

Addressing Food Systems Issues Through Youth Engagement: An Ohio Case Study

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Introduction & Need for Research

Food is a necessity, but accessing sufficient, healthy food is a growing global issue. Food systems are considered a social-ecological system comprised of food production, processing, packaging, distribution, retail, and consumption (Berkes et al., 2003; Ericksen, 2008). Issues relating to this system include the governance and economics of food production, food waste, sustainability, and the impact of food on health (University of Oxford, n.d.). Engaging youth to become problem-solving producers, entrepreneurs, change agents, and leaders is considered critical for bringing forth transformative changes to food systems (Kwan, 2014; USDA, 2018; Yeboah, 2018). Food systems issues are inherently interdisciplinary. Education, policy, transportation, agriculture, and health all play a role in understanding and solving challenges. Community-based organizations can offer programming to educate and engage youth on food system issues. However, there is a dearth of literature on how such programs are doing so.

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

Researchers utilized two theoretical lenses for this qualitative, collective case study. The use of theoretical lenses allowed us to contextualize the youth experience through positive youth development (PYD) approaches and youth empowerment while allowing for data emergence.

Methods

We used a collective case design (Stake, 1994) that employed purposive sampling with the bounded system of out-of-school time PYD programs within Ohio. Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews between researchers and program leaders and field notes. Data were analyzed using a three-stage coding process (Stake, 1994). Researchers triangulated data sources and used thick, rich descriptions, audit trails, peer reviews, member checks, negative case analysis, and researcher positionality to uphold trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results/Findings

Theme 1: Serving Youth in Communities of Need & Meeting Basic Needs

Many program participants live in communities of need and lack food security in both urban and rural settings. One program leader said, "One hundred percent of students within that school district are economically disadvantaged." Program leaders are aware of the basic needs that youth lack at home and do their best to provide resources to meet those needs. Program leaders try to provide healthy snack options during their programs in addition to connecting families to outside resources to receive food assistance when needed.

Theme 2: Engaging Families to Address Lack of Social Capital

Several program leaders discussed the challenge of assisting youth who are a part of a system with various influences. Instead of just focusing on youth behaviors and resources, many programs also include families in educational activities and connect them to resources. Building the connection between the program and the family allowed program leaders to identify individual needs, which allowed them to further develop their programs to meet those needs.

Theme 3: Upholding PYD Principles and Practices

Program leaders spoke of youth as assets and how they were valuable members of their community. Some of the approaches used to support youth development included age-specific programming, maintaining appropriate youth to adult ratio, creating a safe place for youth to feel engaged and welcomed, building trust between youth and adult leaders, and assisting youth to develop positive and meaningful relationships with adult leaders and other youth in the program.

Theme 4: Youth as Actors in Food System Issues

Most program leaders believed the youth to be capable of engaging in food system issues within their communities. Youth were encouraged to understand food system issues and see themselves as actors in addressing them. Some of these projects included raised garden beds, community gardens, and cooking classes. Through these experiences, youth learned about food production, how they could produce food in the future, and proper methods to prepare healthy foods.

Theme 5: Philosophical Differences Among Program Leaders

Some program leaders believed that youth of certain ages were not mature enough to discuss food insecurity and food systems issues. This was not a common theme among all program leaders, but we identified this as a significant distinction between specific programs when brought up. These philosophical differences ultimately determined the organizations' route to engage youth in their communities. Whether the youth become engaged in these topic areas or not, these organizations uphold their PYD principles.

Theme 6: Youth Empowerment Not Viewed as a Primary Focus

Adult leaders did not directly identify youth empowerment as a program focus. However, based on the programming being conducted, youth empowerment could be a potential output of the organizations' processes. All leaders described how they motivated their participants to be engaged in their programs and take the lead. However, many of these professionals were unaware of youth empowerment frameworks that could be utilized to build programming.

Conclusions

Through this collective case, it emerged that leaders view youth as assets with the potential to become engaged in food system issues (Holden et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2005), recognized their part in meeting the basic needs of youth participants while acknowledging youth voice, and developing their skills to become change agents in food system issues (Kim et al., 1998).

Implications & Recommendations

Program leaders and researchers can utilize the emerging themes from this study to help guide their future work. Recognizing that programs must be aware of PYD principles and practices to help meet the basic needs of youth participants is critical for their potential engagement in addressing complex issues.

We recommend that program leaders further investigate youth empowerment frameworks and leverage those to engage youth in food systems issues. Additionally, innovative programming should include families and address social capital issues. Future research should continue to investigate successful PYD programming mechanisms that engage and empower youth to act on food systems issues within their communities. In addition to investigating how adult program leaders view youth as problem solvers, volunteers, and change-makers.

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