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Empowering teens through food justice: An exploration of youth development programs

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Abstract

Youth food justice programs hire teenagers to engage in food justice projects in their neighborhoods. These community-oriented programs encourage youth to discover and develop their natural strengths by farming, taking advantage of leadership opportunities, and working on relationship-building. This exploratory research compares the development outcomes of five youth food justice programs in the Northeastern U.S. through data collected from interviews with youth and adult staff. Four main themes emerged: food justice, community building, providing a safe space, and personal development. Results suggest that program participation supported youth feeling greater connection to their food system, their communities, and themselves. Participants reported gains in systems thinking, a deeper sense of community, positive relationships with adult mentors and peers, and feelings of self-efficacy. Youth food justice programs are crucial tools for building resilient food systems, community well-being, and youth empowerment.

Keywords

youth empowerment, food justice, positive youth development, community development, resiliency

Introduction

Research has shown that connecting youth to community, meaningful relationships, activities of authentic care, and positive roles can help them develop and discover their natural talents, attributes, assets, and social skills (Butts et al., 2010; Catalano et al., 2004; Delia & Krasny, 2018). Provided with the right environment, adolescents can

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enter adulthood with a deep sense of self, strong leadership skills, and self-efficacy (Scales et al., 2001). Originating with a research project by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a strength-based and resilience-oriented model that consistent with the research on connectivity asserts that all youth have the capacity for meaningful self-discovery (Catalano et al., 2004).

Scholars argue that one of the most effective ways to use the PYD model is through meaningful employment, because work is intrinsically based in learning, contribution, and relationship building (Butts et al., 2010). Youth Food Justice (YFJ) programs hire teenage youth to do food justice work in their community, garden and farm, and cook and feed their neighbors, all while developing personal development skills. YFJ programs use the PYD framework by creating community-based spaces where youth can learn about their strengths. This paper analyzes the PYD outcomes of five different YFJ programs in the Northeastern U.S. through data collected from interviews with youth and adult staff. Overall outcomes include youth feeling stronger connection to their food systems, their broad and immediate communities, and themselves.

Food Justice and Positive Youth Development

The current global food system is a corporate food regime, which concentrates wealth and exploits land, labor, and the individual. Wealth is increasingly controlled by powerful monopolies (Howard, 2016), leaving individuals feeling disconnected and abandoned by their food systems (Clendenning, et al., 2016). Low-income communities and communities of color have been subjected to discriminatory laws and policies that make it difficult for them to own their own land, access fresh food, and work under fair labor conditions (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Advocates address these discriminatory policies with systems-based, social justice approaches. Through a lens of anti-oppression, advocates from all sectors of food systems work together to create the food justice movement (Gottlieb & Anupama, 2010). Food justice aims to fight social inequalities, racism, classism, and labor issues in the food system, with the ultimate goal that each person has the right to access healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food (Holt-Giménez and Wang, 2011; Sbicca, 2012). Food justice is radical: it addresses injustices at every step of the food system (Gottlieb and Anupama 2010). Food is ingrained in every aspect of society, making it an important tool for empowerment and anti-oppression (Sbicca, 2018).

A means for promoting empowerment as well, Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a comprehensive way of facilitating adolescent transition to adulthood (Shek et al., 2019). In the early 1970s, youth leaders and educators turned to PYD as a strength-based and resilience-oriented model that views all youth as capable of healthy development if connected to meaningful relationships, communities, and positive roles (Butts et al., 2010). The goal of PYD is to assist youth in developing and discovering their natural talents, attributes, assets, and social skills. PYD is strength-based, which means youth should never be evaluated for a *lack* of assets (Mannes et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, it has been claimed that PYD has historically lacked appreciation for the developmental differences of low-income youth and youth of color (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Other frameworks, such as Social Justice Youth Development and Positive Youth Justice, have been called on to address the complex consequences that racism and poverty have for youth (Butts et al., 2010; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Considering youth within their social contexts, and recognizing the adverse effects of oppressive systems on youth development, these frameworks can be seen under the umbrella of PYD, particularly when used in programs that "encourage youth to address the larger oppressive forces affecting them and their communities" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 87). Thus, PYD can empower youth to be active problem solvers and change agents who play active roles in their communities.

Youth Food Justice Work Programs: Past Research

While PYD programming can be done through schools, after-school programs, and community development programming, Butts et al. (2010)

argue that the most effective way of using PYD is through work programs because youth can be introduced to new roles, skills, and relationships. For youth who may not feel supported or bound for success in their school lives, home lives, or relationships, PYD programs can offer youth spaces set up intentionally for them to succeed (Sonti et al., 2016). The belief that youth have a future worth investing in can be life changing: Penniman (2017) states that "all of our young people deserve to enjoy a sense of purpose, the acquisition of real skills, and the opportunity to contribute to the betterment of the community" (p. 252).

Many U.S. programs hire teenagers into work programs to do food justice work in their communities. These programs may have youth work on farms, at farmers markets, or in community gardens. Most of these programs are doing PYD, whether recognized or not, because their programs are assisting youth in asset-building during an important stage of their adolescence; youth are at a fundamental period of forming their identities, considering their futures, taking on adult roles, and seeing themselves as powerful individuals (Allen, et al., 2008; Cochran & Ferrari, 2009). Past research on these programs has shown that youth food justice work programs are effective in creating a positive sense of self (Fifolt et al., 2018; Hughes, 2016), relationship building (Allen et al., 2008; Delia & Krasny, 2016), and community capital building[1] (Allen, et al, 2016; Gutierrez-Montes et al., 2009; Vitiello & Wolf-Powers, 2014).

For youth who feel unsuccessful at school, having a space in which they are trusted with responsibilities and can succeed will significantly increase their sense of self-worth (Hughes, 2016). Fifolt et al. (2018) found that through doing difficult farm activities, youth reported feeling more responsible. Sonti et al (2016) interviewed youth who graduated from these programs and reported that they "often [felt] proud, confident, motivated, and purposeful, and attributed these attitudes to their internship experience" (p. 283). In work programs, youth create meaningful relationships with their peers, adult staff, and adults in the community (Allen et al., 2008; Delia & Krasny, 2016; Fifolt et al., 2018). Delia and Krasny (2016) argue that leaders of these programs trust youth, set high expectations for them, and give them complex and fulfilling tasks. These caring relationships created feelings of belonging and safety for youth (Delia & Krasny, 2016). Fifolt et al. (2018) found that youth held deep trust and respect for their adult mentors, which created a sense of comfort and security in their program.

Vitiello and Wolf-Powers (2014) assert that youth work programs create community resiliency and revitalization as well. Youth work on projects that revive their neighborhoods, such as community gardens, urban farms, food access programs, and farmers markets, showing communities that youth care about their neighborhoods and that these neighborhoods are worthy of food justice; the programs: "challenge dominant narratives about distressed communities… young people are given the chance to see their community as a place of which they are proud and to which they are committed" (Sonti et al., 2016, p. 272.). This cyclical community development leads to community capital building, which can help individuals enter a "self-reinforcing cycle of increased opportunity and community well being" (Emery & Flora, 2006, p. 23), creating a process of assets that build upon assets (Gutierrez-Montes et al., 2009).

Work programs can increase youth economic capital by building skills useful in future employment, such as teamwork, leadership, reliability, and independence. Some programs include workforce development training, featuring resume building, mock interviews, or field trips to workplaces (Hughes, 2016). Providing youth with these skills not only leverages youth for future employment opportunities, but helps give them a sense of future economic security (Hughes, 2016; Vitiello & Wolf-

[1] Capital is defined as the "resources people and/or communities possess." These resources can be tangible, like money or land, or they can be intangible, like relationships or personal assets (Gutierrez-Montes et al., 2009). These resources build upon each other to create further resources, creating a cycle where the more capital one has, the more they are able to build. Community capital building is a systems approach to addressing which resources promote sustainable livelihoods through community change efforts (Gutierrez-Montes et al., 2009).

Powers, 2014). Importantly, youth are gaining economic capital by being paid for their work (Allen, et al, 2016).

Researchers have noted that these programs struggle with sustained funding: most programs are run through nonprofit organizations, which rely on charitable donations and grant money. These programs are innately insecure because this money is not guaranteed each year. Fulford and Thomas (2013) found that running the Youth for Eco-Action program cost US$100,000 per year, an amount difficult for the program to sustain. Maïga et al. (2021, p. 615) argues that the lack of robust research that clearly supports the benefits of the programs has a direct influence on policymakers' will to implement them. Past research has focused on producing case studies that demonstrate outcomes of individual programs, which may be too narrow for policymakers to extrapolate from in order to justify supportive policy. This paper adds to the research by exploring the commonalities of five programs with diverse settings, histories, and intentions. This ascertains a holistic conceptualization of youth food justice programs—a key step in encouraging policymakers to engage with these programs.

Methods

This is a comparative case study of five nonprofit organizations in the Northeastern U.S. that host youth food justice (YFJ) programs (Table 1). They hire high school-age youth from their communities to engage in farming, relationship building, personal development, and community programming. After gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board of University of Vermont, I identified cases by word of mouth, internet searches, and my knowledge of organizations engaged in this work. I recruited organizations via direct outreach by phone and email. Youth were invited by staff members at their organizations to participate in interviews. While this recruitment process may have encouraged participants who were particularly enthusiastic about discussing their experience, the nature of this study simply aims to explore the general outcomes of these programs, not to make

Table 1. Outline of Practices of Youth Food Justice (YFJ) Program

Organization/Practice	Details of Practice
Project Youth	
Food Justice Work	Farming on urban community farm; running an affordable community farmers market; food justice workshops; community outreach
Other Activities	Journaling; group bonding games; field trips; events with community partners; leading farm tours; cooking workshops; cooking demonstrations
Development Goals of Program	Self-reflection and healing; motivation; trust in oneself; teamwork; public speaking; sense of community; sense of responsibility; growing food; making connections with peers and adults
Leadership	Instilled into the program weekly: each week there are Crew Leaders who take charge
Timeframe	Summer only, 25 hours a week
Payment	Hourly
Urban Growing Corps	
Food Justice Work	Farming on urban youth farm; helping immigrant/refugee farmers on farms; working in community gardens; cooking lunch together
Other Activities	Field trips; workforce development; crafts; herbalism; self-worth sessions
Development Goals of Program	Growing food; tangible work skills; fulfilling relationships; sense of respect for those who are different; sense of responsibility; communication skills; sense of community; connection to the land/nature; self-worth
Leadership	Hires Food Systems Interns each summer as supports for youth programming
Timeframe	3 seasons: spring, fall, summer. 20 hours/week in summer, less intensive in spring and fall
Payment	Hourly

continued

Table 1 continued

Sprout	
Food Justice Work	Farming on urban community farm; bringing food shares to neighbors in public housing; cooking lunch together; cooking and delivering food to community members
Other Activities	Group challenges; group games; workshops on nutrition, food justice, and self-improvement; crafts
Development Goals of Program	Self-reflection; friendship; learning their own attributes; confidence; healthy relationship to food; caring for own well-being; mindfulness; independence; connection to peers
Leadership	Youth are given more responsibilities as they continue on in program: spring session is Youth Leadership intensive
Timeframe	3 seasons: spring, fall, and summer. 15-20 hours in summer, 6 hours in the spring and fall
Payment	Stipend
Farming Justice	
Food Justice Work	Farming on urban youth farm; food justice workshops/discussions; working at and supplying food for organization's food pantry; running affordable community farmers market
Other Activities	Civic engagement; hosting community workshops/discussions; conversations on mental health/relational health; events around culture and food; potlucks
Development Goals of Program	Intergenerational relationships; advocating for social change; communication skills; critical thinking; understanding of colonialism, capitalism, oppression; sense of community; self-worth
Leadership	Hires Junior Staff as support for youth programming and leading community events
Timeframe	Year round. 15-20 hours/week in summer, less intensive in fall, winter, spring
Payment	Hourly; Gift card for winter session
Fresh Harvest	
Food Justice Work	Farming on urban and rural farms; working at farmers markets; workshops on food justice
Other Activities	Community projects and working groups; event planning; personal development; professional development; spending time in nature
Development Goals of Program	Leadership skills; self-advocacy; social justice advocacy; dialogue about differences; connection to the land/nature; professional development skills; self-worth
Leadership	Formalized leadership program. Youth incrementally advance during their time in the program, with highest positions as Peer Leaders or a fellowship.
Timeframe	Year-round. 32 hours/week in summer, less intensive during the academic year
Payment	Hourly

Note. It is important to note that these simple overviews do not fully encompass all aspects and goals of the programs: these programs are complex, dynamic, and ever changing, based on youth input, grant funding, and general improvements each year. A few organizations noted that their programs have changed since the COVID pandemic and are currently in transition phases.

conclusions about them as a whole. Youth and staff gave their written consent, when applicable giving written assent alongside their guardian's verbal consent. Youth and staff participated in open-ended interviews about youth experience with growing food, and their thoughts on food justice, and what they got out of the program. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. All participants were paid for their participation with a US$20 gift card.

Youth participant ages ranged from 15 to 20. Youth self-identified as Hispanic, Black/African American, Black/Caribbean, White, Cape Verdean, African, and Puerto Rican. Adult staff self-identified as White/Native American, Mixed/Puerto Rican, African American/Indigenous, White/Arab, Vietnamese American, and Hispanic. All participant and organization names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Data were collected through 17 interviews with youth (11) and adult staff (6) who work with these organizations. Using NVivo, a qualitative coding software package, I placed coded data from interview transcripts into categories that emerged dur-

ing coding, then axial coded and condensed codes into broader categories. During this stage of coding, four main themes emerged. Within these main themes, seven sub-themes emerged. These themes were used as a structure to analyze data (Table 2).

Results and Discussion

This research seeks to understand with what assets, feelings, perspectives, and relationships youth leave their youth food justice (YFJ) programs. Using Positive Youth Development (PYD) as a framework, I examined how through food justice these dynamic programs gave youth opportunities for connection, relationship building, and self-discovery. Four central themes emerged: Food Justice, Community Building, Having a Safe Space, and Personal Development.

Food Justice

Systems Thinking

All YFJ programs teach food justice by combining workshops and experiential learning. Learning about food justice helped youth understand the larger systems that impact their lives, specifically systems of oppression that target low-income neighborhoods. Learning about these systems was eye-opening for youth. CJ explains how learning about food justice made her realize how her community is impacted by food injustice:

> Before I started working here I didn't really think of the food system much. When I started working with Project Youth, I realized how big of an issue food waste is, food insecurity, climate change … like those things started to stick out to me more. And I just started to develop more of a passion for advocating for these things. I didn't even know what food apartheid[1] was, and I didn't realize that if you go into Black and Brown communities, you can find like five fast food restaurants on one block. I never paid attention to that much. But now that I understand what that is, every time I pass a street with a McDonald's and a Wendy's and all that stuff, I just remember what this program is teaching me. They are doing this stuff on purpose because they know that certain communities can't afford good food. So they make easy money off of us. And that's part of the reason I've stuck around. I want to help my community with these issues.

Table 2. Outline and Description of Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Summary
Food Justice	Systems thinking	Through learning about food justice, youth gain understanding of systemic oppression in their communities and gain passion for social justice, and learn they can be change agents.
	Sense of belonging in nature	Through farming, youth gain access to the mental health benefits of nature
	Empowerment through food literacy	Through growing food and cooking, youth gain food literacy skills
Community Building	Being a part of their community	Youth learn that they care about their community and their community cares about them
Having a Safe Place	A safe place to go	Youth, particularly refugee youth and speakers of other languages, feel they have a safe place to go to
	Reliable mentors	Adult staff are people that youth can bond with, trust, and learn from
Personal Development	Self-efficacy and Leadership	Youth gain leadership skills and a sense of self-efficacy

[1] Food apartheid is a "human-created system of segregation that regulates certain groups to food opulence and prevents others from accessing life-giving nourishment" (Penniman, 2019, p. 4).

Garett expressed a feeling similar to that of CJ, that they now understand that there is a reason why their community lacks access to fresh vegetables:

> I think before this job I was ignorant on a lot of things … but then when I came here I began to be aware of the flaws in our food system, like clear examples of purposeful things in our food system that are made to keep some people down and other people up. I feel like before I came here, I didn't really think about it often. But now when I shop or when I eat, I try not to shop at gas stations and stuff. Even though they do have produce, it's not the best. So I try to shop locally or try to get vegetables at Farming Justice.

Garett adds that they have changed the way they approach food because of the knowledge they have gained about food justice. Jack was surprised to learn about issues he had never heard of before, suggesting that perhaps these issues should be taught in school: "Some people don't even know about these things. I feel like it should be more accessible so people can know more about it. It's like we're living in the dark before someone tells us! I feel like, when you have a certain knowledge, you can see like 'this is not good, they're doing it on purpose.'"

CJ, Garett, and Jack all spoke to the effect that "they are doing this on purpose." Whether youth have an idea of who "they" are does not matter: these insights show that youth are thinking about larger systems at play. While they may have learned about systems of oppression in school, seeing tangible examples can help ground these concepts in their own lives. For example, CJ saw concrete examples of systemic racism and classism manifest through food apartheid in her neighborhood. As Garett and CJ noted, having knowledge about systems of oppression enables them to have more autonomy about the decisions they make and to realize they have the ability to fight back. These examples show that learning about food justice increased youth political efficacy and desire to make social change.

Levkoe (2005) argues that food justice may be an ideal opportunity for youth to "develop the knowledge and skills necessary to actively participate in society and to have an impact on different political levels" (p. 92). Food justice can be a useful groundwork for youth to get involved in social justice causes that they care about. This was true for CJ, who discussed how learning about food justice helped her realize her deep passion for advocacy work and that she plans to pursue a path in social justice. She said of her time at Project Youth:

> [It] uplifted me, making me see my full potential. And opening up my mindsets, learning about new things that I could pursue in my future. I gained a lot of knowledge on these different issues, and how they are impacting my community around me. It helped me to realize how much I care about my community. And just how much I like helping people. If I didn't have this job … I wouldn't have found out that there's different ways I can help my community and that I would actually really enjoy doing those things.

This program helped CJ realize that she can be an active change maker in her community. This connection, from learning about social justice issues to becoming an agent of social change, reflects the PYD literature. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) argue that gaining critical consciousness is an important step in youth development. Learning about systems of oppression gives youth the opportunity to "change the social and community conditions that prevent a positive healthy process of development" (p. 93). Youth can see the world as a place where they can make change (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). From the perspective of critical consciousness, youth choices can become more intentional. Once youths recognize their power to make social or political change, they can see the power they have to make change in their own lives. By learning about food justice, youth leave these programs knowing that they have the power to make change in their personal lives, relationships, communities, and larger systems.

Sense of Belonging in Nature

Not all youths loved farming. While no youths said they disliked farming, only three seemed particularly excited about it. Five said they either did not like being in the heat, lacked motivation to do farming work, or did not like bugs. Data about this is likely skewed towards favorability toward farming because all youths had decided to return to their program. Presumably, those who really disliked farming would not have returned. Regardless, most youths said they gleaned something important from farming: they felt empowered by connecting to nature.

Most youths had never been on a farm or in a garden before. Many said they felt excited about learning about farming, something with which they never thought they would have experience. Ariana said that she entered the program knowing nothing about growing food, but left feeling "like a professional farmer." Steven said, "I never thought that I would actually be a farmer when I grew up. I never knew farming was actually this fun to do." It was empowering, as well, for youth to see themselves take up space in a profession that in the U.S. is dominated by older white people: 95% of farmers are white[2] and 92% are over 35 (Horst & Marion, 2018). In addition to doing farm work at their own programs, all the programs included visits to other farms often run by BIPOC, immigrant, and refugee farmers. Meeting these farmers challenged the dominant narrative of what a farmer looks like and allowed youth to see that farming could be a viable option for their futures. Theo argued that it was important for youth to see themselves in this work: "There are some times when we bring inner city youth to the bigger farms, they get to see how much land there is out there. … I think the most profound thing really is knowing that this work exists, like farming actually exists. And the impact it has on the community." Seeing themselves in this work can have implications for youth's sense of belonging. While it is apparent that most youth will not pursue a career in farming, experience in farming gives them a larger sense of connection to their communities and to their food systems.

In a broader sense than the experience of farming, youth appreciated how much time they were able to spend in nature, which they felt they had historically not been able to do. Eco-racism systemically prevents some youth from encountering green space in their lives, blocking access to the benefits of nature. Communities of color are often pushed into neighborhoods that do not have parks or natural areas for youth to spend their free time (Fisher, 2017). Research has shown that "spending time in nature reduces stress, social anxiety, depression, disease, and impulsivity, and increases concentration, creativity, conflict management skills, agility, balance, academic performance, eyesight, and life satisfaction" (Penniman 2018, p. 246). YFJ programs are an important way for youth to routinely access green space and reap its mental health benefits. Six youths said they enjoyed their job because of the time they got to spend in nature. CJ, Hana, and Jade talked about the therapeutic benefits they got from being on the farm, particularly through weeding and harvesting. Randy said he felt relaxed and comfortable in the garden, and Edwin said this program strengthened his love of nature. Steven shared that being in the garden gave him a space to reflect more than usual: "In the garden I feel calm, I feel like I can really think about what I want to think about." Without farming, youths perhaps would not have learned that nature can help them feel good. Even with discomfort from heat, bugs, and the physical demands of farming, there is still reason to believe that farming is an important part of YFJ programs.

A question that emerged from the interviews was whether farming is necessary to YFJ programs. While there are benefits to farming, as discussed, lack of excitement about farming may suggest that the programs do not need farming to be successful. Perhaps youth are better off spending their time in other program sectors, such as food justice projects, cooking, exploring nature, and personal development. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that farming can be empowering for youth.

[2] This statistic reflects "owner-operator" farmers, farmers who both own their land and work it. The majority of farm laborers who work on farms they do not own are people of color. This statistic demonstrates the history of slavery and racism that has led to extremely low rates of U.S. farmland ownership for people of color (Horst & Marion, 2018).

According to Penniman (2018), BIPOC youth often find connection with the land empowering because it is a counternarrative to the "messages that [their] only place of belonging on land is as slaves, performing dangerous and backbreaking menial labor" (p. 3). A sense of belonging on the land can offer youth dignity and empowerment (Penniman, 2018). More research is necessary to explore whether farming is integral to YFJ programs.

Empowerment Through Food Literacy

Three major components of food literacy are learning what one wants to eat, where one can access food, and how to cook food. YFJ programs help youth with the first component by developing appreciation for fruits and vegetables through farming. Ariana said that trying new foods encouraged her to think about what she eats day to day: "When I was at the farm, I was up to try stuff that I probably never thought of trying, or I didn't think it was edible, since I was uneducated on that type of stuff. … I definitely see myself being more conscious of what I'm putting in my body and what's healthy." Ariana demonstrates how gaining food literacy can give youth the agency to make decisions about what foods they want.

For the second component, YFJ programs also increase food access for families, generally encouraging youths to take home fruits and vegetables. Through the Urban Growing Corps youth CSA,[3] youths were given produce each week to take home. In particular, programs focus on growing crops that reflect the multicultural backgrounds of their communities, like collards, hot peppers, and chayote, demonstrating to youth and their families that they can, and should, have sustained access to the foods that they want. As for the third component, teaching youth how to cook is a major way through which programs promote youth food literacy. Edwin, Jack, and Jade were youth staff at Sprout, where youth participants cook and eat lunch together every day. They said that cooking was one of the highlights of their program because they became confident in their ability to cook for themselves. Food literacy forms resilience: for the rest of their lives, youth can make informed choices about what they want to eat, where to get their food, what foods are important to them, and how to cook. It is radical for youth to learn food literacy because it reclaims the power youth have within their food system.

Community Building

Being a Part of their Community

A central feature of YFJ programs is community food justice work. For all programs in this study, the main focus was for youth to maintain community-facing farms and gardens. The farms and gardens were important pillars in their communities; neighbors could see flourishing plants, familiar produce, active wildlife, and engaged youth. Youth also worked on other community food justice projects (Table 1). Project Youth, Farming Justice, and Fresh Harvest sold or gave away at community farmers markets and food pantries food they grew. Urban Growing Corps and Sprout delivered fresh produce and/or prepared foods to their neighbors. Not only does this work give space for youth to contribute to and engage with their communities, but it allows youth to realize that they are valuable and indispensable members of their communities. Frank reflected that YFJ programs are "giving youth the ability to see that they're important to their community."

Ariana shared how she found her work in the community meaningful. Her program, Project Youth, had a community farm adjacent to public housing, a welcoming green space that the community otherwise lacked: "We have a lot of people coming in and out who are low income. I see this farm as a community farm for a reason: it's for the community!" Other youth stated that doing this work made them feel appreciated by neighbors. Hana reflected on the food distribution part of Sprout, youths knocking on doors in public housing and delivering fresh produce and prepared meals; this gave youth an opportunity for connection and community building:

[3] CSA is community supported agriculture, a marketing approach for farms in which consumers typically commit to farmers upfront for sustained access to produce throughout a season (Gottlieb & Anupama, 2010).

> You could see that people were so excited to see the youth and they were so excited for fresh produce. … I could tell they really appreciated it. A lot of the youth were from Angola, so a lot of them spoke Angolese with the neighbors. I think they really liked bonding with the neighborhood.

Meeting neighbors was an important point of connection for youth. Scales et al. (2001) notes that to hear praise from community is an important part of positive youth development. A community's support of youth work can create powerful cycles. In YFJ work, community can see that their youth care about the well-being of their neighborhoods by projects like cultivating community gardens or providing fresh food to neighbors. This leads to community members praising and appreciating youth, which supports youth feeling cared for, valued, and empowered. This cycle can increase youths' feelings of self-worth, deepen their interest in community development projects, and feel closeness to their neighbors (Scales et al., 2001).

Having a Safe Place

A Safe Place to Go

At a basic level, YFJ programs are simply somewhere for youth to go. Programs are not only places of refuge for youth who have nowhere else to go, but also spaces where they can flourish apart from the manifest agenda of the program. The reality of these programs is that some youth are not interested in learning about the complex systemic issues of food justice. They certainly may not be issues that all youth are passionate about or have the capacity to care about in their free time. Four youth seemed to be in this camp—nevertheless, they had all returned to the program. This suggests that PYD is a central aspect to YFJ programs: in times of development, youth seek stability, support, and connection. Carmen discusses the consequences of not having teen programs in their city: "There's not many after school programs here. … The schools themselves and the towns themselves do not put a whole lot of money into young people. And then we get surprised when there's gun violence and murdering of young children, because there's nothing for them to do! It's not a problem of crime, it's a problem of nurturing and loving." Carmen argues that the programs can play an important role in countering larger systemic issues that youth encounter, like violence or the school-to-prison pipeline.[4] Not having options like these programs demonstrates a disregard for youth livelihoods. Youth, particularly youth of color, may end up in spaces where they are stigmatized, criminalized, and surveilled by law enforcement (Nocella II et al., 2017). YFJ programs can certainly offer spaces for youth to escape these oppressive systems.

YFJ programs also offer safe spaces to youth who may not typically have access to such things. They are safe havens for refugee youth and speakers of other languages. Sprout hires youth regardless of their citizenship status or language. Brooke says Sprout is an important place for refugee youth in her city, who are often placed in shelters and motels: "These applicants this past year, when I asked 'why do you want to do this program?' A lot of them replied with 'I'm living in XYZ shelter or motel, and there's nothing to do and I want somewhere to go during the day.'" Brooke said Sprout was a good fit because "if you are a kid who does not have work permits and does not speak English well and may not be doing well in school. … I do not look at that [when hiring]." She says that youth who are new to the city can feel empowered by joining this program because there are so few options for non-English speakers in her city. Hana said that Sprout was also an important point of relationship building for refugee youth. She and another staff member, Lila, were able to connect well with youth who were new to the U.S.: "A lot of them were asylum seekers or refugees who were

[4] The school-to-prison pipeline is defined as the "ways that social institutions track and narrow the freedoms, options, and life chances of youth of color who are frequently pushed from the highly segregated and underfunded public school system into the criminal 'justice' system" (Pellow, 2017, p. xix). While this definition focuses only on school, it is a holistic concept meant to encompass all the systems through which youth of color and low income youth interact with the prison industrial complex.

coming here, so they connected with me and Lila. We kinda knew what they were going through, so we could share our stories and what our journey living in [our city] was like." Hana was able to make Sprout feel like a comfortable space for youth because of her shared lived experiences.

Importantly, youth at these programs are paid for their work. Research has shown that an important outcome of YFJ programs is youth gaining economic capital (Vitiello & Wolf-Powers, 2014). For this reason, I only selected programs who paid youths for their time. Every program paid youths at least minimum wage; for most youths, this was the first time they were able to make money. Particularly for youth without work permits, a source of income can be life-changing. Not only do YFJ programs provide a place to go during the day and space for social connections, but they give youth a sustainable source of income.

Reliable Mentors

One of the most important aspects of the programs is providing youth with meaningful relationships, which create a sense of belonging and safety (Delia & Krasny, 2016). This connection seems to be less of a boss-employee model; rather, one of mentors who hold their mentees accountable. Jazmyn discussed how this was an intentional framework that she used in Project Youth, that she treated youth as peers, rather than kids, because it helped create mutual feelings of trust and respect:

> It just comes down to treating youth as people! Just because they're younger than us does not mean that they're below us. A lot of the youth say that we feel like an older brother or sister, because we treat them with respect. … We give them a lot of trust, a lot of respect, and a lot of grace. Which [is something that] a lot of times the youth don't see from adults.

Ariana and CJ of Project Youth reflected on how much they got from their trusting relationships with Jazmyn, that they gained self-efficacy and leadership skills because Jazmyn made them trust in their abilities. Youth learn that there are adults who they can trust, depend on, and look up to. Butts et al. (2010) claim that youth who have at least one close relationship with an adult feel more confident in themselves in social settings. This confidence can lead to being more honest and vulnerable in all of their relationships. Youth's comfort around adult staff was abundantly clear during my interviews. I saw youth and adult staff laugh with each other, eat food together, and talk about their personal lives. When asking about their relationships with each other, it was clear that all youth and adult staff had deep respect, care, and appreciation for each other. Carmen said that the program has high retention rates because youth not only feel safe in the physical place, but feel safe being surrounded by people who care about them. YFJ programs are spaces where youth are empowered through growing not only food, but through developing positive relationships with adult mentors.

Personal Development

Self-Efficacy and Leadership

YFJ programs aim to help youths feel confident in their abilities by believing in their innate capabilities (Butts et al., 2010). Part of the strengths-based approach of YFJ programs is creating positive work environments where youth are able to try out new roles and engage in new experiences without anxiety about being disciplined. Ariana and Jack said that feedback from the adult staff helped them learn about their best attributes. In particular, they learned about their self-efficacy. Ariana came into the program often feeling anxious about doing a good job. She talked about giving a tour of the farm to a group of visitors:

> I learned about trusting myself. Because when I first started I was very nervous and unsure … I was like "oh my god I can't do this, what if I mess up?!"… but I would have someone come up to me and be like "Oh my god, you did so good! I've seen you and you really made it look like you were at ease, and you look like a natural." And I was like, Really?! And they were like "yeah you have to trust yourself!" So I definitely gained that, I try to trust myself and not worry too much.

From this program, Ariana learned to trust her own abilities. CJ talked about how her time at Project youth not only gave her a sense of self-efficacy, but also her first experience being a leader among her peers:

> Every week during the program we would vote for a different leader and they would pick the games we would play in the morning and the pairs that we do for different activities and things like that. So we had a lot of responsibilities. But when it was my turn to become the leader, I was a little scared because, you know, I was still shy, I didn't like being out there much. But they pushed me, and I think I did a very good job the week I was a leader! They were very supportive of me.

This is an important example of how PYD encourages youth to discover what attributes they already have. Through leadership roles, YFJ programs can help youth see how they can be leaders. Garett and Jack discussed how leadership positions gave them an opportunity to learn what leadership qualities they already have, and ones that they hope to gain. Garett described how they learned that being a good leader is letting people have space to do their own work:

> One of my best qualities is that I'm more observing than being too hands on. Like I'm not suffocating you, like I'm watching what you're doing to check with you. I feel like by being a Crew Leader, I can get to know everybody individually and see how they work so then I can put them in the groups I feel like they would more fit in for their skill level or just like something that they would more enjoy, things like that.

Jack had very similar reflection on his leadership style. He said that being a leader is "more of a role that I'm playing, because I cannot just order them to do something … that would be bad. I just have to let go and back up, and let them work and see who is playing what role. And then I can't really go and interrupt, I just have to see." Garett and Jack have strong understandings of their leadership qualities and what they desire in a leader. While I only spoke to each of them for about an hour, they emanated a deep sense of self and a high level of self-worth. Their YFJ programs built a strong foundation of leadership skills and self-confidence. These are advanced skills for youth in high school—ones that set them up to feel confident in future endeavors.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that YFJ programs are crucial spaces for youth empowerment. YFJ programs help youth find a sense of self, build community, develop relationships, and discover their strengths. A goal of this research was to highlight youth voices. Due to time constraints and logistics, I interviewed fewer youth than anticipated, and therefore I had more input from adult staff than anticipated. Youth were self-selected, so I only spoke to youth who felt inclined to talk about their experience in their personal time. Youth who did not enjoy their programs likely would not have agreed to participate in an interview. Naturally, some youths were more talkative than others. As I did not spend much time at the organizations or with youths, I was seen as an outsider, and perhaps as a person of authority. Youth may have had thoughts and feelings about their programs that they did not feel comfortable sharing with me. This all may have skewed the data more favorably towards depicting a positive youth experience in YFJ programs.

More research needs to be done that highlights youth voices: what youth get out of these programs, what they want out of these programs, and how they think these programs can improve. Researchers who spend more time with youth may be able to gather unspoken information about their critiques of these programs. Additionally, hearing from youth well after they have graduated from their programs could provide important insight into the long-lasting benefits of these programs that youth may not recognize while participating. Finally, future research should question whether farming is a necessary component of YFJ programs, or whether other aspects of the programs are more foundational.

Barriers to the success of YFJ programs

included funding and staffing. These programs were operated through donations and grants, an innately unstable structure. Programs reported lack of funds for critical resources or to hire enough staff to run programming. One program has had to lay off their adult staff members and temporarily halt their program due to funding issues. This is deplorable, as these programs have immeasurable impact on our youth: we must empower our youth by giving them competency, agency, and resilience. Policymakers must recognize the long-lasting benefits these programs have on resilient food systems, community well-being, and youth empowerment.

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