

POWER IN YOUTH-LED PHILANTHROPY

Jocelyn Broitman

Introduction

The Chicago-based Mikva Challenge Foundation has long believed that young people have the ability to challenge entrenched power structures and thereby exert political influence. I worked at Mikva for four years before returning to graduate school and saw firsthand how it generated programs that would help youth analyze and engage political power. Its core curriculum focuses on having youth identify issues they care about and then advocate for those issues by appealing to the decision-makers who influence and shape public policy. To successfully appeal to decision-makers with power, Mikva has found that young people first need to develop the skills to analyze power in decision-making structures.

In 2016, Mikva set out to create a youth-led philanthropy council. This council would help fund and guide youth-led action projects across the city. In the philanthropy council, the participating youth themselves became the decision-makers with power. The focus of this article is the dissonance between the identity, values, and roles of youth who had been trained by Mikva to challenge power and their role as council members with the power to determine, fund, and guide projects.

This article begins by looking closely at Mikva Challenge and how it helped develop the identity of its “youth activists.” It then describes a moment of conflict experienced by the council members. Then I discuss my intervention to resolve this conflict, describing the theoretical framework used, the intervention itself, and the council’s reactions to it. Finally, the article examines the promise of youth-led philanthropy and the challenges of power that come with it.

MIKVA CHALLENGE

The Mikva Challenge Foundation is a non-profit whose mission is to make Chicago’s young people “informed, empowered, active citizens and community leaders.” To help bring Chicago youth into the

policy arena, Mikva develops programs around what it calls “action civics.” Action civics is based in large part on the harnessing of youth expertise—the knowledge that youth possess regarding the problems they encounter in their daily lives. Through training in action civics, the youth who pass through Mikva’s program learn how to effectively present their expertise and exert pressure on decision-makers. Mikva’s core curriculum teaches participants a six-step process for leveraging their expertise effectively. This six-step process starts with what youth know and builds that knowledge into action through examining community, identifying issues, conducting research, analyzing power, developing strategies, and taking action (Mikva Challenge, 2016).

Mikva created six Citywide Youth Councils (CYCs) to work with different government bodies (e.g., City Hall, the Department of Health, Chicago Housing Authority) in an “advisory” role. The young people on these councils employ the six-step process on an issue and present policy recommendations to decision-makers. Typically, decision-makers select one or two policy recommendations and then work with the group to implement them. Past recommendations that have reached the stage of implementation are a pilot program for free CTA cards for Chicago Public School students and a citywide campaign on condom use designed by young people (Mikva Challenge, 2016).

The success of Mikva’s CYCs can be seen as having achieved these “wins” through using “insider tactics,” which is defined as actions “carried out with policymakers directly [that] include activities such as lobbying, providing testimony, and sitting on policy committees” (Mosely 2013, p. 232). Although formal lobbying isn’t a regular activity Mikva engages in, one can see the logic behind “insider tactics” at work in the ways CYCs engage powerful decision-makers through building reciprocal relationships. Thus their “wins” are practical, in that they achieve real gains for young people, but are also symbolic, in that they create legitimacy for youth voice in the policymaking process more generally.

In an effort to harness both a larger and broader set of youth expertise with which to influence high-level decision-makers, Mikva created the Youth Voice Infrastructure (YVI) in 2015. YVI represented a program expansion, as well as a new way to frame the work Mikva was already doing. It established a network of active young people across the city that in partnership with city leaders would address the city’s most pressing problems. The plan to implement YVI involved coordination with Mikva’s CYCs and school-based student voice committees to engage the larger population of marginalized youth

and bring their knowledge and expertise to city decision-makers (see Appendix A) (Mikva Challenge, 2015).

To build the YVI, Mikva proposed a multi-step process that began with the recruitment of youth action teams at schools across the city. These youth action teams were brought together for the Youth Action Congress in February 2016. At the event, CYC members trained them in “youth activism” strategies. Participants also developed plans for their own community action projects and met one-on-one with community decision-makers. The next step in the process was for these youth action teams to apply for funding to implement their community action projects. To manage this step of the process, Mikva created a student led philanthropy council called the Youth Action Council (YAC), which was responsible for reviewing the action plans and making decisions about what funding they would receive to implement their project. All members of the YAC were recruited from other Mikva programs. The majority of the YAC came from the CYCs (B. Aguayo, personal communication, March 3, 2016).

YOUTH-LED PHILANTHROPY IN CHICAGO

In their discussion of community practice models, Boehm and Cnann (2012) differentiate between organizing from a geographic community and a community of interest. They define communities of interest as those that come together around shared identities or interests as opposed to geographic location. Mikva, which draws young people from across Chicago’s deeply segregated—racial, cultural, and socioeconomic—lines, creates a shared identity of “young people in Chicago” for their participants to organize around. This identity is defined by being systematically disempowered and left out of decision-making structures (e.g., schools and local government) that deeply impact their lives. When the youth utilize this identity in their organizing, they can better advocate for the inclusion of *youth voice* within existing power structures.

In the view of Boehm and Cnann (2012), successful community practice depends in large part on having a space for discourse. Regular Mikva events, like this Youth Action Congress, provide such a space. This particular event drew together 400 youth and decision-makers from across Chicago (Mikva Challenge, 2016). At events like these, young people who might never have crossed paths discuss issues they see in their communities and use their shared expertise to come up with possible solutions. While the differences between communities are not ignored, the shared identity of the “active” young people is

emphasized in everything from the signage at events to the group chants like “youth voice rocks!”

At a similar event I ran for the organization, many participant evaluations emphasized that one of the best parts was realizing they weren’t the only young people who cared about community issues. The sense of shared values and interests fostered at these events allows young people to feel connected to a larger youth activist community in Chicago and integrate that positive connection into their own identities.

In theory, using youth-led philanthropy and youth expertise to fund other youth expertise is the epitome of Mikva’s mission. The thought was that the YAC would use their Mikva training to make decisions about allocating resources, and that the young people they funded would utilize those resources to implement solutions they thought would best address the needs of their communities. In practice, however, the YAC ran into some unexpected challenges. Their facilitator, also a former Mikva student, listened to the YAC make disparaging comments about the action plans submitted by the youth action teams and told me in frustration that the students on the YAC were “acting like city hall.” For example, when an action team proposed a project of bathroom beautification, the YAC dismissed the issue as “too small.” That complaint from the YAC was repeated often. Instead of trusting the expertise of the youth action teams, the YAC was rejecting proposals that did not fit their sense of what action projects “should” look like.

In order to understand this, we can turn to Mizrahi’s (2002) critique of community practice. Mizrahi explains why the members of the YAC might have shifted away from their previous activist identity. As Mizrahi (2002) states, “values, power, and resources inform the way you and your constituency define the problem and select the solutions” (p. 518). Because members of the YAC were accustomed to making recommendations to powerful decision-makers like the mayor and the CEO of Chicago Public Schools, they had come to hold a view of community problems as defined by a certain kind of policy implementation. The youth action teams, however, were based in school communities and focused only on problems and solutions that they encountered in their day-to-day lives. When their respective views about what constituted a proper problem to be addressed didn’t align, the YAC used the power they had to reject the proposals of the youth action teams.

REFLECTING ON POWER

I asked the YAC facilitator if I could come into one of the sessions to do a workshop that might address this shift in power, and he agreed. For the session, I drew on the anti-oppressive practice modality outlined in Tew's (2006) *Understanding Power and Powerlessness: Towards a Framework for Emancipatory Practice in Social Work*. Tew suggests that power should be seen as a social relation that plays out through systems, relationships, personal identities and the interactions between them. To capture the complexity of this understanding of power, Tew lays out a "matrix of power relations" (see Appendix C). Across the vertical axis are the categories of "power over" and "power together" and across the horizontal axis are "productive modes of power" and "limiting modes of power." The categories that emerge in the resulting matrix each represent a way that Tew believes power has the potential to operate.

The workshop session that followed was meant to provide a space for the members of the YAC to come together and reflect on their power, their relationship to it, and how they were using it in their current role (see Appendix B). When we created a shared definition of power, the YAC included money, but it also included relational aspects of power, like social networks and reputation. By highlighting this complexity about power, they conformed to Tew's definition.

YAC members were then asked to think of a time when they did not have power. As Tew (2006) recognizes, people's relationship to modes of power may shift over time and that "People may be involved in more than one mode of power relations at the same time" (p. 40). It is important to recognize that while the individual members of the YAC were in a position of relative power in this group, many of them also inhabited marginalized identities through which they experienced oppressive power on a daily basis. One young person talked about the negative reactions people had when she would tell them she was a teen mother and how, in turn, she took power back by emphasizing that she is meeting her educational and financial responsibilities. A young man shared a story of trying to plan a conversation between youth and police in his community and how, on the day of the event, the adults providing the event space told him it "wasn't a good idea" and called it off. A young woman said she felt powerless when having to choose a gendered bathroom when neither felt like it fit.

After sharing their experiences with each other, members of the YAC concluded that power and powerlessness could happen in relationships and in systems. They went back to revise their definition of power accordingly. After complicating the definition

of power, we turned to the matrix of power relations. I asked about other ways they had seen these uses of power play out and our conversation quickly turned to politics. One member pointed out the way Donald Trump has used collusive power to play on the fears of the white working class. There was a discussion about how local politicians have used a mix of oppressive and protective power to gentrify neighborhoods and take over schools. They all agreed that cooperative power was the ideal.

I wondered aloud what kind of power they were using as the YAC. The room got quiet. After a minute one member spoke up and observed that maybe they had been using some protective power but that perhaps cooperative power might work better. I then asked the YAC to come up with a statement of how they planned to shift their use of power from one that would be wielded against the youth action teams to one that would strive to better align the local groups and the council. Their statement included remembering what it was like to be in the grantee's position and reaching out to the action groups to better understand the motivation for their respective proposals.

For the YAC, having the space for these conversations about power was important because, as Tew (2006) reminds us, "a crucial element of emancipatory practice is to help people to develop a greater understanding of the power relations that may impact on their lives" (p. 35). Beyond personal insight, this deeper understanding of power helps avoid damaging uses of power, whether intentional or unintentional.

CONCLUSION

The YAC's struggles to maintain an empowering approach with the youth action teams demonstrated to me the critical importance of centering power in youth-led philanthropy. Hasenfeld (1992) believes that many different kinds of social service organizations are guilty of not centering power. He believes social workers often fail to acknowledge or address the ways in which power lives in their work and writes that when individuals have power to control outcomes, the choices they make reinforce "personal and professional ideologies" (p. 267). This is not often dealt with, in large part because professional values emphasize clients' rights, creating the illusion that social workers are immune to wielding power in harmful ways. The power still exists, Hasenfeld argues, and social workers should acknowledge it and then empower clients to "make choices and gain control over their environment" (p. 269).

Mikva's work with young people follows this path. A power analysis is a crucial element of their programs and gives young people the chance to critically engage their power while attending to the power within the structures they are engaging. The members of YAC held certain ideologies about how youth activism should look, many of them shaped by their own participation in Mikva programs, and they struggled to balance these as they implemented their given tasks. I believe my workshop helped bring these ideologies to light and enabled them to re-center power in their approach.

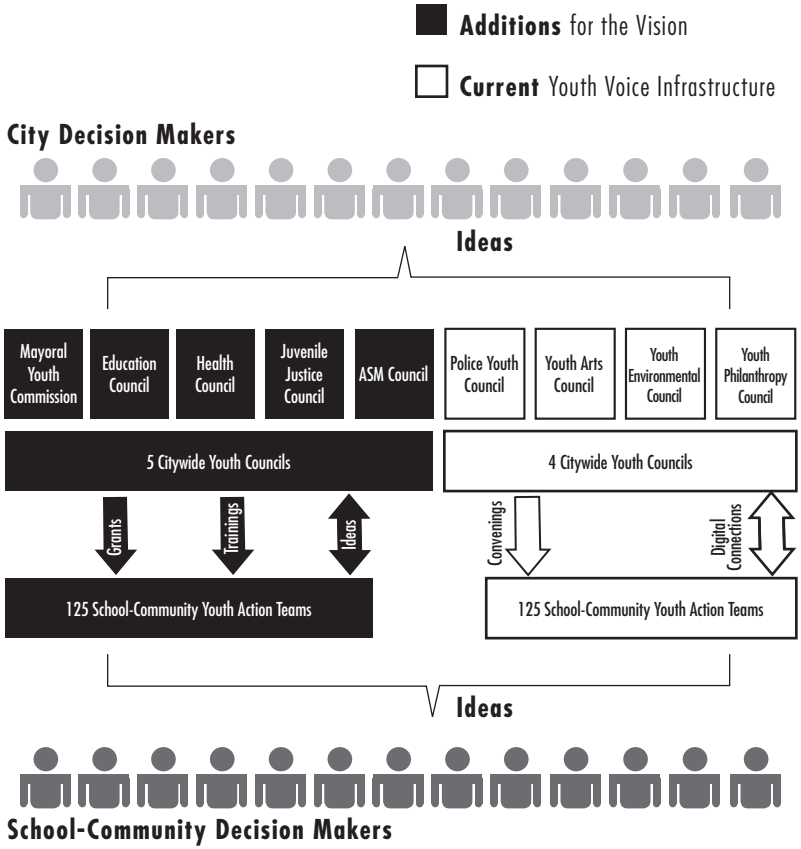
In addition to talking about power, Mikva's approach to youth empowerment includes giving youth direct access to those who have power. However, achieving this kind of access comes with the cost of creating interdependent relationships with decision-makers whose decisions may not always align with the values of the organization. Mosley (2013) notes that the recognizing these interdependent relationships creates an incentive to avoid confrontational strategies. In the case of Mikva's work, its ongoing relationships with decision-makers means that it cannot engage in outsider tactics without risking its ability to give young people a "seat at the table." While avoiding outsider tactics has worked for Mikva in the past, it is not clear if it will be successful in solving all issues young people care about. It very well might get young people in the room with powerful people to share their solutions. However, if their solutions present a serious threat to existing power structure, those solutions may be ignored. Having been on the other side of power, members of the YAC learned firsthand how such power works to reject new ideas.

Mikva Challenge's use of "insider tactics" means that they have taken a long view of achieving change. Instead of overtly disrupting current structures of power in the short term, they are attempting to change them gradually through creating a generation of empowered young people who are able to see and strategically use power. This approach is one that has widely resonated with both young people and decision-makers in Chicago. Mikva has experienced considerable growth the last few years both in Chicago and nationally.

Creating the youth philanthropy council and directly placing resources under their control certainly matches the logic and ideology of Mikva's other successful programs. However, in practice, the complexity and relational nature of power emerged in a way that threatened to derail its potential. A reflection on power and its centering might be a tool the organization needs to add to its curriculum in order to facilitate deeper conversations about forms of power emerging within and through the organization.

APPENDIX A:

**MIKVA CHALLENGE'S VISION FOR YOUTH VOICE INFRASTRUCTURE
(Mikva Challenge, 2015)**



APPENDIX B:

DETAILED AGENDA- POWER ANALYSIS 2.0

<p>Intro/Ice Breaker</p>	<p>Who I Am: Jocelyn/former Mikva staff/social work student Why I'm Here: They are in a unique position as a council (grant giving) and I wanted to create some space to talk about how that changes how they think about power. Who They Are: Go around and share, name, favorite candy, what you are most passionate about</p>	<p>5 minutes</p>
<p>Arts And Crafts To Show Power</p>	<p>Play by Play</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make three to four small groups 2. Group 1 receives the most resources, Group 2 receives just enough, Group 3 a little less, Group 4 receives barely anything. 3. Pass out the different packets and the instruction sheets to all participants and explain that the groups have 10 minutes to complete the activities. 4. The facilitator should help out the groups with more resources (group 1 and 2) while ignoring and treating group 3 unfairly. 5. The facilitator should tell Group 3 to ask group 1 and 2 to share their materials. However the facilitator should tell Group 1 and 2 NOT to share their materials. 6. After the 10 minutes are up have each group present what they have completed. <p>DEBRIEF</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which group had the most resources? 2. Which group ended up having the best results/ why? 3. How do the conditions created during this activity reflect real life situations? 4. Who might Group 1 represent, who might Group 2 represent, who might Group 3 represent? 5. Why didn't group 2 and 3 get together and share resources? 	<p>20 minutes</p>

<p>Thought Museum Power</p>	<p>Play by Play:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Round 1: Group walks around read quotes. Use post it notes to write down thoughts/ feelings they bring up. • Round 2: Stand by the quote that to you feel truest about the nature of power. In that small group (if just one student, join with another group or facilitator) and answer... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o How do you think the person who wrote/said your quote would describe what power is? o Does the person who wrote/said your quote think power is good or bad? SHARE OUT • Round 3 Debrief: Power plays out on an individual level, in relationships in positive and negative ways. It also plays out in systems, like school or government, and we as individuals are a part of that too. • Get in a new small group (of people who had a different quote and answer. . . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o What do you define power as? o What is time in your life when you have had power? What is a time in your life you have not had power? SHARE OUT 	<p>20 minutes</p>
<p>Power Chart</p>	<p>Play by Play:</p> <p>Intro: This is one way to understand power. The author of this believes 2 important things about power.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Power is not zero sum. So there is not a finite amount of power we are fighting over in the world. We have the power we are able to create. 2. That power can be both good and bad depending on how you use it. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pass out one pager with the power chart • Read out loud as a group • Can we think of one current event happening that fits in each mode of power here? <p>Big Group Discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the power in your group look like now? • Does your group have power? What kind? • How are you using it? • Where does your group fall in this chart? 	<p>15 minutes</p>

<p>Developing Group Manifesto/ Mission Statement</p>	<p>Intro: The way your group decides to use the power you have is important. It will frame how you make decisions about grants and how you are able to support those who you work with. To do this you can collaboratively create a manifesto/mission statement for your group.</p> <p><i>On Big Butcher Paper</i> As the _____ (council name) we want to see a Chicago that _____ change you want to see). We believe our work is doing this by _____ (what power do you have that you are giving). We believe that young people of Chicago _____ (what power/expertise do the young people you are working with already have).</p>	<p>15 minutes</p>
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Quotes for Thought Museum:

- Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment. Mahatma Gandhi
- With great power there must also come great responsibility! Stan Lee
- The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any. Alice Walker

APPENDIX C:

Tew’s Power Analysis Matrix

Original Version (Tew, 2006)

	Power over	Power together
Productive modes of power	Protective Power Deploying power in order to safeguard vulnerable people and their possibilities for advancement	Co-operative power Collective action, sharing, mutual support and challenge – through valuing commonality <i>and</i> difference
Limiting modes of power	Oppressive power Exploiting differences to enhance own position and resources at the expense of others	Collusive power Banding together to exclude or suppress 'otherness' whether internal or external

Revised Version Used for Workshop

	Power Over	Power Together
Productive Modes of Power	<i>Protective power – Using power over others to protect people perceived as vulnerable.</i> EXAMPLE: A parent takes away their child’s phone after they experienced cyber bullying.	<i>Co-operative power-working with others that are both similar and different than you to take a collective action.</i> EXAMPLE: Community leaders engaging residents in their community about a new company wanting to move into the neighborhood that some want and others did not.

<p>Limiting Modes of Power</p>	<p><i>Oppressive power-exploiting people's differences to enhance your own resources at the expense of others.</i></p> <p>EXAMPLE: A developer kicking residents out of their homes who have recently immigrated by having them sign a contract in a language that they are not fluent in.</p>	<p><i>Collusive power-exploiting people's similarities to enhance your own resources at the expense of others.</i></p> <p>EXAMPLE: A political leader uses race or background to appeal to a group of people his policies do not in reality benefit.</p>
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JOCELYN BROITMAN is a second-year administration student in the Community School program of study at the School of Social Service Administration. Prior to coming to SSA, Jocelyn was the Director of the Issues to Action Program at Mikva Challenge, a non-profit organization that engages young people in civic and political life. Jocelyn is currently placed at Umoja Student Development Corporation where she supports the Restorative Justice Programming at Sullivan High School in Rogers Park. Jocelyn holds a B.A. from the University of Illinois.