

Things We Never Considered: Perspectives of Middle School Students Living with Food
Insecurity

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Introduction

“So when the weather’s bad or the ground is wet, Dad can’t work. So he can’t work, so we don’t have money, so we don’t have food in the house”, a middle school casually explained to the focus group. Food security is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (USDA ERS, 2015). More than 48 million people in the U.S. (14% of the population) experienced food insecurity in 2015 (USDA ERS, 2015). Missouri’s increase in citizens living with very low food security between 2012-and 2014 is the highest in the country (Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security, 2016).

Childhood food insecurity is a risk factor for negatively affecting a child’s mental well-being (Slopen, 2010). Food-insufficient teenagers were almost twice as likely to have seen a psychologist, have been suspended from school, and have difficulty getting along with others. (Alaimo, Olson and Frongillo, 2001). Additionally, food insecurity is associated with an increase of mood, anxiety, behavior and substance disorders (McLaughlin, Green, Alegria, Costello, Gruber, Sampson, Kessler, 2012). Food insecurity should be acknowledged and understood insofar as possible so that we can recognize and address issues that may accompany the phenomenon in both formal and non-formal educational settings.

Methods and Interpretive Framework

This study’s phenomenological framework assumed that the rural youth were the “experts” in their own experience of living with food insecurity. Phenomenological inquiry holds the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience (Patton, 2002). The aim of this method was not to find the singular essence of food insecurity, but rather, describe it in a way that captures the variation and diversity of the phenomenon (Walker, 1998), particularly through the lenses of the youth as they described their lived experiences. This research addressed the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda Priority 7.1-What methods, models, and programs are effective in preparing people to solve complex, interdisciplinary problems? (Roberts, Herder, & Brashears, 2016).

This study was conducted at three feeding sites that also focused on enrichment programs for middle school students. First, the researcher toured the communities and program sites found in Missouri, journaled, and reflected on observations. Next, consenting youth at each location participated in semi-structured focus group interviews along with 3-6 other students from their program. The researcher developed open ended questions using recommendations from John W. Creswell. During the interviews, the researcher paraphrased students’ comments and asked follow up questions. The 30-45 minute focus group interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, hand coded, and examined for significant statements that provided an understanding of how the youth perceive food insecurity. Meaningful statements were highlighted, and clusters of meaning developed as these significant statements emerged, were categorized, and transformed into themes. To assist in coding, the researcher kept in mind a general list of questions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) and considered her own assumptions, positionality and tensions within her values, attitude, and belief systems (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). This coding process allowed the researcher to show the richness and complexity of middle school students’ lived experiences with food insecurity.

The researcher also gave students the opportunity to draw or write about what they thought an “ideal” assistance program would look like. Additionally, students were given disposable cameras at the conclusion of the focus group interviews to photograph images that represent food insecurity to them. Students were invited to take these cameras home for a week in order to complete this task. These artifacts were also considered when establishing themes. In order to ensure accuracy, the researcher interviewed the program director by phone following the completion of the youth focus group interviews. The researcher allowed for triangulation by incorporating observations, youth focus group interviews, program director interviews, art/writing samples and photographs into the project.

Findings

Three essential themes emerged as outlined below from the youth perspectives on food insecurity. For the sake of brevity richer descriptions and quotes have been withheld.

Presence of social isolation

- feel out of place around other people when they don't have food at home
- express frustration and a sense of hopelessness
- may serve as caregivers to family members
- express distrust of school and community
- may have transient families

Importance of practical skills

- many parents employed in “hands on” work; cooking, construction, cleaning, mechanics
- youth entrepreneurial endeavors that may depend on community resources
- employment opportunities in rural areas may be limited

Desire to serve the community

- believe those who accept help should give back in return
- express empathy for those in difficult circumstances
- recognize and respect community mentors who hold them accountable

Conclusions

Findings from this study offer educators a deeper understanding of youth living with food insecurity and can be applied to our interactions with young people who face this phenomenon. By understanding their perspective, we gain insight on how to design and improve programs to best meet the needs of rural young people who face food insecurity. This study highlights the importance of efforts to develop and strengthen programs that facilitate social connections, teach youth practical life skills, and provide them with avenues to actively participate in service and leadership roles in their communities.

Recommendations

More research is needed in the area of school and community based support systems for rural youth facing food insecurity. Possible research questions to investigate include: *What barriers keep youth living with food insecurity from participating in programs that could provide them with skills and knowledge to better their lives? How can these barriers be addressed in ways that help young people keep their dignity?* We should also investigate ways young people can be included as partners in searching for solutions to help those facing the complex, interdisciplinary problem of food insecurity.

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