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## “The lunchroom is dirty and the food is nasty”: Ethical Dilemmas in Conducting Qualitative Food Studies Research in Detroit and New York City Public Schools

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### **Abstract**

In this article, reflecting critically on past school food studies and considering the landscape of qualitative methods, notably youth participatory action research methodologies, the authors share methodological suggestions for centering social justice and sustainability with the lived experience of youth by drawing on their critical qualitative research in Detroit and New York City public schools. We advance an analytic framework that aims to center youth voices and solutions to social problems such as food justice and equity. To this end we call for attention to human rights, youth participatory research, and relational ethics as part of our intention to center youth voices. Furthermore, the article emphasizes how this critical research with urban communities, ought to, and can, directly involve young people in schools together with their teachers and school leaders working and learning to take actions in support of the health, strength, and sustainability of their communities.

### **Keywords**

food studies, human rights, urban youth, school lunch, relational ethics

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# **“The lunchroom is dirty and the food is nasty”: Ethical Dilemmas in Conducting Qualitative Food Studies Research in Detroit and New York City Public Schools**

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In this article, reflecting critically on past school food studies and considering the landscape of qualitative methods, notably youth participatory action research methodologies, the authors share methodological suggestions for centering social justice and sustainability with the lived experience of youth by drawing on their critical qualitative research in Detroit and New York City public schools. We advance an analytic framework that aims to center youth voices and solutions to social problems such as food justice and equity. To this end we call for attention to human rights, youth participatory research, and relational ethics as part of our intention to center youth voices. Furthermore, the article emphasizes how this critical research with urban communities, ought to, and can, directly involve young people in schools together with their teachers and school leaders working and learning to take actions in support of the health, strength, and sustainability of their communities.

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## **Introduction**

As critical qualitative educational researchers and former K-12 teachers (Sophia and John) and a mental health professional in student support roles (Kristen), who have engaged in fieldwork in middle and high schools, we know the central importance of school lunchrooms as sites of identity negotiations and power struggles for minoritized youth.<sup>1</sup> While lunchrooms have been researched by educational ethnographers as sites of possibility for youth and productive identity development (Dickar, 2008; Nesper, 1997), additional images emerge when we think about the inner-workings of school lunchroom relations, and specifically young

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<sup>1</sup> By “minoritized,” we draw from Gutierrez and Rogoff’s (2003) work that posits that the practice of labeling students’ cultural differences with individual traits such as being “low income,” “at risk,” or any “othering” language is part of the institutional ascription process of identity that allows for hierarchies in schools and society (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). This ascription process positions young people as outside the educational policy-making process and reproduces inequality in schools and society (Rodriguez, 2017a).

peoples' opportunity for food and nourishment in K-12 public schools in the U.S. We start from the assumption/premise that school lunchrooms—and the food options therein—intersect with larger philosophical, ethical, and sociological questions about educational nourishment for minoritized youth. In other words, scholars have noted the low-quality food and abysmal, “toxic” conditions that minoritized youth encounter so much so that they avoid lunchrooms (Laird, 2018, p. 19). These conditions raise questions about American cultural priorities when children and youth not only lack nourishing food but also educational environments. Educational and childhood studies research is emergent on the topic of food studies in relation to social justice matters, and more recently, scholars raise philosophical questions about school food and children's livelihood in the school environment (Laird, 2018). In addition, youth participatory action research (YPAR) has engaged in youth-oriented participatory work outside of the school setting (Cairns, 2018), and yet little efforts to reflect upon methodological dilemmas exist. Yet, scholars attempt to advance the importance of food studies with research in schools (Abala, 2013; Nocella II, Ducre, & Lupinacci, 2017; Rice & Rud, 2018; Robert & Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Sumner, 2016). This diverse critical scholarship is situated at the complex intersections of food, schools, and addressing systemic inequities reproduced via schooling and in particular school food. Aligned with this previous research, we argue with Laird's (2018) amplification of Weaver-Hightower's (2011) call to stop “trivializing and deriding school food and food practices as mere utilitarian distractions and start taking them seriously as objects of study” (pp. 19-20). Thus, we identify a gap in the previous literature related to methodological reflections in education research, and ethical concerns about qualitatively and critically examining food in relation to children and school food as a human rights concern.

Few studies examine how diverse school experiences for children everywhere ought to include—access to food, and knowledge of food production, distribution, preparation, and consumption, that is both culturally appropriate and nourishing. Weaver-Hightower (2011) called for educational researchers to take school food more seriously, asserting: “Food is a basic aspect of life, intimately tied to our survival, our sense of self, our beliefs, our connection to or disconnection from others, and our impact on the natural world” (p. 15). Continuing this call and building upon school the school food research (Laird, 2013; Rice & Rud, 2018; Sumner, 2016), in this article we examine our experiences with food research studies about youth in schools using qualitative methods. We underscore the predominant mode of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) that attempts to center students' lived experiences in relationship to food. We offer a critique of previous usage of YPAR as it has not tended to emergent methodological dilemmas during food research with youth but rather reports findings from youth-centered research, which we acknowledge is important for understanding their inequitable school experiences broadly. Another area of literature we critically review is the evaluation, or program implementation, that does not offer strategies for methodologies but rather describes various programs and their impact on youth perceptions of food. Many of these programs are not in urban communities where schools are high-needs, impoverished, maintain a revolving door of leaders and teachers, and have poor quality food and minimal to abominable options (Laird, 2018).

### **Aims and Contribution**

After a short review of influential educational and social research on food studies with youth, we turn to our own critical qualitative school-based food research experiences in two urban contexts, Detroit and New York, to share how tensions and challenges emerged from the authors' experiences as qualitative educational researchers. Among us, we have conducted research with youth in Title I public schools and community-based organizations dedicated to

food security issues. We expand previous research by advancing a unique glimpse into how a human rights framework, coupled with a relational ethics framework to dismantle power hierarchies of researcher/researched moves toward a methodological ethic of care (Rodriguez, 2020), and argue for centering of youth perspectives. Furthermore, our work is situated working with social justice and sustainability efforts of diverse food producers and the global right for all to healthy food economies and food sovereignty movements (Shiva, 2007). To guide this inquiry, we ask: How can engagement with qualitative methods move toward deeper diverse understandings of how food is experienced by youth in K-12 schools? By diverse, we mean considering how youth access food, gain critical consciousness about its production, distribution, and consumption in a larger capitalist economy. And of equal importance: How can healthy and nourishing food—that is sustainable and reflects a diversity of cultural practices and communities—can be included as educational spaces commit to initiating, developing, and sustaining empowering education through local food sovereignty? Within this, we argue that an ethical, human rights framework on food studies and education research coupled with a deeper relational engagement with youth through participatory methods can shift the current knowledge about culturally appropriate and healthy food, and respond to the systematic political and economic rationalization for not feeding our communities.

### **Review of Relevant Scholarship**

Previous literature on the topic of food studies is emergent and while growing in sociology, policy studies, anthropology, and even philosophy the research in the field of education is limited and even fewer in educational research methods. Furthermore, knowing our interest in foregrounding youth voices in food studies research, we situate this methodological paper in the context of literature on food studies and school lunch as well as participatory research with youth—to augment youth voice in the context of a socio-political issue such as food justice.

### **Political and Philosophical Engagements in Food Studies and Schools**

It is clear from literature in food studies that school food (Poppendieck, 2013) and in particular lunch offers an entry point for considering larger political questions surrounding health, wellness, and community justice (Best, 2017; Cairns, 2017, 2018; Gaddis, 2019; Gaddis & Coplen, 2018; Gibson & Dempsey, 2015; Pike & Kelly, 2014; Rowe & Rocha, 2015) ethical research with young people on food related issues, that is, school lunch, food scarcity, and food deserts in urban context. The term food desert can be misleading, but we utilize the term to refer to geographic locations with a lack of access to affordable fresh, healthy, and culturally relevant foods and instead mostly consist of fast food, dollar stores, gas stations, liquor stores.

Weaver-Hightower's (2011) conceptual piece discusses how food and school lunch has received little consideration in the humanities and social sciences because educators often view food as "utilitarian" (p. 15). This means that school lunch, rather than the food served during it, is merely "grudgingly endured so that children will not be distracted" by hunger (p. 16). The author exposes an uncritical perspective that excludes thinking about the food and larger conditions youth endure in/during school (lunch) limits deeper understanding of the political and philosophical ideologies that intersect with school lunch, especially in high poverty urban schools where young people are often forced to eat, if at all, unhealthy options in unsanitary conditions. Moreover, Weaver-Hightower's (2011) provides a detailed list of reasons food should be given more serious attention by education researchers and others:

School food affects students' health, school food affects student attainment and achievement, school food affects teaching and administration, schools teach children about food [via hidden curriculum], school food is a window into identity and culture, school food affects the environment and animals, school food is a big business, school food is a window into educational politics and policy, school food affects social justice. (p. 15)

These concerns are significant, particularly in the Title I, urban food desert contexts where we have conducted research. Often, the conditions of the school, including the access, production, distribution, and consumption of (un)healthy food options, mirror larger systemic oppression that minoritized urban youth encounter in public schools.

Furthermore, Laird (2013) theorizes educational nourishment as a larger political, economic, and environmental concern, and a concern that should be taken up by educational philosophers and researchers to connect food studies and school lunch with ethical dimensions of schooling. Similarly, Rud (2013) inquires how we might infuse nourishment as part of everyday living during education. Rud calls attention to how most research (and educational practice) ignores how "inquiry into health, the body, and aspects of the good life that are not afforded through other kinds of classroom discussion" (p. 85). These recent discussions about the ethics of food studies and school lunch interest us for the ways in which they center a broader understanding of school lunch and nourishment of children and youths' lives. We return to these larger philosophical questions in relation to methodological ones. From this previous research, we urge scholars to link the political with youth participatory methods so that youth voices and critical consciousness development about the diverse issues related to food, that is, access, production, distribution, and consumption can be made visible as a social justice human rights effort. As such, we discuss how youth participatory frameworks in research methodology are a site of possibility for including youth voice in ethical inquiry in food studies research.

### **The Promise and Challenges of Youth Participation: Toward a Participatory Relational Research Ethic**

In this article, we build upon and extend the scholarship related to youth and food studies research by advancing a multidimensional analytic framework that includes three parts. First, we leverage a participatory human rights framework that centers food insecurity and a lack of access as a social justice. Food security is a human rights issue and calls for youth-centered research methods, and a relational ethic for researchers to embody. Second, we argue linking YPAR with this human rights orientation enables researchers to consider the political and philosophical issues that are crucial for promoting equitable social justice research with youth on this topic. This section provides an overview of the interdisciplinary field of youth-led research, specifically, advancing a United Nations human rights' approach to youth voice and engagement, youth-led research in education, youth participatory research (YPAR). Third, we discuss how important the relational dimensions of research are as part of youth-centered food studies research since they live the experiences of inequitable policies and practices that relate to access to healthy food and environments.

### **UNHCR Global Focus on Youth Voice**

We begin with the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as central to the emergence of and conceptualization of youth participation in relation to research. We then shift to a select review of youth participatory action research organized by

three pillars: (1) a praxis of personal and social transformation, (2) a commitment to democratic participation, and (3) youth voices are central (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Both sections attend to two key themes that the present work builds upon and expands through relational and participatory ethics: youth voice and youth as active agents. We offer a participatory relational ethic as a process centering and amplifying youth voice. An aim of this work is to articulate the conceptual grounding and methodological implications of this process anchored in a view of young people as policy actors, thinkers, and makers.

The UNCRC explicitly connected youths' rights and responsibilities within a framework of civic participation and can be viewed as the genesis for much of the policy and scholarship that attends to the role of young people in the public sphere. The UNCRC participation framework relied on (1) providing opportunities for youth voice and (2) ensuring that youths' voices will be heard by those in power. The assumption that youth participation is a political right lent credence and urgency for decision-makers, governments, organizations, and institutions to consider and support youth participation in civic and political activities (Goessling, 2019; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Subsequently, there have been increasing attention to and calls for the amplification of youth voice and perspective from university-community coalitions, government agencies, to the non-profit sector (Delgado & Staples, 2008; Graham, 2007; Ilkiw, 2010).

### **Youth-Led Research and Methodological Dilemmas**

Similar to these UNHCR tenets that center youth,, additional youth-driven research initiatives emerged as strategies to engage young people as capable actors and empower them to create community-level change, engage in positive youth development, and civic engagement or catalyzing youth political participation, and develop solutions for issues important to them (Van Benschoten, 2000; Christens & Dolan, 2011; Ginwright et al., 2006; Kirshner, Pozzoboni, & Jones, 2011; Yu & Lewis-Charp, 2006; Zeldin, 2004). A youth-focused approach to research carries significant conceptual and methodological implications. Grounded in the assumption that youth are both valuable holders of knowledge and experts on their experience reflects epistemological and ontological commitments while the overarching social justice agenda speaks to the collaborative and action-oriented nature of this paradigm, and the need for researchers to critical reflect upon their relationships and the ethics of youth research. We believe these dilemmas and decisions in our methods raise ethical questions that youth scholars must grapple with, such as: What does an authentic youth voice look and feel like? How does one facilitate and assess meaningful collaboration? What are the conditions and practices that generate power sharing in adult-youth relationships? These questions are central to our conceptual and methodological exploration in this article because they speak to the dilemmas, we faced in our research that we describe below, that is, we conducted critical research, but the participatory, human rights dimensions were less salient in our work (and completely absent from the larger body of scholarship in which we situate this work). Furthermore, we consider the relationships a central piece of ethical methodological practice on food studies research with youth.

### **YPAR and Critical, Relational Possibilities**

To build on youth-led research, YPAR approaches are critical to explore in tandem with the above human rights framework because such approaches center youth voice within social justice and emancipatory aims, critical participatory action research is an "epistemology that engages research design, methods, analyses, and products through a lens of democratic participation" (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012, p. 171). In PAR projects, researchers work

alongside participants as co-researchers to democratize knowledge production through a science “*of the oppressed rather than for the oppressed*” that ignites personal and social transformation (Martín Baró, 1994); YPAR operates as a strategy for youth-based policy making, community organizing, and learning (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), where youth can engage in becoming social scientists about socially meaningful issues (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016)

Building on this previous YPAR literature, we align with Goessling’s (2020) conceptualization of three pillars to a YPAR approach: (1) a praxis of personal and social transformation; (2) a commitment to democratic participation in studying social problems; and (3) youth voices are central to identifying the problems and posing solutions (Cammarota & Fine 2008; Mirra & Garcia, 2017).

The first YPAR pillar prioritizes “a praxis of personal and social transformation,” which involves changes in individual consciousness coupled with action to create social change. Participatory action researchers approach social problems with a “critical bifocality” that attends to the intersection and interrelatedness of structural factors and peoples’ lived experiences (Weis & Fine, 2012). This pillar builds upon Freire’s (1970) approach to critical consciousness through praxis, cycles of action, and reflection. Working from the understanding of the interconnectedness of individuals and society, YPAR is a pedagogical approach “that connects learning to authentic purposes and real-world consequences and provides an engaging and effective approach to teaching and learning” (Wright, 2015, p. 9). In this way, YPAR is always more than a research approach, it is also a pedagogy and a theory of change for creating social justice and equity (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008).

The second YPAR pillar, “a commitment to democratic participation in studying social problems,” reflects researchers’ commitment to engaging in a collaborative process with young people that is rooted in an ethics of reciprocity and relationality. Democratic participation is an ideal that is neither automatic nor a static outcome to be achieved, rather it implies explicit attention to, interrogation of, and dismantling of uneven power relations among the research group. Cahill (2007) argues that participation must be a political stance rather than a strategy that implies consultation and tokenism which replicates, rather than undoes, uneven power relations. From this perspective, YPAR as democratic practice provides a counterhegemonic and decolonizing framework for youth engagement that builds the capacity of young people to analyze, envision, and transform their lives and communities.

YPAR’s third pillar, which is strongly connected to the first, “recognizes and centers the experiences and expertise of those directly affected by injustice and oppression.” Critical participatory action research begins with the assumption that marginalized groups possess valuable expertise about the social systems that oppress their lives and communities. Fine (2016) explained “that expertise is widely distributed but a particular wisdom about injustice is cultivated in the bodies and communities of those most intimately wounded by unjust conditions” (p. 358). This pillar reflects the understanding that youth have a right to participate and make decisions about policies and practices affecting their lives, which aligns with the UNCRC framework. These tenets of YPAR are central to our conceptual exploration here insofar as we believe that in order to have a transformative, democratic space of research youth voice must be centralized.

### **Ethical and Relational Dimensions of Youth-Centered Research**

The final dimension in our framework aligns with YPAR researchers committed to a feminist praxis and ethic of care, the relationships and responsibilities of working with rather than for young people and communities are centered, prioritized, and research develops from a place of concern and care (Cahill et al., 2010). Building from a view of YPAR as an embodied



transformative process of resistance, the relationships and solidarity are key to sustaining participation and action for social justice (Cerecer et al., 2011). YPAR as praxis provides scaffolding toward a collective of co-researchers who are co-learners and co-creators of a shared experience. From this perspective, collaboration is an ongoing negotiation of power that requires adult researchers to recognize youths' capacity and agency in meaningful ways. Relationships are sites of tension and possibility where power is an ongoing contestation and negotiation. The goal is not to "solve" power inequities – especially across race, class, gender identity, etc.— rather it is to grapple with their relationality, mutuality, interdependence, and in-between nature within a nexus of power (Rodriguez, 2020).

There is an ethical imperative for adult researchers working with young people to practice reflexivity and attend to their subjectivities throughout the research process. In her YPAR work with youth of color, Fernández (2018) described her process of attending to her "embodied subjectivities – my lived experiences, identities, and positionalities – as these surfaced when collaborating with Latinx youth in the re-drafting process for their mural design" (p. 223). Critical reflexivity provides a way to connect with one's embodied subjectivities is vital for understanding how research can affect young people and how young people inform and shape the research (Fernández, 2018). Further, Rodriguez (2020) argues for critical reflexivity when conducting research with minoritized youth in order to acknowledge shared stories of oppression and solidarity, which builds on a relational ethics of "disruption" in research methods. The disruption comes when researchers dismantle hierarchies and live in the tensions of inquiry (p. 257). These ethical and relational components are integral to our framework for youth-centered food studies research because central to human rights, YPAR approaches are that power relations are to some extent explicit and dismantled. These dynamics are mulled over and contemplated again and again by co-researchers in the evolving collaborative research process, which acknowledges on-going tensions and possibilities. We take these three overarching dimensions of a human rights approach, YPAR, and relational ethics as a guide, and next we reflect upon specific empirical examples of research with youth regarding food studies.

### **Methodological Tensions & Dilemmas in Researching Food with Youth: Perspectives from the Field**

To advance our framework for youth-centered food studies research, we contemplated our own previous research projects. Next, we think through tensions and dilemmas in our experiences, considering what we did and did not do to advance ethical, relational, and critical food studies research with and for youth. We examine our own critical qualitative school-based food research experience in two urban contexts, Detroit and New York, to share how tensions that emerged from the authors' experiences as qualitative educational researchers. Among us, we have conducted research with youth in Title I public schools and community-based organizations dedicated to food security issues. We offer a unique glimpse into how the specific human rights and relational ethics aspects of our framework help to address the need and desire to dismantle power hierarchies of researcher/researched and work toward a methodological ethic of care. In other words, developing our analytic framework for youth-centered food studies research was an iterative and reflexive process for us, as we maintained some of its commitments, and after reflecting on what we did/have and did not/have not done as researchers, it evolved to include a more robust account of the human rights focus on youth voices and the deeper relational ethics involved in youth-led and centered food studies research.

## Context, Research with Youth and Activist-Educators in Detroit, and Reflections (John)

As an educational researcher and urban education scholar-activist, I found myself asking questions about some of the most visceral ways children were being poisoned and weakened by the food they ate, the liquids they drank, and the air they were breathing. Following a critical sociology of education tradition, these questions were aimed at the systemic ways racism and classism were hard at work in schools and communities. Healthy food, clean air, and clean water are human rights for all; yet, in many of the schools in the US this right is far from being met. Turning to the human rights framework, *The Declaration of Nyéléni* (a declaration that emerged from a multinational symposium focused on food sovereignty, described below), defining such a human right, wrote: “A world where all peoples, nations and states are able to determine their own food producing systems and policies that provide every one of us with good quality, adequate, affordable, healthy, and culturally appropriate food” (Nyéléni, 2007, p. 2). While most school food research tends to focus on school lunches or need-based food assistance programs for breakfast (commonly known as free & reduced lunch), the research I was more interested in was in how and why local food systems had been transformed via commodification, monoculturalization, and in ways that systemically seemed to be making so many children and families sick rather than empowered. With such an interest in mind and at heart, I worked with students asking: How far away from healthy food are you? Moreover, how likely is it that we have access to, or in some cases knowledge of, culturally relevant affordable food ingredients and traditions?

Amidst the early decades of the twenty-first century, food may very well be a determining factor for human survival as a species. As food traditions rapidly monoculturalize, an associated loss of the health and healing wisdom of the elders in our communities occurs. Questions about food have become an educational imperative. While discourses of food security inform dominant discussions on food justice, hunger, and health, what is likely a stronger and more sustainable discourse for addressing food justice is the concept of sovereignty—or what activists and the International Peasant’s Movement, *La Via Campesina*, call food sovereignty (Nyéléni, 2007). In the village of Nyéléni in Sélingué, Mali in 2007 over 500 representatives of diverse grassroots organizations met in response to the growing experiences of local “capacities to produce healthy, good and abundant food...being threatened and undermined by neo-liberalism and global capitalism” (Nyéléni, 2007 p. 1). Recognizing collective wisdom and self-determination of the world’s women and indigenous cultures, they identified food sovereignty as having the “power to preserve, recover and build on our food producing knowledge and capacity” (Nyéléni, 2007, p. 1). While this particular gathering wasn’t the first of its kind, the participants produced *The Declaration of Nyéléni* (2007) within which they provide a succinct and widely used definition for food sovereignty. Nyéléni (2007)—the collective name decided upon by the group in honor of a legendary Malian woman who fed her people—define food sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (p. 1).

Building from the valuable information and language that food security research and policy has to offer, I was interested in learning more from how a very intentional group of local activists organized and subverted oppressive social, economic, and political systems to transform neighborhoods in Detroit, Michigan from food deserts dependent on imported unhealthy, cheap food to sovereign food systems with culturally relevant, nutritious, and affordable access to food. For the activist farmers in Detroit, in solidarity with *campesinos/as* around the world, the question became: How do we learn to prepare and grow culturally relevant and healthy food for ourselves? Furthermore, how can that food be part of a

pedagogical practice that addresses the cultural habits and subjectivities of colonization, racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and speciesism?

With an open-ended overarching question, the qualitative study evolved with high school students as co-researchers that were learning about place and community through a combination of interviews and observations in the food activism in Detroit. The study was shaped around finding meanings from and within the perspectives shared by a variety of interviewee participants, referred to in the research as narrators, involved in food systems and educational efforts that work toward establishing food security, and moving toward food sovereignty. The research grew out of a need to co-construct a meaningful curriculum with my students in Detroit, where they were learning to do research as part of their social studies and mathematics learning in high school. Living and working in Detroit, I realized how difficult it was to access food. I also could not help but take notice of the abundance of candy and fast food that children in the neighborhood and at school were eating on a regular basis in place of nutritious food. It would be all too common to blame parents or the children, and thus fall into the traps of deficit thinking. With a critical awareness of such systemic pitfalls in research, I set out to learn together with students and members of the community how we might better understand something we all depended on for an empowered life. A combination of my personal experience of living and teaching in Detroit set the context from which the activist-educator narrators (or in researcher terms—the interviewees) were selected. My life in Detroit also had impacted my subjectivity as I have been a witness to the impacts of how hunger masks itself in malnutrition in Detroit.

Initially with my students, we conducted a series of three-part semi-structured interviews with seven local activist-educators who were all part of a progressive educator network. Hereafter, these local activist-educators are referred to in this article as the narrators, which is chosen term used because of a qualitative decision to move away from terminology like “subjects” or “interviewees” and more closely depict the roles and agency in narrating important stories and the researchers were listening and learning (Mintz, 2004). The interviews were conducted under full consent from the narrators around the following three questions:

1. How did you come to find yourself working in education and dealing with food?
2. How would you describe the relationship between schools/education and food?
3. What is your vision for a role between food, community and schools?

The interviews did not stringently follow this protocol as each of the narrators interviewed offered a unique direction of questioning toward the activist-educator participants. Each interview was conducted at either the narrator’s place of employment or their home. The seven were chosen for the research specifically because they all lived and were involved in food and education in a food desert as activists and educators. The larger study examined food curriculum, and implications for educational leaders (researchers, teachers, administrators, and policy-makers) as we all learned more about: (a) the importance of a critical awareness of race, class, gender, and ability, (b) an emphasis on cultural relevance, diversity, and self-sufficiency as a goal for communities in food deserts, and (c) the importance of engaging youth in all aspects of food including and emphasizing schools.

There are many lessons learned for co-researching food and place in communities as part of a quasi-participatory study with youth; though, I was originally framing this project as a critical ethnography with youth as co-researchers. The project offered recommendations for education that supports food sovereignty and thus addresses how educators might best support students. Three recommendations that stood out from the research follow in no particular order.

First, schools should encourage young people toward an economic future in local entrepreneurial and agricultural practices that contribute to a direct reduction of dependency on exploitation of laborers and land or on sustenance from outsiders who have systematically failed and continue to fail the local community. Second, educational leaders could, and arguably should be, working to structure curriculum around the vitality, or potential vitality, of the local community in partnership with schools and how doing so exposes the politics of food while offering a solution, or even solutions, that simultaneously addresses local hunger, empowers students, and strengthens community. Third, and practically, educators and youth learned about and engaged in successful campaigns to eliminate foods and drinks with high sugar content, artificial preservatives, and artificial dyes from meals and from vending machines in schools. From this, educators can involve students in researching why such changes are being made as part of the curriculum and in what ways those changes support diversity and inclusion of their cultures in the schools.

The critical takeaways from the lessons in this research are important. The engagement among educators and youth, improving/enhancing curriculum, and engaging in action (i.e., campaigns) speak directly to the type of youth-centered, democratic shifts that can be the outcome of collaborative, participatory efforts. In this sense, students are not learning from top-down policy changes but rather they are actively taking part in the change. Since nutritious food is often systematically made inaccessible to children and families living in poverty, the curriculum of neighborhood schools can be refocused on reclaiming the food commons from food as a commodity controlled by corporations. If educators were to take seriously the revitalization of the commons and begin with food sovereignty in our communities, then every school should have a school garden, or farm. These sites could provide for healthy lunches that also serve as an experiential space for learning how to cultivate culturally appropriate and healthy food as a fundamental part of the curriculum.

Given these structural changes listed, maybe of most importance to us is that teaching and growing the curriculum around food can, and ought to be, an anti-capitalist, feminist, and anti-racist act of teaching all three of which reminds us that this work is intertwined with the ways that humans and more-than-human life suffer in all our communities. Food is inherently intersectional, and healthy eating should not be something afforded by privilege or look one way, often based on objectifying and incredibly alienating practices and ideals if not rethought as to how food can and ought to be sites of resistance to racism, sexism, classism, and more. (Harper, 2007; Reese, 2018; White, 2011).

In all cases, at the very least, school reform needs to commit to feeding children healthy food. Simultaneously, the curriculum ought to foster creativity, innovation, and ethics in rethinking farming and our food production practices including appropriate technologies like roof-top gardening, aquaponics, hydroponics, and other potentially sustainable and equitable practices for growing and distributing healthy, culturally appropriate food. This both responds to the economic recession as well as creates opportunities for young people to become producers of local healthy food and contribute to an economy of scale based on mutual success rather than exploitation and exportation. In summary, the overall strategies suggest requiring school leaders to push for policy reform and take actions toward directly feeding communities while supporting education that engages all students in such direct-action empowerment.

### **Context, Research with Youth in New York City, and Reflections (Sophia)**

As a former middle and high school teacher in the South Bronx, New York City, I came to work with urban schools from a teaching perspective while also studying sociology of education and policy studies. My larger interest was in how urban schools systematically undermined educational advancement and social mobility for youth of color (Rodriguez,

2017a). As a sociologist of education, I wondered and explored the significant factors related to poverty, that is, joblessness, food scarcity, single motherhood, and homelessness impacting urban youths' experiences in school (Wilson, 1996). Much of this literature focuses more on structural problems and taking holistic policy perspectives in society to target and address issues in urban communities (Wilson, 2010). From this foundation, I endeavored to understand youth perspectives, which are often left out of educational research, and theorized the concept of "youthspaces" (Rodriguez, 2017b), which attended to the materiality and life worlds of youth. While my interest in food studies was part of larger ethnographic research on urban youth experiences of inequity, systemic poverty, and discrimination in K-12 settings, the issue arose while researching in the South Bronx, where resources are scarce and healthy food options and school conditions are limited at best.

Like John, reflecting on the scarcity of access to healthy food for the youth I worked with led me to think about how such lack of access reflects larger American values toward minoritized communities of color in urban contexts, and the lack of access to healthy food in their neighborhoods and in their schools. At a time when the focus in educational reforms is on accountability and student achievement, considering how a young person might not do well on a standardized test or complete a worksheet might be because they did not have breakfast, or in many cases dinner the night before, seems far-fetched to some; however,, but as I worked with students in the Bronx as a middle school teacher and later as a researcher, I recall how difficult it was to even find food in the South Bronx neighborhood—a historically disenfranchised community that my principal used to remind us was one of the poorest congressional districts in the country—let alone find *healthy* food. Most of the nearby bodegas sold endless bags of hot Cheetos and purple or pink liquid that I think was a hybrid of juice and soda. To this day, I am not sure. I would bring meals from home for the long days spent there, but what choices did the kids have? As a teacher, I could spend money on fruit, granola bars, and bagels for the kids, and they would never turn down those options, but I constantly wondered what food they eat if there are not even grocery stores in the neighborhood? In critically reflecting, it is important to note that I do/did not have a particular agenda or judgment about the hot Cheetos; rather, I was concerned with the lack of access to healthy options, which had led to sickness, and death across the South Bronx community for decades (Rivera, 2017). At the time of this project in 2017, students participated in city council meetings about food equity and conducted research in their math class about the topic. They learned that over 1 million New Yorkers were considered "food insecure," which refers to the difficulty accessing food "due to lack of resources."

While my research focuses on larger questions about minoritized youth experiences of inequity and discrimination in high-poverty urban public schools, the data I reflect upon in this article is from a subset of interviews and questionnaires from one class of eleventh graders in a high-poverty, high needs high school in the South Bronx (N=11). This class was working through topics of interest as part of a social justice curriculum with their math and advisory teacher. I explored issues related to school lunch with this subset of students. Youth in this group attended city council meetings on the school lunch improvement in the school district as well. The questions in the interview and questionnaire relate to the youths' critical perspectives on school lunch in their school. For example, students were asked: (1) What is there to eat at school? (2) Do you eat lunch at school? (3) What does your lunchroom look like? (4) What type of food is near the school, and or near your house? The issues they raise traverse similar schools in the district, which is why a few of the students were invited to be a part of the city council's school lunch improvement conversation. This city council project included youth participants, which was interesting for the youth in this project because the city council

acknowledged food as a “human right,” but youth participation was constrained and did not result in youth-led initiatives and policymaking.<sup>2</sup>

My subjectivity is implicated in this project and a producer of knowledge with a desire to use qualitative inquiry to imagine a better world (Denzin, 2017; Peshkin, 1988). As a former teacher in the South Bronx, in a building very similar to where these kids attend school, it was hard for me not to recall the roaches scurrying across the floor in the lunchroom or the rat feces that was found in food that had been served in that school. Listening to youth stories nearly a decade after my teaching experience, it was apparent that “aint shit changed,” as one teacher said related to the low-quality food options and overall school conditions.

Youth reported things when asked about the food options on the questionnaire such as, “It’s nasty,” “IT’S TERRIBLE,” [emphasis in all capital letters from youth on questionnaire], and “There’s really just pizza or gross meat.” With these responses, the follow up questions from questionnaire and interview data asked youth if they eat at school, and largely they replied “no.” When asked what food was available to them in the neighborhood, many mentioned the abundance of “chips,” which I learned meant a wide array of things from hot Cheetos to actual chips. They often ate these things because they were 25 cents in the nearby bodegas. Additionally, they said there were fast food chains near the school, that is, Dunkin Donuts, McDonald’s, or Subway, which they sometimes would get if they had money or if a teacher took them. The youth responses varied in terms of how many were able to acquire food from places other than the school versus not eating anything at all. However, the choice to eat at school was generally not the first or any choice for the youth.

As I reflected, two concerns emerged. First, I thought about how youth voices were missing from the open-ended questionnaire. I assumed the school lunch was abysmal, and even though youth confirmed this perspective, the questions did not allow for their stories to emerge with enough rich, thick description to understand their everyday realities (Geertz, 1973). Second, I considered how this study could have been participatory and contained a structural plan for change in the school where could draw on their personal prior knowledge and provide solutions to the school-based problem of healthy food options and extend to the community given their participation and consciousness from city council meetings. Instead, youth attended city council meetings but were not able to extend the new knowledge to city, community, or school wide transformation. While there were many barriers to this, a particular approach with youth-centered data and knowledge to share at the conclusion could have been attempted. Additionally, youth voice was centered and sought out in this project, but I did not actively seek additional pathways to promote youth-led solutions, in part because of the structural constraints in a large urban district.

The reality was that the commitment to healthy food as an educational reform issue was not a central priority in the district, community, or the school except among some of the teachers. The burden to talk about these issues often fell on individual teachers along with worrying about all the factors that impact their schooling experience, including food injustice and insecurity. And while a few youths had the opportunity to attend city council meetings on the issue, it remains unresolved with various calls for the department of education to eliminate pizza and sweetened milk for more healthy options such as salad bars. Involving school leaders, and district coalitions, could be a promising avenue for a future participatory project on the topic with youth.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on this initiative, see: <https://council.nyc.gov/data/food-equity/>. At the time of this research in 2017, youth had engaged in limited participation beyond attending city council meetings. Food equity remains an issue in New York City public schools with evolving interventions and plans.

### **Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion: Toward a Relational Ethics of Food Studies with Youth**

Above, we shared our respective contexts, studies with youth, and reflections considering our multi-layered analytic framework that combines central tenets of the UNHCR perspective on youth voice and civic engagement, YPAR paradigms, and what we argue as the relational ethics of critical qualitative research. We needed to consider the fundamental and philosophical aspects of this type of research. We also wanted to bridge the philosophical with the methodological dimensions of food studies research with youth. While John and Sophia both engaged in critical ethnography and valued youth perspectives, our studies were quasi-participatory in the research process and not always explicit throughout the process. John had significant political and philosophical commitments that were brought to the larger project and activism for food justice in Detroit but reflected upon the limited ways youth consistently engaged in the research development and dissemination of findings. Missed opportunities to further engage school leaders and educators in youths' findings occurred, but could certainly be rectified with more explicit commitments to the participatory dimensions of our framework; John built strong relationships with youth, again centering reflection and relational ethics within the participatory process was needed and arguably would be invaluable to any local food sovereignty curriculum that included food as part of the relational ethics inextricable from the lives and experience of the youth involved.

Similarly, Sophia reflected on the shortcomings of the research in relation to our evolving framework. While Sophia lacked the deeper political and philosophical knowledge about food justice at the time and human rights approaches to young peoples' lives compared to John<sup>1</sup>, the project involved youth who collected data and attended council meetings related to healthy food in New York City. While youth participated to this extent, that is, collecting data, they were not involved in analysis or dissemination of the research, especially given the lack of participatory approaches. This latter point made quasi-participatory aspects limited in scope. In Sophia's research food study was an important aspect of youths' lives in high poverty urban schools, but often felt like a low priority both in the research and in the context of the school given the culture of discipline, high teacher turnover, and low-quality curriculum, which are common constraints in urban public schools. Despite a deep care and concern for high school youth in Sophia's research, the relational ethics we offer in our framework were limited. In both our cases, we may have believed in dismantling research hierarchies, and disrupting status quo approaches to research (even with our larger commitments in critical ethnographies, but in practice and implementation, we succumbed to common mishaps in qualitative research that seeks youth input, and then fails to be held answerable to the communities we serve. As part of our critical reflexive methodological practice; however, we aimed to develop a framework that could potentially account for the things we missed in our research with youth in food studies.

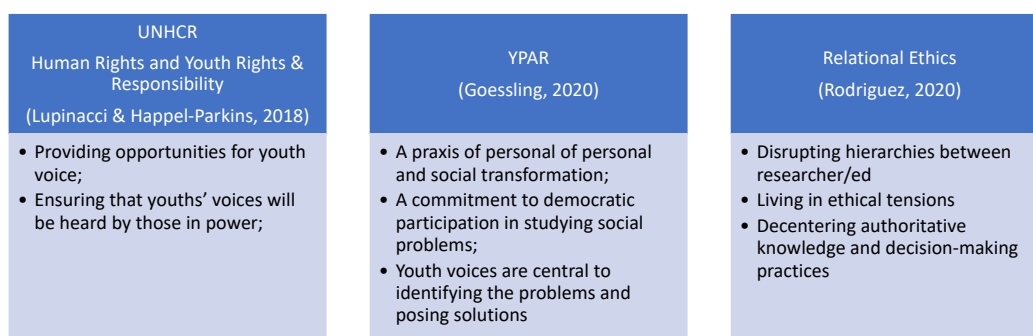
To summarize our framework, we developed Figure 1. What follows is our unfinished conclusions about how this framework advances youth-centered food studies research. Combining aspects from UNHCR, specifically about youth voice, rights, and responsibility, YPAR's commitment or democratic participation in studying social problems and posing solutions, and a deeper relational ethics for critical qualitative research enabled us to accomplish two things. First, augment our reflexive methodological practice by unpacking what we did and do not do to advance youth-centered food studies research. Second, we expanded and enhanced these interdisciplinary frameworks (UNHCR and human rights educational research) and the much-discussed YPAR by engaging methodological reflexivity and relational ethics that decenter us as authoritative knowledge-producers. We urge critical youth-centered researchers to continue these practices and live in the tensions that we reflected

upon here. Thinking globally and locally about food equity and food studies research will be an on-going social problem.

### Figure 1

*Youth-Centered Food Studies Research: An Analytic Framework*

## Youth-centered food studies research: A framework



In addition to this framework overall, we argue that the focus on relational ethics and living in tensions in youth-centered research will be applicable for critical qualitative researchers with/beyond food studies. As such, we problematized our positionality as researchers in our urban contexts and engaged with/moved beyond acknowledging power dynamics and positionality to call for a framework that centers human rights, youth voice, and relational ethics for food research with young people. We base our call on the need to center ethics and access to food as a human right, and as a significant barrier to the schooling experiences of youth living in high poverty and attending high needs schools. Clandinin and colleagues (2016) recently commented on the importance of naming our power positions in research and moving toward a relational ethics stance that informs our research methodologies. They argue, “We need to learn to linger in the relational tensions shaped by our ethical stance. We need to attend to the ethical shaping of our research puzzles and our unfolding work. Relational ethics are lived and informed by the messiness of lives and living and the tensions this calls forth” (as cited in Rodriguez, 2020). These authors argue that these relational tensions also “live within us” and challenge our own sense of ethics even if there is not an intention to resolve them. These authors underscore the relational tensions—tensions that come alive through troubling research topics such as the scarcity of nourishing food for youth we have encountered.

As qualitative researchers, calling attention to our ethics renders visible our values and commitments to viewing nourishing food and options within the conditions of school a fundamental human right. Across our research contexts, we paid attention to food injustice, and in Author 2’s case there was a direct attempt to co-research and target social change at the local level through specific school-based campaigns and learning opportunities for school leaders and educators. Despite Author 1’s attention to youth experiences, the lack of participatory framework and specifically targeting a structural change in the school or district



left the issue one that was researched and engaged with by youth without shifting consciousness of school leaders or district-level personnel.

This article, reflecting critically on past school food studies and considering the landscape of qualitative methods, notably the potential of critical youth participatory methodologies, calls for centering social justice and sustainability with the lived experience of youth. Furthermore, the article emphasizes how this research ought to and can directly involve young people in schools together with their teachers and school leaders working and learning to take actions in support of the health, strength, and sustainability of their communities. As noted earlier, the promise of YPAR and involving democratic conceptions of research helps to dismantle hierarchical researcher/participant dualisms and potentially centers transformative dimensions of research. Following a commitment from the authors to democracy we recognize that democratic participation is about a process, not a goal or outcome. The most distinct aspect of YPAR is the role of adult co-researchers and the explicit power relations involved, with most projects taking place in schools or community settings where the adults also have institutional authority over the youth, in addition to power relations inherent to intergenerational collaborations. Relationships between and across the researcher and youth co-researchers are sites of tension and possibility, as this is where power is negotiated. From this stance, the researcher's goal is not to "solve" power inequities – especially across race, class, gender identity, etcetera — rather it is to grapple with their relationality, mutuality, interdependence, and in-between nature within a nexus of power (Cahill, 2007)—to live in the tensions as part of our relational ethics.

Researching food and school lunch issues cannot happen in isolation due to the myriad of factors impacting children and youth living in high poverty neighborhoods in urban contexts such as Detroit and New York City, where we have collectively worked for over a decade. However, without centering food scarcity as a social justice and human rights issue, researchers and educators miss the detrimental impact it has on youths' daily lives and school experiences. Much of the literature mentioned in sociology and education focuses on larger issues of poverty and inadequacy from deficit based perspectives, and many of the interventions are also aligned with what Tuck (2009) has called "damage-centered" research, which Paris (2019) argues is a type of research (and largely part of the normative practice of educational and sociological research) that has "been waged for centuries against Indigenous, Black, and other people of color by the academic settler colonial project" (p. 219). Instead, we argue that centering food insecurity as a social justice and human rights issue from youth perspectives accounts for the abandonment of communities such as those we have worked with in urban context and potentially centers the experiences of youth in the larger context of the policy abandonment, discrimination, and lack of access and equity in public schools in large urban centers such as Detroit and New York City. Centering food injustice and insecurity, first and examining communities and schools through youth perspectives is a necessary step toward honoring the resistance and social movements these youths have the promise of engaging in. As researchers and educators, this aligns with the relational ethics mentioned above regarding the tensions and messiness of such approaches.

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