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Article

Food for Thought: Young People and Youth Workers' Perceptions of Food Insecurity and the Youth Work Response

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Abstract: While there is significant research on the impact of food insecurity, there is less so through the lens of young people and the youth work response. Therefore, this research presents findings from a small-scale United Kingdom-based study asking what are young people's and youth workers perceptions of food insecurity and the youth work response. Focus group research methodology was adopted. The research recognised that food insecurity is part of a wider issue of poverty and inequality, and we explored how this is perceived by young people and youth workers at the Personal, Cultural, and Structural levels whilst also situating issues of food insecurity in the global context. Themes of *togetherness*, *relationship*, *otherness*, *disempowerment*, and *learning* were identified as key components in the youth work response to food insecurity. A number of recommendations are made, including the importance of highlighting the power of youth work in responding to young people experiencing food insecurity. The youth work approach has application to all professions working to challenge issues of food insecurity and social injustice.

Keywords: food insecurity; youth work; inequality; social justice; empowerment

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1. Introduction

1.1. Food Insecurity

Food insecurity and food poverty are terms often used interchangeably to define "not having regular access to a supply of healthy and nutritious food to meet dietary needs" [1] (p. 1). The term food poverty has been a contested subject, primarily concerned with issues of access to food [2]. Food insecurity is described as the continuum of being uncertain about how food will be obtained, incorporating issues such as availability, quantity, and reliability of food to meet nutritional needs and ensure an active and healthy life [3]. This encapsulates overarching issues associated with inequalities caused specifically by not being able to equitably access food, ranging from compromising on the quality and variety of food to skipping meals or not eating for a day or more [4].

Globally, it is estimated that around 2.4 billion people experience moderate or severe food insecurity [5]. Across the world, conflict, climate emergencies, and economic instability are arguably contributing to the insecurity individuals face in accessing healthy, affordable food [6]. Whilst food insecurity has long been perceived as an issue more pertinent to the Global South, it is now a serious concern for some of the richest countries in the Global North, leading to increased research and discussion [7].

Research commissioned by the Trussell Trust to identify levels of hunger in the United Kingdom (UK), for example, found that 14% of all UK adults (or their households) have experienced food insecurity in the 12 months to mid-2022 [8]. Therefore, food insecurity is considered to have reached emergency public health levels [6], fuelled by an increase in the cost of living in the UK since the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 [9]. However, data regarding food insecurity within the UK demonstrate regional variation. In Wales,

for example, it is estimated that food insecurity affected 20% of households between 2021 and 2022, equating to at least 753,000 adults, with low-income families being significantly more at risk of relying on food aid [10]. In Wales, 26% of young people have reportedly gone without food, higher than any other area in the UK [11]. As such, the UK, and more specifically Wales, provides the geographic context in which this research has been undertaken.

1.2. Food Insecurity, Inequality, and Oppression

Food insecurity is part of a wider issue of poverty and inequality experienced by marginalised people across the world [12]. While policy agendas concentrate on healthy eating, this largely ignores the systemic long-term patterns of unequal access to resources and opportunities that may improve the situation [13]. Thompson's [14] PCS model provides a framework from which to locate and analyse the oppression faced by those experiencing food insecurity, and consequently, it act as a tool for identifying sites and practices of intervention to address the issue. The model posits that there are three interconnected layers at which oppression operates [15]. The P level concerns the Personal or psychological level. This relates to the individual and their own views and opinions they hold about themselves and others. The C level relates to the Cultural and the shared values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes in society that can perpetuate oppression. The S level relates to the Structural level where institutions, economic systems, and political structures create and maintain inequality [14]. However, Sallah [16–18] argues for the need to also critique causes of inequality and oppression at the Global, or G Level. Such is the impact of globalisation on the economic, political, environmental, cultural, and technological contexts in which the world is constructed and experienced [18,19], where consideration needs to be given as to how these factors impact on issues such as food insecurity.

Personal—Beyond the research that demonstrates the physical issues for young people experiencing food insecurity such as fatigue, poor sleep, disordered eating [20], poor concentration, and impact on learning [21], there is evidence to show that food insecurity leads to experiences of stress, anxiety, and frustration caused by the constant concern about where food will come from [22]. Research has also shown that young people who access food support say they feel stigmatised, shame, and hopelessness, with little evidence of positive self-worth for those with this lived experience [23]. This is counter to a sense of belonging or togetherness [24]. Thus, physical, psychological, and social fragility compound the injustice already experienced by young people who are hungry [25].

Cultural—Food insecurity does not exist in a vacuum but is intertwined with an identity that can be perceived negatively by those who have access to food towards those that do not [26]. Culturally, a shared belief is perpetuated that the issue of food insecurity is an individual problem, suggesting people experiencing it can rectify the situation themselves by working harder, gaining more money, and budgeting better to make healthier choices, for example [27]. Thus, there becomes a culturally ingrained negative stereotype of people "living off the system" and illegitimately enjoying the benefits of food assistance. This constructs a category of the "undeserving poor" who become stigmatised or "othered" as a group [28,29]. This in turn, impacts at the Personal level with internalised feelings of guilt and shame, due to not meeting the requirements of self-sufficiency perpetuated by the structural neoliberal agenda [28].

Structural—The neoliberal agenda has been the dominant political discourse for decades in the UK. Through subsequent governments, there has been an increased focus on neoliberal economic practice [30]. Whilst different definitions of neoliberalism exist, Vallier [31] argues that neoliberalism be considered as a philosophical view that "a society's political and economic institutions should be robustly liberal and capitalist, but supplemented by a constitutionally limited democracy and modest welfare state" (p. 1). Based on individualism, free trade, and privatisation, it sets the tone that people are a product, and the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness are the priority of those in power [32,33]. Neoliberalism favours free-market capitalism, deregulation, and a reduction

in government spending, which has led to harmful social economic consequences, such as increased poverty and unemployment, as well as further exasperation of unequal income distribution [34]. Advocates of neoliberalism argue personal wellbeing of individuals and communities are maximised due to natural market forces [35]. However, this also leads to ways of thinking in which everything becomes commodified [36], including the control, access to, and quality of food. Following the global financial crisis of 2007/2008, neoliberalism twinned with a raft of austerity measures in the UK led to cuts in government spending, in turn impacting on levels of poverty and widening the gulf in financial, human, and social capital [37]. More recently, from 2022 onwards, the cost of living has increased with rises in food and energy prices that further exasperates issues of poverty and food insecurity.

In the UK, anti-poverty strategies have framed poverty as an economic issue, placing responsibility on the individual and therefore a private matter not a concern for wider society to address [38]. Instead, the focus becomes on individual routes to employment and the promotion of meritocracy to enhance economic opportunities that lead to social mobility. Remaining government initiatives are not born out of compassion but a drive for austerity [39,40]. A particular type of language is often used in neoliberal ideology that legitimises and normalises individualisation, impacting on young people in particular in detrimental ways [41]. For example, the language around whose responsibility it is to "feed the poor" [42] (p. 38) reflects the decentralisation of public services, and an increasing pressure on private and not-for-profit organisations to lead on providing a response to food insecurity [2,7,43]. Hence, organisations such as the Trussell Trust and others not only provide food bank services but act in ways to lobby those in power to end the need for food banks in the UK through anti-poverty strategies that address structural inequalities [44].

Global—No longer solely a concern of advanced capitalist nations, the impact of neoliberalism is felt across the world [45]. Globalisation itself is anchored in neoliberal orthodoxy, privileging profit despite the human cost [19]. Issues of food insecurity can be a lens for the critique of neoliberal capitalism, as despite the goal to end world hunger, food insecurity remains a global issue [7]. Messer and Cohen [46] highlight the link between globalisation, trade, conflict, and war that impact on global markets, food prices, and the distribution of food. Other global issues such as climate change and increased global poverty also lead to conditions of food insecurity [5]. Thus, it becomes an issue of geopolitical concern that determines who eats what, where, when, and why [47]. Issues of power and control become pertinent at the global level in terms of who has access to safe food, its commodification, and how it is distributed—often unfairly and in unjust ways [46,47]. Hence, young people as the future generation need to be engaged in forms of critical education that increase their consciousness of the impact and realities of globalisation [16,19]. Through encouraging young people to make the links between their own realities and global perspectives, inequalities such as food insecurity can be challenged, promoting food sovereignty and the universal right to food for all.

1.3. Young People and Food Insecurity

The impact of food insecurity is far reaching, going beyond feeling hungry to the uncomfortable or painful physical response to having insufficient food to lead a healthy, active life [48]. Physical, psychological, and social fragility compound the social injustice already experienced by those experiencing food insecurity [25]. Young people are one such group disproportionately affected by food insecurity, despite being protected, in most countries by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) [49], which includes the right to nutritious food (Article, 24). Globally, it is estimated that 21 million children are severely food insecure [50]. Within the UK, children and young people are more likely than adults to be in food-insecure households [51]. Whilst there is significant research on the impact of food insecurity [52], there is scope to critically explore this further in order to better understand the socio-economic duty to ensure each

child receives their right to food [53]. This requires the intervention and response of all professions working with children and young people.

1.4. Professional Responses to Food Insecurity

A wide range of professions advocate for the importance of young people to be food secure with sufficient access to nutritious food, hence working in ways to challenge food insecurity [54]. Within formal education settings, teachers recognise the importance of access to food during the day in terms of eating well, developing social skills, and learning cultural rules that enhance young people's social development and overall well-being [55]. However, current approaches in the UK to addressing food insecurity, such as providing breakfast clubs and free school meals, can negatively impact young people who are not accessing education, often those already marginalised and experiencing multiple forms of inequality [56]. Health and social care practitioners have highlighted the risks to young people's health if they do not eat well, or even at all [57]. However, in addressing this, health professionals have reported feeling uncertain about how to respond to issues of food insecurity due to not always having information on the wider context to support the needs of young people [57]. Furthermore, social workers have highlighted the challenge in gaining help and support for children, young people, and families experiencing food insecurity, while also ensuring young people are safeguarded [58]. The main responses across the professional field often involve the offer of free food. Research has found that this can lead to positive responses in encouraging participation in community activities, but also in reducing stigma and boosting self-confidence, communication, and teamwork skills while cooking and eating together, for example [59]. Although this may solve the problem in the short term, this does not solve the underlying causes of food insecurity. Youth work is another profession at the forefront of dealing with the issue of food insecurity [60], one that should seek to challenge the systemic foundation of the problem.

1.5. Youth Work and Food Insecurity

Whilst different models of youth work prevail [61], youth work can be defined as a people-centred profession working with young people underpinned by a "commitment to diversity, anti-oppressive practice and the provision of relational spaces in which individuals and groups can think critically about their lives and worlds, in order that they might act to shape them differently" [62] (p. xvii). It is based on voluntary engagement and occurs in spaces and places young people choose to attend, creating a unique power dynamic with young people at the centre of engagement [63–66]. The relationship between young people and youth workers is the starting point for the foundations of fostering association and a sense of togetherness where through negotiation, young people have autonomy and agency to make informed decisions about their lives [64,67]. To bring about transformational action, youth work is best described as a process of informal education, valuing the relationship between youth workers and young people; promoting association and experiential learning [68]; and importantly, raising critical consciousness [69] to empower and promote participation in democratic processes to bring about social change [70] on issues such as food insecurity.

However, the economic and political context in which youth work occurs in the UK is challenging, not least because of the impact of neoliberalism and austerity already discussed in this paper [71,72]. This has resulted in a reduction of youth work provision and services [73], especially those funded through governmental sources, disproportionately affecting already disadvantaged communities and young people [66]. Much like services that exist to address the challenge of food insecurity, the voluntary and charity youth work sector have filled the gap [74]. However, youth work is a devolved responsibility amongst the UK nations, such that in Wales there is a commitment in the Youth Work Strategy for Wales (2019) to ensure young people are thriving, and that youth work "has a role to play in strengthening the foundations for achieving prosperity for all" [75] (p. 23). Thus, despite

a reduction in services, youth workers are often at the forefront of an ever-increasing need to support young people on issues of poverty and food insecurity, for example.

Youth workers report that providing a local response to food insecurity is an endless pressure, with attempts to respond to the physical need for food often going undocumented and undertaken in isolation from other community-based provisions [76]. Ord and Monks [60] conducted a small-scale study in youth work organisations in deprived urban areas in the UK, exploring how food poverty impacts on youth work. Through semi-structured interviews, findings highlighted that youth workers were concerned about food poverty in the communities in which they worked, responding by ensuring young people could eat at the centres, albeit often without budgets to do so [60]. This model of youth work delivery is highlighted by Wills and O'Connell [12] as being linked to the ethos of social justice, using food to bring young people together. Ord and Monks [60] concluded that cooking together does more than just respond to hunger, it offers young people the opportunity to feel part of something through building relationships with others. Findings also indicate that youth workers are acutely aware of the impact of inequality, often struggling to find ways to respond to both the need of providing food and challenging the systemic causes of poverty and inequality [60]. The response at a personal and community level reiterates the sticking plaster approach, rather than addressing issues at a structural level of the PCS model [14], or wider global concerns [17,18].

Therefore, while there is a significant body of literature on food insecurity, there is limited empirical evidence exploring both young people's and youth workers' perspectives on this issue [60]. Qualitative studies with young people are in short supply, and those that have been conducted highlight that food insecurity is not simply about food. Young people experiencing food insecurity are likely to be affected by multiple inequalities due to socio-economic status, race, gender, sexuality, ability, care experience, and other individual factors, yet their perceptions are underrepresented in studies on the topic [76]. Thus, the personal is political. If this is not identified, discontent remains individualised through a discourse that oppresses those who feel powerless, particularly young people experiencing multiple disadvantages [77], compounding the issue of food insecurity.

1.6. Research Aim and Objectives

Expanding on the above literature and drawing on Thompson's [14] PCS model as a framework to both construct and analyse the research, the aim was to examine young people's and youth workers' perceptions of food insecurity and the youth work response so that recommendations for future practice, policy, and research could be made. The objectives of the research were as follows; (1) to explore young people's perceptions of the youth work response to food insecurity, (2) to explore youth workers' perceptions of food insecurity and the youth work response, and (3) to critically examine young people's and youth worker's perceptions of the underlying causes of food insecurity.

2. Methods

2.1. Methodology

The classifications of Guba and Lincoln [78] were used as a starting point to locate the paradigm and methodology of the research. A post-positivist research paradigm was employed for the research, as an approach that seeks truth and evidence and is reliable and valid from the perspective of individual phenomena [79]. Critical realism was adopted as the ontological perspective, a philosophical position that is both realist and subjective [80]. The reality of the world is acknowledged, but knowledge production is imperfect, and so both discourse and meanings are critical to understanding [81]. For the purposes of this research, food insecurity is recognised as a reality across the globe; however, it is subjectively shaped by experience and the contexts in which it occurs [82].

In conceding that knowledge is imperfect [83] and that people's experiences of food insecurity, for example, are subjective [3], an interpretivist epistemological position was selected [84]. Interpretivism is a viewpoint that explores how people ascribe meaning to

objects, events, and experiences, and thus interpretations are made of the social world and social interactions within it [85]. Thus, the value in culture, historical context of social life, and individual assumptions is acknowledged [86]. This is balanced against the role of the researcher in interpreting young people's and youth workers' experiences of food insecurity to ensure that their voices were heard. Thus, a phenomenological approach was adopted.

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that explores the individual human experience of the lived world [87], describing the essence of the phenomenon through investigating everyday experiences [85]. Grounded in people's experience of their social reality, phenomenology is the exploration of personal experience, valuing the researcher's interpretations as well as those partaking in the study [87]. The advantage of this approach for the research was the ability to study the first-person point of view, going beyond description of what is seen and heard to explore the meaning of experiences [88]. Therefore, a more interpretive phenomenology was employed [88,89]. The research paradigm, as well as subsequent ontological and epistemological positions, were also designed using inclusive approaches in line with the youth work perspective [90].

2.2. Method

Focus groups were selected for the research method to provide rich, qualitative data, where group discussions, dialogue, and creativity stimulate conversation [85]. Focus groups align with youth work principles: starting where young people are at, understanding how they make sense of the world, and seeing them as experts of their own lives [91]. This allowed for the bringing together of groups of young people and youth workers who have shared experiences in unique ways [92].

Two focus groups were conducted: one with young people, and one with youth workers. Both focus groups were guided by the same set of semi-structured questions and activities so that data could later be triangulated to enhance validity within the analysis. The focus group discussion was facilitated by a researcher who guided conversation based on a selection of questions or prompts, while at the same time being an observer to the subjective experiences that were shared [93]. The semi-structured nature of the focus groups also allowed for flexibility based on the responses and conversations generated through this method of data collection. The focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed, and the data were shared with the research team for analysis.

2.3. Sampling and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to select participants [82], ensuring that those with specific knowledge and experience of food insecurity could best provide the information required [85,94]. Random sampling could not facilitate the power of storytelling and highlight unique participant experiences [95]. Focus group members were recruited using a systematic approach with specific criteria in place for participant selection [82]. Young people had to have previous experience of food insecurity but currently be food secure, be aged 18, and be currently accessing group work in the same youth work provision. Young people were recruited through their existing relationship with one of the researchers and their participation in existing youth work groups. All young people who fit the criteria were given the opportunity to participate in the research. Five young people took part in the young people's focus group; five young people identified as female and one as male. All of the young people were white British. All young people were 18 years old at the time of the research and had pre-existing relationships with each other.

The criteria for youth workers to participate in the research were to be professionally qualified with at least one year of professional experience, registered as a youth worker with the Education Workforce Council in Wales, and to have worked with young people with previous experience of food insecurity. Youth workers were recruited through existing professional networks. Five youth workers took part in the research, with all identified as white British females aged over 25 who were known to each other.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data generated for this research was analysed drawing on Braun and Clarke's [96,97] six step approach to thematic analysis. This included becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and then producing them for discussion. Thematic analysis is an iterative process that involves returning to the data multiple times [97]. Initial analysis was conducted by the researcher present at the focus groups. However, reflexivity was demonstrated through an awareness of the researcher's positionality both in having pre-existing relationships with the participants and the power inherent in their role as youth worker with the young people [98]. Whilst this was beneficial in encouraging qualitative discussion and data generation [90], subsequent analysis of the data was undertaken by the other members of the research team who could be more objective. Themes were then collated and synthesised from all researchers to reach a consensus, thus enhancing the credibility and the trustworthiness of the qualitative data and its analysis [96].

It is noted that a pragmatic approach to coding and theme development was taken that involved a balance of deductive and inductive analysis [99]. Deductive analysis is derived from the experience of the researchers and existing knowledge of the topic. Drawing on the literature review and youth work experiences of the researchers, it was anticipated that themes in line with Thompson's [14] PCS model would be identified, and as such, themes recognised through the analysis have been presented using this framework in the discussion. The researchers also remained engaged in the process of inductive coding; being open to unanticipated themes and patterns that emerged from the data, hence demonstrating further rigour in the research process [87], the results of which are presented below.

3. Results

Through undertaking thematic analysis [96,97], the focus group activities with young people and youth workers generated the following results in relation to perceptions of food insecurity and the youth work response.

3.1. Togetherness

The data demonstrated that the theme of togetherness was important for both young people and youth workers in supporting young people experiencing food insecurity. Togetherness can be defined as a positive emotional response of being united with others, feeling included and not alone, to strengthen participation [24]. Young people stated the following:

> *"When I think about it, we make stuff together and learn and have a laugh".*

> *"Eating together though, it's not about being hungry sometimes, it's about eating on your own".*

> *"We felt we had each other with the youth service".*

Data from the youth workers' focus group also supported the theme of togetherness. Youth workers stated:

> *"Once I knew that (he was hungry), we cooked together, we ate together".*

> *"It's about sitting actually having time to eat together, feeling proud you know of what he's done".*

> *"There's these young people who don't have family necessarily, friends fill that void, young people feel connected here, one of our key values is working with young people to feel part of their community, it isn't just about food".*

Thus, the act of coming together and feeling connected with other young people with the same lived experience of food insecurity was important for young people in creating a sense of togetherness at a personal level. This was acknowledged equally by youth workers who created the space for this to happen and to enable connections to be made.

3.2. Relationships

The personal feeling of *togetherness* was facilitated explicitly through building *relationships*, specifically, the importance and positivity of forming relationships based on mutual respect and empowerment between the young person and youth worker [67]. Positive relationships are a fundamental starting point for youth work practice, enhanced by the voluntary nature which differs from other professions [63,64]. On the importance of the relationship with their youth worker, young people in the focus group said the following:

> *"Others (professionals) judged us, like social workers and housing workers and stuff, I'd only go to my Youth Worker".*

> *"Youth Workers are helpful, supportive, and resourceful. Literally only my Youth Worker is there when you need food, there's never anyone else to turn to".*

> *"We had some fun times (with the Youth Service) being able to meet at different places, food was always a big part of that".*

> *"I feel like the Youth Service has been a huge part of my life. They've got it captured, yeah. They care, listen, and more importantly make sure you're not hungry, who else does that, they're not just there for the money or power".*

Whilst young people were able to identify the importance of the youth work *relationship* for them, especially in addressing issues of food insecurity, youth workers reiterated the power of these positive relationships, stating the following:

> *"The conversations we get sat round the table can't be explained in an outcome. It's connected to the values and principles of Youth Work; it isn't just about food".*

> *"The activity is eating with others, and eating at all, the issue doesn't go away, people are still hungry, but it's not just about food, it's really important that young people feel heard and we're building relationships".*

3.3. Otherness

Creating a sense of *togetherness* through positive youth work *relationships* also created a safe space for young people to explore the next theme, a sense of *otherness* due to their lived experience of food insecurity. This was acknowledged by both young people and youth workers, where there is a sense that being different transcends a relationship of power culture and history, often with an underlying feeling of not belonging [29]. In terms of food insecurity and accessing youth work support, young people stated the following:

> *"They judge us, not the Youth Workers I mean but everyone else, like we didn't ask to be in this situation".*

> *"Having the youth centre, somewhere we could talk about it (food insecurity) and not feel weird".*

> *"It just felt normal for once, like we did what normal kids do".*

> *"We had the youth centre to come to. They (Youth Workers) didn't make me feel embarrassed, in fact they made me feel normal and explained it's a more common experience. We got help getting food parcels, and they made sure we didn't go without".*

The theme of *otherness* for young people was also recognised by Youth Workers in the focus group, especially the impact of cultural perceptions of young people experiencing food insecurity:

> *"Yeah, they (young people) feel very alienated by what goes on socially".*

> *"There's an assumption that (some young people) want to be eating chips all the time and they don't. People say they aren't spending their money properly too. They just feel like they don't fit in".*

3.4. Disempowerment

In addition to the theme of *otherness*, a further theme developed in terms of *disempowerment*, where young people and youth workers were critically aware of the structural causes of food insecurity but felt somewhat limited in their ability to make any systemic changes. Youth work often finds itself trapped in neoliberal discourse that demands a response to immediate issues, responding to the personal impact of food insecurity for young people rather than being able to address structural inequality [65]. When asked about what they perceived to be the causes of food insecurity, young people responded with the following:

> *"It's not just us though. Yeah, it's the government. What is it? Inflation, yeah, question that".*

> *"So, there is money everywhere so like who has it 'cos we don't".*

> *"We've got no power, what can we do".*

> *"I mean, food poverty that's like you don't have enough money to buy it. With food insecurity it's more like, you might have money, right? But you've got nowhere to cook it, or you've got no way of making it, or you just don't feel like you don't want to eat by yourself or whatever. So, who wants to hear about that, cos they need to, we're not doing ok, and they've done us over really, it needs to change so the next generation don't suffer like this".*

Youth workers also echoed an understanding of the structural causes of food insecurity, but also a similar feeling of *disempowerment*:

> *"Why are there so many food banks, and community pantries, the focus should never just be on the person or family, it's got to change higher hasn't it?".*

> *"Young people are engaging in political education but feel powerless to being able to create change".*

> *"Others see food as the key thing, I think there's a very big divide. The Government need to make sense of this. Young people are coming to us to eat because they haven't got anywhere else, it's a much bigger discussion that needs to be had higher up".*

> *"There is a pressure from the government and from everybody else, unless we do something to change it, nothing's going to change. It's the hierarchy".*

What is noticeable here is that whilst youth workers acknowledge the structural causes of food insecurity and the *disempowerment* faced by young people, there is little discussion about the role of youth work in supporting young people to feel empowered and participate in democratic processes to challenge food insecurity at the structural and global level.

3.5. Learning

Instead of engaging in attempts to bring about systemic change, the focus for youth workers and young people in the research was around personal *learning*. The theme of *learning* was a means of feeling more empowered when faced with experiences of food insecurity. Drawing on an approach based on informal education [68], youth work brings people *together* through positive *relationships* and encourages *learning* on issues that are directed by young people [64]. Young people recognised the *learning* that took place to address the issue of food insecurity through their interactions with Youth Workers:

> *"We solve problems, we learn how to cook, and I mean, if we work with our Youth Workers maybe we could do more".*

> *"They (Youth Workers) would get me, and we could do a cooking session at the youth centre, so I was learning as well as eating, I was never hungry then".*

> *"I wouldn't have learnt how to manage my money otherwise. I was learning as well as eating".*

> *"We need more opportunities that teach us".*

Youth workers also acknowledged the learning that takes place and the potential for positive change:

> *"Through the Youth Work sessions, we empower young people. They are making food for others; they say they're not feeling like they're just taking".*

> *"Our sessions became about prepping meals for the week, batch cooking and taking them home. It was hard when managers would say that is not my responsibility, but it changed their lives, they learnt those skills within 12 weeks of support".*

However, the focus of the *learning* noted here by young people was on how to navigate and cope with the immediate issue of food insecurity at a personal level, through things like learning how to cook on a budget. There was no exploration of young people learning and engaging in critical education about their right to healthy and nutritious foods, nor how to raise and challenge this with those who have the power to bring about systemic change.

4. Discussion

Youth work is a professional practice, based on the principle of voluntary engagement with young people to support a healthy, safe, and empowered future [65,66]. Underpinning youth work is the principle of anti-oppressive practice [15] which seeks to challenge oppression and inequality at the personal, cultural, and structural levels [14]. Food insecurity is one such form of inequality that youth work is increasingly working to challenge with, and for, young people [60]. Through qualitative focus groups with young people and youth workers, several key themes have been identified in this research, which highlight young people's and youth workers' perceptions and experiences of food insecurity. These include the themes of *togetherness*, *relationships*, *otherness*, *disempowerment*, and *learning*, each of which relate to the different levels of Thompson's PCS model [14].

Youth workers and young people talked about the importance of *togetherness* and making connections with other young people with lived experienced of food insecurity. Youth work lends itself well to the concept of togetherness [24,65]. Youth work seeks to walk by the side of young people on their journey, interpreted by young people as not feeling alone but achieving together [63]. It was recognised that working together ultimately seeks to empower young people to be creators of their own future [62]. From a youth work perspective, this aligns with the principle of association, which much like togetherness focuses on feeling empowered through interaction—united by the recognition that there are others in similar situations [64]. This research finds young people place value in specific activities and engagement with other young people with direct experience of food insecurity so that they do not feel alone. This, coupled with youth work sessions that use food as a way to bring young people together [12,59], may help to alleviate oppression felt at the personal level in working towards removing stress, anxiety, and frustration caused by the constant concern about where food will come from [22].

However, there was a counter-theme of *otherness* recognised by both youth workers and young people. Here, the focus groups highlighted a sense of being different, often with an underlying feeling of not belonging [29]. Internalising inequalities such as food insecurity is not uncommon to young people. Mott et al. [76], for example, explore young people's experiences of feeling out of place around those who live in food-secure homes. The results of this research were similar to Garthwaite et al. [23], who also found that young people who access food support say they feel stigmatised, shame, and hopelessness. Findings also replicated research by Purdam et al. [26] and Swales et al. [28] in terms of the oppression felt at a personal level of Thompson's model [14], transcending to the cultural level as young people and youth workers were aware of other people's culturally formed perceptions of food insecurity [28].

Otherness is reinforced in neoliberal food security agendas, promoting the narrative that individuals are the cause of their own failings [42]. The research has shown that bringing young people together is beneficial in challenging a culturally created and personally internalised sense of otherness for those experiencing food insecurity. Changing negative

attitudes and developing opportunities that create a sense of belonging are also key priorities for young people and therefore must be considered in youth work practice [68]. It has been argued that the sense of togetherness leads to building positive relationships [64], as the next theme has shown.

The importance of the *relationship* between youth worker and young person was exposed through the research. It is considered fundamental to youth work practice to place such value in relationships as the starting point for engagement [68]. The priorities that follow must be led by young people to reconsider the balance of power in favour of those engaging in the youth work process [62–64]. Thus, there is a purposeful move away from adult and child power dynamics so that the youth work relationship is on a more equal footing [68]. For youth work, and the response to food insecurity in particular, the relationship between young people and professionals becomes the starting point for connecting young people, so that feelings of safety become commonplace [60]. Consequently, this works towards addressing inequality and oppression felt by young people at the personal and cultural level of Thompson's model [14]. The research demonstrated that similar relationships were not held with other professionals, leaving youth work well placed to build relationships with marginalised young people, such as those experiencing food insecurity. However, there is scope for other professions working with young people, such as those within education, health, and social care to foster positive relational practice that encourages a sense of togetherness and learning in challenging issues of inequality.

The research identified a troubling dichotomy between the ideology of youth work striving for togetherness and the neoliberal agenda of otherness that seeps into practice [40]. Youth work often finds itself trapped in neoliberal discourse that demands a response to immediate issues, rather than being able to address structural inequality [67]. The research demonstrated that there is critical consciousness [69] of the structural causes of food insecurity by both youth workers and young people [45]. However, while youth workers explored dynamic ways to address need at a local level in responding to the personal impact of food insecurity for young people, opportunities for young people to engage in political education to challenge the systemic causes of food insecurity were limited [60,70], and consideration of the global level was non-existent. This led to a theme of *disempowerment* in the research from young people and youth workers alike. Whilst youth workers demonstrated pragmatism in ensuring young people were fed, feelings of oppression were expressed due to a system that frames young people as the problem, as well as the challenge of addressing structural oppressions [65]. This is compounded further by the wider neoliberal context and impact on youth services [71,72]. Therefore, there are further opportunities to encourage young people to be active in creating a future where they can actualise their rights [42] and engage in democratic participation and collective action [39] to address issues of food insecurity.

Underpinning the research was the final theme of *learning*. Young people and youth workers reiterated the importance of learning in their experiences of youth work, especially in challenging issues of food insecurity. Education, especially informal education, is a fundamental principle of youth work [68]. Informal education prioritises learning with others, as well as the importance of the association between young people and youth workers to foster positive learning experiences starting where young people are at [64,68]. Previous research engaging young people in activities in a variety of settings, such as budgeting and cooking, highlights how food can become the tool to learn and to bridge gaps that encourage participation for all [60]. Responsive youth workers feel a responsibility to ensure young people learn but also eat [60]. Only when the foundations of youth work are built on experience, togetherness, and positive relationships can learning start to be explored [64]. What is of note, however, is that the learning opportunities discussed in this research focused on addressing the Personal and Cultural levels of oppression, rather than challenging the Structural [14]. Therefore, it is argued that youth work and other professions need go beyond a sticking plaster approach [27] to encourage opportunities for critical and global education [18]. In so doing, informal education can be mobilised to

identify oppressive relations of power, humanise oppressive experiences, and enfranchise through rights-based education, leading to positive social change and a more hope-filled future [61,79].

It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of the research here, especially in terms its small-scale nature. Such is the case with phenomenological methodology that generalisations to larger populations would not highlight young people's individual stories [88]. It was important in this research that these young people's voices were heard. It is also recognised that as per the thematic analysis approach, the themes presented are representative of those most common in the talk of young people, and therefore alternative narratives have not been attended to. Additional research with larger sample sizes would be beneficial to further explore young people's perceptions and experiences of food insecurity in different local, national, and global contexts, as well as allowing scope for alternative perspectives and themes. In so doing, this would enhance the transferability and generalisability of the research findings. A more diverse sample of research participants would also aid in also ensuring that under-represented voices of young people are included in debate on this issue [76], especially as young people experiencing food insecurity are likely to be affected by multiple inequalities [42].

5. Conclusions

Youth work makes a difference to those who voluntarily engage in it [63]. The practice of youth work assists in creating relational spaces that foster enquiry [62], so that the stories of young people who experience inequality, such as food insecurity, can be told [67]. The research has demonstrated the importance and interconnectedness of the youth work relationship, in order to bring young people together, foster learning, and challenge the sense of otherness caused by experiences of food insecurity. However, whilst young people and youth workers are aware of the structural determinants of food insecurity, there is scope to move beyond a sticking paster approach that provides free food in order to challenge neoliberal policies that can lead to a sense of disempowerment. This is not to claim that youth work is the only way of offering any guarantee of bringing about change, but this research and others [60,66], for example, suggests that a youth work approach can be beneficial in engaging with marginalised young people who would otherwise not access support. The research therefore advocates that other professions who engage with young people and socially excluded groups focus on the importance of *togetherness*, *relationships*, and *learning* to encourage a sense of empowerment and to challenge issues of social injustice. This cannot be done in isolation as food insecurity is a global issue, and so there are also further opportunities to engage young people in forms of global youth work [16–18] to bring about change.

We return here to words of a young person from the research: "*they've done us over really; it needs to change so the next generation don't suffer like this*". This research therefore advocates for a more empowering model of youth work and other forms of work with young people more generally. A model that encourages critical challenge of the systemic political, economic, and social origins of food insecurity and involves ensuring young people are at the heart of advocating and instigating structural change to address social injustice thus ensures everyone has access to food, for this generation and the next.

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