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Youth Empowerment for Sustainable Development: Exploring Ecosocial Work Discourses

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Abstract: Youth empowerment within the context of sustainable development (SD) is starting to gain more attention within social work, both internationally and in Sweden. SD, as an integrated set of global goals in tackling social, economic, and ecological challenges, is a vital concept in social work. Protecting people and the natural environment can be considered the fullest realization of the person-in-environment, a foundation upon which the social work profession is built. The ecosocial perspective is widely discussed in terms of societal transformation in harmony with nature. Within this context, this article explores ecosocial work discourses in youth empowerment. Data were gathered through 20 qualitative semi-structured interviews with key representatives of youth organizations from Gävle municipality, Sweden, and analyzed using ATLAS.ti v.9.0. The main findings are discussed within the framework of ecosocial work, youth empowerment, and a Foucauldian perspective on discourse, power, and knowledge. The results indicate the need for an ecosocial youth empowerment, calling for increased knowledge of both youth empowerment through SD and ecosocial work for those working with/for youth connected to social work practice. The results highlight the importance of an ecosocial youth empowerment on a more structural and collective level.

Keywords: youth empowerment; ecosocial work; sustainable development; Foucauldian discourse

1. Introduction

Youth, generally defined as young people aged between 15 and 24, are a key population. Their empowerment as members of our societies is vital for the societal ecosocial transition from a human-centered to an ecosocial focus, in pursuit of Sustainable Development (SD) and the United Nations "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In relation to sustainability, ecosocial transition is a holistic perspective with ecological, economic, and social dimensions of development focusing on the interlinkage between social and ecological sustainability [1]. From this perspective, it is argued that youth can create and become a positive and dynamic force for SD if they are given the knowledge and opportunities to thrive and be involved in decision-making processes [2]. Youth inclusion in decision-making processes for SD is therefore one of the key variables associated with youth empowerment.

Youth empowerment, and empowerment in general, occurs at individual and collective levels, in the form of, amongst others, psychological, social, economic and political empowerment. Rocha [3] presented empowerment as a ladder, with individual empowerment focusing on changing the individual (individual level), and political empowerment focusing on changing the community (collective level). Youth empowerment emphasizes youth strength instead of weaknesses. It enables and promotes greater active youth participation and influence in the settings in which they are involved and which affect their lives [4]. Variables associated with youth empowerment include "increased skills, critical awareness and mastery of the environment, higher levels of self-determination, shared

decision-making, and participatory competence" [5] (p. 403). These variables can be observed in the movement initiated by the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, who in 2018 at the age of 15 started a protest outside the Swedish Parliament for stronger action on climate change with a sign reading "Skolstrejk för klimatet" (School Strike for Climate). This strike initiated the Fridays for Future movement, in which youth on school strike protested every Friday against the lack of professional and political responses towards climate actions. In particular, professionals such as social workers across the world are being blamed by climate-engaged groups of young people for not doing enough to secure their future in terms of SD [6].

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development published a report, Our Common Future, including a now widely cited definition of SD as being "a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [7] (p. 54). SD (references to SD inherently cover the SDGs, as the SDGs are the embodiment of SD) aims for a balanced, harmonious, and integrated set of goals that meet urgent environmental, social, and economic challenges by focusing on people, the planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership. Nevertheless, some have argued that SD and the SDGs are still very anthropocentric [8,9], though some SDGs can be interpreted as comprising biocentric or ecocentric aspects [8–10]. This means that these SDGs do recognize not only human values but the intrinsic value of all living beings [8]. SD ranges from eradicating poverty to promoting sustainable cities and communities [11]; it consists of interlinked goals relating to the dimensions of economic prosperity, environmental protection, and social equity; these are widely known as the "triple bottom line", a notion coined by John Elkington in 1994 [12]. These three dimensions (sometimes referred to as elements) are widely acknowledged as the "three pillars" in discussions of SD.

In Sweden, as in many other countries, one way that young people learn about SD is through Lärande för Hållbar Utveckling (Education for Sustainable Development, ESD) in schools. ESD was developed to response the need for education to address sustainability challenges; at the 2019 UNESCO General Conference, the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) for 2030 was adopted, which is a continuation of UNESCO's four-year Global Action Program (GAP) for Education for Sustainable Development [13]. ESD is widely recognized as an integral component of The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as a key enabler of all SDGs in achieving societal transformation towards a more sustainable society by emphasizing on education's role for the SDGs, the focus on the transformation and member states' leadership [14]. Although many of the SDGs are explicitly directed towards the wellbeing of young people, SD in general and youth engagement in SD in particular have not been major subjects of discussion in mainstream social work [15]; this is also the case in social work in Sweden, where the planetary focus on the ecosystem in relation to human wellbeing has only been marginally investigated [16,17], and few empirical studies have been conducted. Youth as community members are often seen as individuals who lack capacity and agency in comparison to adults, and thus they are rarely actively engaged as community members in decision-making and social change processes [18,19]. An extensive review of social work literature addressing environmental topics between 1991 and 2015 [20] found no title or abstract including the words "youth", "young people" or "children", indicating the marginal focus on the role of youth within this area. It is vital to engage and empower youth within the practice of social work, as they are the future agents of change, particularly concerning changes towards SD. In this connection, youth empowerment within the ecosocial transition towards SD needs to gain more attention within social work, both internationally and in Sweden. In this context, some authors have pointed out the need to involve and empower young people in SD work, which amongst other has been amplified by global calls being made to social workers in engaging key partners such as the youth in SD through ecosocial work [21,22].

The concept of an "ecosocial" approach is still fuzzy, ranging from human harmony with nature to a philosophical paradigm of the human position in a "person-in-environment" perspective. Different organizations with different priorities and back-

grounds use different definitions of the term. Within social work, the ecosocial approach is one way to address socio-ecological crises and societal transition towards sustainability. Ecosocial work is understood as emancipatory and political [19,23], as it calls upon social workers to act collectively with community members to support social and economic equality, human dignity, ecological sustainability, and collective wellbeing [24,25]. Ecosocial work recognizes the interrelation and interdependency between the wellbeing of the Earth and its inhabitants [26], taking into consideration the broader biophysical aspects (including the biotic, abiotic, natural, and built environments) and social environment in a way that conjoins social, ecological, cultural, and economic sustainability [23,24,27]. Ecosocial work also challenges the modernist view of the place of humans in the natural world [26], which has been taken for granted; thus, ecosocial work adapts the philosophy of post-anthropocentricism by decentering the position of humans in the natural world.

The anthropocentric view is commonly dualistic and binary, with humans considered to be masters above "the other" and "outside" the ecosystem [21], and nature considered to be at the service of fulfilling human needs. Post-modernist social work is challenged with socio-ecological crises, leading to discussions of the need for a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to a more ecocentric perspective in viewing the relations between human/nature and human/animals [21,28–31]. Social work and societies at large are therefore required to decenter human exceptionalism by extending "rights" to non-humans [10] in order to address contemporary socio-ecological challenges [26]. There is a need for a "post-anthropocentric turn" in social work [31] by rejecting the twin ideas of human supremacy and human exceptionalism [32].

Social work is both a practice-based profession and an academic discipline; it focuses on the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities, and ranges from providing counselling to working with sustainable development issues [33,34]. In the Swedish social work, since the beginning of the 20th century, some environmental perspectives within social work have been discussed and framed within social policy, community planning, and community work focusing on the relationships between the social living environment and individual wellbeing [35]. However, current social work in Sweden is predominantly focused on evidence-based clinical practice with neo-liberal and neo-bureaucratic governance [36], and also focuses on individuals and families and their social environment at the expense of the natural environment [37]. On top of this, it has almost no room for structural social work or the possibility for ecosocial work practice [38,39]; however, in April 2017, the Swedish government appointed a special investigator and a team of experts with the task of reviewing the Social Services Act (2001:453) and some of the social services' tasks (dir. 2017:39). The task included designing a social service that contributes to social sustainability focusing on individuals, structural work and methods development, with a preventative perspective to give people equal opportunities and rights [40]. The investigation team submitted its final report called Sustainable Social Services—a new Social Services Act (SOU 2020:47) in August 2020. In this report, it is discussed, amongst other topics, how the Swedish Social Services are an important player in the work with SD in Sweden; and by building sustainable social services, we can promote long-term structural preventative work and contribute to sustainability within the SDGs.

Within this context, this article aims to explore ecosocial work discourses in youth empowerment activities and practices in the municipality of Gävle, Sweden, with a particular focus on young people between the ages of 15 and 19. The research questions are as follows:

(1) What ecosocial work discourses related to youth empowerment can be identified?
(2) What driving forces and circumstances are there for ecosocial work-related discourses with/for youth?
(3) What implications do the findings have in terms of research and practice of ecosocial work in promoting youth wellbeing and work-life capacities within the context of sustainable development?

Using a theoretical and conceptual framework based on a combination of ecosocial work, empowerment, and Foucault's work on discourse, power, and knowledge, this article identifies key focus areas on ecosocial work related to youth empowerment within the context of SD. Thus, the article not only brings an important layer of empirical evidence to the discussion of youth empowerment in the transition towards SD, but also contributes towards creating a theoretical discussion on this particular theme.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

A theoretical and conceptual framework (Figure 1) was developed on the basis of existing literature and used in conducting this study. An abductive approach was chosen in which the framework guided the data generation and the gathered data were explored with reference to the framework, moving back and forth between the framework and data during the analytical process [41]. The conceptualization and theorization therefore provided a basis for exploring and understanding ecosocial work discourse and youth empowerment within the context of SD. A narrative explanation including the reasoning behind this framework is given below.
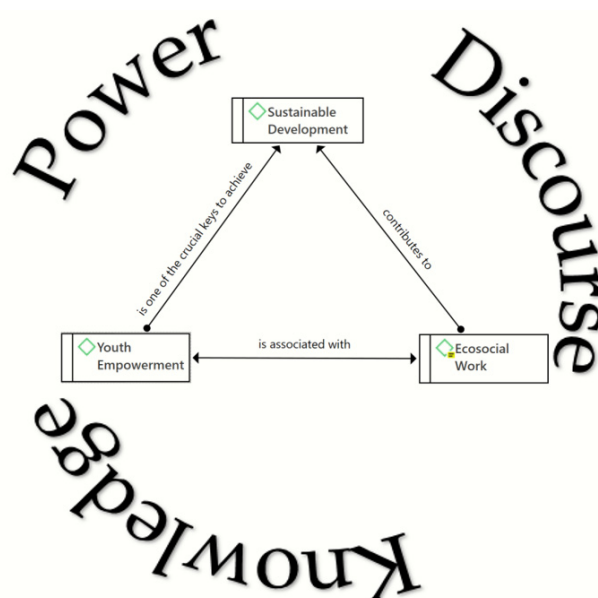

Figure 1. Theoretical and conceptual framework based on Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Empowerment is a central concept within social work, particularly in enhancing the wellbeing and strength of all people by engaging individuals and structures in addressing life and societal challenges [33]. Empowerment in social work refers to both the desired state of being empowered through interventions, and the intervention method itself in improving wellbeing; it is multidimensional and multifaceted, but is often defined as having the means to control one's life situation in achieving personal and societal goals [42]. The concept empowerment is connected to individual and collective health, wellbeing and environments [43–47]; it is also understood as a social action process in which community members have, assume, or expand their power and responsibility in creating desired societal changes [48]. This means empowerment occurs at different and multiple levels, such as individual, family, organization, and community/collective [44,49]

Individual empowerment is empowerment on psychological, individual case work levels [50] stressing individual capacity-building, personal control, a positive life view, and may also include a comprehension of the sociopolitical environment [51,52]. In this relation, the adults working with youth empowerment and sociopolitical learning experiences has empowering role in "challenging deficit assumptions of youth political capabilities" [53] (p. 53). On the other side, collective empowerment is on group, social, political, and structural levels [50] focusing on sociopolitical and political empowerment [3] involving

"processes and structures that enhance members' skills, provide them with mutual support necessary to effect change, improve their collective wellbeing, and strengthen intra- and inter-organizational networks and linkages to improve or maintain the quality of community life" [44] (pp. 33–34). In this relation, youth empowerment on the collective level can be carried out through educational, interpersonal, or civic engagement opportunities based on the activities provided by those working with the youth [53], where these activities also engage and mobilize the youth towards social action [49]. Both the individual and collective empowerment as described above may indicate the traditional top-down approach to empowerment, rather than the circular reciprocal empowerment. The top-down empowerment is linear power -over exchanges [54] whereas the ones with power empowering the ones without; while reciprocal empowerment is circular and it is not only empowering others but also oneself: a mutual empowerment rather than one-sided [54,55].

Empowerment can, amongst other things, be gained through an ecosocial work perspective which strives to empower people and enhance their agency over their lives, through a more ecocentric approach; it also aims to promote and enhance the wellbeing of people and the planet. When discussing empowerment, notions of power and the implications of the powerful–powerless dichotomy are unavoidable. Power is a central concept in Foucault's works, such as The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972), Discipline and Punish (1995), and The Order of Things (2005). In these works, Foucault opines that institutions can be understood in terms of techniques of power that are a form of "power/knowledge" that observes, monitors, shapes and controls people's behavior [56–58]. Power is comprised of the rationalities by which one governs the conduct of others. It is not only repressive, negative, or destructive, but also positive and constructive in the sense of being constitutive in the shaping of people's lives and ideas [56]; however, power is not exercised solely by those who hold institutional power; it is also located in a more diffuse assembly of groupings, including those who are oppressed, as through resistance they can possess "power against" [57,59].

As in the work of Foucault, the notion of power in this article is inextricably related to knowledge, since those in power produce the dominant knowledge within the discourse studied. Knowledge governs the discursive practices that determine what is "true" or "false" [60]. Within the Foucauldian perspective, alternative forms of knowledge are recognized, allowing consideration that power is not possessed and "one way", but rather is exercised and circuitous with multiple sources [61]. Foucault developed the "power/knowledge" unity, discussing how knowledge is an exercise of power and power is a function of knowledge [62]. Power produces knowledge, and the operation of power is used through the construction of knowledge [63]. Power/knowledge is "the deployment of force and the establishment of truth" [57] (p. 184). This means that knowledge relies on an acceptance of truth established, and power/knowledge operates everywhere where there is any kind of power relation, in all interactions, and in the institutions and systems that we create.

Within the modernist social work approach towards empowerment, there is a power relationship between professionals/practitioners and clients. The professionals/practitioners have certain power over the clients, which is embedded within their professional roles and positions [64]. This power, if not exercised carefully, could instead unintentionally disempower the clients and service users, such as the youth population. As power is not given/possessed but rather exercised [61,62], "giving" the power to the youth to create a new narrative for their lives, but without giving them proper support, tools, knowledge and resources in how to exercise the power, will be meaningless. On top of that, those working with the youth should recognize that the distribution of power exercise among the youth could carry disempowering effects, if it is for example based on which youth can/most likely to participate (for example, most youth who participated in the activities provided by the youth centers in this study, were mostly boys, with some efforts by the centers in recruiting more girls by offering e.g."movie night for girls").

Following the work of Foucault, which is rooted in post-modernist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist philosophy, postmodern social work theorists have identified that the concept of empowerment in social work is centered excessively around sovereignty, state control, and institutional power, instead of realizing that power is everywhere and relational [59]. Postmodern analysis of empowerment in social work encourages social work practitioners to consider their own interpretations [65], and to not only consult the service users but also offer them the interpretive framework to determine interventions [66]; it also inspires deconstruction of the main modernist concepts in social work, and simultaneously provides new ways for social workers to conceptualize power and empowerment in constructing more relevant approaches to contemporary social work [59].

While adult empowerment is dominated by civic participation, youth empowerment is often concerned more with preventative intervention; that is, the prevention of problem behaviors and negative outcomes [5], and at the same time, enhancement of resilience among the youth through educational settings [49]. This preventative work is based on the knowledge of the practitioners who work with young people, which can mean that these practitioners have the power of imposing surveillance upon the youth (see Ref. [55]). The knowledge of these practitioners is a result of their interaction with their colleagues and other actors working with youth, forming a community of practice that focuses on the management of knowledge and how it is used [67]. The preventative intervention approach in youth empowerment can be translated as empowerment on an individual basis, aiming to prevent and/or reduce undesired behaviors and at the same time to develop and strengthen the individual; however, this individual strength perspective carries a risk that the empowerment might become too individualized. While individual empowerment is important, in addressing structural issues such as SD and the SDGs there is a need to combine it with collective empowerment based on collective identity. In relation to SD and the SDGs, as well as the Fridays for Future, youth are seen and act collectively as a community and identity: a homogenous group with joint interests consisting of heterogeneous individuals and identities. According to Foucault, individual identities are recognized, socially constructed and regulated within certain discourses [68]. Consequently, collective identity is when two or more individuals act as social objects based on reciprocal attribution and shared affirmation. When there is a collective identity, it can be assumed that there is a community and vice versa. Community refers to local community, residential area, neighborhood, local society, interest groups, togetherness, and more-which includes both social and geographical aspects [17]. In this study, the youth is seen as a community with a collective identity based on the shared social aspects, such as being left behind in relation to climate issue discourse, which affect their need for a liveable planet.

Youth engagement through youth empowerment is said to increase youth's developmental assets and understanding of complex issues such as environmental protection [19]. It is important to engage youth in working towards all the SDGs at all levels [69], especially as many of the SDGs are directed towards them. Through youth empowerment, combined with the acknowledgment that young people are future agents of change and that their developmental processes are pivotal in building a prosperous and sustainable future, youth are crucial in assisting the realizations of the SDGs. Good health and wellbeing are both requirements for and outcomes of the SDGs, and can also promote sustainable work-life capacities for all; however, good health and wellbeing are important and necessary not only for humans, but also for non-humans and for the planet we live on. It is thus important to promote and advocate for human and non-human wellbeing, as well as human work-life capacities, through ecosocial work and an SD framework. Even though SD and the SDGs were created in anthropocentric terms, there are possibilities to promote the health and wellbeing of non-human sentient animals and non-sentient parts of nature such as plants, oceans, and the ecosystem directly within the SD framework through some of the goals [9].

Ecosocial work, besides interventions and practices, also aims at developing local sociopolitical action strategies for sustainable development of living environments [70]. These sociopolitical action strategies could, for example, be carried out through integrating

social policy with climate change policy to create ecosocial policies [71]. Ecosocial policies would enhance and "combine sustainable livelihoods with human wellbeing" [72] (p. 2). To develop local sociopolitical action as collective action, such as climate-proofing activities, it is crucial that there are places where communities can meet to exchange knowledge and raise awareness [73]. In this article, the respondents and the youth they work with are communities who meet in schools, youth centers, buildings owned by the respondents' organizations, and public spaces in the neighborhoods for the work of youth empowerment and SD.

3. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted according to the Good Research Practice guidelines published by the Swedish Research Council [74] and the university's policy regarding the guidelines for personal data treatment defined by the General Data Protection Regulation [75]. Before the data were gathered, we conducted an assessment according to the Swedish law on social research ethics, "Lag (2003:460) om etikprövning av forskning som avser människor", as well as guidelines from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority [76], and concluded that the study on which this article is based did not require ethical approval from the authorities; however, this study is part of a broader project that has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (ref: 2021-00426). The study was designed using an abductive approach which enabled the researchers to find "the most plausible explanation" based on the gathered data [77].

3.1. Sampling and Recruitment

To obtain a range of views and experiences, the study was based on non-probability strategic purposive sampling, which is suitable for use where the units (e.g., sites, settings, organizations, and people) can provide relevant and rich information to answer the research questions [78,79]. The respondents were employed at organizations in Gävle municipality and worked with youth who lived or went to school within the municipality. Gävle municipality is located in East-Central Sweden, and has for several years been one of Sweden's most environmental-friendly municipalities [80]; nevertheless, its inhabitants still have unsustainable lifestyles. For the rest of the world to live just like people in Gävle and the rest of Sweden, four planet Earths would be required [81]. Gävle had 102,904 inhabitants in 2020, of whom 12,032 were aged between 15 and 24 [82]. The average annual unemployment rate that year for individuals aged 16–24 years was 8.2% in Gävle (6.2% in 2019), compared to 4.7% in Stockholm [83]. In relation to sustainability work, the municipality has high ambitions for its environmental work, aiming at "providing competitive advantages for companies and young people to demand their right to a sustainable future" [81] (p. 2).

The organizations included those within the municipal public sector as well as civil societies. All of them did work that could be connected to the SDGs and social work, even though some of them did not operate within the "classic" social work system such as municipal public sector social services. Within the Swedish social work context, a "classic" social worker often refers to a social worker at the municipal Social Services, called "socialsekreterare", (a "social secretary"). A socialsekreterarehas direct contact with clients (individuals and families) and works with preventative and risk-targeting approaches, with the mandate to exercise of authority, which can include statutory interventions. Other social workers who are not "socialsekreterare" can work at private or civic organizations, as e.g., school counsellors, youth worker or community worker. The organizational work of the respondents had a significant relation to social work, in relation to responding to the needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities while at the same time addressing social problems in society as a whole; the organizations worked either directly or indirectly with youth, where some provided/offered activities were specifically for youth, whereas some provided/offered activities and programs were for general municipal citizens.

Before data were gathered, the organizations and respondents were sent letters containing information about the study and about research ethics. In cases where the respondents' job descriptions were known to us and/or could be found on their organization's website, these respondents were contacted and asked directly before the request was made to their organizations. Organizations which fit the criteria as sources of information but provided no information on the job description of their staff were contacted through the managers. An overview of the respondents is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents from 10 different organizations working with young people in relation to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Respondents (Age, Gender)	Organization	Title/Main Work
#1 (40–50, F)	A: municipal public sector	Unit manager working with social sustainability
#2 (30–40, M)	A: municipal public sector	Related to social sustainability towards the citizen
#3 (40–50, F)	B: municipal public sector	Assisting schools in developing environmental strategies
#4 (40–50, F)	B: municipal public sector	Project leader for Education for Sustainable Development towards schools
#5 (60–70, F)	B: municipal public sector	Operational manager within education and school systems
#6 (20–30, F)	C: public sector, municipally owned company	Coordinator for "social wellbeing" towards tenants
#7 (60–70, M)	D: non-profit association/civil society	Manager at youth center
#8 (30–40, M)	D: non-profit association/civil society	Youth center leader, working with youth aged 13–19
#9 (40–50, F)	D: non-profit association/civil society	Youth center leader, working with youth aged 13–19
#10 (40–50, M)	E: municipal public sector	Deputy unit manager for field social workers
#11 (30–40, F)	E: municipal public sector	Field social worker towards youth (initially targeted at ages 13–19 but later expanded to those who are younger and older)
#12 (40–50, F)	F: municipal public sector	Unit manager at support and prevention unit
#13 (30–40, F)	F: municipal public sector	Family therapist, working mainly with children and youth aged 6–20
#14 (60–70, F)	F: municipal public sector	Family therapist, working mainly with children and youth aged 6–20
#15 (40–50, F)	G: municipal public sector, municipal association/local authorities	Strategist for work for sustainability
#16 (50–60, F)	G: municipal public sector, municipal association/local authorities	Coaching, providing education, and leading projects related to an environmental perspective
#17 (30–40, M)	H: Non-profit association/civil society	Manager at youth center, working with youth aged 13–19
#18 (30–40, M)	H: Non-profit association/civil society	Deputy manager at a youth recreation center, working with youth aged 13–19
#19 (30–40, M)	I: municipal public sector	Working with crime-prevention programs and education, especially with non-profit associations and schools
#20 (50–60, M)	J: municipal public sector	High school deputy principal

3.2. Data Gathering and Handling

As this was a qualitative study, the appropriate number of interviews was governed by the research design. We achieved our aim of interviewing 1–3 respondent(s) from each organization. The respondents were given the option to choose the place and time of the interview.

Data were gathered between September and December 2019, after obtaining consent from the organizations and the respondents, through 20 semi-structured interviews with 20 key respondents, which lasted 30–60 min and were recorded. The interview guide was developed based on the aim of the study and relevant literature, and refined in the summer of 2019 after two pilot interviews. The guide consisted of three themes: (1) overview of organizational work, (2) organizational work with the SDGs (where a diagram of the SDGs was shown to the respondents) and ecosocial questions, and (3) prerequisites for successful organizational work with youth. The themes were represented by 22 open-ended questions, though not all questions were asked in all interviews, as in some cases the respondents discussed the relevant issues in their responses to earlier questions. The interview guide and the interviews were in Swedish. Audio recordings were transferred to ATLAS.ti v.9.0 and were password-protected and stored securely in such a way that they could only be accessed by the research group when connected to the institutional data storage of the University of Gävle. The data were handled in a confidential way in order to ensure that no unauthorized person would have access, and are presented here in a form that avoids any harm for the respondents.

3.3. Data Analysis

The interviews which provided the main data for this article were coded, thematized, interpreted, and analyzed through an abductive thematic network analysis (ATNA) using ATLAS.ti v.9.0. software. ATNA is "an abductive way of reasoning in looking at and explaining the linkages between the emerging themes from the analysis of the gathered qualitative data" [41]. It allows the researcher to identify and link themes in the analysis [84].

Quotations that were relevant to the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study were selected, transcribed, and translated into English. These quotations were coded with keywords or phrases indicating the meaning of the content, and were then grouped and linked as themes based on the framework [85] with the help of several functions in ATLAS.ti v.9.0. The data were reduced to patterns (descriptive findings) and themes (categorical/topical interpretations of the patterns) [79] in relation to the conceptual and theoretical framework. The elements of the data analysis are summarized in Figure 2, and a narrative explanation is provided further down.

Qualitative data analysis methods such as Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) involve searching through and analyzing the core content of interviews and/or written observations to determine what is significant, by identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data. Regardless of the choice of method, any qualitative analysis is shaped by the researchers' own insights, experiences, and "selves" [61]. We remained critically reflexive on our own biases and discursive knowledge, from choosing the topic to designing the study and writing the article.

The data were analyzed using an FDA approach with the help of ATLAS.ti v.9.0, highlighting the network relations between power and knowledge within a discourse. When discussing Foucauldian discourse, it is inevitable that ethics and networks are included as parts of the broader discussion. Discourse, according to Foucault [56], is a way of representing, defining, and producing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic through language; but discourse itself is a practice and is produced by a practice, and is used to regulate the conduct of others. He states further that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" [56] (p. 49). This means that Foucauldian discourse is not merely text and language; it is inevitably related to practice, and inevitably influences how ideas are put into practice.

Figure 2. The analytical process.

Applying this reasoning, FDA aims to understand how the "meaning" of social actions, texts, and practices is constructed through their connection to power relations and power imbalance [61]; however, Foucauldian discourse should not be reduced merely to "meaning", because it also determines which partial version of reality we perceive is accepted as "truth", and how it constrains our perceptions [56,61]. Researchers utilizing FDA are concerned with the dominant and hierarchical power embedded in politics and knowledge as well as the process of "games of truth" within sociopolitical contexts [86]. FDA is not about determining which discourse is "right" or "correct", but rather about the mechanisms which produce the discourse we accept. This means that the FDA approach stimulates researchers to find differences, absence, and locality instead of similarities, presence, and universality [61]. While discourses can either facilitate and enable or limit and constrain what can be said, by whom, where, and when [87], FDA looks also at what "is said" and "not said", because "[discourses] do not 'determine' things but intervene in the relations of what can be known, said, or practiced" [86] (p. 120). This indicates that discourses look at who uses language (spoken and written), when it is used, and how it is used in power relations, implicating subjectivity and creating practice.

FDA considers the ways in which the power/knowledge nexus functions to achieve certain subject positions, subjectivities, and ways of being [88]. This means that it can be applied in exploring the power relations and power effects in discourses; however, there are no strictly Foucauldian methods of analyzing discourse, and no exact set of rules to conduct Foucauldian-inspired analysis [86,89]. When applying FDA in the present exploration of ecosocial work discourses in youth empowerment activities and practices in Gävle, we consider: (1) the discursive construction of ecosocial work and youth empowerment, (2) the dominant and silenced perspectives in the knowledge production in the discourses (who produces, and which knowledge?), and (3) the exercise of power in relation to the knowledge (who "can" exercise, and in what way?). Such questions formed the basis of

developing our analytical, theoretical, and reflexive memos when writing up the findings from this study.

4. Results

The results presented in this section are based on the thematic analysis of the interviews, and are organized using the themes which emerged in the process of discourse analysis. The themes are presented in Table 2 and used as subheadings below.

Table 2. Summary of the main themes.

Themes	Codes Related to Themes
Knowledge/awareness	Respondents' knowledge/awareness of SD and the SDGs
	Respondents' knowledge/awareness of ecosocial relationships
	Power position
Youth empowerment	Youth participation
	Youth involvement
	Power position
	Youth participation
Available and needed circumstances for SD work and ecosocial discourse with youth	Youth involvement
	Power position
	Collaboration
	Network

The codes are words or phrases used in capturing the condensed meaning units from the transcribed interviews and literature reviews of the theoretical and conceptual framework [85]. A code is simply "a descriptor of a data segment that assigns meaning whereas a theme is a theoretical constructs that explains similarities or variations across codes" [90] (p. 452). The codes answer "what", in relation to the context of the study. The themes answer to "how?", and it is a thread of an underlying meaning on an interpretative level, carried by and generated through the codes. The codes and themes are derived by applying an abductive approach in which moving back and forth between the framework and data during the analysis process.

4.1. Respondents' Knowledge/Awareness

4.1.1. Sustainable Development

The interviews gave quite clear indications of the respondents' knowledge of, or familiarity with, SD and the SDGs. Most respondents were familiar with SD and the SDGs in relation to their work. Those who were familiar with the SDGs mainly worked within the municipal public sector, particularly with social sustainability and in the education and school systems. This is reflected in the following quotation from one of the informants:

> *Sustainability is very central for the future of our city, for the municipality, and for the world—and I'm talking about the economic, ecological, about the environment and climate, and social sustainability, the good life for all. . . . / . . . when we're working with sustainability, we work internally, meaning we work together within the municipal organizations and we work externally towards the municipal citizens. (#1)*

This could be related to the fact that their organizational goals and job descriptions clearly stated that they worked with SD and certain SDGs. These respondents also covered all three dimensions when discussing SD, while the other respondents tended to focus strongly on the environmental dimension, to some degree on the social dimension, and hardly at all on the economic dimension. Despite this, the interviews indicated that all respondents saw themselves working with social sustainability, including those who could not really describe what SD (especially social sustainability) or the SDGs were about, and/or how and whether their work was related to the SDGs. This indication emerged

when these respondents were shown a diagram of the SDGs, as they quite quickly pointed out which of the SDGs their work related to. The SDGs they pointed out were those which could be interpreted as having more explicit relations to social dimension, such as gender equality, reduced inequalities, and good wellbeing.

One respondent (#10) who worked as a field social worker within the social services and almost all respondents working at youth centers indicated that they were not familiar with SD and the SDGs. As respondent #10 explained, field social workers' tasks are preventative, and targeted toward youth who are at risk. The field social workers' main approach was outreach and preventative work aimed at youth aged between 13 and 19, though in practice they worked with both younger and older youth in all neighborhoods in Gävle; however, they indicated that their outreach and preventative work was based on "need"; some neighborhoods might signal a higher need, based on, for example, information they received about how under-aged youth "hung around" in certain neighborhoods late at night, or any other indication of unwanted activities.

Respondents #10 and #9 (the latter of whom worked at a youth center) stated explicitly that they were not familiar with SD and the SDGs, and had never previously seen the SDG diagram they were shown (a diagram which is widely used in different platforms in relation to SD discussions), though they were familiar with the word "sustainability". For instance, one of the responses was:

> *[After a long pause] I don't really know [what sustainability is, what SD is, or what the pillars are]. [Upon being shown a diagram summarizing SD and the SDGs] No, I have never seen these before. (#9)*

As respondent #9 worked with youth empowerment at a youth center where SDGs were part of their work, it gives an interesting insight of how the top-down empowerment approach the organization applied, may turn into reciprocal empowerment, as respondent #9 may be empowered by the youth and the work she did for the youth empowerment.

Sustainability and SD are popular yet fuzzy concepts that are used on a daily basis in many different contexts in Sweden; however, defining, understanding, explaining and recognizing the concepts and their embodiment may not always be as easy as saying the words. The unfamiliarity with the concept expressed by respondent #9 can be understood from the main type of organizational work. The five respondents who worked at youth centers said that their work involved providing a safe space and place for these youth to come to (#7), to have meaningful/positive leisure activities where adults (the staff) acted as positive role models (#9), to get help with their homework (#17), or just to hang out with other youth (#8).

The two youth centers where our respondents worked are located in two of the most segregated and stigmatized neighborhoods in Gävle, referred to in this article as localities X and Y. In the local media, certain areas of these neighborhoods are often associated with crime and other undesired states, which are considered to be far from what an ideal community or ideal citizens should be. Respondents #7, #8, and #9 worked at the same youth center, where the framework for their main mission was delegated by the municipality. Certain parts of these neighborhoods consist of housing areas for many of the "new Swedes" (people who have recently obtained Swedish citizenship), with housing that often consists of overcrowded apartments. The youth centers are located in these areas. A few days before respondent #9 was interviewed, a murder was committed near the youth center. This created great worry among the residents, especially among the youth, and at the same time strengthened the negative narrative on marginalization and exclusion of this particular area.

The youth organizations with which respondents #9 and #10 were involved worked with many SDGs, which were adapted locally and specifically to their context, yet these respondents had clear difficulties in putting their work into a bigger context such as SD and the SDGs. This could be because the SDGs were designed globally as a framework and are often understood within a global perspective, even though the practices are very much

on the national and especially local level, fitting that specific context, such as in the work of these youth organizations.

In general, the interviews showed that most (16 respondents) of the respondents understand their work in relation to the SDGs, with the most frequent references being exclusively within the context where they worked, both horizontally and vertically.

4.1.2. Interrelation between Social and Ecological Dimensions

All respondents except #9 expressed an awareness of the direct and/or indirect relation and interrelation between the social and ecological dimensions, in daily life generally and in their work specifically; however, despite this knowledge and acknowledgment, the ecological dimension seemed not to be a "natural" part of the respondents' work with youth; the sole exceptions were respondents #15 and #16, who worked at the municipal recycling company. After being specifically asked about this in the interviews, the respondents started to reflect on and analyze the role and position of the ecological dimension in their work, and in some cases, illustrations were given by the interviewer (these illustrations were given in response to the respondents' inquiries, in order to contextualize the question. The interviewer made sure that the illustrations given did not lead the interviewees' responses).

Some respondents discussed the relationship in a more superficial way and others in a direct manner, saying, for example, that littering in some areas led to (stronger) stigmatization of the areas concerned (#18); or that having beautiful, well-maintained plants in a neighborhood gave a good impression of that neighborhood (#13). Some respondents discussed deeper implications of the interrelation between the social and ecological dimensions; for example:

- climate refugees, how the planet's temperature/climate can affect humans' social behavior in one way or another, and how humans affect the climate (#1);
- bad planning of a neighborhood with limited green areas, contributing to less social space to interact, leading to social isolation/exclusion (#2, #14);
- the relationship between public transportation, socioeconomic status, and segregation/isolation (#3);
- high houses/apartments in front of each other blocking the sunlight and contributing to a lower level of feeling of wellness (#14);
- overcrowded apartments due to socioeconomic situations potentially leading to the need to find a "second living room", which could be a youth center, or outdoor hanging around in the neighborhood (#19).

Some interesting quotations were as follows:

There is a development project in locality X, and both the social perspective and the environmental perspective are important and should be taken into consideration, e.g., it should take into account the emissions when building, or how to create a safe environment so that children can be there without being hit by the traffic, there should be areas to ride a bicycle, and to have green spaces between the buildings, because green spaces are important both for health and for the environmental perspective. These two aspects go hand-in-hand in a sustainable city development perspective. (#1)

... There are some certain aspects that we can simplify, e.g., *public transport. What does it say about the socio-economy factor: who uses the most public transport? That is a simple example, a complex and difficult to explain ... in the future we would get "climate refugees". There we can see the relationship, how the planet's temperature/climate can affect humans' social behaviour in one way or another, and how humans affect the climate. (#1)*

Many of the youth we work with, are alienated socioeconomically, that can be seen in how the neighborhood looks like—people live in overcrowded apartments, there is exclusion, and there are young people who even live outside this exclusion. (#17)

As shown above, some respondents, especially those working with social sustainability and the education and school systems within the municipal public sector, discussed the

social and ecological interrelation and its implications on a more structural level and using a more holistic perspective. This included the need for a green environment, sustainable city planning, and climate issues; however, the implications discussed were related more to the green environment than to climate action. A green environment is related to safeguarding and improving the health of the environment, as humans need and rely on the environment for their survival [91], while climate action is concerned with action to deal with ecological crises such as climate change and natural disasters caused by extreme weather; humans would benefit much more from the latter than from the former [73]. The reason that climate action was only marginally discussed by the respondents could be that extreme weather and natural disasters are not common in Sweden, and the respondents may have assumed that this kind of climate crisis was not relevant to the context of their local position.

4.1.3. Ecosocial Work with Youth

The interviews indicated that only nine of the respondents had frequent direct socio-ecological interaction with youth, namely field social workers, staff at youth centers, and family therapists. These respondents worked with the young people in their communities on a more practical level.

The interviews further revealed that the respondents who were directly in contact with youth worked predominantly on a more individual level, involving some degree of local community empowerment interventions. In their work, the ecological dimension was predominantly seen as having social value which contributed to the wellbeing of youth. This manifested in, for example, having plants in the area where the family therapists worked, thus creating a welcoming, safe, and warm environment (#12, #13, and #14); or picking up litter in the neighborhood where the youth lived to counteract the stigmatizing images of marginalized areas (#8, #9, #17, and #18). The respondents who worked at the youth centers (#7, #8, and #9) emphasized the importance of trash picking by youth, suggesting that the appearance of an environment or neighborhood gives a kind of "expectation" of how the neighborhood and people "should" be like. The respondents believed that people in the said neighborhood may unconsciously or consciously live up to this expectation, and so in an environment that is already littered, people may continue littering and so make the problem even worse. In this sense, a littered environment has not only an ecological but also a social impact, as illustrated in the following quotation:

> *Organization W (which is a youth center) in locality Z has also worked with the youth in the neighborhood on a project related to sustainability, where in 2018 the youth in this locality composed a song called "Planera, Sortera & Organisera" [Planning, Sorting & Organizing] about the importance of sorting out their household waste and avoiding littering,* as an action to keep the Earth alive. (#6)

The song mentioned was sung by two teenage girls from the neighborhood in a video showing the neighborhood, intended to educate and show the other (younger) youths how to sort out their waste. The song and video also showed how natural and human-made disasters impact human lives.

Like localities X and Y, a certain part of locality Z is home to many "new Swedes". Without meaning to suggest a correlation, it is worth noting that this part of locality Z is also often associated with undesired activities, including shooting between criminal gangs that took place in 2020. The sustainability project in locality Z largely aimed to create tenants' participation, a feeling of safety, and a sustainable outdoor environment. This was conducted through providing information to the tenants on how to sort their waste correctly, encouraging the tenants to give feedback, and the increased presence of employees of the house company in the neighborhood. Respondents #15 and #16, who worked at the municipal recycling company, explained that this part of locality Z had lower levels of correct waste-sorting, but that in collaboration with the youth center and the municipal housing company, the "sustainable Z project" not only succeeded in improving waste-sorting in the neighborhood but also created a sense of belonging and togetherness through active participation.

As shown in Table 1, 11 respondents worked indirectly with the youth. Their tasks were to a great extent on the strategic, non-operative, administrative, and planning levels, in collaboration with the other actors who worked directly with the youth within their networks. For instance, a respondent from one such organization stated:

> *In ESD it is important to promote an interdisciplinary perspective of SD and not isolate the three pillars, even though there is a tendency for that,* e.g., *the social sciences teacher focuses mainly only on social sustainability . . . // . . . We have a "whole school approach", we aim for the students to achieve "action skills"—we can't just teach and tell [the students] about things, but the students need to get the opportunity to practice. One learns better by doing. Action skills have a lot to do with attitudes, knowledge, and values, but also with practicing ways to contribute. (#4)*

According to this respondent, through ESD, the main objective of schools was to contribute different perspectives in the area of SD. Even though ESD is largely about theoretical knowledge of SD, students were also given the opportunity to practice and act based on that knowledge. From this knowledge and practice, it was hoped that an increased awareness would develop about issues related to SD, such as climate crises. On the other hand, as indicated by other respondents, in practice the overarching and "holistic" theoretical knowledge of SD and SDGs offered to the youth focused on the green environment instead of climate action. Climate action is needed to prepare the youth to meet the increased ecological crises and challenges.

The quotations above also indicate that the action skills were addressed on an individual level in the local context, but the individuality and locality were implicitly put into a global context of SD and the SDGs, through knowledge about, awareness of, and attitude towards SD and the SDGs. This indicated that ESD aims to empower youth with different understanding, knowledge, abilities, skills, and attitudes and to make responsible actions towards social, environmental and economic aspects; however, as shown in the quotations above, often ESD is interpreted and carried out with a somewhat narrow focus on topical issues rather than with a holistic ecosocial approach (see Ref. [13]).

4.2. Youth Empowerment

Our data suggest that all the respondents could see the importance of their work on sustainability and how it contributed to improved quality of life for the youth they worked with and for. All respondents indicated the importance of involving young people in discussions and activities relevant to them. The participation and involvement of the young people were reflected in how they were consulted, given the responsibility to be in charge (with supervision), given the chance of shared decision-making, and given the opportunity to mobilize their peers. Some relevant quotations are given below.

> *We have initiated "youth ambassadors" to keep the nearby environment clean; six youths, three nights a week, patrolling the neighborhood and making sure that staircases in the buildings are clean, and picking up trash when necessary . . . //when they want to do an activity, we ask who wants to take the responsibility and let them do it under our supervision. (#9)*

> *We must think about how to get and motivate these young people, how we could get them to vote . . . // . . . My starting point was that the young people themselves would know best; they would have the best idea of what was working or not in reaching this group . . . // . . . we employed young people to reach this group as "young vote ambassadors". We let them come up with ideas with how to reach this target group. The strategy was to let the young people come up with the strategy. Young people are the experts on themselves. (#2)*

Both above mentioned quotations show a linear top-down empowerment, where the power relation is asymmetry—though both quotations may indicate a possibility for reciprocal empowerment, as there is " an interaction between people having personal authority, based on self-interest in enhancing their capacity and in effecting structural change, in their own contexts" [54] (p. 241).

The youth centers contributed to the empowerment of these youth by providing ways of taking control over their lives, by creating a new and positive narrative of themselves, and by encouraging them not to live up to the negative narrative they were assigned by others. The youth were given the opportunity to exercise their power, as capable youth, through activities within and outside the youth centers. Some activities were decided by the youth, while others were designed by the youth centers, based on what the staff considered important and necessary for the youth. The staff at the youth centers are seen as positive role models who are present to help govern the youth. This is an embodiment of Foucauldian ethics, as the youth are forming their self-understanding through ethical codes in the context of youth empowerment discourse governed by power relations with the adults who guide them [63,92].

Respondents who worked at youth centers and family therapy centers described the youth they worked with in relation to the challenges they faced, compared to other youth in general, and in relation to resources, capital, possibilities, and opportunities. They further discussed how many of the youth they worked with were at risk of "going wrong" in various ways (e.g., criminality, drug abuse, dropping out of school), and their work created a foundation for reducing this risk.

> *The most natural thing about "preventative work" [such as their work] is that it's about social sustainability, it's about creating . . . not changes, but maybe creating interventions and small contributions which can help make the necessary changes to be sustainable in the long run. (#12)*

The tasks of all the respondents were governed by those who had a mandate to exercise power over them, and at the same time they exercised power over those within their mandate. For example, the main framework for the organizational work of the organizations in this study was dictated by the municipality as the central authority; however, the respondents also had the opportunity and possibility to exercise their power towards the municipality as an attempt to create a power balance. This is another example of the embodiment of Foucauldian ethics, as the respondents constituted themselves as subjects based on the ethical codes in the context of ongoing power relations in their work networks, as the means to govern themselves and to govern others [63,92]; however, the respondents could break their "silenced" perspective in an attempt to challenge existing power orders [56]. As Foucault states, when there is power, there is resistance [63,92]. This can be seen implicitly in the quotation below:

> *Within the municipality, there is a "Social Sustainability Program" and an "Environmental Strategy Program", and we see this as a wrong step by the municipality—we have expressed this to the municipality, but the municipality chose to do it anyway. We can't isolate social sustainability from environmental sustainability; it makes it more difficult to see SD as a whole. (#4)*

The respondents working within the municipal public sectors can be seen as being in the middle of "governing" and "being governed by". Within their respective networks, they influenced the work of those working directly with youth, while their own work was usually governed by those above them in the hierarchical order. The quotations given below exemplify power dynamics that prevail in sustainable development work with/for young people.

> *Our work is based on the mission assigned to us by the politicians . . . // . . . It depends on what kind of missions we get. (#2)*

> *For us, the ESD, we work on the basis of the "Environmental Strategy Program" (Miljöstrategisk program) established by the city council of the municipality—but above all, it's based on the governing documents of schools, and the curriculum, which sets a framework for ESD. (#5)*

The construction of knowledge within ESD discourse (which includes ecosocial discourse) in Gävle is operated through the exercise of dominance power which mandates,

governs, shapes, and controls the young people (or people in general) subjected to it. This means that the ESD discourse is a result of a mechanism governing how young people within the ESD network think, say, and do—and, in turn, they re-create, re-produce, sustain, and distribute the discourse. The ESD is firstly governed by the overall governing documents, such as the curriculum set by the "Skolverket" (National Agency for Education), combined with Gävle's own Environmental Strategy Program, which is carried out via the Board of Education's Strategy for ESD [93]. The Environmental Strategy Program focuses on environmental sustainability, but the results of the work also generate positive effects in the social and economic sustainability dimensions [81]. The discourses of the young people might be shaped by the structural power that prevails within such working conditions and relationships.

4.3. Circumstances for SD Work and Ecosocial Discourse with Youth

ESD is a way of teaching about SD and the SDGs, which were created in anthropocentric terms in order to fulfill human needs and maintain the factors needed to do so. Both SD and the SDGs, thus, largely neglect the needs of non-human animals and nature [8]; however, some of the SDGs could be considered relevant in promoting the wellbeing of non-human sentient animals and non-sentient parts of nature [9]; this, however, has not been discussed widely. In relation to the construction of discursive knowledge of ESD as stated above, the work on sustainability within the municipality is steered by the dominant modernist approach, which is rooted in anthropocentricism [26], creating possibilities as well as challenges. These possibilities and challenges were perceived by the respondents as barriers as well as opportunities in carrying out their SD work and ecosocial discourse with youth. A respondent from the municipal "social sustainability" department said:

> *The public sector doesn't really follow this relationship between the ecosocial aspects, as we are very much controlled by New Public Management; we have to measure as much as possible, which means it should be measurable. But these kinds of questions on ecosocial issues are more qualitative questions, about people's feelings, values,* etc.—*we aren't interested in making diagrams. There are of course relations between environmental and social questions, but in some aspects we need to distinguish them, so that things are manageable. (#2)*

The municipal public sector is governed by laws and regulations, and by politics and politicians who have significant roles in determining the core objective and "ambition level" of the sector when working with certain issues. The employees can express opinions and suggestions, but their work is controlled by political power, control, and management.

The aspect most frequently mentioned by the respondents when discussing the available and necessary circumstances for SD work and ecosocial discourses with youth was collaboration between different actors within the youth's network. All of the respondents were part of this network, and they collaborated with one another. For instance, one respondent stated:

> *We collaborate with many different actors, including a youth center located in the marginalized neighborhood, and this youth center does a lot of work with sustainability questions [with the youth in the neighborhood]. The youth were asked once, what a sustainable neighborhood would look like, and they came up with ideas of how they could cycle around the neighborhood if we as the housing company provided rental bicycles in each building's entrance, and they could rent the bicycles with their key cards . . . // . . . (#6)*

Respondent #2 noted that the large number of young people in Gävle was an asset in achieving the SDGs. These young people were seen as agents of change and possibilities, and they needed to be empowered. Thus, collaboration was seen as very important, not only because of the large number of youth in Gävle, but also because the youth belonged to different networks; however, the availability of resources to create different platforms to accommodate the youth posed a challenge in the collaboration process itself. As a couple of the respondents put it:

The municipal management is very segmented . . . // . . . The segmentation and specialization create difficulties, as it means that we need to talk to different people, different leaders, there are different fund allocations, which makes things slow// . . . It would be wonderful if there could be a "hållbarhets avdelning" (Department of Sustainability) which covers both strategic and operative responsibility for sustainability work in the municipality. (#3)

Resources are a source of power to implement the SDGs. Networking and collaboration with other actors provide access to resources and hence power. Networking and collaboration with others are also central strategies for collective empowerment, as they build relations with everyone involved [50]. Networking and collaboration could result in different actors in this study coming together with their knowledge, networks, and discourse, and interaction between them could create the possibility to communicate with local politicians about what is needed in the work of youth empowerment with SD.

5. Discussion

The general purpose of this article was to identify ecosocial work discourses for youth empowerment as well as the driving forces and circumstances for these discourses and activities, by focusing on youth in Gävle municipality, Sweden. In particular, this article discusses the implications of the findings in terms of research and practice of ecosocial work in promoting youth empowerment within the context of SD. The results in relation to the research questions could be summarized as: (1) the discourses for youth empowerment within SD are mostly concerned with the green environment, which still has strong anthropocentric values; and (2) power and knowledge act as both circumstances/driving forces and challenges for (ecosocial) youth empowerment within SD. These results indicate that municipal and community work with youth empowerment within the context of SD in Gävle is on a good path; however, there is a need for more youth community climate commons in order to expand youth empowerment to a more critical level, and to raise youth awareness of a more global perspective in relation to climate issues and how Gävle is a part of the global network of SD and the SDGs. There is also a need for increased ecosocial youth empowerment, especially collective ecosocial youth empowerment, hand-in-hand with the youth community commons.

We conclude from the results that it is essential to actively include youth as a part of the community in SD work. Youth is a transitional period in which individuals experience physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and interpersonal changes and development as they move towards an adulthood in which they will be expected to be active and fully responsible members of society. An ideal adult life is supposedly manifested by contributions to self, family, community, and society at large. Youth are important agents of change due to being the generation who will "take over" from the current generation, and youth empowerment is a key factor in carrying out and realizing the SDGs. To actively involve and empower youth towards SD, there is a need for practical knowledge of "what to do and how to do it", in working with youth within the context of SD. This knowledge brings practitioners together with the community at large, and produces sustainable practices. Such knowledge and practices act as the dominant discourse within SD work with youth, forming methods and tools that the practitioners and community can continue to share and develop together [67].

This can be seen as community capacity, defined as "the characteristics of communities that affect their ability to identify, mobilize, and address social and public health problems" [46] (p. 259). For a group of people to be seen as a community, there should be a sense of belonging to the social networks of their peers [94,95]. Communities are associated with interlinked relationship norms and institutions which are local and place-based [96]. Communities range from a group of people living together to organizations and neighborhoods, and are continually produced and reproduced as people change and move [97]. The youth in this article, and youth in general in different contexts and localities, are a

community sharing these characteristics. The respondents are also a community in relation to their work with youth and SD, sharing the norms within their networks and institutions.

For a community to address the challenges and issues they face and to achieve the objectives they aim for, there is a need to mobilize that community in concrete community work activities using their own structures and resources. Such mobilizing community work is a key aspect of collective empowerment [50]. Collective empowerment emerges when people come together to address the obstacles they face, while at the same time, their power and capacities are strengthened to change their disadvantaged social position and create social change [49,50,98,99]. The collective empowerment of groups and communities is conducted through collective action, and the action is either supported or restricted by the power structures that they encounter [100]. Empowerment on the individual level is significant and necessary, even in addressing complex matters such as SD. Empowerment is a central concept in social work, operating on the micro (e.g., individual), meso (e.g., community), and macro (e.g., society) levels; however, individual empowerment with a preventative approach is not enough, as it relates quite weakly to the bigger picture of how structural issues such as unfair distribution of resources, climate issues, structural poverty, and other injustices intertwine with and contribute to disempowerment. In addressing structural issues, there is therefore a need to understand that different groups within society have conflicting interests regarding resources and power, where those with power, capital, and wealth dominate and make decisions regarding those who are without [57,59].

This article brings a strong indication of segmented understandings, in the findings on SD and sustainability concepts. Most of the respondents had a tendency to focus primarily on the environmental dimension in the form of a green environment, rather than on climate issues; this includes those respondents working within the social services, which in Sweden is the "classic" social work setting. This is an interesting aspect, as these respondents could see the relationship between the ecological and social perspectives in their work; however, when analyzed more deeply, the ecological/environmental perspective discussed by the respondents is concerned with social values and benefits for humans. In the current anthropocentric era where humans see themselves outside of the ecosystem, combined with the increased ecological crises, climate action as a response to these crises requires much more than a nice, healthy green environment created by, for example, garbage picking and waste-sorting by individuals. Ecological crises, which are intertwined with socio-ecological crises, require fundamental systematic changes and changes of the contemporary dominant discourse [56], calling for collective empowerment and climate intervention.

The social dimension of SD seemed to be the hardest part for most of our respondents to describe through their work. This could be because the social dimension entered the discussions and debates on SD fairly late, as the initial central narrative of SD was about saving endangered species and ecosystems, highlighting nature exploitation by humans [101]. On top of this, discussions of the economic dimension of SD have suggested that the "ideal" goal of balancing the three pillars is essentially difficult to achieve, given that economic growth tends to be prioritized [102,103]. The definition of SD itself—"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [7] (p. 54)—implies an anthropocentric perspective in that the center of the development is humans and their needs; furthermore, humans and their needs are discussed through their relation to the need for economic growth based on finite natural resources, which shadows the social dimension.

Thus, it is also important to reflect upon the idea of "fulfilling needs", as stated in Our Common Future in relation to SD. That report is concerned in particular with "the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given" [7] (p. 54). What needs are to be fulfilled? What needs are essential? Are these "needs" essential for human survival, or are they merely desires? Who defines what the needs are? Do we collectively agree on the "need" to celebrate "old" and "new" occasions (such as Single Days) by buying things? Was the choice of "recycled / used / second-hand garments" as the 2018 Swedish "Christmas gift of the year" an attempt of resistance toward the dominant

materialism? These questions are particularly vital when speaking about wellbeing, as this is frequently related to the fulfillment of needs.

In the respondents' work with youth empowerment in relation to SD, the ecological dimension with social value was predominant. This was mainly carried out through individual empowerment via group activities, where the ecosocial discourse is achieved through encouragement of participation and use of a shared decision-making process. These practices encourage participatory competencies, as embodiment of youth empowerment. This empowerment was predominantly on the practical-individual level, with the aim of preventing youth from undesired problem behaviors which can lead to stigmatizing negative outcomes, not only for the youth themselves but also the neighborhood. Respondents who worked with youth on the strategic, non-operative, and administrative levels indicated that youth empowerment also included increased action skills and critical awareness. These two elements of youth empowerment are developed through ESD in schools, which is more on a structural level.

As well as focusing on the content that is to be taught, ESD also applies a pedagogical approach and methods in which students' participation and influence are a significant part of the process [14,93]. In discussions of SD, students are made aware of their and others' position, influence, and responsibility; what problems the world has faced and is facing; and what they should and can do to address these problems within the local and global context [104]; they are also encouraged to be critical and reflect on values, and to have local and global perspectives as well as knowledge of the interdisciplinary collaborations which aim to achieve SD and the SDGs [104]. In the biggest picture, SD and the SDGs aim for wellbeing and health for humans through maintaining the health and wellbeing of the planet. Without a liveable planet, there are no possibilities, space, or place for humans to survive. A liveable and healthy planet accommodates the possibilities for youth to develop their bio-psycho-social health and wellbeing. Consequently, good health and wellbeing are assets and resources which can benefit all the individuals concerned and society at large, and are essential for human development. Conversely, poor health and wellbeing waste potential and drain resources across all sectors.

ESD is a lifelong learning process that enhances cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral dimensions through its pedagogical methods, learning content and outcomes [14]. Through ESD, youth as students are taught not only about the theoretical and practical knowledge applicable in their daily local life, but also about their position as inhabitants of the world. They learn not just about the importance of sorting waste, but also about the climate crises and climate changes the world is facing, and how these crises (even if they are "far from home") influence and are influenced by their actions. They are ideally taught about, and to address environmental challenges by revisiting the complex, underlying social and economic issues that are intertwined with these problems [14]. Nevertheless, as shown in the results, there is a disconnection between what is taught about SD (ESD), awareness of SD, knowledge of SD, and the concrete practice and activities, the latter of which are mostly about the green environment. The practice and activities done with the youth reflect the dominant discourse instead of challenging the fundamentals of the contemporary way of life in the anthropocentric era. Based on the power structures, relations, and hierarchical positions in a network of relationships, people in the lower position (such as youth compared to the respondents; the respondents compared to local politicians; local politicians compared to central government) may just "accept" the dominance of the leadership in governing them [63]. As Foucault states, the network of power relations lies in social networks rather than on the subject, and individuals' active formation of their selves as subjects is related to the context of particular discourses, power relations, and practices and how individuals might act on themselves in the context of ongoing relations of power [92].

Without ignoring the importance of aspects such as the green environment and trash picking—which can foster and build youths' knowledge and awareness of the ecological crises—there is also a need to implement this knowledge and awareness in concrete youth

collective empowerment and climate action beyond the green environment, such as youth community climate commons. To do this, there is a need to "strengthen communication and advocacy efforts on the SDGs in order to mobilize populations beyond SD communities" [14] (p. 39). In relation to youth empowerment for SD, this would allow youth to mobilize together to have a greater influence over and ownership of climate change abatement [73], and can be viewed as a challenge to the dominant discourse. When youth break their "silenced" knowledge and awareness, for example in the Fridays for Future movement, their actions can be regarded as resistance of the dominant power; because when there is power, there is resistance [92].

The ecosocial discourse within youth empowerment in Gävle is governed by ESD as the dominant discourse, which in turn is governed by the overall governing documents such as the curriculum and Gävle's own Environmental Strategy Program established by Gävle City Council. Even though the name of the program indicates a strong focus on the environmental dimension of SD, the results of the work within the program certainly contribute positively to both the social and the economic dimensions of SD. The program is not exclusively designed for ESD, but rather is aimed at municipal groups within Gävle (sectors, companies and municipal associations), residents of Gävle municipality, and the business community in Gävle municipality [81]. In relation to ESD, the program aims to increase the students' knowledge and action skills that contribute to sustainable societal development [81].

Contributions and Limitations of the Study

In the era of climate crises there is a growing need for social work to actively include environmental perspective in both the discipline and practice, including in Sweden. The environmental perspective in social work in Sweden has been predominantly framed and discussed theoretically within social policy and community planning. As shown in Sustainable Social Services—a new Social Services Act (2020:47) [34] the concept sustainability has not yet been a central concept in the Swedish Social Services and has not attracted attention in previous revisions of the Social Services Act. The report suggests that this is due to that academic connection between sustainability and "vård- och omsorgsområdet" (the health and care area, which are the main focuses in the Swedish Social Services) is relatively weak because SD is a broad interdisciplinary field with connections to several subject areas. Within this context, this study is based on, and contributes with empirical layer and evidence to the discussion of environmental perspective in the Swedish social work, through youth empowerment as a base; moreover, the Swedish social work is predominantly operating within individual casework steered by neo-liberal discourse, leaving marginal room for structural social work or ecosocial work practice, for instance. The results of this study contribute to opening up an ecosocial discourse in the Swedish social work discipline and practice, paving the way to the creation of new knowledge within the Swedish social work discourse, which includes the Social Services.

Though 20 interviews were carried out representing by 10 different organizations, the organizations were from the municipal private sector and non-profit association/civil society, but with no representations from private sector. The inquiry to participate in the study was sent to some organizations within the private sector, but all declined for various reasons. This means, important ideas, understanding and knowledge from the private actor were not included. This study also highlights the expertise knowledge of those working for/with youth and SD issues instead of the knowledge of the youth as experts themselves (the next two articles of this project will highlight the voices of the youth and social workers, where amongst other the implications of sociopolitical action strategies for SD will be implicitly or explicitly discussed). Another limitation is that the study was conducted as a qualitative study, where impacts and effects of youth empowerment were not statistically explored. The statistical number of the impacts and effects is interesting to explore, as it can contribute to provide another facet in the understanding of the youth empowerment and SD work.

6. Conclusions

Some of the respondents in this study showed an awareness of the need for ecosocial transition in societies to address climate issues, but concrete practices in their work with youth focused mainly on the green environment; nevertheless, the results indicate that there is good work being performed with youth empowerment in relation to SD. There are also suggestions that ESD aims to increase youth's understanding and awareness of the ecological and social dimensions from a broader and more structural level within the context of SD; however, the youth empowerment in this context within the non-school realm is very much on an individual and more practical level which embraces the green environment, with preventative work combined with a green environment approach based on the specific "stigma" attached to the neighborhoods where the youth live. There is a disconnection between what the youth are taught about SD and the SGDs, and the concrete practices.

While it is necessary for youth to understand the importance of the negative impact of littering on their neighborhood, and what they can do about it, it is even more important for them to understand the relational power issues in, for example, the climate emergency, exploitation of nature, unsustainable consumption, societal impacts of ecological issues, and ecological impacts of social issues. This requires political youth empowerment where youth are given the knowledge and tools to thrive, the resources to assist them in exercising the knowledge/power, to be involved, and to take charge of their lives; moreover, it requires "collective ecosocial youth empowerment", which is on collective level, political and emancipatory. The main focus would be for youth to understand and then challenge the current unsustainable view of the place of humans in the natural world. Collective ecosocial youth empowerment can help youth engage on the micro, meso, and macro levels of SD (see [67]). It helps youth to understand the interconnectedness and interdependency between a human and the natural world, and the networks of power/knowledge which govern this relationship. The aims of collective ecosocial youth empowerment are to make youth aware of the structures of society, ecology, and economy in relation to social issues and wellbeing of humans and the Earth, and also of what they themselves can do individually and collectively. Collective ecosocial youth empowerment requires networking and collaboration between different actors in youths' lives, such as the public sector, the private sector (private organizations were asked to participate in the study, but for various reasons declined the request), and civil society. This goes hand-in-hand with the need of global efforts led by policymakers, educators, practitioners, learners and youth in order to have significant progress ESD for 2030 [14].

Most of the respondents in this study were from the public sector, which may indicate that SD work with youth empowerment is largely the responsibility of the municipality. This is combined with the work of the civil society organizations. Although their work is mostly on the green environment, these organizations have been shown to play a major role in the emerging environmentally-oriented commons in a wide range of urban settings [105]. Another important factor in fostering (collective) youth empowerment in relation to SD is the need for decision makers, and public and private sectors to recognize and acknowledge youth as key contributors and agents in promoting all sectors in SD [14]; however, as indicated by the findings, the organizational work and the tasks of the respondents were governed and steered by those in the higher hierarchical power, which are anthropocentric and neo-liberalist. The results indicate that this governing power leaves a very little room for the organizations and the youth to work with structural and sustainable issues other than on the superficial, and individual levels. Another indication is that there is little room for reciprocal empowerment within the youth empowerment discourse in Gävle, especially on the collective/political level, as it is very much steered with top-down empowerment approach; however, it is not impossible as it has been shown by Greta Thunberg, whose own individual empowerment mobilized youth collective, political empowerment in relation to climate issues. Nevertheless, one can reflect on the need of youth to be empowered with top-down approach for them to establish their personal authority, before reciprocal

empowerment can take place. To empower oneself (self-empowerment), one needs to rely on the existing empowerment structures and discourses within a particular context. As per definition, reciprocal empowerment is "an interaction between people having personal authority, based on self-interest in enhancing their capacity and in effecting structural change, in their own contexts" [55] (p. 3).

In mid-August 2021, after wonderful weather in June and July, Gävle was flooded by heavy rainfall (Figure 3). Many people had previously seen this kind of natural catastrophic event as something that took place "far from home" and that did not affect either Gävle in particular or Sweden in general. Sweden excels in many SD measurements and policies, but also has a large per-capita carbon footprint. Good individual levels of sorting waste, consuming organic produce, or using less water when showering all make substantial contributions to a sustainable way of living, but it is also necessary to raise awareness of the issue of climate emergencies as close to home, not only happening in other countries or in a distant future.

There is therefore a need to address and connect awareness of the green environment, both on an individual and a collective level, to the bigger picture of climate issues, the socio-ecological impacts, and the paradigm behind climate issues. Collective ecosocial youth empowerment can act as a driving force allowing youth to foster and exercise their strength, participation, and autonomy in discussing and practicing in the glocal SDGs. It can also act as an embodiment of concrete practices for youth reflecting awareness of the deeper socio-ecological interrelations, thus challenging the modernist-anthropocentric human position in the ecosystem. Finally, it can assist in lifting up the SDGs which can be considered as accommodating the wellbeing of non-human sentient animals and non-sentient parts of nature, despite the anthropocentric paradigm.

Figure 3. Flooding in Gävle in mid-August 2021 (Picture taken by E.C.).

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