‘I teach them that anything is possible’—exploring how adult leaders perceive and handle social factors of youth mental health in the context of young people’s civic engagement

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study was 2-fold: to explore, in the context of young people’s civic engagement in Sweden, (i) how adult leaders perceive social factors of youth mental health and (ii) how adult leaders handle such social factors within their organizations. Interviews were conducted with leaders engaged in various civic organizations that provide leisure activities for young people. Using thematic analysis, three themes were constructed. Firstly, the social landscape of youth mental health described how adult leaders perceived the social factors of youth mental health within the context of civic engagement. Secondly, the organizational structures developed by adult leaders illustrated the organizing forms that leaders created for young people’s civic engagement. Thirdly, adult leaders’ strategies for addressing the social factors of youth mental health reflected the strategies developed to handle e.g. stress and achievement pressure. The adult leaders recognized the importance of their organizations and their huge potential to have a positive impact on youth mental health. However, some participants also saw limitations in terms of their own resources and competence. They found themselves having to address

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How adult leaders perceive and handle social factors of youth mental health regardless of whether they felt competent and prepared to do this or not. Our findings contribute to the existing knowledge on youth and community development via the role of adult leaders in promoting young people’s mental health by highlighting the organizational structures and leadership strategies developed by them.

Introduction

There is a growing global concern regarding the negative trends in young people’s mental health; between 10 and 20 percent of children and young people worldwide are affected by mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, with long-lasting effects for individuals, communities, and societies (Kieling et al., 2011; Bor et al., 2014). Mental health problems encompass a range of symptoms and disorders, and the present paper focuses on self-reported symptoms rather than psychiatric disorders. For example, in the Swedish context, the proportion of Swedish 13- and 15-year-old girls and boys reporting psychosomatic complaints and stress-related problems has increased considerably since around 1985, and, in comparison with other Nordic countries, the increase has been more pronounced in Sweden (The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2016, 2018). Mental health problems are a result of a complex web of biological, psychological, and social factors (Hall et al., 2016; Landstedt and Coffey, 2017). Our study focuses on the latter.

The term ‘social determinants’ or ‘social factors of health’, as used in this paper, recognizes the significance of how circumstances, including interpersonal and power relationships of, for example, gender, class, and ethnicity, on individual, family, community, and national levels, affect health outcomes and health inequalities among young people (Viner et al., 2012). On a structural level, youth researchers point to social factors related to employment insecurity and the expansion of consumer cultures, personal responsibility, and individualism when explaining changes in young people’s health, especially stress (Woodman and Wyn, 2015; Landstedt and Coffey, 2017). Achievement pressures (regarding school, behaviour, and appearance) have been found to be particularly important in relation to young people’s mental health, especially among girls (West, 2017; Anniko et al., 2019).

The social factors of relationships and social networks are central for positive mental health and have been identified by young people as imperative in promoting emotional well-being (Hall et al., 2016), and also in relation to how young people understand the concept of community through connectedness and friendship (Yerbury, 2012). When young people are civically engaged in organizations related to, for example, sports,
culture, and religion, they have access to important arenas where these relationships and social networks can grow (Cicognani et al., 2015). In Sweden, around 60 percent of young people aged 16–25 hold a membership in a civic organization, making youth civic engagement an important arena within Swedish civil society (Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2019). Unlike countries such as the US and the UK, where sports and cultural activities are often provided within the school system, these are provided through voluntary civic organizations in Sweden (Hertting and Kostenius, 2016).

In this paper, youth civic engagement will be defined as *third spaces* (Kivijärvi, 2015), representing social spaces separated from home and school environments, where young people can take part in public dialogue, define shared goals, negotiate conflicting interests, pursue common strategies, and develop a sense of connection to a broader group (Middaugh et al., 2012). In these third spaces, young people not only connect with peers but also develop relationships with non-related adults such as adults with leadership responsibilities (Nolas, 2014). Young people who find adults other than their parents to guide them have better outcomes in terms of scholastic success, social-emotional well-being, and connections to social capital (Griffiths and Armour, 2014; Sieving et al., 2017). Research shows that apart from the leadership roles in youth organizations, adult leaders view themselves as pseudo-parents, social workers, counselors, fundraisers, and educators (Morgan and Bush, 2016). These multiple roles also imply challenges and difficult negotiations regarding, for example, tensions between profound democratic and social responsibility ambitions and the lack of resources to achieve their goals (Tebelius, 2007; Walker, 2011; Ramey and Rose-Krasnor, 2015). Coe et al. (2015) further argue that adults might be reluctant to acknowledge youth as resources, thereby making egalitarian relationships difficult to build.

Further, youth-adult relationships are also essential for partnership building and long-term involvement in community development efforts, but they can only occur by providing sustained interaction, communication, and positive relationships with adults, other youth, and community organizations (Brennan et al., 2009). Thus, whilst it is important to acknowledge how community contexts shape youth development, youth development also shapes communities and the community building process by expressing and sharing common interests and needs (Brennan, 2008). We therefore argue that youth civic engagement should be recognized and included as an important arena by scholars and those active in community development and youth mental health.

Third spaces are important places where young people are engaged and where community and adult leaders are in a position to learn about the
social issues affecting youth mental health. At the same time, youth civic engagement has been described as a ‘black box’, an unknown where young people go in and ‘good things’ happen (Jones and Deutsch, 2011). A better understanding of the strategies or approaches of adult leaders within youth civic organizations is needed to unpack this black box, especially with regard to how these spaces might represent untapped resources in relation to youth mental health (Jones and Deutsch, 2011; Morgan and Bush, 2016). To address this gap, this study explores how adult leaders perceive and handle social factors of youth mental health in the context of civic engagement. Their perspectives and daily experiences of working with young people are important so that we can learn from them about the social factors that are negatively affecting young people’s mental health, as well as the potentially protective role of civic engagement and adult leaders in supporting positive mental health among young people.

The study

Setting and participants

The study was conducted in northern Sweden, a sparsely populated area with the largest cities situated on the coast. The recruitment process started in December 2016 with a mapping of civic associations through information on webpages, public social media profiles, and registers listing organizations provided by the municipalities. In total, 23 organizations with activities for young people were contacted, representing sports, grassroots activism, voluntary organizations, culture, community service, youth clubs, and religious organizations. The recruitment process was ongoing throughout the data collection until completion in October 2017. We used a combination of purposive and maximum variation sampling (Creswell and Poth, 2018) to ensure diversity across rural and urban areas in addition to different types of activities directed to young people. The organizations were not selected on the basis of mental health programmes or of being alike.

Eight adult leaders from different organizations were interested in participating (six women and two men between the ages of 25 and 55). They were active in sports clubs, cultural associations, and religious groups. The organizations differed in size, stretching from 10 to 50 young members of various ages (ten–twenty years), genders, and ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The organizations were located across four municipalities covering geographic areas with high and low population densities. The roles of the adult leaders ranged from coaching sports practices and leading music groups to organizing events and summer camps and helping with homework. Most of the leaders received some form of financial compensation for their work.
Collecting and constructing data
A constructivist qualitative research design was applied (Mason, 2002). Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions and conducted in Swedish. The interview guide consisted of three broad questions concerning youth civic engagement, social factors of youth mental health, and the roles of adult leaders within the organizations. Follow-up questions were added to the guide between interviews to pursue emerging themes. All interviews took place at locations chosen by the participants and lasted between 55 and 75 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded, and the audio files were transcribed verbatim.

Ethical considerations
The participants received written and verbal information about the purpose of the study, the research procedure, and data storage. All participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could decide to withdraw from participation at any time without giving any explanation. In addition to the information letter, informed consent was discussed and collected orally. Names of individuals and organizations were replaced by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Only the authors of the paper have had access to the securely stored data. Ethical approval was obtained from the Regional Ethics Committee in Umeå (2016 466–31).

Data analysis
Data were analysed according to the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis commenced whilst transcribing the interviews and was conducted in parallel to continued data collection, creating a dynamic development of the analytical process by moving back and forth between the phases (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Memos were written to document ideas and preliminary interpretations of the data. Transcripts were imported into the software programme MAXQDA 12, which was used for coding. Initial coding identified features in the data relevant for the aim of the study, followed by sorting all the initial codes into potential themes and subthemes. These themes were not discovered as such; rather they were constructed during the analytical process (Clarke and Braun, 2013). The themes were continuously discussed and reviewed to define the nature of each individual theme and to highlight the relationships between themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During the final phase, we jointly wrote up the findings and contextualized the analytical narratives in relation to the existing literature. Table 1 illustrates an example of the coding framework.
Results and discussion

Based on the accounts of how adult leaders perceive and handle social factors of youth mental health in the context of youth civic engagement, the following three themes were constructed: the social landscape of youth mental health, the organizational structures developed by adult leaders, and adult leaders’ strategies for addressing the social factors of youth mental health. We used a house and its surrounding landscape as a metaphor to conceptualize the relationships between the themes. The first theme depicted the landscape or the broader setting of youth mental health as perceived by the adult leaders, within which the house, or civic engagement, is located. The second theme illustrated the structure of the house and represented the organizing forms that the adult leaders created for young people’s civic engagement. The third theme represented the activities carried out inside the house and reflected the strategies developed by adult leaders to handle the different social factors of youth mental health.

The social landscape of youth mental health

According to most of the adult leaders, the broader social landscape of youth mental health was dominated by social factors, such as stress and achievement pressure, that affected the mental health of young people in a negative way. They witnessed how youth in their organizations were stressed and expressed feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, frustration, and despair in relation to educational achievements and future careers. These findings mirror prior Swedish studies on mental health, school-related pressure and responsibility-taking, especially among girls (Landstedt and Gådin, 2012; Wiklund et al., 2012). As a part of this, achievement pressure could result in youth being unable to participate in leisure activities and thereby missing out on the possibly positive mental health implications of

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Table 1: Example of the coding framework

| Initial codes                  | Sub themes                                      | Themes                                      |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Result-oriented activities     | Deciding what kind of organization you want     | Organizational structures developed by adult leaders |
| Leaders’ ambitions             | Winning or having fun?                         |                                             |
| Obstacles excluding teens      | Building an inclusive and equal space          |                                             |
| Who gets involved?             | Strategies to include teens with special needs |                                             |
| Integrating newly arrived youths |                                               |                                             |
civic engagement (Haraldsson et al., 2010). Karin, a leader within a faith-based organization shared her experiences:

One girl really wanted to be a youth leader but felt ‘No, I can’t because I have to really engage in school’ […] I feel it’s just wrong if you aren’t allowed to have any leisure time at all and actually do something you enjoy because school takes up all of your time […]

The account of adult leaders also reflected the complexity of civic engagement in relation to performance pressure and mental health (Låftman et al., 2013; Griffiths and Armour, 2014). This was highlighted by Karl, a sports coach:

They are really struggling with their private lives, with families and boyfriends … the demands from school … and on top of that, they have additional demands from their sports.

As noted, pressure to perform and compete within organized participation can increase the level of stress and achievement pressure among young people. We argue that these experiences should be understood in relation to current discourses of self-discipline, time management, and individual responsibility for personal success (Heywood, 2007; Woodman and Wyn, 2015; West, 2017). Given that the social landscape of youth mental health was described as dominated by performance pressure, the role of civic engagement as potentially mental health-promoting spaces is complex and challenging. This will be further outlined in the following themes.

The organizational structures developed by adult leaders
The second theme depicts the structure of the house, representing the organizing structures that adult leaders created for young people’s civic engagement.

Deciding what kind of organization you want Some of the participants emphasized the importance of building positive environments for youth, and, in order to create supportive routines, they relied on written materials such as codes of conduct and policies concerning core values, as expressed by Mats, the head of a youth centre:

We draw on basic principles and values. If we see something, we protest; we don’t accept offensive language and cursing […] we have to be clear on what the rules are.

Previous research has also found that a common set of policies, value-based principles and concrete guidelines support adult leaders in their daily
work with civically engaged youth (Hertting and Kostenius, 2016). Other aspects of deciding what organization they want that are not necessarily covered by policies and guidelines include the balancing act of running an organization without putting too much pressure on the young members. Different opinions were voiced by the participants. Karl explained the dilemma:

The real breaking point for many sports clubs is do we play to win or to do something together and have fun?

As a way of avoiding the possible negative mental health consequences stemming from the activities being centred on competition (Griffiths and Armour, 2014; Hertting and Kostenius, 2016), some participants expressed a goal of promoting playfulness and joy. They voiced the need for an alternative to result-oriented activities, which they saw as governing much of young people’s lives. Others had a different strategy where achievement and performance were viewed as positive and central for youths’ development:

I am that old woman who criticises them ... some are offended in the beginning ... but you know what? If I would just say, ‘Wow, you are so good’ and ‘You’re the best’, what happens? You stop trying. (Caroline, leader for a cultural association).

To engage youth as collaborators and partners was also essential in adult leaders’ strategies when structuring their organization. By inviting and encouraging young people to engage in the decision-making concerning daily activities and organizational structures, the adult leaders wished to involve youth in establishing a democratic connection between the organization and its members. Mats described how his organization depended on young people’s own initiatives and engagement:

It builds on them being their own driving force when it comes to leisure activities.

This empowering process in which youth have authentic opportunities to influence decision-making is a key component in positive youth-adult partnerships as well as in community development, and it has the capacity to allow individuals to participate purposively through collective actions in creating, articulating, and maintaining efforts to support or change social structures (Christens and Dolan, 2011; Zeldin et al., 2014; Body and Hogg, 2018). From a democratic perspective, this challenge dominates societal narratives regarding the ability of youth to participate in important decision-making, and youth involved in organizing learn strategies for collaboratively harnessing their collective social power to challenge powerful people and institutions to make community-level change (Christens and Dolan, 2011; Zeldin et al., 2014). An interesting finding related to this was that
the participants struggled in keeping youth motivated and interested in decision-making processes. One reason for this might be the added levels of stress and achievement pressure these kinds of responsibilities can result in for young people (Coakley, 2011).

Creating belonging

Trying to make the young members feel like they were part of something bigger was another organizational strategy developed by adult leaders in a bid to counter increased levels of stress and pressure on young people. Central to this process was the opportunity for youth to have fun together and to have a chance to ‘just be’:

> Our organisation is like this free zone where you don’t need to think about everything out there because in here we have this sense of community together. (Karl).

Feeling that you belong to a certain space is a fundamental component in creating a sense of community—and for psychosocial benefits for young people—where trusted adult leaders have an important role in providing such a supportive climate (Yerbury, 2012; Sieving et al., 2017). The leaders also emphasized that everyone needs to feel equally important. By collaborating with others, youth can create something collectively and feel confident in taking on new roles and responsibilities. However, as described by the participants in Yerbury’s study (2012), this requires hard and active work where communication is central to creating a respectful environment, something that was also voiced by Monica, a leader of a cultural organization:

> Often the leaders see the same problems in their groups [...] it’s about making young people work together, to build a sense of unity in the group so that everybody feels that they can develop at their own speed and that they feel they are part of something.

The importance of youth leadership has been connected to a sense of community and belongingness with positive implications for youth well-being, where older youth often take pride in passing on their skills to younger peers (Hastings et al., 2011). This was exemplified by Daniella, a leader from an equestrian club:

> I mean, they grow [...] they look out for the younger ones in a really nice way, and therefore I think it’s important to allow them to take on some responsibility [...] and having us adults on the periphery to help out if something comes up.

The benefits of caring for younger ones through support and mentorship was seen by some of the participants as a way of creating belongingness
within the organization, thus pointing to the importance of fostering youth leadership.

Building an inclusive and equal space  An important task for the adult leaders was to create equal opportunities for young people to participate. Similar to the discussion by Buzinde et al. (2018), which highlights how positive youth development must be grounded in a commitment to enable all young people to thrive through inclusiveness, the participants in our study brought up challenges such as membership fees, costs for equipment, activities, and travelling which made it difficult for young people from low-income families to participate. Helene, the chairperson of a sports club described how the taboo of having financial problems or constraints resulted in parents using other explanations for why their child was absent from certain activities:

You might hear things like, ‘He can’t participate because we are out of town’ . . . because no one wants to say, ‘Well, he can’t participate because we don’t have the money’ . . . so money does play an important role.

Concerns regarding the commercialization of Swedish civil society and the excluding mechanisms it has for young people especially have been raised (Norberg and Redelius, 2012). The adult leaders had different strategies for dealing with these economic challenges. Some strove to reduce membership fees or offered activities free of charge, whilst others provided equipment that members could borrow.

Green and Singleton (2006) argue that spaces of leisure are always gendered, sexualized, classed, and racialized, and that ease of access and movement through these spaces for different groups is embedded in relations of power. Apart from class, the participants also recognized inequalities based on gender and ethnicity in relation to youth civic engagement and access to third spaces. Several of the adult leaders problematized the absence of minority girls in their organizations:

The girls [with a minority background] had to quit [doing sports], even though they really enjoyed it and were really good at it . . . because their parents needed them to babysit their younger siblings . . . because that’s how it is where they come from . . . so then they become excluded . . . it doesn’t matter what you do as an organization because that’s how it is . . . and it’s really sad that they can’t choose themselves (Helene).

Similar to Tebelius (2007), the adult leaders perceived the absence of minority girls as an individual problem based on cultural differences rather than scrutinizing possible exclusionary and discriminatory practices within the structures of their organization.
Another aspect of building an inclusive and equal space includes the challenges of living and being civically engaged in a sparsely populated area of rural northern Sweden with few options for leisure activities for teens. Caroline explained:

You have to be into fishing or snowmobiles … that’s it! Or hunting or something like that … there is nothing else!

Online communities and social media constitute possible responses to this as young people find themselves with little access to public spaces ‘in real life’ (Harris et al., 2010). Jamila, from a gaming organization expressed how online communities are important for teenagers who engage in activities outside the perceived traditional civic organizations:

I think it can be difficult to have the courage needed to break existing norms … there is a huge focus on traditional sports … I mean, you can be questioned [for doing something different].

As illustrated, even if the structure of the ‘house’ is somehow stable, it is under constant maintenance and reconstruction as a result of the continuous decisions, roles and negotiations the adult leaders engage in together with the young members of the organization (Ramey and Rose-Krasnor, 2015; Morgan and Bush, 2016).

Adult leaders’ strategies for addressing the social factors of youth mental health

The third theme illustrates the different strategies adult leaders developed on an individual level in order to handle social factors of mental health among young people.

Creating a bond of trust

A crucial component in supporting youth in the best possible way was to establish a bond of trust between youth and adult leaders; this has previously been identified as potentially reducing stress among young people (Haraldsson et al., 2010; Griffith and Larson, 2016). The participants wanted to make sure that they show that they care and that the young people within the organization had someone to turn to, especially youth with few trusted adults around them and those from troubled homes. For Caroline, this was as important as leading the actual activities within the organization:

My girls say … ‘It’s so nice to talk to you and I know you won’t call my mother’.

The adult leaders also stressed the importance of looking out for youth in other situations, outside the organization. This included, for example, taking on parental responsibilities:
There have been so many times during these years where I have biked to get teens from different parties ... when their parents can’t manage. (Caroline).

In contrast to those who described how their responsibilities stretched far beyond their obligations, others acknowledged how they lacked the capacity to act as social workers or psychologists for youths, as illustrated by Monica:

> I’m here as a cultural leader, you know. I’m not paid enough to also be a psychologist and to deal with these kinds of issues; it’s not my responsibility.

This reflects previous findings of how the many roles and tasks for adult leaders can be daunting and stressful (Tebelius, 2007; Hertting and Kostennius, 2016) and possibly impact their capacity to develop third spaces as mental health promoting spaces.

Finally, a sense of social trust between youth and non-related adults has the potential to make young people feel agentic and valued (Jones and Deutsch, 2011). Having a trusted adult to talk to can greatly impact youth decisions to become civically engaged and take part in the community development process through the emergence of agency and resilience along with the wider community (Brennan, 2008; Brennan et al., 2009). This links to our second subtheme constructed from the analysis that emphasizing the importance of believing in youth as an adult leader within civic organizations.

**Believing in youth** Being positive and encouraging as an adult leader leads to a number of positive psychosocial consequences for young people in other contexts beyond their civic engagement (Zeldin et al., 2013; Sieving et al., 2017). This was reflected in the quote by Caroline, where she also emphasized the value of hard work:

> I teach my kids that anything is possible ... but you have to work for it. If they want to go to New York—fine! But then, we have to find a way to earn the money and make a plan on what we are going to do there ... and it works!

Adults can guide youth through the process of learning the skills necessary to become active and equal participants in community-building activities, simultaneously challenging ageistic norms and societal narratives regarding young people’s ability to participate (Brennan et al., 2009; Zeldin et al., 2014). Participants emphasized the importance of foremost telling youth that they are proud of them regardless of their achievements. This has been highlighted in other studies as an important role for adult leaders.
in after-school settings (Griffith and Larson, 2016) and was perceived by the participants as a strategy in handling social factors of youth mental health:

You have to help them and tell them how precious they are even if they don’t get the highest grades. (Karin).

Further, adult leaders saw important opportunities to boost young people’s confidence and to encourage them, especially in situations of setbacks and disappointments:

We can’t change the situation . . . you know, with friends and peers, about the Internet and the demands on how to look and behave . . . the only thing we can do is to make them believe in themselves. (Caroline).

**Concluding remarks**

Through the metaphor of a house and its surrounding landscape, this study sheds important light on adult leaders’ perspectives on handling social factors of youth mental health within civic engagement. The social landscape influences the house, its activities, and organizational structures, which in turn shape the adults’ strategies to handle this landscape. One of the ‘good things’ we found in the ‘black box’ of youth civic engagement was the relational space between adults and youth, which holds great potential for mental health promotion and for community practitioners to support young people’s development. In these third spaces, ties to others can provide youth with connectedness, support, and networks leading to an identification of their role in the community (Brennan et al., 2009).

The adult leaders believe that the Swedish education system with its expectations of success and social responsibilities is putting a great deal of pressure on young people and that this is contributing negatively to their mental health. This reflects the discourse prevalent in contemporary Western societies where individuals are expected to be flexible, self-disciplining, and self-inventing and to compete in an increasingly globalized and uncertain labour market (Låftman et al., 2013; Woodman and Leccardi, 2015; Landstedt and Coffey, 2017). Civic organizations have the potential to bridge multiple worlds of youth, creating a safe space, generally more accepting and supportive (Noam and Tillinger, 2004; Harris et al., 2010). However, different types of third spaces may have various things to offer in relation to working with young people and addressing mental health factors. As seen in our study, the adult leaders find themselves addressing the psychosocial needs of young members regardless of whether they feel prepared to do so or not. Thus, for community development practitioners, the perspectives, experiences, and strategies of the adult leaders allow
for a better understanding of how social factors of youth mental health are dealt with in civic organizations that do not explicitly aim to address such factors.

Moreover, children and young people from economically vulnerable groups, such as single parents, foreign-born parents, and blue-collar households, have less access to leisure spaces and organized activities (Lindström and Öqvist, 2013), which also was problematized by the adult leaders. Rather than reflecting on the organizational structures, however, the participants discussed this matter as an individual’s problem, especially with respect to girls from a minority background. We argue that there is a strong need for an intersectional understanding of barriers to participating in leisure activities or being civically engaged, with a focus on discriminatory and excluding mechanisms within youth civic organizations (see also Watson and Scraton, 2013). Further research is also needed concerning how such exclusionary practices impact stress and mental health challenges for minority youth.

The adult leaders strove to involve young people in decision-making processes and as mentors since this was perceived as something positive for youth development in addition to democratizing the organization. This strategy has the potential to empower youth to the extent that they are able, and allowed, to make contributions to the community and be seen by others as resources (Brennan et al., 2009). But equally important was the opportunity for youth to ‘just be’ and to enjoy themselves without feeling pressured to perform. Otherwise, being civically engaged might simply add to the multiple simultaneous stressors young people face (Dworkin and Larson, 2006; Sharp et al., 2014). At the same time, and in line with previous research (Body and Hogg, 2018), pushing and providing critique were also highlighted by some of the participants as important strategies to keep youth motivated, prepare them for challenges, and help them deal with obstacles. This requires a trusting relationship between youths and adults as pointed out by Walker (2011).

A strength of this study was the diversity of civic organizations represented. However, one might assume that the adult leaders who agreed to participate all had some level of personal interest or had previously reflected upon questions regarding youth mental health and civic engagement. A different sampling technique would possibly have resulted in other views, experiences, and strategies being brought to the table.

To conclude, our findings highlight the tensions between the different strategies implemented by adult leaders in their approach to youth participation, and in achieving their goals and intentions with the organization. As seen, civic engagement has the potential for balancing some of the negative impacts from other areas in young people’s lives. By advocating organi-
zational structures founded on belongingness, inclusion, and equality, the adult leaders provide support through trust and by believing in youth. On the other hand, critics argue that the concept of positive youth development within civic organizations is grounded in assumptions about the need for increased individual responsibility in constructing oneself (Coakley, 2011; Wyn et al., 2015), which can add to feelings of stress and achievement pressure for young people. Mirroring this complexity, this study concurs with Sharp et al. (2014) in stating that caution should be taken before practitioners of community development and others assume that more organized activities are always better for all young people. Rather, quality of participation and relationships, together with access based on equality and inclusiveness, and possible negative experiences from being civically engaged need to be further investigated. Above all, we need to understand the social processes within the context of youth civic engagement from the perspectives and experiences of young people themselves and how civic engagement can influence social factors of youth mental health such as stress and achievement pressure.

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