However, he explained how he began to acknowledge the role that lived experience plays in developing understanding of these issues, and through his involvement in the HYA he learned “sometimes you shouldn’t tell your opinion to convince someone else, but just to give them a storyline with the other way” (Nick).

Similarly, and also referencing the *Sinterklass* debate, Lara expressed that no matter how constructive the debate on racial discrimination there would always be a difference in the way members understood the issue as a result of their highly diverse lived experiences.

Some of us [youth ambassadors] just don't acknowledge racism the same way. Some people just don't see it like me. So a lot of times we are in discussion about racism or whatever, and we find a way to work it out. But I know they don't really see it the way I see it, or feel the way I feel about it. But they can't! It's impossible. Because being born white you are being born with a privilege, and you don't have to think about your color because your color 'is'. Somebody who is white is not constantly confronted with being white, because that's the norm. So I don't think a white person can feel what I feel. I think they can imagine, but never feel what I feel. *But*, as ambassadors I think we are open and *acknowledge* everything (Lara)

However, instead of feeling discouraged by this disconnect Lara explained how she simultaneously increased her own understandings of racial discrimination through these discussions as she learned how it’s perceived by others. For example, by hearing the counter arguments, and the rationalization behind, she feels it strengthens her own argument and capacity to work with individuals who do now acknowledge it the way she does. She explained that while her lived experiences had shaped her own understanding of racial discrimination, hearing the opinions/arguments of other youth members from an often academic level further strengthened her own understanding.

I'm learning from them [the other ambassadors] because they see things from a different perspective. And things from a perspective that I never thought about. Maybe they see things from an educated level- from a school level or a student level. And I see things from a life level. And it's so interesting to have these kinds of discussions, and then yeah, have a development in both our brains. So I see that I'm learning, and I see that they're leaning. They're leaning from me and I'm learning from them, a lot. Really a lot. (Lara)

Through the HYA youth members have the opportunity to share their own opinions, understandings, and experiences with injustice with youth from their community that they normally would not interact with. This creates a unique situation where youth are regularly encountering new perspectives from their peers, causing them to reflect on and rethink their own understandings of various issues related to structural inequality. When asked to what extent members’ felt that participating in the HYA had increased their understanding of social inequality that exists in The Hague, 3 members indicated ‘somewhat’, 2 ‘quite a lot’, and 3 ‘greatly’ (Survey Question 4), indicating a shared perception of awareness building among respondents.

3.2 Opportunities for Self-Investigation of Community Problems

Through their involvement, youth members are supported in doing their own research

on community problems. This connects with literature on PAR and YPAR¹² methodology as a tool for supporting CC awareness, as young people are provided opportunities to define and conduct research on the issues relevant to their social world (Cammarota 2011). Regarding the importance of YPAR in youth development initiatives, Cammarota and Fine summarize:

Through participatory action research, youth learn how to study problems and find solutions to them. More importantly, they study problems and derive solutions to obstacles preventing their own well-being and progress (2008: 6).

This investigative process occurs in various capacities during a member's involvement. While the problems being investigated often are *not* directly aligned with understanding issues of structural inequality (e.g. gender representation in the city council, adult-youth power relations within the community, the overrepresentation of ethnic youth in Dutch prison), they *are* in line with the Cammarota and Fine's explanation as youth members conduct research on the problems they perceive to be preventing the well-being of youth. For example, one member conducted research on Dutch nightlife practices in order to inform youth of existing dangers (Zana), while another conducted research on schools/students to substantiate the contemporary challenges facing youth in the Dutch education system (Rabab).

Additionally, earlier this year the group carried out an investigation of shisha lounges in the community. The project was the reaction to stories youth members were hearing from other youth in the community regarding problematic encounters they were having within shisha lounges- mainly regarding underage girls being provided alcohol and solicited to engage in sexual acts for money [Sara, Denise]. Compelled to investigate, and with the networking support of Alan, the group planned and held a series of discussion meetings bringing together shisha lounge owners, health and police department officials, and miscellaneous individuals from the community (including youth of course) to provide multiple perspectives for understanding what was actually happening, why it was occurring, and how to best prevent it (Figure 3). This directly reinforces the abovementioned dialogical learning process central to CC awareness development. Guided by a woman external to the group knowledgeable about the requirements for legitimizing their request to higher officials, the ambassadors used the data they collected to construct and provide a formal document of their findings, and proposed policy solutions, to the Youth Department of Health & Safety. They are currently awaiting a response.

Engaging in community research (especially the problem identification and data analysis stages) promotes the awareness component of CC development among youth (Foster-Fishman et al. 2010: 67). The *action* component, however, occurs as youth members use this knowledge to develop, and provide, their informed policy suggestions to the Hague Youth Department of Health & Safety. Similarly, upon Zana's investigation of nightlife practices (awareness), she used this knowledge to plan and facilitate a course informing

¹² Cammarota & Fine (2008: 6) distinguish youth participatory action research (YPAR) from PAR for its emphasis on being explicitly pedagogical, with implications for education and youth development

youth how to better protect themselves when going out (action), illustrating the linked and reinforcing nature of the two components

Figure 3 – Photo of Shisha Lounge Investigation



Source: HYA Facebook, uploaded December 14th, 2014

While such investigations may touch on issues of structural inequality (e.g. discussion of gendered power relations within shisha lounges), shifting the focus to more directly explore these oppressive forces, especially in relation to the marginalized status of youth, would be more advantageous regarding CC development aims. However, they still play an important role as youth members learn *how* to identify and investigate the problems relevant to their lives. For example, through their participation in the shisha bar investigation members learn how to navigate the process of gathering and analyzing the evidence needed to construct formal documentation necessary to be legitimized by higher officials. This equips youth with the knowledge and tools to investigate the other negative forces in their lives and at a later point. Furthermore, while adults traditionally have been solely responsible for researching and creating solutions to the issues youth are facing, this process shifts power back towards youth. Through this process the youth decide not only what the problem is, but also why it exists, and what action *they* feel is a suitable response. In this sense the investigative process itself supports the overarching aim of empowering youth to alter adult-youth powers asymmetries that exist in youth development approaches and policies. As conveyed by one youth member:

I really think that if you are an elder you can't understand some things. You are from a whole other place. And when the government is doing research they are *not* the people who should be doing the research [...] I mean how many adults have been to a shisha lounge? I think if you are now 40, you didn't have a shisha lounge when you were 20. When you are 20, it's different than experiencing it when you are 40. (Lars)

In the context of the HYA, knowing how to investigate and report problems to adult decision-makers allows them to more effectively work within the existing political structure, and have their proposed changes realized. However, it cannot be overlooked that the outcome of the shisha lounge investigation ultimately hinges on whether the higher officials agree that it is a problem worth addressing and the proposed changes are feasible. This elucidates the reality that youth-initiated projects, such as the ongoing shisha project, cannot be separated from the inequitable structures and adultist ideology they are embedded in.

3.3 Reflections

While these above processes were found to have awareness enhancing outcomes, stories and explanations shared by several participants also indicated clear shortcomings in the CC awareness development process. While a main indicator of a critically conscious individual is the ability to view social problems and inequalities in systemic terms (Watts et al. 2011: 46), members often struggled to do so. More specifically, youth members had difficulty expressing the connection between the maladaptive behaviors of youth (notably educational failure, debt, criminal behavior, and lack of political participation) and forms of structural oppression: ageism, classicism, racism, etc. (Romero et al. 2008: 138). Instead of explaining these conditions/outcomes in systemic terms, members often employed individual blame theories to explain the problems facing Dutch youth. As highlighted in section 2.1, this is problematic as it fails to acknowledge the structural barriers preventing the well-being of youth, and instead blames the individual as the source of their own problems.

Ok, I went to a black school and I was thinking like 'is this it? Do you *really* want to get old and to not fight for opportunities, because you can create your own opportunities. That was my mentality from my parents. They always said like 'ok if you really want something it doesn't matter if you fail, you will get there'. That was the stuff my parents said. Go to high school in the other part of The Hague. But the other people [students] there were like 'ok I don't care, I will stay here at *this* high school.' And it's not only that, it's also the mentality. If you are with 10 people who have the mentality like 'Ok, I don't care', then you also get stuck (Claire)

I went to youth jail near Leiden, and there were a lot of children with an ethnic background. And I was shocked, this shouldn't be okay. And the parents say the police are getting to them easier because they are watching them more, but if you are doing nothing wrong the police can watch you 24/7. But if you didn't do something wrong you won't end up in jail. And when I drive through the neighborhood at 2 o'clock on a Monday and I see children sitting on the ground or at the park, I'm like 'don't you have parents to call you home? What are you doing on the streets?' I don't even have time to lie on my back and watch a soap series, and they have all the time in the world. That's about decisions. They just aren't ambitious. (Niek)

Particularly interesting about these examples is the recognition of inequality, yet a failure to attribute these structural inequalities to the negative outcome. For Niek, he recognizes the disproportionate number of ethnic youth being held in jail. For Claire, she recognizes that there are segregated 'black' schools in areas of town where people are less likely to receive a good education. However, they still rationalize that it's the individuals within these situations, or perhaps their parents, who are at fault for their negative position rather than pointing to the injustice of the situation. Such explanations demonstrate a *naïve consciousness* "marked by the individual who blames personal or

group shortcomings for inequalities and tries to adapt to the dominant ways of society” (Freire in Moya 2012: 17-18). By attributing these negative outcomes to a lack of motivation, lack of ambition, lazy parenting, or general apathy, they demonstrate an understanding more in line with individual-deficit thinking than a critical consciousness, and perpetuate a system where the blame is placed on youth rather than acknowledging and acting to change the significant barriers/oppressive structures they are facing (Ginwright & Cammarota 2002: 82).

These stories furthermore reflect a feeling of frustration that young people themselves aren’t improving their situation, demonstrated through comments such as “I see people around me who are living, and aren’t doing anything. They are like ok I want a job. But yeah, if you want a job you need to work hard for it. Go!” (Claire) or “When I see youth who aren't ambitious I'm disappointed” (Niek). Interestingly it was youth members with second-generation immigration status who were more likely employ these explanations, and harness this frustration. For the examples provided above, it was additionally mentioned how their parents had sacrificed many things (e.g. possessions, occupational status, social rank in society) in order to migrate to The Netherlands. This sheds light on how family background, including experience with migration, might play a role in shaping CC thinking, and future research could benefit by investigating this link.

Because these findings indicate a shortcoming in the awareness development process among youth, further investigation would be valuable in understanding the factors/process that are hindering this outcome. Additionally, how factors external to the group, such as family background, further shape the development process.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Action Empowering Processes

This empirical chapter engages with the collected data and reflects on how involvement in the HYA, beyond awareness building, enhances the capacity of youth members to take action towards changing the social and political conditions in their communities. After all, social justice emerges not only by fostering a social awareness, but also by “providing opportunities for young people to change the social and community conditions that prevent a positive, healthy process of development” (Ginwright & Cammarota 2002: 93).

4.1 Opportunities to take direct action on youth-related issues

As underscored in section 1.4b, youth members are actively involved in discussing and providing advice on various youth-related issues in their community through advisory sessions arranged with politicians and other community leaders. These opportunities within the HYA are in-line with the action component of CC, as youth members play an active role in changing (or perhaps more realistically influencing) policies and practices in their community to better match their own needs. Youth members recognize that policies are traditionally made *for* youth and not *with* youth, and perceive their participation in the HYA as an active step (by no means a full solution) towards rectifying this injustice:

Usually plans, rules and law for young people come from old people, and that's fundamentally wrong. You need young people's input. (Aaron, in explaining the importance of the HYA)

This city and other cities need it [organizations like the HYA], because they need to speak with young persons. Because a young person also needs to explain what's going on, you know? Because we were at the congress, or something like that, about the plan for the youth from the government. They were talking *about* young people, but there weren't any young people there, you know? So they are making plans for young people, but they don't hear what young people want. (Claire)

Beyond their advisory role, youth members have numerous opportunities to take action as they engage in the real world issues that shape their lives (e.g. unemployment, neighborhood safety, educational inequalities). Table 3 outlines such opportunities within the context of the HYA.

The opportunities listed illustrate how youth ambassadors are engaging in action to improve the conditions for youth in their community (e.g. quality of life, neighborhood safety, educational attainment, securing employment). They furthermore demonstrate members working to change/create solutions to various conditions of structural inequality (e.g. ethnic discrimination, gender equality, educational inequality).

As youth members engage in these issues that shape their lives they develop an increased understanding of how to confront these unjust conditions, thus further supporting the awareness/action cycle (Akom et al. 2008: 10).

Table 3- Opportunities for Direct Action between February-December, 2014

Action Opportunity	Description
District Roundtable Sessions	Bringing young people living in a specific are together to share their experiences and ideas for improvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mariahoeve; <i>Status of young people</i> • Segbroek; <i>Safety & quality of life</i> • Scheveningen; <i>Safety & neighborhood conditions</i> • Centrum; <i>Safety & use of public space</i>
Students4Students	Member initiated project to provide low-income students with tutoring and guidance during final year of high school. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>educational equity/ attainment</i>
Copenhagen Exchange	International training with other youth from European countries (i.e. Croatia, Armenia Ukraine, Germany, Romania) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>minority rights, conflict resolution</i>
Youth Work Week	Campaign aimed at improving the situation of Dutch youth seeking work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>youth unemployment</i>
No Hate Speech Movement	Campaign aimed at stopping online 'hate' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>discrimination (various forms)</i>
Dare to be smart	Project to recognize and support youth struggling with the transition from elementary to high school <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>educational attainment</i>
Discrimination Workshop	Participatory workshop on preventing discriminatory practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>discrimination (various forms)</i>
International Women's Day Roundtable	Roundtable session with Dutch youth to think of solutions for improving gender equality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>gender equality, economic independence</i>
Integration Movie	Participation in film about integration in The Hague focused on anti-discrimination and diversity policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>minority rights, ethnic/ racial discrimination</i>

Source: Created by author based on organizational documents

4.2 Fostering a Feeling of Sociopolitical Control

Watts et al. (2011) and Diemer & Li (2011) argue that an individual's *perceived* ability to enact social change is a precursor to action. While Watts et al. use the term 'political efficacy', and Diemer and Li use the term 'sociopolitical control', in their recognition of CC development both essentially argue that "people will be much more likely to engage in critical action if they perceive the ability to create change via their actions" (Watts et al. 2011: 50). In other words, while an individual may be aware of systemic inequalities, he/she will be unlikely to take action unless it's believed these actions will be effective (Watts et al. in Christens et al. 2013: 170).

Results from the supplementary survey mirror this finding, indicating that respondents perceive participating in the organization *increases* his/her ability to take action on the problems facing youth in the community: 3 members indicated 'somewhat', 4 'quite a lot', and 1 'greatly' (Survey Question 5).

In the coding process of listening and re-listening to the stories of youth members, two main factors were identified as playing a role in this process: a sense of collective efficacy and the presence of authentic youth-adult partnerships.

4.2a Increased sense of collective efficacy

Collective efficacy is a prominent theme in the youth organizing literature, and can be thought of as “a belief in the capacity of the group to pull together and realize shared aspirations or address shared problems,” (Watts & Flanagan 2007: 786). In diverse ways, youth members expressed the feeling that their ability to enact change in the community is increased as a result of their membership in the group [Aaron, Clair, Esmee, Fleur, Niek, Robert].

Being young, young and ambitious, a lot of people don't take you serious because you are young. So 'you need more time to think it over' or 'you need to go read more' or 'maybe later in life', or whatever. Older people *always* find a reason to say 'no, you're too young or you're not ready yet'. And before being an ambassador it was really hard to get into the city, or get into the local government, or to be heard by certain organizations because you are just a citizen, or you are just a youngster. But becoming an ambassador you have a name behind you. That makes you feel safe, or like you have some people behind you. And you feel heard. And that's the thing I never felt before becoming an ambassador. (Denise)

Through their involvement in the organization, youth members perceive that adults are taking them, and their change efforts, seriously. This empowers youth to engage themselves in various projects. I highlight Shania, one of the newest members to join the organization this year. Shania is 17, and is in the process of initiating her own school-based initiative called 'Ready to Study and Ready to Help,' which serves as a student-to-student support system. Through this program students can either join as a 'coach' to provide academic support and mentorship, or they can join to receive peer support. When asked why she wanted to start the project, she explained that there was often a disconnect in which teachers were unable to explain the material in a way that the students understood it. Recognizing that teachers in her school were unable to provide the extra time needed to support struggling students, and that students themselves had the capacity and skills to help one other, she wanted to further engage students in supporting each other.

I knew that a lot of students don't understand the lessons. Not every teacher has the ability to explain everything very well. A lot of students can do it better. So I thought, if students can help each other it's good for the student himself, and it's good for the school (Shania).

As she explained her idea further it became evident that her decision to take on this role was connected to her membership in the group. Previously she had felt that she was not being taken seriously as a student, and her ideas were not valued. However, as a result of her membership in the organization she perceived a switch, where her ideas and questions were suddenly validated more highly. As she described:

At my school they know that I'm a youth ambassador now, and I can see that they see me different from other people. So they listen to me, and when I ask something I get a serious answer [...] And the teachers know that now, so I'm kind of higher than the other students. I really notice that. Because before I was just one of the other students, and the teachers didn't

really listen to me even when I said something. It was like 'ok.... alright...'. But now they really listen, and they want to talk with me and have conversations. (Shania)

Shania's case demonstrates how being part of this youth organizing group has resulted in an increased feeling of self-worth as she is being taken seriously, and her ideas and questions are finally being validated within her school. This increased sense of sociopolitical control empowers Shania in her desire to initiate 'Ready to Study and Ready to Help'. The following exchange illustrates and summarizes this feeling of collective efficacy with the HYA.

M: When it comes to making social change, do you think that individuals have the ability to make social change?

S: Individuals? Not when you are all alone. Not at all. When you are alone, no. There has to be a group or a lot of people who think the same way about a specific problem to make a real change. You may want to change something on your own, but that is not possible. Maybe in a small community, but not somewhere like The Hague. I don't believe that you can do that.

M: Being part of the youth ambassadors, do you think you have the potential to make social change?

S: I think we do, yes. Because we are a group, and a lot of ambassadors have the ability to describe themselves really well- which is great- and to explain things to people, and to make them understand the problem. And yes, to make them understand *we* can make a change. (Shania)

4.2b Authentic youth-adult partnerships

"Mention of the youth-led movement generally conjures up images of initiative run totally by and for youth, with no adults in sight. Nothing could be further from the truth. The most successful youth-led initiatives have adults involved in numerous capacities, and organizing is no exception" (Delgado & Staples 2008: 184).

In reality an entire research paper could (and should) be written regarding the presence of youth-adult relationships within the context of the HYA. After all, these relationships are inherently complex and bring conceptual and political tensions to the field of youth organizing (Delgado & Staples 2008: 14), and Alan's role as adult supervisor is no exception. It is easy to spot the contradictions in the arrangement. Alan's position is the only one that is paid, which seems to have implications regarding the higher importance and 'value' of his position over the youth members. Additionally, not only is he the originator of the project, but he continues to play the lead role in scheduling weekly meetings and advisory sessions with politicians and other community/business leaders.

Further research is unquestionably necessary in order to more fully analyze these various adult-youth relationships and how power is exercised within the organizing and political context of the HYA. This including an analysis of the extent to which youth members are choosing their own interests to pursue, and deciding the level of adult-engagement *they* desire- including when, how, and under what circumstances Alan and other adult allies are invited (Delgado & Staples 2008: 22-23). Furthermore, while adults with relevant knowledge and experience have valuable insight to give and can significantly aid the experience (as is clearly evident in the observed case study and

highlighted throughout this paper) this relationship can simultaneously disempower youth (Ibid: 14). This study, and other studies on youth organizing, would highly benefit from a deeper analysis of these complex relationships.

However, in relation to this particular study, the data elucidates that Alan's role as adult supervisor is a vital enabling factor of the group's perceived success. Youth ambassadors *unanimously* perceive Alan's role as fundamental to the success of the organization, and the perceived ability of youth members to carry out their objectives, thus increasing their sense of sociopolitical control. 10 of the 11 youth members interviewed expressed doubt that the group would continue to be successful if Alan were to leave the group, and a youth member were to take over his role. This is despite the average length of involvement of interviewed members being nearly 4.5 years, and with multiple active members with 6 or more years of experience, seeming to indicate enough first-hand experience to make this a reasonable consideration.

Instead, members pointed to Alan's extensive professional experience in the field, widespread network, and slightly detached role from the group in facilitating group discussions, as irreplaceable factors of the group's success. Furthermore, members felt that their current life situation as students and workers didn't allot them the necessary time needed to take on the secretarial role that Alan holds, or what they referred to as the 'boring' (Denise) or 'practical' (Lisa) work. As highlighted in section 1.4c, youth members understand Alan's role as vital 'to create the circumstances' for them to carry out their work. This mirrors the work of Delgado and Staples, strong advocates for the role of youth-led organizing, who stress "it would be irresponsible for us to ignore that youth may have less experience, knowledge, or expertise in community organizing when compared to adults" (2008: 14). Youth-led initiatives inevitably confront an adultist society where "adults mobilize more political resources, both on their own behalf and that of youth, than do youth themselves" (Checkoway 1998: 783). Alan brings imperative access to the resources and networks necessary for the youth ambassadors to carry out their initiatives.

In order to better understand Alan's role, and the extent to which Alan plays a supportive role, towards the end of each interview I asked youth members about how they conceptualized Alan's role within the group. In order not to push my own interpretation of the group, I was careful to never mention 'youth-led organizing' during the fieldwork, but rather referred to my study as looking at youth organizations more broadly. As part of this inquiry I asked members whether they considered Alan's role as (1) an ally, (2) a mentor, (3) a leader, or (4) a boss, and provided basic definitions when needed. In 9 cases members identified his role as an ally, a mentor, or both, and in two cases a youth member identified him as 'leader' in addition to an ally. However, further explanation clarified he's more of a facilitator 'keeping things in-line'.

M: When you think about Alan and his role in this, how do you understand his position?

D: At first I saw him as a leader, really leading the group. But now I know he's leading the group, but not 'leading the group', giving us directions or whatever. He is really a democratic leader, and we decide of course on everything, but he keeps everything in line. I see him as a leader, but then as equal because he is a leader, and he knows a lot, but he doesn't act like that. So he is equal to all of us. [...] He can help you to get where you want to be, but that's all about

you. (Denise)

I further highlight Baris and his currently ongoing initiative ‘Dream Catchers’. Dream Catchers was a response to Baris’ own personal experience making the transition from high school to university¹³, where he needed to make a decision at an early age what educational track he would enroll in. Recognizing the challenges that Dutch youth face in making this decision so early, and the consequences that many young people face as result of choosing the wrong path (e.g. longer time in school unable to work, additional debt/loans, burnout with education system), he initiated a project to support the transition.

I was sitting down one day and I was like 'I want to be a lawyer' [...] I thought why do I want to be a lawyer when I never met a lawyer, or went to a court to see how they do work? And I thought maybe it's not even my thing, maybe it's not my cup of tea. So why don't I try it? And I was thinking, there are so many other people who want to be something, or are choosing the wrong education, and then actually ending up somewhere where they don't want to end up and being miserable and having depression or burnout. We see it a lot.

Baris therefore started a program linking students in their final year of high school with an adult professional in the workforce who had their ‘dream job’. For example, he told a story of a girl who applied to the program interested in being a chef. Through the dream catchers initiative she was matched with a chef in a 5-star hotel in The Hague. She spent a full day in the kitchen not only observing, but participating in the food prep and being able to ask questions about the job and career preparation while gathering advice and building a support network. Beyond helping youth to ensure their interest in a profession, he also incorporated an application process to encourage youth to practice promoting themselves and their interests to employers. Something he had found to be important in his own life experience.

While this was Baris’ own idea based on what he perceives to be a challenge youth in his community face, he explained how he would not do it without the support of Alan. While Baris does not have the professional networks needed to arrange these encounters, Alan utilizes his extensive network to connect Baris with the individuals he needs to make the initiative happen. Together they have created an ‘advisory group’ consisting of Alan and four other adults who work with Baris. Following his selection of the chosen applicants from the pool, these adult allies use their established networks to connect Baris with the career professionals he is seeking. While Baris had the idea and initiative to get the project started, in reality he lacked the professional network to make it happen without the support from involved adult allies. Alan’s support in this project mirrors Denise’s explanation that “He [Alan] is more creating the situation, the conditions for us to play our role, to be able to do our work correctly.”

4.3 Reflections:

While these findings demonstrate the potential of youth organizing in providing opportunities for youth to take action against the real-world conditions which impact their well-being, and the well-being of other youth, the study also raises questions

¹³ HBO level in Netherlands

regarding the actual extent to which involvement in the organization leads to transformative change. The main problem, perhaps, is that it is unclear what 'transformative' actually implies in the context of CC development. If the outcome of transformation is understood as a radical restructuring and elimination of unjust structures/forces in one's life and community, then the conclusion of this study would clearly be that transformation regarding the marginalized situation of Dutch youth is *not* a realistic outcome within the context of the HYA. However, my engagement with the literature, and the ongoing analysis of the chosen case study, has led me to the conclusion that 'transformation' in the context of CC is multidimensional- it implies change, navigation, and at times even conformity.

Change occurs as youth members respond to pressing issues, and address the everyday problems relevant to their lives (Ginwright & Cammarota 2002: 88). For example, when shisha lounges go from being a space where underage girls face the risk of being sexually solicited to a space where they feel comfortable, or when a program arises to support youth struggling in school with additional peer support, we can recognize that as change in that it is "action to improve the conditions of their lives" (Moya 2012: 3). It is not transformation in the truest sense, because it does not address the root causes of injustice. The shisha lounge solution does not address underlying gender inequalities, intertwined with cultural understandings of women, which are at the heart of the problem. Furthermore, initiating a 'Ready to Study and Ready to Help' peer support system does not address the fact that these schools are segregated along socioeconomic and racial lines, where youth in 'black' schools systematically have fewer resources and opportunities for advancement. Additionally, as explained by Cammarota in Harwood (2007), change is not always a direct outcome of the CC development process. For example, despite opportunities for youth to present their research findings and recommendations for change to various stakeholders, there are many times nothing happens with this information. Instead of seeing this as a failure of the CC development process, Cammarota says often this is the 'reality' and an important lesson on its own in the process. However, even when change is not an outcome, he argues the process itself is "transformative on an individual basis" (Ibid).

Navigation occurs as youth members learn what Diemer & Blustein refer to as "play[ing] the game on an uneven field" (2006: 230). Essentially, through an enhanced awareness of sociopolitical barriers, youth members are empowered to navigate or transcend them to achieve desired outcomes (Ibid: 224). Youth members in the HYA recognize that "usually plans, rules and law for young people come from old people, and that's fundamentally wrong" (Aaron). They are aware of this injustice, and use their enhanced awareness of the political system and opportunities for direct action to navigate this arena, and increase their voice in the decision-making process. As they increase their awareness of this oppressive arena- the various levels policies must go through (Lisa), how to manage the required laws and papers and access funds (Aaron), whose signatures you need and how to get them (Sara), the right words and etiquette (Aaron), how to argue your idea in a politically correct manner (Esmee), they use this understanding to "play the game". In reality, however, it does not change the existing political structure, which continues to be run entirely by adults, and largely excludes and undervalues young people.

Lastly, it seems conformity itself is an act of transformative resistance. Highlighting the work of Fordham (1996), Cammarota & Fine provide the example of young people staying in school, even if they are ideologically opposed to the institution because they know doing so avoids self-defeating outcomes. In other words, youth are “using school for their own purposes” (2008: 3) as they strive for social advancement. At times youth members expressed opposition to the entire political system, but recognized that it would be self-defeating to their own goals if they refused to be a part of it. For example, while Denise recognizes her role as an ambassador as important for supporting her own social projects, this is in direct contrast with her feeling of being part of the system.

And that was my moment where I thought 'whoa, I'm too much in the system'. And I don't want to be in the system. But if you want to make a change then you have to be a part of the system in a way, because otherwise you can't make a change. (Denise)

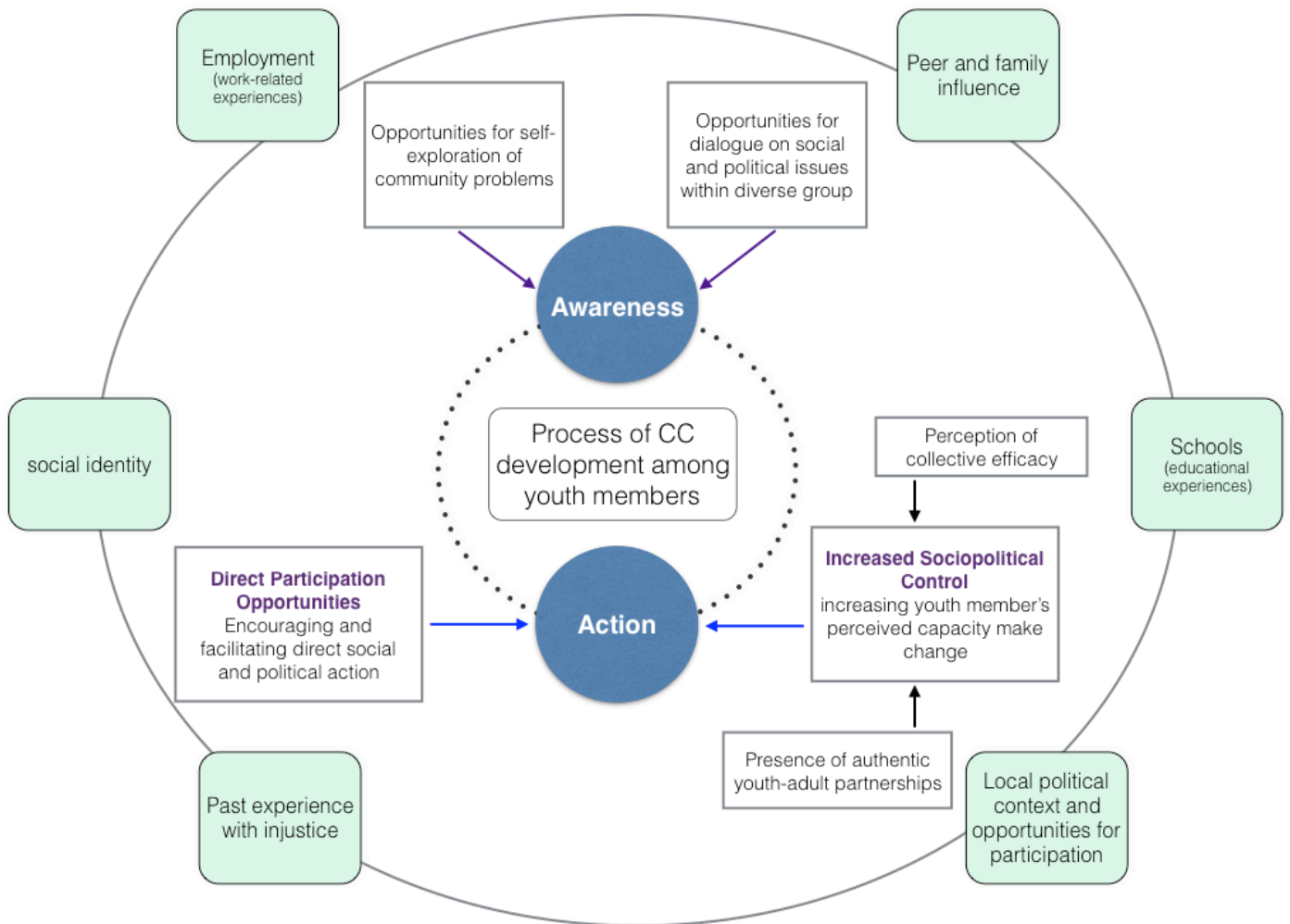
Applying a more nuanced view of transformation allows us to better appreciate the various ways involvement in the organization supports youth in taking action against the conditions in their lives and community preventing their well-being. However, it undeniably raises further questions regarding the extent to which youth-led organizing can actually change the root conditions of inequality, and whether power asymmetries are actually being altered, or simply navigated, through the process.

4.4 Overview of Findings

Based on an understanding that youth development approaches should aim to empower young people in responding to and changing the oppressive conditions in their lives and communities, this study analyzes how youth-led organizing might support these aims by fostering a CC among youth members. In doing so it makes analytical and empirical contributions to the literature on youth development and youth-led organizing.

The analysis suggests that opportunities and support for dialogue within a diverse group, and the self-exploration of community problems, are key factors playing a role in the awareness-building process among youth members. When it comes to increasing the ability of youth to take action against oppressive conditions, youth-organizations can play a role by supporting opportunities for youth to take action against structural injustices, but also more generally against the conditions which have a negative impact on their well-being that may be overlooked or non-prioritized by adult decision makers (e.g. youth unemployment, unsafe nightlife conditions, educational failure). Furthermore, the presence of authentic youth-adult partnerships, and a developed sense of collective efficacy, within the organization context can increase youths' change-making perception, encouraging them to take action. Figure 4 illustrates these findings within the proposed CC framework.

Figure 4 - Critical Consciousness Development Process within the HYA



Source: Created by author

Chapter 5: Conclusion

While the youth development field has made a noteworthy paradigm shift from viewing youth from a problem-oriented perspective to a positive-oriented perspective, a shift currently being promoted in The Netherlands, a social justice perspective demands that we continue to push the envelope further. Recognizing that young people face significant structural and ideological barriers in their daily lives, I argued that youth development practitioners and policy makers should further aim to empower young people in taking action against unjust conditions, including conditions which prevent their overall well-being. Through a case study of youth-led organizing occurring in The Netherlands, I analyzed and identified the factors/processes within this organizing approach which play a role in supporting the development of critical consciousness among youth member.

However, this study also raises questions regarding the whether youth-led organizing provides opportunities youth with the tools to combat structural injustices, and the extent to which they are leaning to navigate and work within unjust institutions. Additionally, it calls for future research regarding the complex power relations that exist between youth members and adults within the youth-led organizing context, and the extent to which this organizing approach actually alters power asymmetries between youth and adults decision-makers/resource-holders. These relationships have critical implications for the ability of youth-led organizing to effectively match social justice aims, and demands further research.

Appendix 1: Researcher Profile

Beginning at the age of 16, and lasting throughout university, I was involved in various leadership positions within school and community organizations. My experiences within these roles not only served as a stepping-stone for self-serving interests such as enrollment within a university, but led to an increased feeling of self-worth as a young person. Having these opportunities available to me, and perceiving them as positive experiences in my own developmental process, inevitably these experiences have shaped my support of positive youth development approaches before ever entering the field. Consequently, my future career interest in working in the field of education and youth-development signifies a personal agenda that shapes the way I understand and frame youth and youth development approaches.

Furthermore, my interest in using notions of CC has personal motivations. My engagement in the literature of Ginwright and Cammarota, and their social justice approach to youth development (2002, 2007) originated from my interest in the work they are doing in California and Arizona (where I originate from). In fact, Cammarota is a professor at the university I attended. In 2010 legislation was passed in Tucson, Arizona that banned 'ethnic studies' (in reality a Mexican-American Studies Program) from occurring in the Tucson Unified School District. The law essentially banned classes that "advocate the overthrow of the U.S. government, urge ethnic solidarity, breed ethnic resentment or treat students as members of a group rather than as individuals" (Planas, 2015a), and the Superintendent of Public Instruction at that time claimed that the program violated the law because it "repeatedly reference[d] white people as being 'oppressors'" (Lundholm as cited in Julien 2012: 43-44). These courses included curriculum on race and socioeconomic inequality, and it was determined they "bred resentment against whites" (Planas 2015b). Among the course book list was Paulo Freire's seminal piece *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was temporarily banned.

This situation, and my interest in Ginwright and Cammarota's work inspired me to engage with the literature on CC, trying to understand why this program and this book created such a panic among legislators and policy makers. Ultimately I came to the conclusion that knowledge (or *awareness* as used in this paper) is power. For the state's adult (and disproportionately white) legislators and power holders, the idea of ethnic youth exploring their marginalized position in society sparked fear. Therefore, my understanding of CC as a form of empowerment, and how it can be applied to youth development thinking, is intimately shaped by my own interests and background.

Appendix 2: Supplementary Survey Questions

Response choices: (1) not at all, (2) slightly, (3) somewhat, (4) quite a lot, (5) greatly'

- **Question 1:** Being a youth ambassador increases my UNDERSTANDING of how youth-related policies and decisions are made in The Hague.
- **Question 2:** Being a youth ambassador increases my ability to INFLUENCE or CHANGE how youth-related policies and decisions made in The Hague.
- **Question 3:** Discussions and debates during group meeting encourage me to think about social and political problems in my community from a new perspective.
- **Question 4:** participating in the Hague Youth Ambassadors increases my understanding of social inequality that exists in The Hague.
- **Question 5:** participating in the Hague Youth Ambassadors increases my ability to take action on the problems facing youth in my community.

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