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For the Love of Land and People: An Evaluation of The Food Project as an Empowering Youth Development Program

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FOR THE LOVE OF LAND AND PEOPLE: AN EVALUATION OF THE FOOD PROJECT AS AN EMPOWERING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Emily Walls

It's a cloudy, almost rainy day and I'm 15 years old. I file off a bus with 29 other people who I've never met. We're in the suburban, almost rural town of Ipswich, Massachusetts. Most of us shuffle over and sit under a large, almost circus-like tent set up to the side of a 3 acre farm. We are greeted with relentless enthusiasm by the program staff. It's my first job, but today doesn't feel like I'm going to work. I get put into a team called a "crew", who apparently I'll be working with for the rest of the summer. I am quiet and nervous; everything is new and strange and I don't know what to make of any of it. But hey, at least I'll be getting paid?



Tent on the Wenham Land



Youth Crew on the Ingalls Land

A few weeks in and today my crew is out amongst the basil, weeding and pruning the plants. The weeding is easy; I run my hands through the soil, shifting it around and aerating it, all while dislodging weeds. The rain causes the soil to stick to my hands, coating them in mud. I look up and one of my crewmates is exclaiming in alarm. The muddy soil has turned treacherous and she has sunk into the path between the farm beds. The crew rushes over to help and we get her out, only... her shoes are left behind in the mud! We grab them and head to the relative safety of the tent. We are wet and muddy, but I can't help but feel closer to these strangers who make up my crew

Today is the last day of my summer job and it is our Family Feast celebration. I'm surrounded by all of these people I've gotten to know this summer and a bunch of our family and friends. My crew is going to perform a skit about what we've learned about sustainable agriculture this summer, but really I'm just excited to get to dig into the food! It is fun and bittersweet. Goodbyes take several minutes as everyone tries to hug everyone else. This summer has been even more than I imagined it could be, I hope I can return again!



North Shore Family Feast

For the Love of Land and People

Emily Walls

The Food Project is an urban agriculture and youth development organization based in Boston, Massachusetts. Founded in 1991, the organization brings together youth from across urban and suburban divides to work on their farms each summer. The Food Project is a model for urban agriculture youth development programs across the country, spreading their methods to other organizations and providing resources. Organizations that have either been founded by former Food Project staff or gotten training from The Food Project include Common Good City Farm in Washington D.C., Growing Places Indy, in Indianapolis, IN and Urban Roots in Austin, Texas.¹ The question then becomes is The Food Project an effective empowerment organization? What aspects of their methods represent positive empowerment and should be utilized in other organizations? What aspects of their methods are exclusionary or harmful? What does The Food Project need to do to rectify these problems? I will attempt to answer these questions by analyzing online and print resources such as manuals and videos on youth empowerment that The Food Project puts out, as well as the stories of youth as who have participated in the program.

In this paper, I will use Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE) as a methodology to evaluate the successes of The Food Project and to understand the critical places where The Food Project needs to improve. CYE is a set of six dimensions to assess effective youth empowerment organizations. I will demonstrate the strengths and critiques of The Food Project in each dimension of CYE; both what I see as evaluations that need to be made as well as the critiques and strengths put forth by the youth themselves. I will work to put forth

a complex picture of The Food Project programs which both capitalizes on and contextualizes youth's insider perspective. I hope to show that The Food Project youth programs demonstrate effective empowerment because they successfully create safe spaces, engage youth in work that is meaningful to them, and give youth the confidence and skills to effect change in their world.

Background:

Everything at The Food Project comes back to the land. Therefore, it makes sense to start with the land on which The Food Project is built and the history that is buried there. Many of Boston's neighborhoods have strong connections to race and class such as the Italian North End, the poor Irish Southie or the elite Beacon Hill. As Michael Conzen and George Lewis put it, "Ethnic segregation has been a social condition of Boston ever since the Irish arrived in the 1840s."² While the identities of the neighborhoods shift over time as immigrant populations move in and move around, the separation still remains. In 1970, "Blacks [were] more segregated in Boston than in most other large U.S. metropolitan areas, in the South as well as the North," with a dissimilarity index of 91.4.³ This means that 91.4% of people would need to move between neighborhoods in order to have white and black people evenly distributed across Boston. Nearly all of Boston's black population lived within the confines of the Roxbury neighborhood.⁴ This is the segregated Boston of 1974 that was met with Judge W. Arthur Garrity's ruling in *Morgan v. Hennigan* that Boston schools were unequally segregated and

¹ The Food Project. "Annual Report 2012," Accessed December 10, 2013, <https://thefoodproject.org/sites/default/files/AnnualReport2012.pdf>

² Michael P. Conzen and George King Lewis. *Boston: a geographical portrait*. Ballinger Publishing Company, 1976. 36

³ Ibid 38

⁴ To see maps of Boston's segregation through the decades see: https://sites.tufts.edu/gis/files/2013/11/Colton_Paige.pdf

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needed to be integrated by busing. It was this Boston that would become a warzone in the aftermath of that ruling.

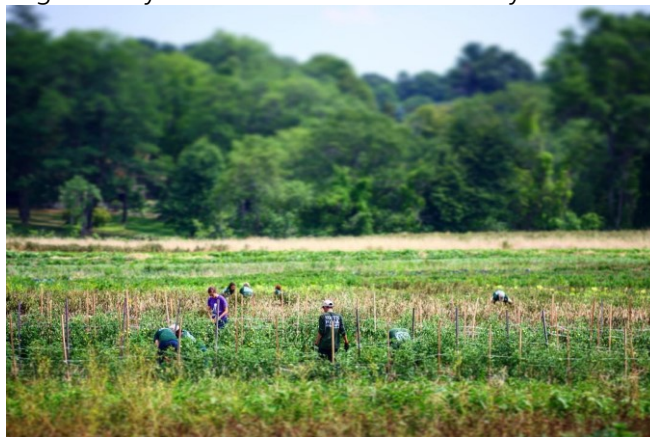
The plan was to integrate schools by busing some white students from South Boston to Roxbury schools and busing some black students from Roxbury into South Boston. This plan was met with resistance and outright violence. South Boston residents surrounded the South Boston high school protesting the court order. On their way back to Roxbury, buses full of black children were attacked by white adults and teenagers and pelted with eggs and rocks. Black and white parents feared for the safety of their children. Perpetually high racial tension at South Boston High School results in 10 to 15 fights on a normal day.⁵ One of such fight ended in Michael Faith, a white student, getting stabbed by a black student. As white students left and the rumors spread, South Boston residents surrounded the school, refusing to let the black students out of the school. Phyllis Ellison, a black student bused to South Boston recounted:

I remember the police cars coming up the street, attempting to, and [the protesters] turning over the police cars. I was just amazed that they could do something like that. So they tried—the police tried to get horses up. They wouldn't let the horses get up. They stoned the horses. They stoned the cars. And I thought that day that we would never get out of South Boston High School.⁶

A rescue had to be launched with decoy buses driving up to the front of the school to distract the protesters so that the black students could

be snuck out the back, onto additional buses, and driven safely back to Roxbury.

This is Boston. This is the history buried in its soil. Segregation in Boston has become less stark over the years, with the segregation index dipping to 67.8 in 2010, but a segregation index of over 60 is still considered very high.⁷ This is the land in which the seed of The Food Project was sown. It is one of racial and class divisions, of barriers built and maintained through violence, intent and habit. This brings us to the history of The Food Project itself. It began with Ward Cheney, a white farmer from Lincoln (a suburb of Boston) and Allen Callahan, a black minister from Boston. Together they founded The Food Project because they wanted to bring together youth from both the city and the



Youth crew working on the Wenham Land

suburbs so that they could forge connections to the land and to each other. Ward Cheney described this goal: "Working in the field side by side with those whose backgrounds and circumstances are alien to one's own—working towards a common goal that is larger than oneself—provides one with an uncommon sense of freedom."⁸ In farming, it is easy to see

⁵ "The Keys to the Kingdom 1974–1980: Eyes on the Prize—America's Civil Rights Movement 1954–1985." 1994. Directed by Blackside, Inc. Films Media Group, originally broadcast by PBS. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=105033&xtid=58644>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Brown University "Boston-Quincy, MA Metropolitan Division: Data for the Metropolitan Area," Accessed April 17, 2017, <https://s4.ad.brown.edu/Projects/Diversity/segregation2010/msa.aspx?metroid=14484>

⁸ Ward Cheney. "Invitation." Internal training materials, 2016.



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the cost of inattention or a lack of effort; the weeds come back or the plant becomes overgrown. It is similarly easy to see (and eat!) the literal fruits of your labor. In a very visceral way, your work matters. The Food Project meant to bring youth together to do meaningful work that would make a difference, "Meaningful action and lasting changes come through love and respect for land and for people," Ward Chaney wrote. From this aim, The Food Project became the practice of "Youth Growing Together;"⁹ both youth working alongside one another to grow produce, and youth building relationships with one another across lines of difference.

This work takes place on sprawling acres of farmland in the suburbs, but it also takes place in small plots in the city and in greenhouses located next to bodegas. This is significant because urban and suburban farms are two entirely different contexts. Urban farms are not just miniature rural farms, they are an entirely different form that responds to the needs and constraints of urban space. Timothy Eric Smith defined the urban farm as:

Urban, by nature of its density

Farm, by virtue of its food producing potential.

⁹ Slogan on TFP youth t-shirts circa 2009

¹⁰ Timothy Eric Smith, "Boston Urban Farm: mending the Southwest Corridor," (Masters Thesis,

Not an implant of a rural setting
No gambrel roof or red barn
Fewer cupolas, more solar collectors
Less weather vanes, more rain sheds
Fewer farmhouses, more greenhouses
Not rows extending rise beyond hill to horizon
Not a landscape found, but one built,
Not unlimited expanse, but efficient expense
High density, diverse, integrated: socially,
formally, agriculturally.¹⁰

In fact, within The Food Project's structure there are separate Urban Growers and Suburban Growers. This is not a question of acreage, it is a matter of technique. Though both work to practice sustainable agriculture, what that looks like on 1 acre out of 31 suburban acres and 1 acre out of 1 total urban acre, is very different. In the urban context, soil contamination is common. Lead from gas and paint has seeped into the soil over the years so it is unsafe to plant directly in that soil. Instead, an urban farm is more likely to put down landscaping fabric (a permeable fabric designed to maintain soil moisture and drainage) in order to create a barrier and then trucked in all fresh soil and compost. A raised bed on an urban farm could even be 100% compost, whereas on a suburban farm a small amount of compost is incorporated into the soil



*The Food Project's greenhouse
located in Dorchester, MA*

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990)
Accessed April 7, 2017.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/70177> 61

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that was already on the land. A suburban farm might have a tractor to help speed up various farm tasks while an urban farm gets by on individual labor instead. While there are several other urban agriculture programs in Boston, including some specifically focused on youth empowerment, there are not currently any other organizations working on bridging the gap between the suburb and the city through farming like The Food Project.

The Food Project does several incredible things. First, in the context of a racially segregated Boston area, it brings together diverse youth. It then works hard to build community amongst these youth by having them engage in meaningful work and meaningful conversations. It also does this work in both the urban and suburban context, which allows for a diverse set of growing techniques and, as a non-profit, the flexibility to experiment with "win-win distribution systems"¹¹ or strategies that make fresh produce from local farms available to residents of low-income neighborhoods at prices they can afford while not causing the farm to operate at a loss. The Food Project is built on a love for the land and for people, striving to create personal and social change through sustainable agriculture.

Positionality:

I come to my research not with objectivity but the knowledge that objectivity is impossible, therefore I embrace my subjectivity with the goal of understanding how my subjectivity impacts my research and making that understanding clear throughout my research paper. I am a white, middle class, asexual woman. These identities and experiences are a part of who I am and how I understand the world. Even grounding my work in the words and experiences of other youth, I am working into Western epistemology when I

frame this project in terms of effectiveness and work to record in writing the results of this work.

I recognize my position as a member of The Food Project community. I am an alumna of the very program I am studying in this project. The Food Project was an important and transformative experience in my life since high school. I have gone on to take on various staff roles for an additional 3 years. I come with many preconceptions of what this program looks like and how it can be empowering based on my own powerful experience in the organization. My membership in this community and connection to this topic is why I consider this research important and also a significant place of bias in my work, in what questions I ask and don't ask, in how I construct my thesis and how I interpret my interviews. I embrace coming in with this bias, but also want to make this explicit in my research and analysis as well as being sure to look at opposing perspectives to understand what I might be missing from understanding this program through my own experience.

Methods and Methodology:

My examination of The Food Project (TFP) goes beyond the limits of only analyzing the models of youth empowerment The Food Project uses and the policies which make up their programs. Rather, I will focus on the experiences of the youth themselves. The participants of these youth programs speak the greatest truth about the effectiveness of the program. For this reason, I used ethnographic interviewing to open the conversation up for youth to speak their feelings and experiences of the program. As a graduate of The Food Project's youth programs myself, I recognize that my perspective will be influenced by my membership in this community. Understanding

¹¹ The Food Project, "Annual Report 2015," https://issuu.com/thefoodproject/docs/annual_report_fy15 9

Name and year	Gender	Race	Hometown ¹²	Years in program
Elisa '08	Female	Person of Color	Urban	4
Lydia '09	Non-binary	White	Suburban	3
Sean '10	Male	White	Suburban	3
Izzy '10	Female	Person of Color	Suburban	3
Nadine '07	Female	Person of Color	Suburban	2
-- '08	Female	Person of Color	Suburban	3
-- '10	Male	Person of Color	Urban	3
-- '09	Trans Woman	White	Suburban	3
-- '10	Male	Person of Color	Urban	2

this, I chose to interview youth with whom I already have a relationship with. I believe the depth of those relationships helped me open the conversation up with a level of trust with my subjects. I contacted nine youth who were in the program at the same time as me and interviewed five of them for a half an hour each. In choosing whom I would contact I considered the diversity of The Food Project and tried to gather a diverse group of youth. The table above tracks information about the alumni I contacted. Those I interviewed are listed by the pseudonyms that I will use in the remainder of this paper. Those who I did not interview are the interview, and the questions I asked. In striving for diversity in my subjects, I certainly did not succeed in all areas. My interview pool is primarily female and primarily youth who lived in suburban areas. I respect the truth of the experiences of these youth; they speak their own truth about TFP. However, I must recognize this as one version of many truths about TFP. Therefore, by no means do I intend

denoted by dashes. Each youth is also denoted by what year their first summer with The Food Project was. This is because within The Food Project culture youth identify themselves with what summer they began with the program, as not all youth continue beyond their first summer. Additionally, those that do continue are involved for varying amounts of time (ie Seed Crew 2009).

In doing this research I do not want these five voices to be the only voices heard when it comes to TFP's youth programs. I recognize that I have only captured a limited picture by nature of the people who I chose, the length of to generalize this as the only truth. The conclusions which I draw here reflect what I have heard in these particular interviews and my own experience as a youth of The Food Project. The recommendations I make are based on this perspective. I hope that more youth can share their experiences in the future

¹² The distinction of being from urban or suburban areas is an important one to The Food Project as this is a divide that TFP works to break down. It is one of the

dimensions of difference which TFP uses in working to create a diverse group of youth.

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and that further ideas can be brought forth, some which may challenge my ideas.

I will use a methodology based in the study of youth empowerment in order to analyze these interviews. Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE) is the result of analysis of several youth empowerment models and their effectiveness at several levels of empowerment. Jennings et al. identified six dimensions of youth empowerment:¹³

A Welcoming and Safe Environment

Equitable Power-sharing Between Youth and Adults

Meaningful Participation and Engagement

Engagement in Critical Reflection on Interpersonal and Sociopolitical Processes

Participation in Sociopolitical Processes to Effect Change

Integrated Individual and Community Level Empowerment

The goal of CYE is to "support and foster youth contributions to positive community development and sociopolitical change, resulting in youth who are critical citizens, actively participating in the day-to-day building of stronger, more equitable communities."¹⁴ Effective youth empowerment will be defined here as upholding all of these dimensions, resulting in youth who feel capable of challenging sociopolitical processes.

One limitation of CYE is its open definition of what sociopolitical processes need to be reflected on and changed in order to constitute critical youth empowerment. In an attempt to be applicable to a wide range of youth

empowerment programs with a variety of goals, CYE does not specifically name the structures, processes and social values critical youth empowerment engages with. Instead, CYE's goals are more general. This openness and lack of specificity means that an organization can engage their youth meaningfully with a specific system of oppression, while ignoring or not bringing into focus other systems of oppression that influence and help perpetuate that system. This group could even work towards a goal which helps a small portion of the vulnerable population they are attempting to protect, but leaves the most vulnerable at the mercy of a system which has abandoned them, denied their existence, or imprisoned them.

Literature Review:

Most discussion surrounding models of youth empowerment work under the assumption that youth empowerment programs are beneficial and have an overall positive impact on participants. However some scholars take issue with this assumption, such as Matthew Morton and Paul Montgomery, in their study, "Youth Empowerment Programs for Improving Adolescents' Self Efficacy and Self-Esteem: A Systematic Review," they attempt to examine the impact of a wide variety of youth empowerment programs and their effects. Morton and Montgomery only found 3 studies out of 65 that met their standards of experimental or quasi-experimental studies that looked at self-efficacy and self-esteem. The results were fewer and less definitive than they hoped: "While the few includable studies do not show positive intervention effects on these primary outcomes, there is also no evidence of harm from their outcomes data."¹⁵

¹³ Louise Jennings, Deborah Parra-Medina, DeAnne Hilfinger Messias, and Kerry McLaughlin. "Toward a Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment," *Journal of Community Practice* 14, no. 1 (2006): 41.

¹⁴ Ibid 40

¹⁵ Matthew Morton and Paul Montgomery, "Youth Empowerment Programs for Improving Adolescents' Self Efficacy and Self-Esteem: A Systematic Review," *Research on Social Work Practice*. 23, no. 1 (2013): 25 accessed September 29, 2013, doi: 10.1177/1049731512459967.

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Essentially, Morton and Montgomery were only successful in proving that there is not much high quality impact evaluation being done on youth empowerment programs and unable to say anything significant about the effectiveness of programs themselves for either self-efficacy or self-esteem. Morton and Montgomery represent a very critical perspective in the field of youth empowerment. Their study highlights the lack of statistically significant findings for youth empowerment programs and they argue that this gap brings into question the efficacy of the these organizations.

Russell et al. look at youth experiences of empowerment in "Youth Empowerment and High School Gay-Straight Alliances."¹⁶ They interviewed and did focus groups with youth leaders of Gay-Straight Alliances in the state of California to understand how the youth defined empowerment and learn how youth described the experiences they found empowering. Youth described their experiences as leaders of GSAs in their schools as an empowering experience, comparative to their experiences before being leaders. Russell et al. also argue that youth empowerment should focus on interpersonal and intrapersonal empowerment or individual empowerment because youth occupy a pre-citizen social location and cannot achieve community level empowerment. Russell et al. and Morton and Montgomery are in contrast as far as what they consider acceptable evidence for youth empowerment. Russell et al. look at and value the experiences youth report themselves as having. The question that needs to be answered is what is "better" evidence? What should scholars consider compelling evidence of effectiveness? This division is a key part of the current discussion surrounding youth empowerment and its efficacy.

Another prominent aspect of the conversation is around models of youth empowerment. Though there are common themes between models, there is no one way to empower youth most effectively. Unlike Russell et al., Jennings et al. argue that not only is empowerment at the community and organizational levels possible for youth to achieve, but that it is a key part of their model. "Youth-determined and youth-directed activities are essential for CYE, but these rarely occur without some level of adult support and guidance."¹⁷ Here, youth must have more than token participation, they have to have real power to impact and make decisions within the organization. Jennings et al. also distance themselves from the perspective of Morton and Montgomery who would like a clear system to evaluate youth empowerment in terms of its outcome. Jennings et al. agree that the impact of the model should be assessed. However, they recognize the complexity of measuring the outcomes of such a multifaceted process, "empowerment is not experienced in the same way by individuals, organizations and communities. Therefore, the development of a global measure of empowerment is not an appropriate goal."¹⁸ Youth empowerment programs need to be assessed, but just as there is no one correct way to empower youth, there is no clear way to assess these programs either.

The model of CYE is one useful way of looking at youth empowerment programs to see their effectiveness. What Morton and Montgomery are ultimately looking for in their examination of youth empowerment programs is accountability that programs are doing what they set out to do. The model of CYE outlines six key dimensions against which programs can be measured. These dimensions have

¹⁶ Stephen T. Russell, Anna Muraco, Aarti Subramaniam, and Carolyn Laub, "Youth Empowerment and High School Gay Straight Alliances," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 38, no. 7 (2009): 891-903.

¹⁷ Jennings et al, "Theory of Youth Empowerment," 45

¹⁸ Ibid 52



Farmland behind Ingalls Elementary School

been used to evaluate current youth development programs such as in Melissa Pearrow's study, "A Critical Examination of an Urban-Based Youth Empowerment Strategy."¹⁹ Pearrow's evaluation is that the organization she studied, the Teen Empowerment Program, does meet these dimensions however she suggests that "there needs to be more systematic examination of how this program impacts the individual and collective sense of empowerment."²⁰ Review and evaluation of youth empowerment programs needs to happen. Yet, not all scholars agree with what constitutes solid evidence. Pearrow aligns more with Jennings

et al. and Russell et al., warning that tradition evaluation strategies may minimize findings into individual outcomes, losing sight of the overall picture. The question remains what constitutes "good" evidence of empowerment? I argue that this best evidence comes from the youth themselves, how they describe their experiences and what impact they perceive that these programs have on them. Critical Youth Empowerment, grounded in a critical framework is then essential to help understand best practices for youth empowerment programs. The conversation around youth empowerment has yet to do much research

¹⁹ Melissa Pearrow, "A Critical Examination of an Urban-Based Youth Empowerment Strategy: The Teen

Empowerment Program," *Journal of Community Practice*. 16, no. 4 (2008): 509-525.

²⁰ Ibid 521

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which combines the theory of a critical model and the experience of youth in such a model.

Critical Youth Empowerment and The Food Project

The Food Project employs 150 youth each year in their Lincoln-Boston program and their North Shore program.²¹ The Food Project has three different levels of youth programs operating in two regions. The first program is Seed Crew.²² Youth between the ages of 14 and 17 are hired and work on an urban and suburban farm four days a week and volunteer at local hunger relief organizations one day a week. They work Monday through Friday from 9 to 4 for six and half weeks in the summer, while being paid a biweekly stipend.²³ During the summer, the youth are learning how to take care of the land and the plants, harvesting food and engaging in workshops about how soil works and other important concepts for growing. However, TFP's programs are about more than just growing food, their goal is "creating personal and social change through sustainable agriculture."²⁴ Youth also participate in a variety of workshops on goal setting, personal finance, diversity and oppression. A Seed summer is one where youth "work together to grow vegetables sustainably and distribute thousands of pounds of produce while learning important leadership, teamwork, diversity, and civic participation skills."²⁵

This growth can continue into the academic year if youth continue to work with TFP in Dirt

Crew. In this program, youth meet 3 Saturdays out of a month from 9 am to 4 pm during the school year, again being paid a biweekly stipend. Workshops from the previous summer are expanded upon and youth learn to lead volunteers on the farm. This program "focuses on developing leadership and public speaking skills. It also enhances communication skills and deepens agricultural and food systems knowledge in the young people with whom we work."²⁶ The final program is the Root Crew which youth who have completed at least Seed Crew can apply for. In this program, youth become teachers and facilitators, continuing to lead volunteers on the farm, as well as learning facilitation skills which allow them to run workshops both internally at TFP and externally with community groups and organizations. The Root Crew program runs in both the summer and academic year. Ultimately, the goal of TFP is to create a supportive environment where youth can learn and grow.

A Welcoming and Safe Environment

The first dimension of Critical Youth Empowerment is a welcoming and safe environment. Jennings et al. describe this as an environment "where youth feel valued, respected, encouraged and supported... [that] allows participants opportunities to share their feelings, take risks, and feel as if they belong to a family-like community."²⁷ When asked what

²¹ The Food Project. "What We Do," accessed December 4, 2013. <https://thefoodproject.org/what-we-do>

²² In 2014 The Food Project changed the names of their programs. Prior to 2014 Seed Crew was known as the Summer Youth Program (SYP), Dirt Crew was D.I.R.T. Crew (Dynamic Intelligent Responsible Teenagers), and Root Crew was known as the Internship Program, all the youth interviewed participated in programs pre-2014 and will sometimes refer to the old program names. I chose to update this language to reflect the current trajectory of the organization.

²³ The Food Project. "Youth Programs," accessed December 4, 2013 <https://thefoodproject.org/youth-programs>

²⁴ The Food Project. "Mission and Vision," accessed December 4, 2013 <https://thefoodproject.org/our-mission>

²⁵ The Food Project, "Seed Crew," Accessed March 14, 2017 <https://thefoodproject.org/seed-crew>

²⁶ The Food Project, "Dirt Crew," Accessed March 14, 2017. <https://thefoodproject.org/dirt-crew>

²⁷ Jennings et al, "Theory of Youth Empowerment," 41

Youth Programs at a Glance

typical day

● seed crew

a six week long summer program where youth between the ages of 14-17 work on both urban and suburban land to grow food sustainably while connecting with diverse peers and learning important skills such as teamwork and leadership.

9-12 Fieldwork
planting, weeding, harvesting, turning and spreading compost, general farm tasks

12-1 Lunch

1-4 Workshop
on topics such as cultural sharing, power & privilege, agriculture, personal finance, food justice, goal setting

Assistant Crew Leader

youth can return to the Seed Crew experience as mentors and leaders for new Seed Crew youth

weekly schedule

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Lynn (urban)	Beverly (suburban)	Hunger Relief Organizations	Beverly (suburban)	Lynn (urban)

*North Shore schedule, Lincoln-Boston works on a rotating schedule for working on urban/suburban land over the course of the summer

● dirt crew

a program spanning the academic school year where youth meet 3 Saturdays a month to learn and practice public speaking skills, lead volunteers on the farm and continue to learn from workshops designed to expand their thinking

typical day

9-12 Serve and Grow
youth practice public speaking and leadership skills by leading volunteers from the community through farm tasks

12-1 Lunch

1-4 Workshop
youth engage in more in-depth workshops on topics they began to learn about in the summer

*youth can continue to apply for root crew until they graduate high school

● root crew

both an academic year and summer program where youth develop skills in teaching and facilitating by developing and delivering workshops to community members and fellow youth in the Dirt Crew. During the summer they expand their expertise in sustainable agriculture, by working at farmer's markets and helping with CSA distribution

typical day

Morning Harvest
youth help the head farmer prepare for the afternoon market/CSA pick up by harvesting, washing, and weighing produce. After this is done they help with general farm maintenance tasks such as weeding and planting

Lunch

Farmer's Market/CSA
youth head to the farmer's market site and help set up the market. They then greet customers and help sell produce. Or if it is a CSA day they help divide produce equally amongst the shares and greet CSA members as they come to pick up their produce

all youth are paid a biweekly stipend for their work in the program!

peer leaders

youth who have already been through both the summer and academic year Root Crew programs can return as peer leaders. With their extended experience in TFP programs they help lead their peers and take on more responsibility for different aspects of farm operation

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the environment of TFP is like, Elisa,²⁸ one of the youth, immediately began to describe The Food Project a safe space: "It feels like family, it feels like the safest type of family, it's, you know, with family you never know what they're gonna to say, but like with The Food Project family... it's like you know that whatever someone is gonna to say is coming from the best intentions and their most honest self."²⁹ Nor was Elisa the only one to describe The Food Project in this way. Nadine describes: "it kinda felt like a second home, so it was... but better because all my friends were there, so it was like a really warm community."³⁰ These youth illustrate the warmth of The Food Project community. In describing it as home and family, they express their connection to the space and the people within it. This marks The Food Project community as welcoming, a key dimension of CYE.

One particular striking example of the comfort level one youth had in the community comes from Sean. He recalled going to a retreat of the Root Crew where the youth participated in workshops which were designed to provide a space for youth to open up on a very deep level:

Especially during the retreats I feel like I can open up and just cry my eyes out which... is not... something I could do in front of my own dad. I wouldn't be able to cry in front of my family but I can cry in front of these people on the first retreat during the Internship [Root Crew]... I'm pretty sure I just was meeting some of these people for the first time and I was like revealing my deepest darkest secret because that's the kind of environment that not only that people in The Food Project create but these

people have been raised up in the same environment so I know I can trust them.³¹

The youth express a confidence in the safety of The Food Project community that allows them to take risks in what they are able to share with a group of people, beyond what they would in other situations. Elisa, Nadine and Sean demonstrate The Food Project's capacity to be a safe space where youth can "share their feelings, take risks, and feel as if they belong to a family-like community,"³² as Jennings et al. identify as an important aspect of this dimension of critical youth empowerment.



Youth hugging

As an organization, The Food Project has a few structures which work to create this kind of environment. The first of these is the Vision guideline system, a set of 8-10 concepts that help youth feel open to share, feel that their words will be respected, and give them ways to deal with disagreement. These guidelines are

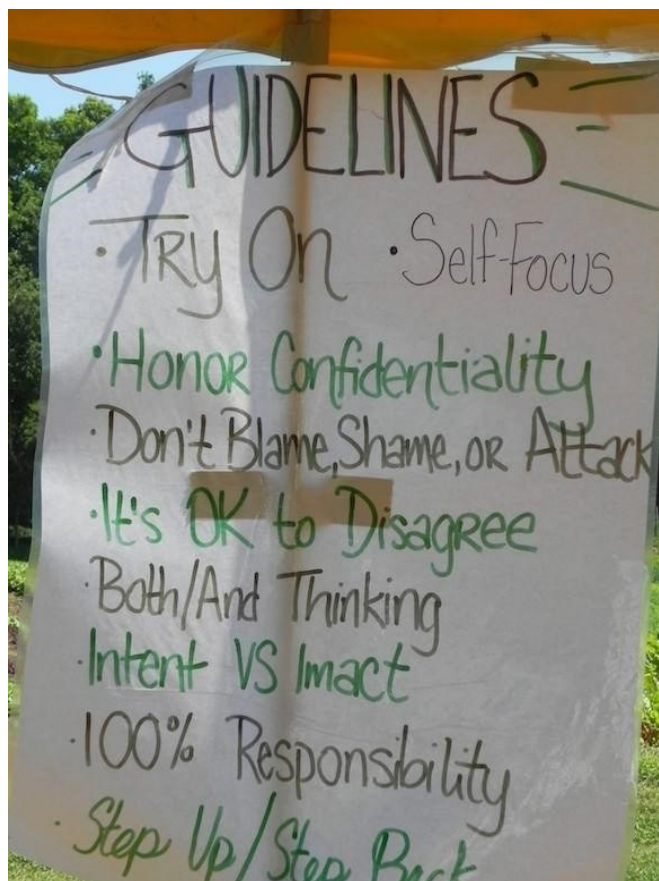
²⁸ All names of interview subjects and the staff they mention by name are pseudonyms

²⁹ Elisa, (Female of color, Seed Crew '08, participant for 4 years), interview by Emily Walls, Video Communication, November 11, 2013

³⁰ Nadine, (Female of color, Seed Crew '07, participant for 2 years), interview by Emily Walls, Video Communication, November 11, 2013.

³¹ Sean (white male, Seed Crew '10, participant for 3 years), interview by Emily Walls, Video Communication, November 11, 2013.

³² Jennings et al., "Theory of Youth Empowerment," 41.



Visions Guidelines poster

reviewed often within TFP, along with examples of what each of the guidelines look like. When the youth and adults of The Food Project buy into these guidelines, the guidelines support a community that is open, honest, caring and can deal with conflict. The guidelines are an aspect of what makes TFP a welcoming and supportive community.

The Visions guideline system helps create what Sean calls "The Food Project culture." Vision guidelines not only govern how conversations happen within The Food Project, but how youth and adults are expected to conduct themselves. These values then create the norms of how this community operates. The first summer youth spend with TFP they receive training on these guidelines, going over them often more than once a week.

These norms are enforced until they become self-regulated where youth will police themselves and each other. One example of this is how Izzy³³ corrected herself from using the word "but" and changed her statement to use an emphasized "and." This use of "and" in the place of "but" is normed language in The Food Project. This comes from both the guidelines (both/and thinking) and The Food Project's feedback system of Straight Talk. In Straight Talk statements such as "you are really good at A **but** need to work on B," are discouraged and instead are rephrased, "you are really good at A **and** need to work on B." When this statement is said with a "but," A becomes devalued. This speech pattern reaches beyond the feedback system into conversations youth have with each other, both inside and often outside of work.

The buy-in to these guidelines is the foundation of the safe space created at TFP. Youth are encouraged to adopt these guidelines through repeated exposure throughout their time in TFP programming. As youth begin to buy-in they begin to hold other youth accountable to the system. This is the social process of creating compliance to norms. There also is a more formal organizational structure of the Standards Agreement and Violations. At the beginning of the summer, youth sign an agreement regarding the conduct that is expected of them during their time in the program. These include such things as wearing appropriate attire, being on time, working hard, and respecting one another. If a staff member observes a youth breaking one of these standards the youth will earn a violation. Youth move through a step system for each violation in a category they earn (i.e. Step 1 for a first transgression, Step 2 for a second etc.) Eventually if the youth earns enough violations in the same category they can be fired. However before they get to

³³ Izzy, (Female of color, Seed Crew '10, participant for 3 years), interview by Emily Walls, Video Communication, November 24, 2013.

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that point, youth can “earn back” violations by not earning another violation in the same category in the next week. For many years The Food Project attached a monetary value to steps meaning that after Step 1, a warning, youth would begin to lose money from their paycheck. In earning back a violation they also earned back the money they lost. The goal of this system was to help youth learn what the expectations in a job environment are. Youth rarely reach the point of being fired and even then, there is a rehiring process which the youth can go through.

However, in 2015 the organization re-evaluated this system. Though meant as an incentive, the monetary aspect of the Standards Agreement was hurting the youth most who needed the money the most. Youth from middle to upper class backgrounds would not be terribly affected by losing \$60 out of a several hundred dollar paycheck. Whereas working class youth were sometimes depending on the money from their paycheck to support their families' financial expenses. The Food Project did not change the Standards Agreement or the system of steps but the monetary penalties were removed. Interestingly, this did not impact the effectiveness of the system; about the same number of youth earned violations as they had under the system with monetary penalties.³⁴ This formal system is sometimes used to help enforce the norms created by the Visions guidelines, generally in the form of a Respecting Each Other violation.

While The Food Project works to bring together groups of diverse youth, there are still youth who are excluded from the welcoming environment of The Food Project. Though not explicitly stated, youth need to be able to perform the physical work of farming, including bending over and lifting heavy objects. Youth must be present for a full 7 hour workday, five days a week for six and a half weeks. These

requirements can exclude youth with some kinds of disabilities, especially youth who require mobility aids. Creating accessible farms is certainly a challenge, but it is not impossible. The urban farm is a great opportunity for this. While suburban farms are usually built on pre-existing farmland, urban farms are conversions of the urban landscape.



*“Raised vegetable beds for disabled access”
2009 David Hawgood*

This space can then be created with accessibility in mind. Raised bed gardens can be built up higher, so that rather than being about 10 inches off the ground they are closer to two feet off the ground, making them accessible to people in wheelchairs and people for whom bending over is difficult. In fact, The Food Project has built beds like this both for community members and at the school garden on their land behind Ingalls Elementary School in Lynn. The problem currently is that these accessible gardens are only one or two beds at a farm with over 50 beds. The accessibility is there in some ways, but it would work directly against the welcoming community environment TFP seeks to build because it would isolate rather than connect youth. Integrating this kind of accessibility into the TFP youth programs would certainly be a significant challenge but such changes would mean that even more youth could be a part of

³⁴ Conversation with John Wang, North Shore Regional Director, staff training 2016.

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the welcoming environment of The Food Project regardless of (dis)ability.

The Food Project intends to be a family-like and supportive community, and in many ways and for many youth they succeed in that goal. They create an environment that is a welcoming and safe space where youth feel comfortable and are able to be vulnerable, learn and grow. The experiences of the youth who find the community safe are a truth of The Food Project and that safety is a key part of their empowerment. That being said, a critical examination reveals the ways TFP can be exclusionary as well.

Equitable Power-Sharing Between Youth and Adults

The Food Project mission is to bring together a diverse group of youth and adults to work together to build a sustainable food system.³⁵ In light of that, relationships between youth and adults are important. Jennings et al. argue that equitable power sharing must occur between youth and adults to have effective empowerment. They describe what this can look like, “[adult leaders] having high expectations for youth to take the lead, yet being available and providing guidance and support when needed.”³⁶ This guidance needs to be supportive but not dominating. The Food Project works to strike this balance and many youth felt both these high expectations and saw the support that was available to them. Sean describes this experience very adamantly:

Everyone there just said you *can* do this. They didn't have any question in their mind about whether I could or couldn't, they didn't feel like they had to test me. They knew I could do it and they gave me the space to figure out how I was going to do it.

Sean also described the supports that existed for youth including role models in the form of

the staff as well as other youth such as Level Two Interns (now called Peer Leaders). Sean experienced the high expectations of adult leaders through their unrelenting belief in him and his capacity to succeed.

For CYE, the power that youth hold cannot just be token power. The youth at The Food Project have real power in the organization. One such example is youth membership on the board of The Food Project. Elisa served on the board when she was a Food Project youth. She argues that this was a position of real power that had real impact:

It became so clear to me that like the adults at The Food Project like a 100% valued youth voice in decision making, in... in everything that they did. The fact that they wanted youth to, like, help decide things about like where millions... er... thousands of dollars were gonna get spent. Like that just seems... that was like... I'd never been given that much power and, like, voice and leadership... um... within an organization or any club or anything in my life.

The youth representation on the board says that the staff of The Food Project are not only willing, but want to have youth in the room when they are making decisions that impact the organization as a whole.

Yet the need for youth involvement has not always been respected. Between 2012 and 2014 The Food Project went through a lot of staff and organizational changes. One such change was the separation of the North Shore and Lincoln Boston Root Crews. Prior to the 2013-2014 academic year, Root Crew had program-wide gatherings where youth from both the North Shore and Lincoln Boston programs would get together on one of The Food Project farms or in one of their offices to work and have workshops together. The decision was made to separate the two Root Crews by adults only. This was very distressing for the youth, Izzy described the feelings that

³⁵ "Our Mission and Vision"

³⁶ Jennings et al., "Theory of Youth Empowerment," 45

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emerged for the youth in the aftermath of this decision: "When we heard this news we were all like already heartbroken, but thing that made it worse was that that decision was made 3-5 months before it was given to us." The most hurtful thing for the youth was that they had been divested of power and removed entirely from the process. Both Sean and Izzy, the only youth I interviewed who were employed by The Food Project at the time of this decision, expressed both their frustration with the way this decision was handled. Sean felt a hope for the future because of the reactions to this decision throughout the organization: "After [the decision was made] a lot of bad feelings that, like, burst out from everyone even from other people that were, like, in positions of power they were like this wasn't right and then came down and were like we support you and we think that we could continue restructuring and add a youth component in somewhere." The idea of a Youth Council was proposed to be a youth voice in restructuring decisions but never was implemented. This moment is one where The Food Project failed to have equitable power sharing between youth and adults.

The Food Project also uses their feedback system of Straight Talk as a way to reinforce youth power. Straight Talk frames feedback in terms of "positives" and "deltas." Positives are what someone is doing well, how they have improved, or the positive impact they have on the community. Deltas are not negatives, rather they are what someone can continue to improve on or what they could do better. The Straight Talk system is both something used to give feedback for youth and as an opportunity for youth to give feedback to their supervisors, other staff and the organization as a whole. Straight Talk follows Kathrin Walker's Principles for Youth-Involved inquiry, which

focus on the use of youth participation in evaluation research. These principles are: "organizational and community readiness, adequate training and support for involved youth, adequate training and support for adult staff, selecting the right team and sustaining youth involvement."³⁷ The Food Project demonstrates its commitment to and competence with these principles in the way it frames and utilizes Straight Talk and how it reacts to youth feedback. Both youth and adults³⁸ are trained in how to give and receive Straight Talk.³⁹ The organization also demonstrates its readiness in that it takes youth feedback seriously. Sean recalled the first time he recognized the respect adult leaders had for youth input:

I accidentally like started bossing Ned the farmer around and I realized, oh wait, I mean I didn't mean for it to come across that way, but I realized that I was comfortable enough in the work that I'm doing and he was confident enough in my own capability that he took my advice and he went with it. And I was like, whoa. I would not expect anyone to listen to me like that. I'm just a junior in high school!

Feedback from youth is elicited frequently, at the end of the growing season, the academic year program, at the end of retreats, even just after receiving workshops youth are asked how they experienced the program and the youth respond with positives and deltas. This data is then written down so that the feedback can be preserved and acted upon. Overall, The Food Project tends to value youth input and presence in much of the organization. Youth and adults are in partnership and the power shared between them is equitable. Nevertheless, there are still ways TFP can

³⁷ Kathrin Walker, "Youth Empowerment Evaluation: Learning Voice," *American Journal of Evaluation* 28, no. 3 (2007): 322

³⁸ Mike, Evans, "Summer Youth Program Manual Volume 3: Implementation," 56-57. Accessed December 8, 2013.

https://thefoodproject.org/sites/default/files/FoodProject_SYP3Manual_0.pdf

³⁹ Greg Gale and Kristin De Voe-Talluto, *Growing together: a guide for building inspired, diverse, and productive youth communities* (Lincoln, Mass: The Food Project, 2000) 46.

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improve this power balance such as including youth voice in large organizational change such as restructuring.

Meaningful Participation and Engagement

Another dimension of CYE is meaningful participation and engagement for youth. Youth need to be more than just present, "youth need to engage in activities relevant to their own lives, ones that excite and challenge them and 'count as real.'"⁴⁰ The way youth are engaged has to matter to them. Elisa connected to the educational outreach she was able to do as an Intern, giving workshops on healthy eating and what goes on in our food:

We were able to reach *thousands* of people... maybe it was hundreds for me. But to know that, that like, the education and that workshops and those types of things can keep going and those models can be replicated and we can share them on websites that other organizations can use and that we're part of this national movement. That right there, the fact that we designed information... a way to communicate information that can be shared with thousands of people is unreal. And the information that they're taking in can affect their entire life, their life length, their health, their medical bills, all of those things can change drastically. Their children, their grandchildren, like, the net that we were able... that I was able, that the youth I've worked with have been able to cast out and it's a ripple effect, it just keeps going, it's going to keep going.

For Elisa this was meaningful because it had the potential to change the lives of thousands of people, workshops ceased to be a work

activity, a task she had to do and became a revolutionary and world changing act. This made the work of The Food Project meaningful for her.

For each youth this meaning is different, although no less important. For Izzy, she connected to doing work in her community because of the connections it brought her rather than just the impact she was having on others' lives.

Having the opportunity to serve the community... while getting stories and connections and growing from them I think that is so meaningful to me. And that's what's made me love The Food Project for so long. I think that's really touched me as well.

The combination of connections and helping the community in an authentic way were important for Izzy. Whereas Lydia, acknowledged that she knew that the work The Food Project did was meaningful to the community, but for her the meaning came from her connection with the staff and youth in The Food Project community:

How important the work was, was kind of abstract to me. It was important to me and I knew it was important to do but it wasn't why I was working there, to be honest. I was working there for the community and the greater good that I kept coming back to work there for was that community.⁴¹

Lydia felt invested in the community that had supported her empowerment and found meaning there rather than in the greater implications of the work she was doing. These youth all found the work at The Food Project meaningful, albeit in different ways. This is what makes meaningful participation. Jennings et al. emphasize the need to have

⁴⁰ Jennings et al., "Theory of Youth Empowerment," 43.

⁴¹ Lydia, (white non-binary person, Seed Crew '10, participant for 3 years) interview by Emily Walls, Video Communication, November 16, 2013.



North Shore Root Crew participating in a workshop

varied opportunities for youth to engage in and practice leadership skills. These youth did not find their empowerment or the meaning of the work in the same spaces but nonetheless they found it.

Engagement in Critical Reflection on Interpersonal and Sociopolitical Processes

Critical reflection is something that youth empowerment organizations need to do for CYE, however it also tends to be the dimension emphasized least in practice. Jennings et al. define this dimension of CYE as when youth have "opportunities to engage in an integrated participatory cycle of critical reflection and reflective actions with the goal of creating change in sociopolitical processes, structures, norms, and images."⁴² This critical awareness is vital to the next dimension of CYE which is action aimed at changing sociopolitical processes, without awareness youth cannot take action. Critical reflection requires time and many youth organizations do not make time for this.⁴³ The Food Project's Seed Crew spends about half of their workday in workshops many

of which raise youth's critical awareness.⁴⁴ These workshops also extend into Dirt Crew and the Root Crew as well. Many of these workshops focus on diversity, personal identity and privilege and oppression, raising the youth's awareness of the different places they come from and the systems of power that govern their lives.

Youth spoke of these workshops as spaces where they were able to share their experiences and learn from the differences of others. Sean described these workshops as being focused on the youth's experiences:

The content of the workshop is really what all of the participants bring to it. So like the gender identity workshop... and a bunch of different diversity workshops where we're actually participating and giving our thoughts and learning more about each other and ourselves along the way. It helps us realize that the world isn't as small as it seems when you are sitting in a town full of privileged white people.

Sean highlights that youth were learning from each other as well as the curriculum content of the workshop. Elisa valued the workshops

⁴² Jennings et al., "Theory of Youth Empowerment," 47.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Jack McKenzie, "The Food Project- North Shore Summer Youth Program," YouTube video, 7:48. Posted

by "The Food Project," May 8, 2012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kc8uVj6l3-Y>

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because it was the first time she had been able to talk about social issues:

I've never been in a group where there was that diverse of a body and it was acknowledged. I think that's where the anti-oppression curriculum comes in. Because too often we are in these groups that are so, so diverse and no one ever talks about it. Because there's not someone who's there who feels comfortable enough to facilitate that conversation.

For these youth, The Food Project's workshops gave them a space to learn new ideas and give voice to their own experiences. They reflect back on these experiences as a positive learning experience. However these workshops themselves are limited.

The Food Project's anti-oppression workshops involve three basic workshops. The first, Level the Playing Field, introduces youth to definitions of privilege and oppression, defines "target" and "non-target" groups and facilitates conversations about how youth have been impacted by their membership in these groups for a variety of different categories (race, class, gender, sexual identity, religion, ability status). There is also a Modern Oppression and Internalized Oppression workshop that talks about the behaviors that result for both privileged and oppressed people as a result of oppression such as dysfunctional rescuing, or the habit of privileged people to impose unwanted help. The final workshop in this series is a Levels of Oppression workshop which engages youth in discussion about the different ways oppressive ideas are enforced, at the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels. These workshops serve to engage youth in conversations about how power operates in their lives. However, the limitation of these workshops is that, usually, only one mode of power is investigated at once.

Thus ignoring the interconnectedness of different social categories and how oppression is enacted on multiple identities.

Without a more nuanced idea of the way that oppressions interact with one another and the way power operates, youth only gain a very basic critical consciousness that can be result in unintentional harm. Dean Spade argues that not understanding power in its complexity can lead to harmful strategies of change. He cautions:

If we seek to imagine transformation, if we want to alleviate harm, redistribute wealth and life chances, and build participatory and accountable resistance formations, our strategies need to be careful not over simplify how power operates. Thinking about power only as top/down, oppressor/oppressed, dominator/dominated can cause us to miss opportunities for intervention and to pick targets for change that are not the most strategic.⁴⁵

This argument is supported by Roderick Ferguson who argues for the necessity of intersectional thinking in his *queer of color critique*. One of the central assumptions of *queer of color critique* is that "racist practice articulates itself generally as gender and sexual regulation, and that gender and sexual difference variegate racial formations."⁴⁶ The Food Project's current workshops, even at the highest level, don't focus on intersectionality. Certainly, youth gain critical knowledge through the anti-oppression workshops that The Food Project facilitates. Yet these workshops must take the first step if youth are to understand the power structures that influence their lives and learn how they can disrupt these systems.

⁴⁵ Spade, *Normal Life*, 25.

⁴⁶ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in black: toward a queer of color critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 3.

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Participation in Sociopolitical Processes to Effect Change

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Once youth have built up critical thinking about sociopolitical processes, the next step is to attempt to make change in the harmful processes. Jennings et al. argue, "youth are not truly empowered if they do not have the capacity to address the structures, processes, social values and practices of the issues at hand."⁴⁷ The goal of critical reflection is the ability to take critical action in a meaningful way which impacts the community. Along with their anti-oppression curriculum, The Food Project also has workshops about food insecurity, food deserts and food justice. These workshops engage youth in understanding the inequalities in the food system and how people are resisting them. Then youth begin to understand how the work that they do with The Food Project, growing and selling produce or building raised beds, helps resist these inequalities. Elisa recalls the change she felt herself making when she worked:

You're seeing direct impact every single day, right, like you build a raised bed for a family who previously didn't have a raised bed and now that person has the ability and they're empowered to be able to have control over their own food. We could do that on a given Saturday during the school year. You'd build five of those raised beds, right? You go home at the end of the day and you're like, hey five families now have control over their food... Being able to actually do the manual labor to make that possible, that direct correlation is unreal. We were most certainly making change like that.

Youth made impact in their communities by coming to work each week. The Build-A-

Garden program (BAG) that Elisa references has built over a thousand raised bed gardens in Boston and on the North Shore between 2009 and 2014.⁴⁸ That is at least one thousand families with the ability to grow their own food. The youth who constructed those beds directly contribute to the food sovereignty of one thousand families. The Food Project enables youth to enact change in sociopolitical processes when it puts them at the forefront of these efforts.



North Shore Dirt Crew with the Build A Garden beds they built

Food sovereignty is the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced sustainably and their right to decide what their food system should look like.⁴⁹ When individuals are able to control their own food, they are less vulnerable to state violence. Dean Spade argues, "state programs and law enforcement are not the arbiter of justice, protection, and safety but are instead sponsors and sites of violence."⁵⁰ Government programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, previously known as food stamps) determine the access that low income people have to food, especially fresh and

⁴⁷ Jennings et al., "Critical Social Theory," 48.

⁴⁸ Charu Gupta, "Our Raised Beds Improve Family, Community Health," *Happenings Spring 2014*. https://issuu.com/thefoodproject/docs/spring_2014_pr_int_newsletter_for_we

⁴⁹"Declaration of Nyéléni" 2007. Accessed April 17, 2017. <https://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>

⁵⁰ Spade, *Normal Life*, 21.

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healthy food. As funding for these programs expand and are cut, so is people's access to food. A raised bed garden built in a person's backyard or in a nearby community space does not factor into their income on a government form and such a garden built by The Food Project is built at no cost to the individual. Each year Build A Garden members can come to TFP's annual plant sale and pick up at least six free seedlings to plant in their garden. This garden then means control over a source of food for those most vulnerable to state violence.

On the one hand, The Food Project has the Build A Garden program which allows for resistance to state violence, on the other hand, some of the ways TFP is working towards creating a model food system are also predicated on the benevolence of the state. Part of The Food Project's strategic plan that they put out in 2015 advocates building win-win distribution systems. Ideally what this means is ways of distributing food which allow farmers to offer produce at rates which low-income residents can afford to pay while still allowing the farmer to make a profit. TFP



Lynn Farmer's Market in Central Square

recommends, "developing and advocating for new healthy food subsidies and alternative payment systems."⁵¹ TFP has already had success with this. They helped pilot the Boston Bounty Bucks Program in 2007 which allowed customers paying with EBT cards to get twice the amount of produce for half the amount of money (up to \$10 per day). So by paying \$10 with SNAP benefits they could get \$20 worth of produce. This program has the potential to be a win-win distribution model because those with SNAP can stretch their benefits to get more fresh produce and farmers still get the full revenue from their produce after being reimbursed for the difference. But this is a state program, funded by the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive grant from the USDA. So just as funding can be cut from SNAP, so too can it be cut from the USDA grant. The Bounty Bucks program has increased the access thousands of Boston residents to fresh healthy produce. That is good! I don't want to suggest that this program is a bad idea, but I do want to caution that this kind of solution is still one that leaves people vulnerable to state violence. This is a tension that most likely will always be present, even the Build A Garden program had some funding come from the state. The difference is that if the Bounty Bucks program is cut people cannot continue to use it whereas a garden remains viable even after the funding has dried up. The Food Project's youth are contributing to lasting sociopolitical change by constructing these gardens.

According to Jennings et al., true empowerment happens when youth are able to address structures and practices themselves. Building raised beds may create sociopolitical change, but the youth are not the ones who created the BAG program, even if they are the ones who construct the gardens themselves. Sean argues that The Food Project is doing that empowerment:

⁵¹ "Annual Report 2015"

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The way I saw The Food Project was that it was it's kind of like a breeding ground for great people. I mean we do tons of good work there, we help a lot of people and that makes me happy that... that... it's definitely a big part of why I joined. And at the same time I feel like what we learned there we're expected not only to bring it back when we return, like I definitely hope to someday. It kind of just starts the thinking process and at a certain point you... you don't learn everything you could learn from The Food Project but you learn enough that you could go out and you can make a difference somewhere else. So it's kind of where it all starts and we're expected to start our something, whatever that might be. Even if that doesn't have to do with food justice anymore.

The Food Project's empowerment to action goes beyond the work that youth do within the context of the program to what they take outside its doors and their capacity to create change. Elisa talked about her life after The Food Project and how what she learned at TFP carries over into her work:

I think the most important thing in terms of being an agent for change is... I mean I can't be stopped now, and that empowerment feeling, that doesn't just go away. I know that I can make change and that I can be, that I'm someone important, like that every single person is important and once you know that you can't un-know that.

Youth have the capacity and the belief in their capacity to create change in their communities.

Social change is not a singular point of liberation; it is a process. The Food Project also demonstrates their understanding of this. Their slogan around their 20th year anniversary was "A project that became a movement,"⁵²

suggesting that they understand this concept. Dean Spade argues that effective resistance organizing requires a focus on process. "Process-oriented and relentlessly self-reflective practice must attend all of our work if we are to resist the dangers of new norms that we invariably produce."⁵³ This self-reflective practice is critical for The Food Project. They are empowering many youth, helping people get access to fresh produce, and spreading awareness of food issues. However, continued analysis of their work is necessary in order to reach their goal of creating personal and social change for a diverse group of people without unintentionally replicating harm.

Integrated Individual and Community Level Empowerment

Finally the question comes, are youth empowered? Jennings et al. advocate for the integration of individual and community level empowerment, "Integrated Community-level outcomes include effective and active organizational coalitions, pluralistic leadership, and increased participatory skills among individual community members"⁵⁴ Youth need to both feel empowered as individuals and as members of the community. Youth feel empowered at the community level through their power in the organization, such as Elisa serving on the board. They also feel empowered through the influence they have through Straight Talk and in the organization in general, like Sean felt when working with the farmers. Youth also feel empowered in their greater communities because of the impact that they are able to have selling food at the farmers' markets and building raised beds. At The Food Project Gala, an annual fundraising event, Rodney, one of the youth spoke about what community means at The Food Project

⁵² "Annual Report 2012"

⁵³ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*, Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2011, 194.

⁵⁴ Jennings et al., "Theory of Youth Empowerment," 50.

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and how he sees TFP youth impacting their communities:

Can all of the TFP youth stand up? Everyone else, take a look around. Think of the impact each and every one of these youth have in their community, on the lives of people in their surrounding communities each and every day because of The Food Project. Now multiply that number by 10, 20, 22, 40 and more. I promise you, even when you do the math, you will not begin to grasp the magnitude of impact that Food Project youth have in our communities, on our society, and someday on the world. That's what The Food Project is - an organization that offers love, comfort, selflessness and empowerment to youth and expects youth to go out and do the same.⁵⁵

Youth feel empowered to make changes in their communities because of what The Food Project has taught them. When they feel empowered at the community level it is because they were first empowered at the individual level which gave them the confidence to create change in their world or have a say in the organization itself.

Individual empowerment is when youth feel capable of being their complete selves, feel secure in their abilities, and have the confidence to challenge themselves. Lydia felt most empowered by her individual growth in finding her voice:

My heart started going really fast, ba-boom ba-boom, ba-boom, every time I thought about joining a conversation. It was really really bad. And I remember my ACL [Assistant Crew Leader] had this thing where we would go out into the far field and people would just yell. And I couldn't do it, even at the end of the first summer. I just couldn't raise my voice even in the middle of a field just to be silly. It kind of terrified

me... [At The Food Project] I was given to understand that my opinions and even my silly jokes were welcomed. They... they were worth hearing.... I feel like I got myself out The Food Project. When I started The Food Project I was 16 and I really had no idea who I was, at all. I was so painfully self-conscious that I just spent more time thinking about what other people expected me to be and being that than what I actually was... The Food Project gave me my soul.

Lydia experienced transformation through The Food Project that she isn't sure she could have found anywhere else. This empowerment comes from The Food Project community and even more than that the staff.

The staff are a very important part of this empowerment process. Elisa talked about the relationship between youth and adults and how this was really important part in her feeling valued in The Food Project and as a part of her growth:

These adults instilling in us that no matter how old you are and no matter where you're at, like what you have to say is so important. No matter what it is you have to say it's so important that you're saying something. That mentorship, particularly Dan, my supervisor for so many years, I think my relationship with him, yeah he was in charge and the supervisor for so many folks, but it always felt like I had a one on one personal relationship with him as well, that he really cared about my whole person and not just how I was doing in the work environment. And I think that was huge too, like, that it wasn't just that these adults were our supervisors, that they were there to support us and empower us. They wanted our being to grow and change and be challenged and it wasn't just, oh, like you need to improve in your public speaking or... it wasn't just all of this you need to this

⁵⁵ Rodney, "Gala 2013 Talking About Community," YouTube video, 3:53, posted by "The Food Project,"

September 27, 2013,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yoONa20EFA>

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better for the work environment. I want you to be a better human being so that can be translated into your whole world.

Authentic relationships between youth and adults were an important part of youth's empowerment. It reinforced the importance of their voice and offered space to grow with support from adults who cared about them as whole people. Serido et al. argue that, "effective mentoring relationships must be authentic, consistent, and enduring, with both the young person and the adult receiving benefit from the relationship."⁵⁶ This brings to the forefront a critique youth raised of The Food Project: the consistency of staff.

Youth recognize how important the staff are in their development, they also recognize that keeping consistently effective, supportive staff who go above and beyond in their work and their relationships with youth can be difficult. Lydia lamented, "There are too many awesome adults at The Food Project!" She wonders about the ability of The Food Project to reliably replicate the conditions that were empowering for her:

It does make me think sometimes that The Food Project must have some way, some reliable way of finding these amazing people, 'cause there's so many of them there, but I also wonder... a lot of my experiences, the ones that really meant a lot to me, were very much based on the people who made up the community and to make something like that repeatable... I don't know. I don't know if it can be done... to consistent... like always find really great people to do these jobs.

The kind of relationships youth build with staff must be authentic in order to be effective. More than that, they also need to be enduring and consistent. This is something that Elisa worries about:

Retention of staff members is extremely difficult in youth development field. Paywise and... it's very challenging to keep around people who are tremendous leaders and mentors to youth. There's not a lot of sustainable practices around keeping amazing people in those positions. And that's something that is unfortunate because a lot of those folks, those adults who are amazing would love to stay in that type of work, but it's not feasible to them. That's something that The Food Project... there's so much turnover, so much. So that's challenging and difficult to watch.

Elisa identifies that youth need consistent role models and adults in their lives and is very concerned about the turnover that The Food Project experiences. This is not truly a retention problem but a structural problem. Several key positions at The Food Project are AmeriCorp programs which fund an individual for, at the most, two years before they are forced to move on and a new service member must replace them. This is difficult for youth as they age out of the program as well and many of the staff they had connections with move on to other positions and organizations and they begin to feel disconnected from the community. The Food Project needs to improve the consistency of its staff in order to properly support their youth.

Evaluation:

The Food Project's strengths lie in its creation of safe space where youth feel supported in a family like environment. This safe space extends to the community the organization creates for youth. One where they are both challenged and supported, with adult staff who form authentic relationships with youth. Youth feel empowered by this community that helps them find their voice and

⁵⁶Joyce Serdio, Lynne Borden, and Daniel Perkins, "Moving Beyond Youth Voice," *Youth & Society* 43, no. 1 (2011): 47.

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listens to that voice when they use it in Straight Talk and on the board. Youth feel empowered by meaningful work that matters to them and impacts their community in a significant and positive way. These are the powerful and effective aspects of The Food Project's work. The Food Project excels at pretty much all aspects of Critical Youth Empowerment. That does not mean that there aren't aspects of their work that unintentionally create harm or exclusion or the potential of those things. Youth with disabilities are often excluded from TFP programming. Staff turnover threatens the ongoing sense of community youth have with the organization. Anti-oppression workshops do not center intersectionality creating an incomplete picture of what power and privilege

looks like and the impact that it has. Nevertheless, I also believe that The Food Project has the ability to consider and respond to these critiques. It is an organization that has centered reflection as an important aspect of its organizational culture and functioning. The critiques I raised here, those I missed and those that will be brought up in the future can both be recognized and changes can be implemented. There are certainly challenges for TFP in addressing these critiques and those constraints may not allow for adequate change to take place. But overall, The Food Project is an incredibly transformative program which has for 25 years ignited the capacity of youth, showing them just how powerful they are.



Alligator Clap

This is the traditional way The Food Project ends events with community members. The top hand represents the knowledge everyone came here with, the bottom hand represents the experiences we had together and the things we learned and bringing our hands together to clap represents us bringing that knowledge out into the world.

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