URBAN CHILDHOODS
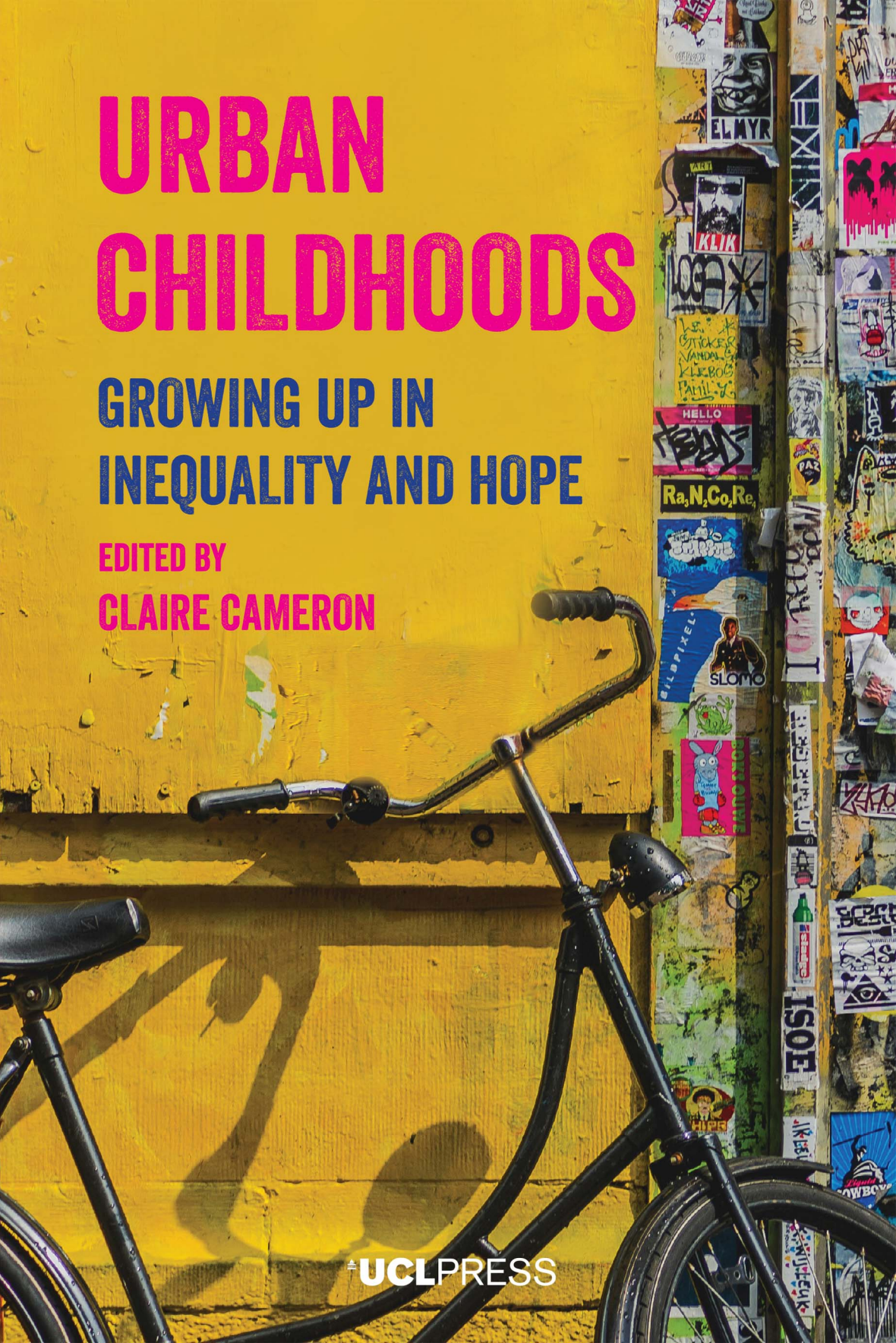
GROWING UP IN INEQUALITY AND HOPE

EDITED BY
CLAIRE CAMERON

Urban Childhoods

Urban Childhoods

Growing up in inequality and hope

Edited by Claire Cameron

⌂UCLPRESS

Contents

List of figures

List of tables

List of acronyms and abbreviations

BBBH	Bromley by Bow Health
BiB	Born in Bradford project
BiBBS	Born in Bradford's Better Start
CBMDC	City of Bradford Municipal District Council
C-HAPIE	Children-Health and Place Intervention Evaluation tool
CPAG	Child Poverty Action Group
DfT	Department for Transport
DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
GDCI	Global Designing Cities Initiative
HWC	Healthier Wealthier Children
HWF	Healthier Wealthier Families project, East London
IFS	Institute for Fiscal Studies
IHE	Institute of Health Equity
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
JU:MP	Join Us: Move Play
LBBD	London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
LBI	London Borough of Islington
LBTH	London Borough of Tower Hamlets
LTN	Low-traffic neighbourhood
NICE	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
NIESR	National Institute of Economic and Social Research
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PHE	Public Health England
SEISS	Self-Employment Income Support Scheme
SSP	Statutory Sick Pay
TfL	Transport for London
UC	Universal Credit
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
WHO	World Health Organization

9

Inequalities on a plate? Children's voices from urban school food environments

Natalia Concha, Meredith K. D. Hawking, Liina Mansukoski, Carol Dezateux and Maria Bryant

With energy rising, I conquer the day,
Challenges met in every which way.
No empty stomach, no weary soul,
A good school lunch makes me whole.

(Zara, Secondary school student, Netherhall Learning
Campus, Huddersfield, Food Foundation 2023)

Introduction

Between 20 and 25 per cent of children in England experience hunger on a daily basis. This reflects rapidly rising levels of food insecurity that affect not only people living in the margins of society but also those working families where household income is not sufficient to purchase enough food. Further, well-documented inequalities in availability and accessibility mean that poorer families consume less fruit and vegetables, fibre and micronutrients than wealthier households, with evidence consistently demonstrating that dietary intake in children and young people does not meet government guidelines (Bryant et al. 2023). The negative effects of poor diet are not constrained to the present day or, even to the near future. Being unable to provide children with enough, sufficiently nutritious food has multiple negative long-term consequences for health and wellbeing, including higher risks for obesity, poorer growth, other forms of malnutrition, dental decay and poorer mental health.

Given that children consume approximately 30 per cent of their diet at school (Nelson et al. 2007), this setting has often been seen as an ideal place to provide healthy food, while simultaneously supporting food education and nurturing appropriate food and eating behaviours. Recent research has explored the 'micro' school food system and proposed a number of key principles that could be considered by schools to meet children's needs (Bryant et al. 2023). Central to these key principles is a well-grounded acknowledgement that schools provide pastoral care to children and their families through free school meals. The school food research reported in this chapter presents three case studies, two from Bradford in Yorkshire and one from Tower Hamlets in London. These case studies argue that research and policy can benefit immensely from foregrounding children and young people's perspectives and experiences in shaping free school meals and school food environments.

The provision of free school meals to eligible pupils in England is a longstanding policy aimed at addressing socio-economic inequalities and promoting educational attainment. There is a wealth of research that highlights the significant role that school meals have on academic achievement (Schwartz and Rothbart 2020; CDC 2019), childhood food insecurity (Ralston et al. 2017), childhood overweight and obesity (Terry-McElrath et al. 2015), dietary quality (Au et al. 2018), school attendance (Ruffini 2022) and behavioural problems (Gordon and Ruffini 2018).

Under the Education Act 1996, publicly funded schools in England have an obligation to offer free school meals to disadvantaged pupils (DfE 2024). However, eligibility criteria for means-tested free school meals entitles only those families with an average household income of less than £7,400. Despite this, around a quarter of all children in England are deemed eligible for means-tested free school meals (DfE 2024). In secondary schools in England, this equates to a daily allowance of £2.53 to purchase food and drinks, though this may vary across schools. Schools in the highest areas of deprivation (mainly those in urban areas) often have a substantially higher proportion of children whose families are entitled to free school meals and therefore often have a considerable role to play in supporting families. Linked funding (via the Pupil Premium, which is additional government funding aimed at improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools in England) is allocated to schools based on the number of children eligible for free school meals; thus, funding is intended to support a broad range of school activities for children and families. Schools located

within urban settings therefore have the potential to receive more policy investment than those in more rural areas.

The role of schools in providing free school meals and support to children and young people needs to be understood as part of the broader socio-economic landscape in which these policies operate. There have always been inequalities in access and quality of food but, for a long time, historical trends largely highlighted an improving picture in the UK, similar to other democratic European societies. Compared to early Industrial Britain, most measures related to social and environmental determinants of health, including those related to food such as growth in height, started to show positive trajectories over time (see Treme and Craig 2013, s132). This is no longer the case, with children from the UK now being, on average, 7 cm shorter than their European peers by the age of 5 years (NCD-RisC 2020).

In the 1940s, many initiatives were launched to support families, including the National School Meals Policy in 1944, which required local authorities to provide school food and milk for all children. Since then, there has been a shift in policy priorities and increasing economic constraints, such that childhood diet is viewed as an individual choice and family responsibility, not something where the government has a major role (Abbasi 2024). Governing bodies in schools in England have a statutory responsibility to monitor compliance with school food standards (DfE 2023). The effect of this is that while the policy enables schools to deliver services that are more locally contextualised, it may also exacerbate inequalities, whereby schools in disadvantaged areas may struggle with competing financial and other priorities.

In conversation with the critical sociology of childhood

As we confront the stark reality of food insecurity and the limitations of the UK means-tested free school meals policy, the critical sociology of childhood offers an informative theoretical lens to unpack the social construction and structural inequalities surrounding the lives of urban children in school food environments (Christensen et al. 2018). As discussed in Chapter 2, this volume, the 'traditional' view of childhood as a linear, developmental and universal trajectory disregards the nuanced and diverse social realities experienced by children, including those who are living in urban contexts experiencing inequalities. We thus join childhood scholars in challenging the idea that using age as a neutral marker of development often overlooks children's capabilities to act

and participate in social life. Instead, we should value human learning and experiences occurring throughout the life course, where children, despite their years, have a major contribution to make (Christensen and James 2005; James and Prout 1997; 2015; Corsaro 2005; 2011; Mayall 1998; 2000). This sociological lens aligns with the wider programme of social science research underpinned by a social constructionist, post-structuralist, intersectional and decolonial framing, which largely argues that many under-represented groups and communities around the world have been agglomerated into 'WEIRD' (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic) contexts (Apicella et al. 2020; Henrich et al. 2010).

Applied to childhood, sociologists working in the 'new' paradigm have established how childhood has been devalued in its present, as a transitional phase with potential implications for the future (James and Prout 1997; 2015). This objectification of children negates the complexity of their lives in the here-and-now and particularly impacts children who come from non-WEIRD contexts, including migrant and minority ethnic children living in urban environments in both the global North and South. In our urban school food research, this means exploring children's lifeworlds through their diverse voices and experiences as they face systemic barriers around food insecurity and healthy food, thereby contributing towards the research programme of societal childhood inclusion (Corsaro 2005; 2011; James and Prout 1997; 2015).

Voice: system complexity and the role of children and young people

Building upon this framework, our research investigates the complexity of school food systems and the role of children and young people within them. Consistent with all complex problems, the factors that influence food insecurity and inequalities in access to healthy diets are difficult to disentangle (Parsons and Hawkes 2019). Various models have been proposed to describe the wider food system, including those that give rise to health issues such as obesity, those describing the sustainability of food sources, and the school food system. Although there is no single universally accepted model that captures the complexity fully, understanding and acknowledging that multiple systems interlink, and that the causes of negative outcomes are multifactorial, is essential if we are to transform food systems so that they provide nutritious and sustainable food for all.

In the UK, the National Food Strategy (Dimbleby 2021) proposes 14 actions needed to make a radical change to the food system. It advocates change measures spanning from reductions in intensive farming to extension of the school holiday food provision. In the time between its launch in 2021 and a UK policy paper (the then government's Levelling Up White Paper: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2022), there was a growing sense of the need to continue to build momentum via strengthening the evidence and through advocacy. The speed of change requires research evidence gathering to keep pace to inform decision-making. In parallel, youth activism on climate and food justice has gained momentum worldwide, with young people increasingly calling for transformations to protect the planet in which they will grow up (Delgado 2015, 154–63; Harper et al. 2017; Kwan 2014; Tsui et al. 2012). This has inspired school-led campaigns where young people are making their voices heard on issues about inequalities, food sustainability, climate change and food poverty, and often demonstrate a commitment to build a better world. Within school food, campaigns led by young people such as Christina Adane, a prominent UK youth activist advocating for food justice, have sparked conversations about the need for children to have access to healthy food outside of school term time. Adane's activism was amplified by Marcus Rashford, a professional footballer for Manchester United and the England national team, who campaigned extensively for increasing food support for children living in poverty. Rashford, who grew up experiencing food insecurity himself, has used his public platform to speak out, leading a high-profile campaign which urged the government to extend free school meal vouchers during the school holidays and the COVID-19 lockdown periods. These campaigns were a key part of the initial pledge for additional UK government funding for the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme (DfE 2022) to support families in receipt of free school meals when schools were closed. Other groups of young people, with the support of opportunities such as the Food Foundation's Young Food Ambassadors scheme, have intensified their call for food justice, and celebrity TV chef Jamie Oliver's Bite Back campaign relentlessly highlights the need to improve policies for children's right to food.

In addition to encouraging advocacy, we argue that working alongside young people and other actors to support decision-making in research and policy enables our findings to be relevant and useful (Altares et al. 2022; Tsui et al. 2012). This should move beyond a simple level of involvement or engagement, to a model which fosters innovation and systems transformations; from priority setting to development of

new curricula. However, it is important that adults do not overly burden young people with the responsibility for change, and be mindful that, if we truly want to transform our food systems, we need political leaders to step up. Empowerment of young people plays a vital role in decision-making, but children and young people are ultimately bearing the brunt of the crisis and therefore cannot also be expected to fix it.

Ensuring that children's voices are included when developing, evaluating and sustaining policies is a key ambition of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Drawing on Lundy's (2007) model of child participation, which emphasises self-expression, facilitation of voice, listening and acting on children's views to conceptualise Article 12, the British Academy Childhood Policy Programme sought to reframe the ways in which children engage with policymaking processes (Berkley and Wright 2022). Its report, 'Reframing Childhood', highlighted the fragmented nature of current policymaking on childhood and proposed seven evidence-informed principles to guide future policymaking. In a related piece, Kraftl (2020, paragraph 2) draws our attention to the fact that 'children and young people are among the most marginalised groups in any urban place' and that they are 'routinely excluded from decision-making and planning processes designed to make those places better'. Hence assuring the participation of the urban child in policy development is a key challenge which we have sought to address in a variety of ways, as highlighted in the case studies below.

Case study 1: prioritising school food with children and young people in Yorkshire

'Engagement' sits at the heart of understanding current food systems and what is needed to navigate to a preferred system. 'FixOurFood' in Yorkshire is a wider partnership programme that seeks to transform food systems by centring on children and young people through participatory, citizen science methods and systems thinking (Doherty et al. 2022). A cornerstone of FixOurFood is the 'Leaders for Change' (L4C) initiative, a collective of children and young people from diverse schools across Yorkshire. These young leaders mobilise peers and directly drive the programme's activities and outputs, by co-creating solutions to food system challenges. The L4C engaged 465 children and young people to identify research priorities and provided a platform from which the young participants could be part of local decision-making within their

own schools (Rose et al. 2021; Thomas et al. 2003). As part of this work, young people from L4C were invited to rank the importance of 11 school food interventions at the L4C launch event in 2021. Options included the introduction of policies at the school, local and national level, as well as guidance, growing (and learning about) food, changing menu options, free school meals, school food committees and recycling/composting. Young people were also given the opportunity to say how their decisions were relevant to their lives via live recordings and debates. The top five ranked priorities after this event were:

- plastic free wrapping
- vegetarian/vegan options
- drinking water always available
- recycling/composting
- free school meals for all.

These options were used as the basis for future events to help children and young people in school food prioritisation within the FixOurFood programme, including a prioritisation activity within an event hosted by the Yorkshire Agricultural Society in 2022. In this, 229 children from 11 primary schools were asked to rank the options proposed by the L4C. Children also identified new priorities, including provision of trips to learn more about food, free breakfast and incorporating children's voices in decision-making in school. The top ranked priority at this event was 'free school meals for all'. The third event to gain insights from children and young people was part of the University of York's 'Festival of Ideas' in 2022. The prioritisation categories that were proposed by the L4C were used in a dot-marking exercise in which children and young people were asked to put a dot next to the category that they would prioritise. This exercise was completed 146 times, with the highest ranked priority being 'free school meals for all'. Combined, these three ranking exercises with input from 465 children and young people led to a 'Top 5 prioritised school food areas'. This information was shared with all Yorkshire Members of Parliament, in addition to forming the basis of research within FixOurFood. The L4C continue to engage in this space, with many participants campaigning locally on a variety of the topic areas, including provision of free drinking water, food packaging and free school meals.

FixOurFood also applied frameworks like the Three Horizons (3H) model to support long-term changes in the food system (Doherty et al. 2022). The Three Horizons (3H) model is designed to co-create strategic insights to support complex transformation grounded in

'futures methods' – approaches integrating human agency (that is, people's ability to make choices and take actions), and addressing uncertainty – with systems thinking (Sharpe et al. 2016). Researchers within the FixOurFood programme have delivered 3H workshops with young people, in addition to adult partners (including school leaders, teachers, governors, caterers, national experts, as well as food producers and retailers) to provide an understanding of the challenges faced and the perception of critical actions needed to support food system transformation (FixOurFood 2022), including: making better use of initial grassroots initiatives, monitoring school food standards, overcoming poor practices that have been introduced as a result of wider contextual influences (for example, use of 'grab bags' during COVID-19) and improving mechanisms to avoid disjointed processes for funding. By engaging with young people in thinking about these complexities, the project gained insights into the systemic challenges they face as social actors. Through this process, the programme facilitated the meaningful participation of young people to shape research priorities, policy advocacy and local campaigns. The L4C shows how place-based systems thinking applying participatory methods integrates children and young people's contributions to food systems transformations.

Case study 2: Food Improvement Goals in Schools project – children's voices and agency in school food environments in Tower Hamlets

This focused ethnography placed children's voices at the heart of our inquiry. The Food Improvement Goals in Schools (FIGS) project involved working with primary school-aged children in Tower Hamlets. It carried out a qualitative evaluation of the council's initiative to improve school food and children's healthy eating. We focused on recognising children as active agents through their lived experiences in context, exploring free school meals, school food and eating practices. Since 2014, Tower Hamlets Council has provided free school meals universally in primary schools, extending the government-funded offer beyond Reception–Year 2 (aged 4–6 years) to include children in Years 3–6 (aged 7–11 years) (Tower Hamlets 2021). Yet uptake is not universal, and our research explored the reasons through first-person experiential perspectives.

Situating children's voices at the core of our research meant designing creative methods to engage children in mini-groups which

enabled children to express abstract ideas through symbols, such as drawings and stories. We used techniques that encourage participants to project their thoughts and feelings onto external objects or scenarios, like drawings, to help them communicate experiences that may be difficult to express verbally. These are regarded as valuable meaning-making tools for child communication in research (Brooks 2005), providing access to non-verbal 'knowledges' (Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000, 258–9) and symbolic worlds (Jovchelovitch et al. 2013; Yuen 2004). We validated these methods prior to our fieldwork with local children. Based on their feedback, we merged a short vignette (Barter and Renold 2000) with a drawing activity, creating a form of visual storytelling. The purpose was to have tools enabling a familiar, entertaining and flexible encounter where children could voice critical and grounded daily perspectives around school food and healthy eating. We conducted 12 mini-groups with 43 children (Years 3–6, aged 7–11 years) and observed activities and the school environment across all primary school years (from age 4–11 years) in six schools. We worked closely with the head-teachers and teaching staff to engage with boys and girls from diverse backgrounds, that reflected the schools' demographics.

Children's voices and ownership of food preferences

Creating opportunities for children to voice meal preferences in mini-groups and intervention activities (such as voting at cooking 'TV-style' activities and tasting sessions) meant children felt included and valued. Using a hands-on approach, children were encouraged to experience food in a way that engaged all their senses. This meant children could explore different flavours, textures and smells, which helped expand their understanding and appreciation of healthy foods and of eating as a larger, more holistic experience (Earl 2022; Pink 2004) from tasting interventions. Children expressed their preferences for homemade food, revealing a connection many of them shared with cultural and faith-based traditions and practices (such as Eid, Diwali, Christmas). While views on school food varied, 'Fishy Fridays' stood out as popular. Frustration about limited dietary options and quality were expressed, with some calling for a diverse array of choices and/or culturally authentic meal preparation. Projective techniques such as using a third actor who was a friendly but hungry child alien named Zippy who landed at their school, allowed for the elicitation of responses on what mattered to them: 'If he [Zippy] has just one meal it's not going to fill him up, he's still going to be very hungry. Because the portion sizes

are very small, like, the portion sizes we get' (Girl, Year 5). Re-assessing portion sizes was a common theme.

Capabilities and agency

Children's capabilities surfaced not only in their suggestions to improve school food, but also in narratives describing active contributions of preparing meals at home. One Year 6 girl proudly indicated, 'I can cook anything. I can cook rice and dal. Dal is just like lentils. I can cook like chicken, fried rice, stir fry, anything!' Recognising children's agency, understood as their capacity to act and make choices (James and Prout 2015), by incorporating their real-life experiences as first-person perspectives in research, contributes to practices upholding UNCRC principles. It enables children's participation to shape their lives and the lives of those who form their immediate networks. We found children can play a pivotal role in improving eating practices at home. This offers pathways for policymakers to consider wider engagement through children's connection to their lifeworld of school–home, extending child and family health. However, as we have noted throughout this chapter, children face structural constraints in their everyday lives. When they bring healthy eating advice from school to home, families may find it difficult to actualise this, particularly for those experiencing food insecurity and poverty in the UK. Given that many children place relationality as central in their lives (Mayall 2000; see also Chapter 1, this volume) our findings highlight the need to continue addressing the power imbalances and structures that limit their potentialities; yet, we recognise these as important pathways to continue building blocks for social change.

Case study 3: Free school meal allowance project – working with young people as citizen scientists and advocates of change in Yorkshire

> I love food. It was one of the reasons I was so excited to move to secondary school.
>
> (Lara, Bedale High School, North Yorkshire, Food Foundation 2023)

Citizen science entails a collaboration between scientists and members of the public that has the potential to transform science and society (Bonney

et al. 2009). Not only does this increase public awareness of science, it also allows us to gather data that would otherwise be meaningless, difficult or expensive to collect. For children and young people, citizen science is also believed to promote scientific literacy (Bonney et al. 2009; Bonney et al. 2016), foster a sense of community (Bender et al. 2017; Frazer et al. 2024) and develop critical thinking skills (Schusler and Krasny 2014). This case study describes work that was co-delivered by researchers at the University of York, the Food Foundation and young people from seven schools across Yorkshire in 2023, aimed at exploring the value of free school meals (Connolly et al. 2023). It applied a citizen science framework developed by Shirk et al. (2012), including guidance on how to engage members of the public in research in a way that is meaningful and effective.

Campaigning organisations have been advocating for improved access to school food for many years, with 'Young Food Ambassadors' revealing that the limited budget of the free school meal allowance forced them to choose less healthy options to satisfy their appetite, and healthier options were often scarce in many schools (Inquiry Committee and Young Food Ambassadors 2019). To investigate this further, we worked with young citizen scientists to explore their school food environment and gather data to provide evidence on the ability of food to meet the needs of young people who are entitled to means-tested free school meals.

Forty-two young people, aged 11–16, from seven schools with higher than national average rates of free school meals eligibility were invited to become study citizen scientists. They attended a research training day and were provided with a daily budget equivalent to the free school meal allowance at their school (£2.15–2.70) and were challenged to buy healthy, tasty and sustainable meals over five school days with this amount. Young citizen scientists completed daily record diaries and lunch-time observation forms, indicated how full they felt after eating and recorded the cost of what they purchased. They were also asked to audio record their daily thoughts around school meals, and later participated in group discussions about their findings with other young citizen scientists from their school.

Through this work, the researchers learnt that those on free school meals had restricted choices with regards to the timing and types of foods that were available to them. In most schools, young citizen scientists could only choose a 'meal deal' option, with a set cost for a meal including a sandwich, a dessert and a drink. In some instances, non-meal-deal items offered healthier alternatives and did not come with the

unnecessary need to purchase a drink in a plastic bottle. Unlike others who were able to pay for their food, young people enrolled as study citizen scientists were often not allowed to use their free school meal allowance at break times, and many expressed hunger due to having to wait for lunch to eat (often past 1 p.m.). This type of restriction is most pertinent to children and young people experiencing food insecurity, who are also most likely to have missed breakfast (Kudsia 2021).

The young citizen scientists also reported that the lack of pricing on items meant that they would often have to make quick decisions and/ or feel embarrassed at the till when they were asked to put back foods that were beyond their budgets. They also shared findings, including a lack of fruit and vegetables available to buy (in four out of seven schools, no fruit was purchased over the entire week by any of the young researchers), rushed and short lunch breaks (30 minutes) in which the majority of time was spent in a queue, which was compounded by the fact that those on free school meals were often not able to access the quicker queuing option (selling snacks/paninis). Finally, young citizen scientists from all schools reported a lack of access to free and clean drinking water.

The role that young citizen scientists played in this work continued beyond data collection, as they all contributed to producing a study report and to presenting the findings in front of an audience of key decision-makers in Parliament. At this event, study citizen scientists shared their findings in multiple ways, including as poems. Importantly, they led the production and the delivery of the event. To further highlight the power and importance of the voice of young people, the event was well attended, with attendees including 16 Members of Parliament and four Lords. Key recommendations called for an amendment to the school food standards to include two portions of vegetables with every meal; ensure schools have sufficient funding to provide access to free, clean and maintained drinking water; and to extend free school fruit and vegetable provision to all year groups.

Hope: reframing collective agency

The three case studies presented in this chapter highlight the value of including children and young people's voices to inform policies and practices related to school food environments. Case study 1 addressed priority-setting efforts through directly engaging with children and young people in decision-making processes regarding school food

provision in Yorkshire. Children and young people called for the need to focus on sustainability and on prioritising 'free school meals for all'. The study showed how their voices can put pressure on shaping school food policy, giving weight to wider efforts calling for universal provision (Rose et al. 2021; Thomas et al. 2003). Case study 2 explored children's lived experiences and agency within school food environments in Tower Hamlets. By applying creative methodologies in children's mini-groups and sensorial self-reports, the study revealed the nuanced ways in which children interact with, perceive and experience free school meals. Their preferences, rooted in cultural and experiential contexts, provided evidence for adopting a critical childhood sociology lens to tailor interventions that reflect children's diverse backgrounds in urban environments (Christensen et al. 2018). Case study 3 adopted a citizen science approach to look at the influence of the free school meal allowance on young people's dietary choices and the impact this has on their wellbeing. Through active participation in all aspects of the research process, young citizen scientists gathered grounded insights on the structural barriers and inequalities inherent in school food systems. In this distinctive example, we saw how children and young people's voices can be lifted to a platform that matters, where they took their findings to key decision-makers in the UK Parliament in line with the UNCRC's articles on Rights to Participation and Freedom of Expression (Articles 12 and 13), and puts into practice Lundy's (2007) model, relevant for the UK context in which they live. However, fundamental changes to the food system requires strong and durable political leadership as well as young people's voices. As young people in our research have shown, we need to revolutionise food production, trading decisions, marketing and planning policies and welfare systems. It is through this long-term and integrated vision that we can hope to deliver a food system in which healthy, affordable, tasty food is the default for all children and young people. Without this, the chances of meeting our UN Global Food Sustainability goals for ending malnutrition, addressing nutritional needs throughout the life course, and providing access to safe, healthy and sustainable food are very low.

Our empirical work not only aligns with the UNCRC, but also goes further in joining scholars critiquing essentialist human developmental and universal frameworks that conceptualise childhood solely from a WEIRD perspective (Apicella et al. 2020; Henrich et al. 2010) and as potency-in-transition to reach adulthood (James and Prout 1997; 2015). This goes beyond binary representations of children as either active/passive or powerful/vulnerable, and aligns with those arguing that

focusing solely on children's agency may risk overlooking the impact of structural inequalities, adult power dynamics and social normativity affecting children's lives (Corsaro 2005; 2011; Taft 2019). Although our research calls for the need to continue challenging age-based hierarchical definitions of capabilities by giving a platform to children's voices, we see how intersecting inequalities and adult power dynamics have failed to protect and provide the care and support that millions of children still require across the globe (UNICEF 2019). Our case studies show children as active participants who contest these notions, but also as human beings who require care, support (from parents, families, teachers, peers), provision and recognition (from policymakers, politicians). We thus propose the adoption of a more nuanced perspective, where we balance children's agency with an understanding of their needs and positioning in society. Through this lens, calls by children and young people for policies to extend universal free school meals provision are a key pathway to address some of the inequalities.

Our case studies provide evidence of the transformative potential of placing children and young people's voices at the centre of school food programmes. This builds upon the recommendations set out in the UK's National Food Strategy (Dimbleby 2021) by adding the voice of young people (particularly Recommendation 4, to extend free school meals, and Recommendation 13, to strengthen government procurement to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent on healthy, sustainable food). Involving children and young people in decision-making fosters a sense of democratic participation, setting up foundations which are key for social development and participation in the here-and-now, applicable to the UK urban context (James and Prout 1997; 2015). Our citizen science project on free school meal allowance (Case study 3) enabled children and young people to engage in dialogue with those in power calling directly for policy reform. Such active leadership means that findings centred on issues that matter to young people can lay the ground for more responsive policies when policymakers choose to engage in prioritisation processes through democratic and civic participation principles. As researchers committed to navigating the complexities of food system transformation, our work shows how their perspectives are indispensable in sculpting a healthier, more inclusive, diverse and equitable pathway for a healthier society for all, providing a more democratic way of influencing political leaders as children do not have a vote.

Improving the translation of health inequalities research

In a final reflection, we touch upon the processes that make our research and engagement with children and young people possible. In recent years there has been an increasing requirement that publicly funded health research must demonstrate meaningful social impact. However, it can be challenging to translate research evidence into policy-related action to tackle health inequalities. Often, the impact of research findings has, at best, indirect effects on local policy contexts, alongside other prioritised factors, such as time, financial restraints and personal experience (Elliott and Popay 2000). Moving from evaluating interventions towards finding 'what works' locally is an important part of this process for which collaborative working between partners within the system is key. These projects are enabled by partnerships that bring the research right into the conversation with policymakers – without the local authority's interest, it is less likely that research projects would receive the necessary support to generate impact. The ActEarly collaborative (Wright et al. 2019) is one such example of an effective partnership between local policymakers, health and social science researchers and community members, including children and young people, and local institutions. Conceptualised as 'knowledge encounters' (Aveling and Jovchelovitch 2014), the collaborative partnership model allows for different forms of 'knowledges' and makes use of a shared pool of *insider-on-the-ground experience* with *outsider-conceptual-evidence-based knowledges* to enrich our understanding of the impact of a given policy within the system. Importantly, this form of partnership gives voice to all actors within the complex system, including children and young people. Returning to Lundy's (2007) model of child participation, we have shown how the work of our partnership provides both space and facilitation for children to voice their views, as well as a listening audience and appropriate follow up policy-related action. From the examples we have discussed in this chapter, we have shown that effective partnership working and local policy change can lead to social value and health-related impact that goes beyond the local community.

Acknowledgements

been essential to our work. We would like to extend our gratitude to: Sundus Mahdi, Wendy Burton, Georgia Irving, Rob Oxley (University of York), Grace Gardner (Newcastle HDRC), Maddie Sinclair (Glasgow University), Annie Connolly (Trussell Trust) and ActEarly Community Researchers Mathilda O'Donoghue and Pratima Singh (Queen Mary). Our local authority partners have been central in supporting and enabling the research. In Bradford, we are particularly grateful to Tim Howells and Lisa Dowling and in Tower Hamlets to Katy Scammell, Rab Brownell and Simon Twite. The Food Foundation and Bremner & Co have also provided advocacy, resources and guidance. Our funders UKPRP, UKRI and the Global Food Security Programme have all been instrumental in making this research possible. Finally, we express our deepest gratitude to the schools, parents, carers and particularly to all the children and young people who participated in our research. Thank you for enriching our understanding with your voices and insights.

Further reading

Lister, R. (ed.). (2020–2). 'Multidisciplinary perspectives on the child's voice in public policy'. *Journal of the British Academy* 8 (s4). https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4142/JBA-8s4-00-FULL.pdf.

References

Abbasi, K. 2024. 'Child health: A multisectoral and multidimensional betrayal'. *BMJ* 384: q317. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q317.

Altares, A., Hobbs, S., Sobel, D., Nelson, T., Serpa, M. and Bellows, L. L. 2022. 'Cultivating community change to promote food access and healthy eating through participatory action research with youth'. *Journal of Community Practice* 30 (4): 378–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2022.2139035.

Apicella, C., Norenzayan, A. and Henrich, J. 2020. 'Beyond WEIRD: A review of the last decade and a look ahead to the global laboratory of the future'. *Evolution and Human Behavior* 41 (5): 319–29. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2020.07.015.

Au, L. E., Gurzo, K., Gosliner, W., Webb, K. L., Crawford, P. B. and Ritchie, L. D. 2018. 'Eating school meals daily is associated with healthier dietary intakes: The Healthy Communities Study'. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* 118 (8): 1474–81.e1. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2018.01.010.

Aveling, E. L. and Jovchelovitch, S. 2014. 'Partnerships as knowledge encounters: A psychosocial theory of partnerships for health and community development'. *Journal of Health Psychology* 19 (1): 34–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105313509.

Barter, C. and Renold, E. 2000. '"I wanna tell you a story": Exploring the application of vignettes in qualitative research with children and young people'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 3 (4): 307–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570050178594.

Bender, K., Barman-Adhikari, A., DeChants, J., Haffejee, B., Anyon, Y., Begun, S., Portillo, A. and Dunn, K. 2017. 'Asking for change: Feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary outcomes of a manualized photovoice intervention with youth experiencing homelessness'. *Children and Youth Services Review* 81: 379–89. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.08.028.

Berkley, N. and Wright, A. 2022. *Reframing Childhood: Final report of the Childhood Policy Programme July 2022*. London: The British Academy. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4213/BA1117_Childhood_Policy_Programme_V4-Digital_130722.pdf.

Bonney, R., Cooper, C. B., Dickinson, J., Kelling, S., Phillips, T., Rosenberg, K. V. and Shirk, J. 2009. 'Citizen science: A developing tool for expanding science knowledge and scientific literacy'. *BioScience* 59 (11): 977–84. https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2009.59.11.9.

Bonney, R., Phillips, T. B., Ballard, H. L. and Enck, J. W. 2016. 'Can citizen science enhance public understanding of science?'. *Public Understanding of Science* 25 (1): 2–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662515607406.

Brooks, M. 2005. 'Drawing as a unique mental development tool for young children: interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogues'. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 6 (1): 80–91. https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2005.6.1.11.

Bryant, M., Burton, W., O'Kane, N., Woodside, J. V., Ahern, S., Garnett, P., Spence, S., Sharif, A., Rutter, H., Baker, T. and Evans, C. E. L. 2023. 'Understanding school food systems to support the development and implementation of food based policies and interventions'. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 20 (1): 29. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-023-01432-2.

Campbell, C. and Jovchelovitch, S. 2000. 'Health, community and development: Towards a social psychology of participation'. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 10 (4): 255–70. https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-1298(200007/08)10:4%3C255::AID-CASP582%3E3.0.CO;2-M.

CDC (Centre for Disease Prevention and Control). 2019. 'Health and academics'. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://archive.cdc.gov/#/details?url=https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/health_and_academics/index.htm.

Christensen, P. M., Hadfield-Hill, S., Horton, J. and Kraftl, P. 2018. *Children Living in Sustainable Built Environments: New urbanisms, new citizens*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Christensen, P. M. and James, A. (eds). 2017. *Research with Children: Perspectives and practices* (3rd edition). Abingdon: Routledge.

Connolly, A., Bryant, M., Brinsden, H., Feree, T., Mahdi, S. and McIntyre, Z. 2023. *A Better Deal for Free School Meals: A research project by secondary school students*. London: The Food Foundation. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/TFF_FSM%20Allowance_Report_FINAL.pdf.

Corsaro, W. A. 2005. *The Sociology of Childhood* (2nd edition). Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Corsaro, W. A. 2011. *The Sociology of Childhood* (3rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage/Pine Forge.

Delgado, M. 2015. *Community Practice and Urban Youth: Social justice service-learning and civic engagement*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. 2022. 'Levelling up the United Kingdom'. Policy paper. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom.

DfE (Department for Education). 2022. 'Holiday activities and food programme'. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/holiday-activities-and-food-programme/holiday-activities-and-food-programme-2021.

DfE (Department for Education). 2023. 'School food: Guidance for governors'. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools/school-food-guidance-for-governors.

DfE (Department for Education). 2024. *Free School Meals: Guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools*. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fdad5965ca2f00117da947/Free_school_meals.pdf.

Dimbleby, H. 2021. *National Food Strategy. Independent Review: The Plan*. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Food-Strategy-The-Plan.pdf.

Doherty, B. and 21 others. 2022. 'Transformations to regenerative food systems: An outline of the FixOurFood project'. *Nutrition Bulletin* 47 (1): 106–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/nbu.12536.

Earl, L. 2022. 'The *doing* of ethnographies of eating: Writing, observing, and eating chip butties during ethnographic research in primary schools in England'. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 35 (1): 32–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2020.1761476.

Elliot, H. and Popay, J. 2000. 'How are policy makers using evidence? Models of research utilisation and local NHS policy making'. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 54 (6): 461–8. https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.54.6.461.

FixOurFood. 2022. *Transforming Food Culture in Yorkshire's Schools and Early Years Settings: Summary report of the co-creative Three Horizons process*. York: University of York, FixOurFood research programme. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://fixourfood.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Transforming-Yorkshires-school-food-culture.pdf.

Food Foundation. 2023. *A Better Deal for Free School Meals: A booklet of poems by secondary school students as part of a project on food in schools*. University of York and The Food Foundation. https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/TFF_FSM%20Allowance_Poems.pdf.

Frazer, M. T., Creaser, A., Tatterton, M. J., Daly-Smith, A. and Hall, J. 2024. 'Exploring children and young people's experience of participating in citizen science: A qualitative evidence synthesis'. *PLoS ONE* 19 (7): e0304976. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304976.

Gordon, N. E. and Ruffini, K. J. 2018. 'School nutrition and student discipline: Effects of schoolwide free school meals'. National Bureau of Economic Research. Working Paper 24986. https://doi.org/10.3386/w24986.

Harper, K., Sands, C., Angarita Horowitz, D., Totman, M., Maitín, M., Rosado, J. S., Colon, J. and Alger, N. 2017. 'Food justice youth development: Using photovoice to study urban school food systems'. *Local Environment* 22 (7): 791–808. https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2016.1274721.

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J. and Norenzayan, A. 2010. 'The weirdest people in the world?'. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33 (2–3): 61–83. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X.

Inquiry Committee and Young Food Ambassadors. 2019. 'Children's Future Food Inquiry report'. The Food Foundation. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/Childrens-Future-Food-Inquiry-report.pdf.

James, A. and Prout, A. 1997. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. Abingdon: Falmer Press.

James, A. and Prout, A. (eds). 2015. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kraftl, P. 2020. 'Including children and young people in building cities'. British Academy. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://medium.com/reframing-childhood-past-and-present/including-children-and-young-people-in-building-cities-3964f0c1c832.

Kudsia, L. 2021. 'The Association Between Habitual Breakfast Consumption, Psychological Wellbeing and Food Insecurity in Children and Adolescents'. D.Clin.Psychol thesis, University of Leeds. https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/29729/.

Kwan, A. 2014. 'Youth food activism'. In *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*, edited by P. B. Thompson and D. M. Kaplan, 1850–6. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0929-4_431.

Jovchelovitch, S., Priego-Hernández, J. and Glăveanu, V.-P. 2013. 'Constructing public worlds: Culture and socio-economic context in the development of children's representations of the public sphere'. *Culture and Psychology* 19 (3): 323–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X13489320.

Lundy, L. 2007. '"Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child'. *British Educational Research Journal* 33 (6): 927–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033.

Mayall, B. 1998. 'Towards a sociology of child health'. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 20 (3): 269–88. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.00102.

Mayall, B. 2000. 'The sociology of childhood in relation to children's rights'. *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 8 (3): 243–59. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718180020494640.

NCD-RisC (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration). 2020. 'Height and body-mass index trajectories of school-aged children and adolescents from 1985 to 2019 in 200 countries and territories: A pooled analysis of 2181 population-based studies with 65 million participants'. *The Lancet* 396 (10261): 1511–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31859-6.

Nelson, M., Lowes, K. and Hwang, V. 2007. 'The contribution of school meals to food consumption and nutrient intakes of young people aged 4–18 years in England'. *Public Health Nutrition* 10 (7): 652–66. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980007382519.

Parsons, K. and Hawkes, C. 2019. *Connecting Food Systems for Co-Benefits: How can food systems combine diet-related health with environmental and economic policy goals?* Policy Brief No. 31. Copenhagen: European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies. Accessed 7 April 2025. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK545695/.

Pink, S. 2004. 'Guest editor's introduction: Applied visual anthropology social intervention, visual methodologies and anthropology theory'. *Visual Anthropology Review* 20 (1): 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1525/var.2004.20.1.3.

Ralston, K., Treen, K., Coleman-Jensen, A. and Guthrie, J. 2017. *Children's Food Security and USDA Child Nutrition Programs*. United States Department of Agriculture. Economic Information Bulletin No. (EIB-174). Accessed 7 April 2025. https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=84002.

Rose, K., O'Malley, C., Eskandari, F., Lake, A. A., Brown, L. and Ells, L. J. 2021. 'The impact of, and views on, school food intervention and policy in young people aged 11–18 years in Europe: A mixed methods systematic review'. *Obesity Reviews* 22: e13186. https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.13186.

Ruffini, K. 2022. 'Universal access to free school meals and student achievement: Evidence from the Community Eligibility Provision'. *Journal of Human Resources* 57 (3): 776–820. https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.57.3.0518-9509R3.

Schusler, T. M. and Krasny, M. E. 2014. 'Science and democracy in youth environmental action: Learning "good" thinking'. In *EcoJustice, Citizen Science and Youth Activism: Situated tensions for science education*, edited by M. P. Mueller and D. J. Tippins, 363–84. Cham: Springer.

Schwartz, A. E. and Rothbart, M. W. 2020. 'Let them eat lunch: The impact of universal free meals on student performance'. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 39 (2): 376–410. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22175.

Sharpe, B., Hodgson, A., Leicester, G., Lyon, A. and Fazey, I. 2016. 'Three horizons: A pathways practice for transformation'. *Ecology and Society* 21 (2): art47. https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-08388-210247.

Shirk, J. L. and 10 others. 2012. 'Public participation in scientific research: A framework for deliberate design'. *Ecology and Society* 17 (2): art29. https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-04705-170229.

Taft, J. K. 2019. *The Kids are in Charge: Activism and power in Peru's movement of working children*. New York: New York University Press.

Terry-McElrath, Y. M., O'Malley, P. M. and Johnston, L. D. 2015. 'Potential impact of national school nutritional environment policies: Cross-sectional associations with US secondary student overweight/obesity, 2008–2012'. *JAMA Pediatrics* 169 (1): 78–85.

Thomas, J., Sutcliffe, K., Harden, A., Oakley, A., Oliver, S., Rees, R., Brunton, G. and Kavanagh, J. 2003. *Children and Healthy Eating: A systematic review of barriers and facilitators*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Tower Hamlets. 2021. *London Borough of Tower Hamlets: Poverty review*. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/community_and_living/Poverty-Review.aspx.

Treme, J. and Craig, L. A. 2013. 'Urbanization, health and human stature'. *Bulletin of Economic Research* 65 (s1): s130–41. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8586.2011.00425.x.

Tsui, E., Bylander, K., Cho, M., Maybank, A. and Freudenberg, N. 2012. 'Engaging youth in food activism in New York City: Lessons learned from a youth organization, health department, and university partnership'. *Journal of Urban Health* 89: 809–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4.

UK Government. 2023. 'Academic year 2022/23: Schools, pupils and their characteristics' [dataset]. Accessed 7 April 2025. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2022-23.

UNICEF. 2019. *The State of the World's Children 2019: Growing well in a changing world: Children, food and nutrition*. New York: UNICEF.

Vygotsky, L. S. 1980. *Mind in Society: Development of higher psychological processes*, edited by M. Cole, V. Jolm-Steiner, S. Scribner and E. Souberman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4.

Wright, J. and 36 others. 2019. 'ActEarly: A City Collaboratory approach to early promotion of good health and wellbeing'. *Wellcome Open Research* 2019 (4): 156. https://wellcomeopenresearch.org/articles/4-156.

Yuen, F. C. 2004. '"It was fun … I liked drawing my thoughts": Using drawings as a part of the focus group process with children'. *Journal of Leisure Research* 36 (4), 461–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2004.11950032.