

# **There's a cupboard full of pasta! Beyond sustenance: reflections on youth work and commensality**

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## **Abstract**

Commensality is an area of inquiry concerned with practices of eating and, in particular, eating at a shared table, often explored through ethnographic studies of ritual and culture (Fischler, 2011). This article seeks to reflect on youth work in relation to commensality. Youth work is a practice of open access, informal education with young people that generally takes place in youth clubs or in detached or street-based settings, where young people interact with youth workers by choice. We consider practices of food sharing observed in youth work settings, their meaning, and their value beyond sustenance. When viewed through the lens of commensality, practices of food sharing in youth work settings can be articulated as a conscious method of practice, we argue, in need of further discussion. We explore this aspect of practice in youth work settings based on informal learning, social development, and abundance; considering the tensions youth workers face against a backdrop of austerity, child poverty and the neoliberal impact of the reduction of youth services. Despite this we contend that there is value in identifying, locating, and articulating the relationship between commensality and youth work. Drawing on research across eight different youth work settings in England, this article positions youth work as a site of commensal experience for young people and youth workers, extending the discourse around youth work and creating links with other areas of inquiry such as anthropology, sociology, informal education, and community development.

## **Introduction**

Rooted in ethnography, anthropologists have long explored the ritualistic, religious, and cultural significance of commensality (Durkheim, 1912; Mennell et al, 1992; Klein & Watson, 2016). Increasingly, this aspect of food studies has become applied to modern concerns around nutrition, obesity and changing attitudes to food consumption, including discourse around the 'shared meal' (Fischler, 2011); social bonding and

intimacy (Miller, Rozin and Fiske, 1998), or the cross-cultural experiences of modern young Europeans (Danesi, 2018). Whilst there have been a few small studies making connections between, for example, commensality and faith-based youth work (Barker, 2018) or more directly between food poverty and its impact on youth work practice (Ord & Monks, 2021), we argue that there is space for further inquiry around open youth work and commensality as a valuable aspect of practice.

The data drawn upon in this article emerged during our study *Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work*, a three-year qualitative research study funded by ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) investigating the youth impact agenda; the value of youth work and how youth work is evaluated; and approaches to evaluation and accountability that are appropriate to youth work practice. We are currently in the final year of the study, having undertaken policy analysis and research visits, including focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation in eight youth work settings and in-depth case studies and youth participatory research within two settings around England. Transcripts and fieldnotes were analysed through a collaborative process of open and thematic coding, discussion, and memo-writing. This analytic process was rooted in an ethnographic approach of individual and shared reflection throughout the lifespan of our research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). This was a complex process where codes were examined and dissected in relation to the primary aims of the research, around impact, evaluation and accountability in youth work as will be discussed in future papers.

In our analysis of young peoples' and youth workers' responses to questions around the value of youth work, in relation to evaluation methods and the value of youth work (Doherty & de St Croix, 2019), 'food' emerged as a common experience across settings, linked to concepts of commensality, abundance, and inequality. In diverse settings, ranging from the Northeast to the Southwest of England, young people and youth workers demonstrated what could be described as commensal practices that we observed as illustrative of important aspects of what made youth work valuable - for example, fostering kinship relationships, creating nurturing and safe spaces to be alone

or with others, or creating opportunities for informal learning - and yet were rarely articulated explicitly as such, or as distinct as method or outcome.

When writing about processes of ‘backgrounding’ certain types of knowledge, Douglas (2002) considered the importance of seeing and articulating those apparently self-evident truths “too true to warrant discussion” (2002:24) and the idea of ‘relegating’ or ignoring areas deemed unworthy of explicit investigation. Arguably, some of the methods and processes used by youth workers are vulnerable to ‘backgrounding’. Not least of which, for example, the rich dialogical processes youth workers use that do not lend themselves easily to restrictive or prescribed methods of evaluation, as we discuss elsewhere (Doherty & de St Croix, 2019). In this sense, sharing food in the youth work context may be seen as simply too mundane or unimportant to merit further inquiry, or specify in relation to evaluative norms. Indeed, as researchers and qualified youth workers, we did not anticipate the focus on food in youth work that emerged, perhaps also having taken this aspect of practice for granted during our own professional experiences. Perhaps that is why the concept of taken-for-grantedness of food and the commensal experience in youth work emerged as unanticipated and, because of this, became a notable and joyful aspect of the study. However, it is important to root any discussion on abundance by first reflecting on the reality of practice for many youth workers and young people – a reality dominated by austerity.

### **Commensality and youth work: austerity**

Youth work as a practice rooted in social justice has always been committed to anti-oppressive values and sought to engage with young people on their own terms (Chouhan, 2009). Often attracting young people from marginalised groups and often in areas of socio-economic deprivation, open youth work offers a space for young people to come by choice, as they are. Whilst open youth work can be aimed at specific groups of young people based on age, sex, gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, or cultural background, it is open in terms of the way young people access it - by choice and with no predefined expectations, allowing them to create their own agenda for sessions and the youth work that takes place. However, after more than a decade of austerity, with increasing child poverty (Children’s Commissioner, 2021), and a dramatic devastation of youth services (Berry, 2021), the reduction of spaces for young people to go, let

alone places where they can experience a sense of abundance, have become increasingly threatened. So, it is important to ground the discussion around youth work and commensality in the realities of practice, and the experiences of many of our participants spoke to this and the burden of fire-fighting symptoms of structural inequality, such as food poverty.

The Vaults is a large multi-organisational youth provision spanning a wide geographical area in Northeast England. One of the sessions observed took place in a community-based Centre, in a park surrounded by several large estates. The Centre was well used by many community groups for a wide range of activities, including the youth club. As there was no purpose-built youth centre in the area, youth workers would ‘create’ a club within the Centre for every session and dismantle it at the end of the night. One youth worker said:

*we’ve got all this holiday provision coming up with the holiday hunger stuff, and I think that sort of pressure, to put on a young person anyway, the fact that the parents have potentially not got anything to eat. So that’s going to bring on another pressure. (Polly, youth worker, The Vaults)*

Another said:

*We do it really low cost, the food, being aware these young people are coming from very deprived families... Cos there’s a school holidays poverty...a lot of the young people who come to our session get a free school meal, so they’ve had a meal during the day. So they have tea with us so then they have two meals that day. When they’re off school, some families can’t afford the lunch so they ...go without... so we feed them for free... at least we know they’re getting a meal with us. And what we try and do is open it out to the community as well, so mum and dad might come as well, or brother and sister might come... (Zara, programme manager, The Vaults)*

Prior to current increased public awareness around food poverty, sparked by high-profile campaigner Marcus Rashford, who had successfully forced a governmental U-

turn on holiday school meal vouchers during the pandemic (Bland, 2020), youth workers were already aware of and responding to ‘holiday hunger’. And this awareness was shared across settings by both youth workers and young people, as Jack, a young person we interviewed in the Southwest told us:

*...some people may not be able to financially afford to eat properly, so they'll come in and there'll be a few bowls of like pasta, or something, so it's just like people be able to eat, and if they are like 'sorry, I don't have money to get in tonight', it'll be like 'it's OK, don't worry, just pay back next week', or they can agree something if they just financially can't. It'll be like 'OK, that's fine, don't worry about paying, because if you're here we can help support you as much as possible to get a job or something'. So it's like you are never gonna get turned down at the door... (Jack, young person, Riverpath)*

Where youth clubs have survived, they often exist quite literally on impoverished land, forced to focus on addressing basic needs borne out of structural inequality, such as food provision. In this time of hunger, it is perhaps radical to position food as a *commensal* youth work experience for working class young people, proposing that it be actively linked to the experiential, to creative thought, informal education, or to youth activism, yet arguably, against a neoliberal backdrop, it becomes all the more important to do so as we will now discuss.

### **Commensality and youth work: abundance**

*I think it's just difficult to show exactly what growth in each person looks like. I mean, the enjoyable things about youth work, are like the small things. So, I made lasagne last week with the junior youth club we made it earlier in the day... and then we ate it later on in the house meeting. Three young people were like 'Nah, I don't like that. I don't like cheese... I don't eat this.' ... but three of them tried it who wouldn't have normally, because the younger ones had made it. And those small things are big... The thing was, how do I record that? ... I*

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<sup>1</sup> In this setting young people were asked to pay 50 pence entrance fee. Many youth clubs do not charge an entry fee at all and as Jack points out, in this setting it was flexibly, and sensitively applied and young people could access without paying.

*know that trying lasagne to other people isn't big. I thought, it is big for these young people. Like, it is big. (Nicole, youth worker, Opal Youth Club)*

In this quote, Nicole, a youth worker we interviewed in a London youth club, locates the nuanced ways young people and youth workers respond during sessions, including commensality. The shared cooking and eating experiences transcend the mundane to become a cultural experience embodied by being in the youth club, as well as a method of informal education in the hands of an experienced and considered practitioner like Nicole. Dialogical and conversational practices are accepted tools used by youth workers to build relationships with young people and to nurture personal and social development and are therefore an integral and assumed aspect of informal education (Batsleer, 2008; Davies, 2015). However, the use of food is significant in that often the contribution of commensal elements are overlooked as valuable elements of practice. In fact, the commensal aspect is perceived as so difficult to articulate that Nicole asks, 'how do I record that?' and asserts that 'it is big. It is big'. We see various elements of commensality played out in Nicole's story: the shared preparation of food, the kinship bonds tested through the willingness to express distaste coupled with the willingness to try the food, the ambience and sense of abundance created, opening young people to debate, the importance of the youth work space and how the nature of food in these settings is experienced. There is also the tension in how to articulate this and its value as an acceptable evaluative outcome, and yet Nicole knows that the events around the food and the shared eating experience are crucial elements of the youth work precisely due to the challenge and conversation it elicits.

This experience was not limited to full meals, but was extended to the notion of 'food' in the widest sense, depending on different settings. During a focus group with young people in 'Riverpath', a youth provision spanning a wide geographical area of Southwest England, including coastal, rural and town youth clubs, we asked young people about the value of youth work and what the club meant to them.

*Tracey: ...if you want to do something, you know that like you can say it and they [youth workers] won't like judge you for it, because you want to do cooking one week they'll like take your idea on board, because they know that, you know*

*that they respect you, so you know that you can go to them about things that you want to do.*

*Jack: Especially if you ask them to make pasta. There's a cupboard full of pasta!*

*Ruby: Bags of it. It's ridiculous.*

The young people were visibly animated, excited, and joyful when talking about the abundance of pasta in the club. For them the knowledge of 'ridiculous' amounts of pasta signalled something more than simply food, the youth club as offering a sense of nurture, something more than nutrition. In this setting, a large youth club with an open plan main area and several smaller rooms and spaces coming off it, the kitchen area was right next to the entrance where a table was set up for young people to sign-in. During the fieldwork in this club, we observed many young people head straight for this area after 'signing-in', a deliberately social space and a scene familiar to youth workers; the young people were able to freely open cupboards; cook for themselves and for others, as well as share in what was cooked. And this was happening throughout the session.

In another setting, Dawn, a senior youth worker at Seaside, a youth club in the Southeast, reiterated these ideas when discussing the online youth work space during lockdown, and trying to make it as close to a physical youth club experience as possible,

*I feel like we've now got it at the closest that it could be, without the physical space, but I definitely think that there inevitably is something missing. And it's just things like the sharing of food, that kind of like, I feel like food is a really important thing in my making a quite nurturing safe space, and yeah, just proximity, and bloody hugging people.*

This 'safe space' theme recurred throughout interviews with youth workers and young people and the breadth of youth work spaces will be discussed specifically in future writing. However, here Dawn links the concept of nurturing to how youth work spaces become commensal spaces where the sharing of *and* availability of food extends beyond feeding; in this sense commensality is used in youth work to elicit trust, a sense of ownership, community and wellbeing. And an important aspect of this is about

abundance, not only literal but metaphorical; the safety and care young people felt allowed them to open up.

*you can talk about, basically, anything, at Seaside, and like nobody's gonna judge you for it, like I started, I started coming out to people at Seaside, and like I told [friend] there was a girl I liked, I was like I really like her. [Friend] like, she was like elbowing me and was like oh get in there, get in there, and this was like when we were making pancakes.” (Delilah, young person, Seaside)*

### **Concluding thoughts**

As researchers reflecting back on over forty years (combined) youth work practice, the memory of sharing food with young people lingers like the image of a time or place sometimes invoked by a particular scent; sometimes difficult to identify as to the exact time or place or indeed the specific trigger; but there nonetheless - physical, remembered, and profound. However, to advocate the value of further consideration around youth work and commensality is not to proclaim it as a new practice method - this would be incorrect - but to savour it in a mindful way, to actively consider commensal experiences, activities and practices in youth work as broadly as possible, including how young people may feel about their relationship with food, each other, their youth workers and society more generally. It is important to acknowledge that young people and youth workers will bring a diverse range of cultural, social, and personal associations to their interactions with each other and with food, not all of which will be positive, and youth workers may use food as an activity or as a topic to kickstart discussion about wider issues. However, the essence of recognising the relationship between food and youth work, and articulating it as commensality, is about extending the notion of a 'shared table' to include young people and their experiences.

*I was just going to say that Journeys always seems to have really great snacks. [...] You know, we care about nourishing the young people, our staff, and we're thoughtful about what we're feeding everyone and what's going in our bodies. I think it's important. I think we're notorious for it. (Zayn, youth worker, Journeys)*



Being valued enough to have access to more than enough; food as pleasure, joy, and experience; learning about the self and developing deeper understandings of differences in taste and appreciation; young people making connections between self-care and their potential to care for others. Like many of the ‘softer’ outcomes vulnerable to ‘backgrounding’ in youth work, commensality needs perhaps to be recognised as embedded enough in youth work practice, irrespective of and not bounded by locational or situational differences. This would allow its *foregrounding* as a valuable method and support youth workers to actively engage and reflect on it whether through evaluation and/or embodied through praxis.

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