

Garden Girls: Utilizing Children's Literature to
Promote Environmental Awareness and Healthy
Eating Habits

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Abstract

With rising rates of childhood obesity and an increasing awareness of the environmental, social, and health problems inherent in our food system, it is important that these issues are addressed beginning at an early age, through comprehensive educational programming, in order to engage the next generation in their solution. This project sought to apply principles of Critical Literacy and Garden-Based Learning in crafting a curriculum intended to increase environmental awareness and encourage healthy eating habits through a focus on community gardening. Working with Community Bridges, a Silver Spring-based non-profit that provides multicultural empowerment and leadership programs for underprivileged girls, this project resulted in the creation of a 4-lesson curriculum which is currently being implemented within the *Jump Start Girls! Adelante Niñas!* afterschool program for 4th and 5th grade girls. This curriculum was based around two children's texts focused on community gardening, City Green and Our Community Garden. Using these two texts as a starting point, the curriculum addresses topics of gardening, local vs. global food systems, and healthy eating, while also engaging with the issues of community involvement, leadership, and multiculturalism central to Community Bridges' work. The curriculum as well as information related to the project and resources for persons or organizations seeking to implement a similar program have been compiled and are available on a website created to showcase this project which can be found at <https://sites.google.com/site/jumpstartgirlscommunitygarden/>.

Introduction

I walk him past the hollyhocks, the daisies, the peppers, the rows of lettuce. I show him the strawberries that I planted. When Old Man Hammer sees his little garden bed, his sour grapes turn sweet. “Marcy, child.” He shakes his head. “This lot was good for nothin’. Now it’s nothin’ but good” (DiSalvo-Ryan 1994, 26).

This brief yet vivid passage from DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan’s City Green demonstrates the transformative power of gardening as portrayed in a sample of children’s literature. In this text, a young girl named Marcy takes what was an empty, trash-filled lot on her city block and transforms it into a beautiful garden which brings together her entire community, even the previously aloof and unfriendly Old Man Hammer. It was with this type of personal, environmental, and communal transformation in mind that I sought to pursue the creation of a combined critical literacy and Garden-Based Learning curriculum that would introduce students to the concept of community gardening, discuss the related issues of local food and healthy eating habits, and empower and encourage students to pursue their own gardening projects, either in their communities or through their schools. The intention in pursuing such a project was to provide students with the ability to respond to some of the challenges facing young people today, from obesity and poor eating habits to environmental degradation and destructive food systems, through the direct action of community gardening, which functions to empower individuals and build strong communities.

Over the past three decades, the number of overweight children in the United States has doubled while the number of obese children has tripled, with almost 20% of children between the ages of 6 and 11 qualifying as obese (Roblin 2007, 635). This rise in obesity is attributed in part to poor eating habits, including low intake of fruits and vegetables and the consumption of excess calories in the form of nutrient poor snacks and sweetened beverages (Wallinga 2010; Roblin 2007, 635). Parental attitudes and eating habits, school food options, and marketing and

media campaigns have proven to have a huge influence on children's eating habits and their subsequent likelihood of being overweight or obese (Roblin 2007). Gardening and environmental education have proven an effective response to poor eating habits among children, with participation in the planting and harvesting of fruits and vegetables encouraging increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and the development of healthier eating habits among gardeners (Kish 2008; Blair, Giesecke and Sherman 1991).

Closely tied to the issue of obesity are the issues of environmental degradation and the destructive nature of our current food system. Agricultural subsidies, which promote an industrial food complex centered around the production of corn for use in value-added products such as high-fructose corn syrup, contribute a great deal to the rising rates of obesity in the United States by driving down the price of nutrition-deficient snack foods, sweets, and sweetened beverages in comparison to healthier foods, including fruits and vegetables (Wallinga 2010). This food system also promotes a global food industry which serves to disempower and impoverish individuals in developing countries while also requiring the expenditure of huge amounts of fossil fuels (Imhoff 2007, 72 and 102; Smith 2008). The average food item travels approximately 1,500 miles from farm to plate, requiring the expenditure of almost 17 times as much fuel as local food (Imhoff 2007, 17; Smith 2008). Food production currently contributes nearly 15% of total greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, playing a large role in the ever-increasing threat of global climate change (Imhoff 2007, 103). These statistics indicate a need for a transition away from a global food system to a localized food system, which serves to strengthen local economies and communities while also reducing environmental impact and carbon outputs (Imhoff 2007, afterword; Smith 2008). Environmental education and a focus on the value of local food and the benefits of community gardening can serve a significant role in

fueling this shift towards local food systems by encouraging young people, on whom the impacts of global warming and our destructive global food system will have an increasingly serious effect, to make their voices heard and act to secure their future.

Empowering students to understand the value of the environment and healthy eating and challenge the current power structures in the food industry, which fuels increasing rates of obesity, over-dependence and excessive use of fossil fuels, and environmental degradation, involves first encouraging them to look critically at the world around them and then emboldening them to act on their realizations. Utilizing the pedagogies of critical literacy and Garden-Based Learning and a focus on community gardening, I believe that students could be informed about the seriousness of the issues related to the food system and empowered to take individual or group action to make a change in their own lives, through taking control of their food choices and seeking healthier and more environmentally friendly choices and potentially engaging in a school or community garden project. The pursuit of such a project would serve to provide an alternative and more environmentally-friendly source of produce while also potentially improving their health and the health of their community.

My Approach

In pursuing the creation of this curriculum, I thought that it would be most effective to partner with an existing organization and create a curriculum that could be utilized in their programming. I chose to pursue such a partnership with Community Bridges, a non-profit located in Silver Spring that provides free “multicultural empowerment and leadership programs for young diverse girls in the Silver Spring, Maryland, community” (Community Bridges). The mission of Community Bridges is to empower their participants, primarily young women from low-income and immigrant backgrounds, to succeed as exceptional students, positive leaders,

and healthy young women. I believed that this partnership would be mutually beneficial as I would gain a chance to learn about the organization, how it functioned, what its needs were and how their programming is generally structured, while in return assisting with weekly programming and contributing a relevant curriculum that they could continue to use. I was placed with Community Bridges' *Jump Start Girls! Adelante Niñas!* The *Jump Start Girls! Adelante Niñas!* Program works specifically with girls between the ages of eight and fifteen and focuses on "team-building, critical thinking, the arts, health and prevention, outdoor discovery and community action to develop self-confidence and self-expression" (Community Bridges). Their programming is largely centered on after-school sessions which take place between dismissal (around 3:00-3:30 pm) and 5:00pm.

I began volunteering twice a week with their after-school programs, visiting their sites at Arcola Elementary and Rolling Terrace Elementary, where I worked with groups of between eight and sixteen 4th and 5th grade girls. Through the experience of volunteering to help implement their existing program, I was able to gain insight into how a typical day of programming progressed and use that insight to plan a curriculum that would fit within the limited time-frame of 1.5-2 hours, taking into consideration the activities that occur during every session (ex. snack time, one-up one-down sharing exercise). By spending time getting to know the girls and their expectations of and motivations for being involved in the program, I was able to gather that what they value about the weekly after-school program is the sense of belonging and community that grows out of their involvement in this group focused on them, the sharing and relationship building that is encouraged through the activities, and the chance to participate in something they saw as fun and distinct from the school day.¹ Through this I gathered that it

¹ These are general observations that I made through watching the girls interact with each other and respond to particular activities as well as through talking generally with the girls involved in the program.

was important that whatever curriculum I seek to create involved elements of community building, group discussion, and fun, engaging activities that did not seem overly academic. I also initiated an informal discussion with the students at Arcola Elementary about the idea of implementing a curriculum focused on community gardening. I asked the students if they or anyone in their family gardened, and I received positive responses from almost all of the Latina students and negative responses from all of the African American students. Several of the Latina students responded enthusiastically to the idea of pursuing such a curriculum, while all but one of the African-American students voiced that they thought it would be uninteresting. Kiara, one of the more outspoken students argued that there was no point in pursuing a garden since you could buy everything you need at the grocery store, and since gardening would involve getting dirty and sweating. I found it interesting that those students who were unfamiliar with gardens and had no family members who gardened were the most opposed, while those students whose families had gardens or who ate foods grown in a garden were much more enthusiastic. Considering these responses I decided that one means of balancing the potential challenges of implementing a program focused on gardening and local food with students who were less than enthusiastic about such topics would be to incorporate an element of cooking, for which nearly all of the students voiced enthusiasm.

In shaping a curriculum that would introduce students to the concept and practice of community gardening, while also discussing issues of local food, healthy eating habits, and cultural connections to food, I felt that a combination of the pedagogies of Critical Literacy and Garden-Based Learning would prove most effective. The definition of critical literacy that I chose to use in devising this curriculum is a synthesis of many of the definitions I came across. Critical literacy is a pedagogy through which students are encouraged to think critically about

what they read and see, challenged to engage with the power structures and social norms they encounter, and empowered to envision and work towards a more beautiful, just, and equitable world. The other pedagogy which I incorporated into this project was Garden-Based Learning, which is rooted in the concept of experiential learning in the context of the garden, utilizing the natural world in the form of a garden as a classroom where students can engage with nature as well as social, cultural, and political issues. My intention was that a synthesis of these two pedagogies would serve to allow students to develop their own independent and informed opinions about the issues of local food, environmental degradation, and healthy eating while utilizing the direct experience of gardening to temper in-class reading and discussion and encourage students to pursue their own direct, social or political action through gardening.

What is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy, as a philosophy of teaching, has grown largely out of the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and author of the seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) in which he advocates a drastic overhaul of traditional educational philosophy. In order to counteract what he saw as the ignorance of the oppressed to their own oppression and the systems which perpetuate that oppression, Freire calls for a shift away from the traditional “banking concept of education” in which educators “deposit knowledge into students’ heads” and that knowledge is taken passively as fact by students. He instead promotes a reworking of teacher and student roles, in which students’ voices and opinions are valued and supported and teachers encourage their students to question and critique the world around them (Wallowitz 2008, 3). Along with this process of “problem posing” in which teachers encourage students to “unveil reality” through critically examining the world around them, Freire advocates that students be encouraged to act on those observations as a means of liberating themselves and

transforming those power structures that perpetuate oppression. These principles, namely the encouragement of a questioning and critical approach to the world, and those power structures and social norms which may serve to oppress, as well as advocacy of social and political action to counteract or transform those means of oppression form the basis of what has come to constitute a critical literacy pedagogy.

A variety of definitions of critical literacy have been posed since the publishing of Freire's philosophy. Giroux (1993) defined critical literacy as "pedagogical practices which offer students the knowledge, skills, and values they will need to critically negotiate and transform the world in which they find themselves" (qtd. in McDaniel 2006, 22-23). Critical literacy has also been characterized as seeking to question and critique traditional power structures with the intention of challenging those power structures in the interests of social justice for the oppressed and underserved (Wallowitz 2008). Vasquez presents critical literacy as focused on presenting students with the "spaces and opportunities" to examine how texts are "constructed and constructive" and creating space for critical discussion of those texts and constructions (2006, 10). While a number of variations on the specific definition of critical literacy exist, general consensus is that it consists of four essential elements: "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice" (Lewison et al 2002).

It was through this framework of critical literacy that I sought to create a program that would challenge students to rethink their conceptions of where their food comes from and where their food should come from, considering the impact of the food system on our environment, and also empower students to act on what they discovered. In this way, critical literacy was an ideal pedagogy for this project in that it combines those elements of challenging the status quo and

engaging with socio-political issues through direct action. Critical literacy serves as a means of encouraging students to think analytically and critique socio-political structures as well as raise awareness among students about their ability and responsibility to act in response to those critiques (Beck 2005). According to Beck's research about implementing a critical literacy program among the incarcerated, the practice of critical literacy can be particularly valuable in giving voice and encouraging action on the part of individuals whose voices have been restricted or curtailed, either intentionally or unintentionally, by the power structures and cultural norms challenged by critical literacy (2005). As young women, primarily from immigrant and low-income backgrounds, the girls for whom this program was designed to constitute a group whose voices have been restricted by racism, classism, and sexism and whose thoughts and contributions critical literacy seeks to encourage and empower to act against those systems.

Critical literacy is an inherently political pedagogy, with its implementation often being associated with the exercise of individual freedom in challenging unequal or biased social and political power structures (Endres 2001; Janks 2000; O'Quinn 2005). Hilary Janks, in her discussion of critical literacy as being particularly concerned with educating students about the relationship between language and power, describes critical literacy as both a "weapon" of opposition against the apartheid regime in South Africa and a tool for rebuilding identity and society post-apartheid (2000). The politicization of literacy, through critique of social and political power structures and the corresponding social or political action on the part of students engaging in critical literacy can take many forms, from group discussions to meaningful personal expression in the form of writing, art, and performance to more direct political action through letter-writing campaigns or protest movements, all of which allow students to voice their opinions and perspectives and challenge those power structures and norms they see as

inequitable or partisan (Endres 2001; O'Quinn 2005). While Wallowitz discusses critical literacy as “a vehicle through which educators teach for social justice”, I would argue that critical literacy is more so a vehicle through which educators encourage and empower their students to envision and work towards a socially just world (Wallowitz 2008).

Critiquing Critical Literacy

Critical literacy has become widely accepted in the teaching community as a preferred approach to literacy education and an excellent method for encouraging students to think independently and challenge traditional structures of power. However, a variety of critiques of critical literacy have arisen which address the challenges and problems associated with applying a critical literacy approach to teaching. Authors and teachers coming from a Feminist framework have cited issues with the concept of critical literacy (or critical pedagogy) and the way it is carried out can sometimes serve to maintain or create new power structures in imposing the teacher's intentions on their students (Luke and Gore 1992; Lalick and Oliver 2007). Luke and Gore describe the irony of “rushing into classrooms ready to emancipate, to liberate, to grant space and time for silenced voices... and democratize classroom discourse” while at the same time employing the “technology of control” and “silent regulation” implicit in the use of such signifiers as “power”, “voice”, “democratic freedoms” and the “class, race, gender” triplet (2007, 4). In implementing a critical literacy pedagogy, challenges also arise in balancing authority in the classroom -- seeking to encourage students' agency and independent thought without “promoting the continuation of oppressive attitudes” by failing to step in and moderate when necessary as the teacher (Lalick and Oliver 2007).

While critical literacy is intended to liberate students and allow them to think independently and critique social norms and power structures, this freedom is generally not

absolute in that critical literacy seeks to discourage students from particular perspectives (racism, sexism, etc.) (Mellor and Patterson 2004). While post-structuralists would argue that the pedagogy of critical literacy seeks, in some way, to impose a new set of norms and values on its students, Mellor and Patterson point out that the focus of critical literacy is on removing impediments to “seeing clearly” (such as racism, or sexism) rather than imposing a different set of norms (2004). In directing students to focus on certain social equity issues, critical literacy can sometimes serve to disempower individual students, rather than empower them, by sustaining attention on challenging and divisionary issues such as racism, classism, and sexism, rather than moving beyond such issues, as was found by Carolyn McKinney in her attempt to implement critical literacy in a classroom in Post-Apartheid South Africa (2004). Essentially, what many of those critiquing critical literacy attempt to point out is that, as a pedagogy, critical literacy cannot be always “applied unproblematically as a vehicle for social justice” and that there is a need for increased research on the effectiveness and outcomes of critical literacy as well as acknowledgement of its challenges and pitfalls (Lalick and Oliver 2007, 67; Luke and Gore 2007; McKinney 2004; Mellor and Patterson 2004; Morgan and Wyatt-Smith, 2000).

These critiques of critical literacy offer valuable insight into the challenges and potential pitfalls of the theory of critical literacy as well as its practical implementation, and point out considerations that need to be taken by individuals utilizing a critical literacy pedagogy.

However, it has to be acknowledged that classrooms and schools are unavoidably normative and teaching inevitably involves imparting some norms and values, and those classrooms utilizing critical literacy are often subject to those same norms and values. It is important to acknowledge that what is essential to critical literacy and to its value as pedagogy is encouraging students to recognize those norms and values and determine their validity independently. The limitations of

critical literacy must also be acknowledged and understood in that this pedagogy is not an educational ‘silver bullet’ but a tool to be used by educators seeking to move beyond the “banking model of education” criticized by Freire and towards a more “problem-posing” and empowering model of education.

What is Garden-Based Learning?

As more of the American population moves into urban areas and experience in rural or pastoral areas become less common, children are becoming increasingly disconnected from the natural environment and where their food comes from, slowly losing historically important knowledge about food production and the environment (Noddings 1992, 133; Blair 2009). This loss of connection to the environment and our food system, fueled by a culture of industry and mechanization and increasing urbanization, contributes to the decline of what Love refers to as the “cultural commons” or those practices and knowledge that were once communal and include ecological sustainability, art, crafts and craft knowledge, food preparation and even health practices (Love 2008, 39). Garden-Based Learning attempts to counter these disturbing trends through place-based learning which encourages students to reconnect to the natural environment and engage in activities that serve to educate them about the natural world, and promote personal and social development (Nimmo and Hallet 2008).

In pursuing this project, I sought to combine the pedagogy of critical literacy with a Garden-Based Learning program, through which students would be encouraged, through discussion of community gardening and the issues inherent in our food system, to seek out and engage in gardening activities, either in their community or through their school. Garden-Based Learning (GBL) is currently understood as corresponding to the definition laid out by UN researchers Desmond, Grieshop, and Subramaniam (2004): “an instructional strategy that utilizes

a garden as a teaching tool. The pedagogy is based on experiential education, which is applied in the living laboratory of the garden” (qtd. in Gaylie 2009, 12). Garden-Based Learning grew out of Western European philosophies of experiential education as discussed by Rousseau, Froebel, and Pestalozzi as well as efforts to counter the “industrialization” of education (Gaylie 2009, 12). 20th century educational reformers Maria Montessori and John Dewey also supported this type of experiential education outside the confines of the classroom, where “[t]he life of the child would extend out of doors to the garden, surrounding fields, and forests...in which the larger world out of doors would open” (Dewey qtd. in Gaylie 2009, 13). The popularity of Garden-Based Learning in American Education, as exhibited by the presence of school gardens, has been somewhat inconsistent over the 20th century, but starting in the early 90s there has been an upswing in the number of school gardens and an increased adoption of Garden-Based Learning (Gaylie 2009, 13). Garden-Based Learning, as it is currently understood, seeks to combine the pedagogies of experiential education and environmental education by enabling students to learn larger lessons about the environment and their relationship to it through engaging directly with their environment and building knowledge, skills, and values as a result of that engagement (Desmond, Grieshop, and Subramaniam 2004, 22-23).

Benefits of Garden-Based Learning and Involvement in Gardening Projects

Gardens have proven to be unique learning spaces and excellent tools for developing environmental awareness, improving eating habits and academic performance, and strengthening social skills and community connections. By presenting students with a chance to engage directly with the natural world, they are given a chance to build a stronger relationship with an understanding of the natural world, encouraging students to assume a greater responsibility for environmental stewardship. While gardens provide students a place to gain in-depth practical

knowledge about plants and their needs, soil, plant life cycles, the carbon cycle and the role of sunlight and rain, as well as experience digging, watering, planting, and harvesting, they also provide a space for students to learn larger lessons about the environment (Love 2008, 44; Morgan et al 2009; Blair 2009). Gardens provide students with a context in which they can gain “hands on” experience with urgent local environmental issues as well as an understanding of the larger impact that humans have on their environment and the “interconnectedness of natural systems” (Gaylie 2009, 45; Blair 2009). Such experiences increase students’ awareness of nature and encourage a growth in positive attitudes towards gardening and the environment (Morgan et al 2009). The growth in these positive attitudes towards the environment through gardening encourages students to work to improve the environment and seek a more sustainable future for themselves, their families, their community and the world (Nimmo and Hallet 2008).

Aside from improving students’ knowledge about plants and gardening, developing garden-specific skills, and encouraging environmental awareness and appreciation, Garden-Based Learning and involvement in gardening projects also contribute to improved social skills among participants. Involvement in Garden-Based Learning has been found to contribute to enhanced problem-solving and team work skills among participants, as students work together to plan and implement a garden project (Kirby 2008; Morgan et al 2009). In their analysis of an environmental education program at the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, Morgan et al. found that “learning about plants can be related to life lessons about interacting with others, building self-esteem, and respecting others. By experiencing how their actions affect other living things such as plants, children learn valuable life lessons and grow as social beings” (2009, 47). Gardening projects also encourage a sense of pride and accomplishment among student participants, who can see the direct result of their hard work in the form of a growing garden or the crops

produced, and empower students to lead new participants, or younger participants, in garden activities (Blair 2009, 21; Nimmo and Hallet 2008). While encouraging students to grow socially and develop stronger social skills, gardens also allow children a place where they can be children and enjoy their childhood, playing in the mud, investigating the plant and bug life of the garden, experience the sensory elements of the garden, and exploring their imaginations (Nimmo and Hallet 2009).

Garden-Based Learning and community garden projects also serve to improve the health of the individuals involved and the communities where they are located. Participation in community gardening programs has proven to result in marked increases in physical activity and fruit and vegetable consumption as well as increased participants' involvement in gardening activities at home, improving nutrition and reducing risks of obesity (Twiss et al 2003; Alaimo et al 2008; Parmer et al 2009). Community gardens serve to improve the health of the community in which they are located by providing access to healthy food and a place for physical activity, especially in communities whose access to nutritious food choices may be limited due to location, economic disparity, or lack of transportation (Armstrong 2000; Twiss et al 2003; Blair, Giesecke and Sherman 1991). Community Gardens, while improving the physical health of participants and their communities, also encourage the social and political health of the community, allowing a diverse group of individuals to build relationships with their neighbors and others in the community, contribute their unique skills, knowledge, and experience to the garden project, and partake in social activities and events at the garden (Twiss et al 2003; Morgan et al 2009; Blair, Giesecke and Sherman 1991). Participation in a community garden provides opportunities to participants to develop a wide array of social and political skills including leadership skills, community organizing, cultural competency, and program planning,

implementation and evaluation, as well as encouraging peer-to-peer and intergenerational mentoring (Twiss et al 2003, 1436; Morgan et al 2009, 46). Environmental education programs, including community gardening projects, if conducted effectively, can serve to educate not only the students directly involved, but their parents and community members as well, extending the impact of such programming and creating larger social change as a result (Vaughn et al 2003). By providing the means through which individuals can build relationships in their community and improve social and political skills, community gardens have the potential to educate, empower, and improve not just individuals but entire communities.

Critical Literacy and Environmental Education

In constructing this curriculum, it was my intention to combine the pedagogies of Critical Literacy and Garden-Based Learning in order to enable students to pursue their own political or social action against the imposed norms of the socially and environmentally destructive global food system through engaging in school or community gardens. Community gardens are in themselves both political and social in that they serve to foster and reinforce community ties, empower individuals in their food choices, decrease support of a destructive system, and improve practical gardening and social and political skills. This sort of combination of Critical Literacy and Garden-Based Learning represents a gap in the literature concerning both of these approaches, with only a few authors addressing the potential value of a synthesis of these two pedagogies. Chet Bowers, noted for his work on critical pedagogy in the context of environmentalism, argues for a need to revitalize the “cultural commons” and combat environmental degradation using an updated form of critical literacy which takes into account the potential value in intergenerational knowledge from different cultures, which are often what critical literacy seeks to disrupt (Bowers 2003). Love seeks to apply concepts of critical literacy

to science education and environmental education as a means of challenging the division between science and nature and social and cultural relationships as well as the assumed authority of “scientific” knowledge (2000). Developing critical literacy in science serves to problematize the domination of science by white, Western males and reveal the ways in which scientific knowledge is socially constructed, while also opening up space for alternate readings of science, such as an eco-justice, feminist, or eco-feminist perspective, and the development of “healthier ecological conditions and stronger community relationships” (Love 2000, 45). It was with this perspective on the potential for critical literacy to motivate action towards a healthier environment and stronger communities that I sought to combine critical literacy with Garden-Based Learning, providing a specific location for the practice of critical literacy and the political and social action that is considered an essential part of its practice.

Critical Literacy Texts

In pursuing a critical literacy pedagogy in the interest of encouraging students to consider the impact of our food system and the potential of community gardening as a replacement, I was somewhat limited in the children’s texts available on the subject that would encourage discussion and engagement with issues of local food, community gardening and nutrition. While the number of texts relating to this subject does appear to be increasing as interest in local food, environmental stewardship, and community gardening grows, I was unable to find any award-winning books that would have been relevant to this curriculum. The text I chose also had to be appropriate for 4th and 5th grade students, yet readable in the context of a two-hour afterschool program. Because this curriculum was not built for implementation in the classroom but in an optional after-school program, it was important that the texts and activities related to them be fun and engaging and differentiated from what the girls considered “school work”. Also necessary to

consider were the reading levels of the girls involved in the program, as the age and reading ability of the students varied somewhat. For these reasons, I chose what I saw as bright and engaging texts which would hopefully capture the attention and interest of the students and also allow all of them to participate in reading the text out loud.

The two texts I chose for this project, City Green and Our Community Garden, would both be characterized as “picture storybooks” according to Tunnell and Jacobs, as the illustrations and text share the responsibility of telling the story (2008). In terms of genre, both would fall under the category of Contemporary Realistic Fiction, which “tells a story that never happened but *could* have happened” (Tunnell and Jacobs 2008). Both texts address the topic of community gardens, exploring different aspects of the origins, functions, and results of community gardening. City Green tells the story of a girl who tries to improve her urban neighborhood by converting an empty, trash-filled lot on their block into a community garden. This story details her inspiration for starting the garden, her efforts to gain the right to plant there, and her ability to motivate her community to become involved in the project. Our Community Garden presents a group of children who are participating in a community garden and describing their experience there, the games they play, the fruits and vegetables they have planted and their plans for the produce they grow. While City Green’s focus is largely on the leadership efforts of the main character in organizing the garden and the power of a community garden to bring together a neighborhood, Our Community Garden focuses more strongly on food and emphasizes the independence and enjoyment experienced by children participating in a community garden. By addressing different aspects of community gardens, these two texts serve to complement each other and provide students with multiple viewpoints and contexts from which to understand and consider community gardening.

City Green

Plot Synopsis

City Green, written and illustrated by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan, tells the story of a bright young girl named Marcy who decides to turn an empty lot on her city block into a community garden. Marcy has walked past that sad, empty lot nearly every day for the past year since the city demolished the crumbling apartment building that had previously filled that space. Marcy is inspired to do something about the cheerless lot when spring arrives and she and her neighbor, Miss Rosa, begin their yearly window garden. Every spring the two grow a few small plants in coffee cans they have saved, using dirt from a nearby park. However, after an encounter with the neighborhood curmudgeon, Old Man Hammer, they realize that the empty lot would be a much better place for their garden. With the support of the whole neighborhood, Marcy leads the campaign to put the empty lot to use, putting together a petition requesting the city to rent out the lot to their community and presenting the petition to city hall. The city agrees to rent the lot to the group for one dollar and provides tools and equipment to the group to renovate the space. Marcy and her neighbors clean up the lot and begin planting, despite Old Man Hammer's constant efforts to discourage the project and dampen their enthusiasm. The entire neighborhood pitches in, with various members of the community committing their time, effort and supplies to bringing Marcy's vision to life. Their efforts to put the empty lot to use and beautify the neighborhood lead Marcy and her neighbors to consider what had previously been in the space, realizing that before it was torn down the apartment building had housed many of the neighborhood's residents, including Old Man Hammer. The garden becomes a place of new life, through the plants grown there, but also a place of remembrance for the old building and the people who had made it their home. The sense of community and remembrance that have grown

through the creation of the garden lead Old Man Hammer, the voice of opposition to the whole project, to embrace the space and commend Marcy's efforts. Through her initiative, the neighborhood is brought together for a common goal and develops a strong sense of community around the garden.

Important Characters

The main character, narrator, and heroine of City Green is Marcy. Marcy is depicted as a young, African-American girl somewhere between the age of eight and ten years old. She lives with her mother and older brother in a home in an urban neighborhood, supposedly in Philadelphia. Marcy always appears in her glasses and pig-tails, both of which serve to endear her to the reader, give her character, and emphasize her youth. These characteristics also serve to illustrate her intelligence and her inquisitive and observant personality, which the reader comes to understand through her discussion of the neighborhood and the images in which she is depicted as closely examining the world around her. She is consistently portrayed as deeply involved with her community, talking to and sharing meals with neighbors and encouraging participation in the clean-up of the lot and the planting of the garden. Marcy has strong and healthy relationships with her family and adults in her neighborhood, namely Miss Rosa, who seems to serve as a grandmother figure to Marcy. However, while she is often portrayed having positive interactions with adults, Marcy is never portrayed interacting with children, other than her brother, despite the fact that children are often present in the depictions of the neighborhood.

Overall, Marcy's character serves as a positive role-model. She is smart, observant, independent and involved. She has strong relationships with her family and her neighbors, cares about the well-being of her community, and takes the initiative to improve the world around her. The depiction of Marcy as a young, African American, displaying strong leadership skills and a

concern for her community created a strong connection between this book and its discussion of community gardening and the goals and programming of Community Bridges and *Jump Start Girls! Adelante Niñas!* related to embracing multiculturalism and encouraging leadership in young women.

Old Man Hammer plays the role of the antagonist in City Green, criticizing and discouraging Marcy's efforts to turn the empty lot into a garden. As his name would imply, Old Man Hammer is an elderly white man and the neighborhood grump. He is depicted wearing a fedora and a brown suit, which varies between a jacket, a vest, and a white dress shirt, and carrying a wooden cane. His face appears to be stuck in a perpetual frown and he is depicted on one page yelling at a group of children. These elements, his name, his clothing, his cane, and his facial expressions tend to reinforce the perception of him as a grumpy and unpleasant old man and conform to stereotypes about elderly men that are often perpetuated in children's texts and media (e.g. Mr. Wilson from *Dennis the Menace*).

However, this austere front slowly fades away as the story develops. Marcy learns that Old Man Hammer lived in the building that was torn down and begins to wonder if maybe his attitude is related to a longing for the way things used to be when the building still existed. Through the illustrations and discussions of the characters, another, sadder and more sympathetic side of Old Man Hammer begins to come into focus. After Marcy watches him sneak into the garden one night, she goes out to investigate and finds a little plot of seeds planted neatly in the garden. The reader is then given a glimpse into Old Man Hammer's character when he is depicted napping in his chair, surrounded by pictures of him and a woman whom the reader could assume was his wife. This vulnerable image of Old Man Hammer alone, asleep in his chair and wrapped in a blanket and surrounded by memories of the past, allows the reader to see that

there is more to him than the grumpy exterior he conveys and that his attitude may have a deeper cause. By the end of the text, Old Man Hammer has finally come out of his shell, in response to the consistent efforts of Marcy in pursuing the garden and encouraging his involvement. The seeds he planted have bloomed into magnificent sunflowers, he has come to appreciate the garden, spending time there every day, and he and Marcy have grown to be good friends. The character of Old Man Hammer, though somewhat stereotypical at the start of the story, shows strong character development through the text and allows readers to explore his motivations, thoughts, and feelings through both the illustrations and language.

Miss Rosa, a kindly older woman, guides Marcy in her efforts to reclaim the empty lot and turn it into a garden. Miss Rosa is depicted as a plump and smiling older, white woman, wearing a varied of brightly colored dresses. She falls clearly into the role of a grandmother despite the fact that she is clearly not related to Marcy and is also single. She is the one who introduced Marcy to gardening and with whom Marcy originally comes up with the idea to pursue a garden project in the empty lot. She is a voice of reason and reassurance throughout the process guiding Marcy and urging her to give Old Man Hammer time to come around to the idea rather than be discouraged by his negative attitude. She is also depicted several times as providing food for Marcy and her family. While Miss Rosa's character is not particularly dynamic and conforms somewhat to the conventional grandmother figure, she does somewhat subvert those stereotypes. She is a single and independent older woman who appears to live a full and productive life. She is involved in her community and has built strong relationships with individuals of varying ethnic and racial backgrounds. She provides a dramatic contrast to Old Man Hammer and serves as a positive representation of women as well as the elderly.

Illustration

DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan's soft pencil and water-color illustrations lend themselves well to this warm and cheering text. Her style and medium of illustration lend themselves well to the progression of the story, in which the images become brighter and more colorful as the empty lot, which is the focal point of the text, becomes cleaner and more pleasant. The book starts off with a dingy depiction of trash-filled lot on a city block, created when the building there was condemned and torn down. The empty lot appears as an eyesore on the city block year-round, as depicted on pages 4-5, where DiSalvo creates an effective sense of the passage of time through the depiction of Marcy, Miss Rosa, Old Man Hammer, and a few random children observing the lot and interacting on the block in four, seasonal vignettes. These images and the dark, dingy feel of the first few pages illustrate the negative effect that the vacant lot has had on the neighborhood, with the color of the trash in the lot matching the dull browns and grays of the buildings surrounding it. However, as a highly diverse array of neighbors, in their brightly colored clothing, begin working in the empty lot, the images begin to brighten, the buildings appear less dingy and take on warmer brown and red tones, and eventually the garden itself begins to grow. The final two pages are full of color, as the neighbors gather together in the garden to observe the immense and beautiful sunflowers that have grown up in the garden and Marcy and Old Man Hammer sit together on a bench, surrounded by flowers, surveying the beauty they have brought to their neighborhood.

Also significant about the illustrations in this text are DiSalvo's portrayal of the people living in the neighborhood. Each character is distinct and represents part of diverse array of neighbors, in terms of age, race, sex, ethnicity, and ability. One reviewer commented on DiSalvo's cast of characters saying, "a more demographically diverse group would be hard to find" which considering the placement of a Catholic nun, a young girl in a wheel chair, and a

middle-aged blind woman, on top of the already racially and ethnically diverse group, is quite apt (Bush 1994). The distinctiveness of each of the characters also lends depth to the story in that as you turn the page, many characters that may have been front and center previously can still be found, lurking or meandering across the page in the background. One of the most conspicuous characters who can be spotted either in the background or foreground of nearly every page is Old Man Hammer, whose distinct appearance and strong facial features make him instantly recognizable. The noticeable appearance of the characters and their presence in the background allows the reader to feel like they really know the neighborhood as well as gain a deeper understanding of the characters, especially Old Man Hammer, whose appearance in the background reveals an often sad, rather than stern face.

One set of illustrations in particular stood out for their contrast and their ability to reveal a deeper insight about the characters. Pages 20-21 depict Marcy looking out her bedroom window, from the comfort of her cozy, stuffed animal-laden bed, late at night to see Old Man Hammer sneak into the garden to plant some seeds. The illustration is done so that the reader feels as if they are in Marcy's room, looking out the window to see what she is seeing. These pages are dominated by dark purple, and exist as the only scene in the book that takes place at night, indicating a level of secrecy about the realization that Marcy has about Old Man Hammer. On the next two pages (22-23) the reader is given the opposite view and watches Marcy checking the garden through a window in Mr. Hammer's apartment, while he sleeps upright in a rocking chair. This scene, brightly lit with pinks, blues, and warm browns, reveals potential insights into Old Man Hammer's character, with images of him and a woman (who one would assume to be his late wife) on a table next to him along with a cup of tea and a crossword puzzle. This illustration serves to humanize the previously severe Old Man Hammer, showing him in a warm

and pleasant, yet somewhat sad light; revealing at once the potential source of his negative attitudes, his loneliness, and his vulnerability while portraying him with the first smile the reader has seen. These two illustrations characterize the effective and revealing way in which DiSalvo-Ryan skillfully utilized art to develop the characters, reinforce the text, provide varying view points and provide interesting asides, all functions of illustration according to Tunnell and Jacobs (2008, 31-32).

Language

The language used by DiSalvo-Ryan in City Green is written in a natural and readable style, making the text easily understood by readers of all ages and reading levels. The text, written as if narrated by Marcy, reads as would her diary or her own voice speaking to the reader to tell the story. By giving a strong voice to the character, the writing allows the reader to feel a stronger connection to Marcy and get a clearer sense of her personality. The language used also flows very well, sounding natural if read aloud to a group or read silently. For example, when Marcy is describing her discovery of Old Man Hammer's seeds planted in the garden, the text reads, "Right after breakfast, I walk to the back of this lot. And there it is—a tiny raised bed of soil" (DiSalvo-Ryan 22). Here we see a very simple sentence construction, without much use of multiple clauses, but which clearly conveys a sense of time, an action, and a realization in two sentences that read naturally and include an indication of a dramatic pause. DiSalvo-Ryan maintains this simple, effective style throughout the text, giving voice to the character of Marcy, including her inner thoughts, her realizations, and her interactions with others. DiSalvo-Ryan also uses realistic and nuanced language in her use of dialogue, giving personality and authenticity to the characters.

Her writing style is also very vivid and employs the use of figurative, creating a more complex and detailed text. DiSalvo-Ryan makes use of a metaphor and aptly describes the impact of the empty lot on the block when Marcy says, “Now this block looks like a big smile with one tooth missing” (1994, 4). She also makes use of the idiom “sour grapes” to refer to Old Man Hammer’s attitude toward the garden. She creatively twists this idiom later in the text, when she has Marcy note that his “sour grapes turn sweet” when he realized the beauty and value of the garden (26). She also uses the idiom “hard as nails” to describe Old Man Hammer, indicating immediately and vividly a sense of his personality and disposition. DiSalvo’s writing also exhibits several examples of “precise vocabulary”, an element of good writing according to Tunnell and Jacobs (2008, 31-32). Some of these include “holler” to describe the way in which Old Man Hammer responds to an invitation to help in the garden and “slats” to indicate specifically pieces of wood that are donated to use for a fence. DiSalvo-Ryan’s vivid and nuanced writing lends this text greater depth and provides the reader with a stronger sense of the story, characters, and images portrayed in the text.

Discussion

Overall, this text is well illustrated and well written. The illustrations add a great deal to the story, providing depth and additional information not immediately clear in the text. They also provide added, interesting details to the observant reader, creating nuanced characterizations and providing background information to the story. The language used serves a similar function, adding unique details and providing vivid descriptions and comparisons. The dialogue flows smoothly and naturally and adds a sense of authenticity to the characters. The characters presented represent a very diverse group of people, of varying ages, races, ethnicities, and temperaments. The main character, Marcy, serves as an excellent role model and is one of the

strongest points of this book. While her characterization is not perfect, she represents an empowered young girl, working to improve her community and succeeding in bringing her neighborhood together. In terms of this program, she was an ideal character in that she represented a non-white character succeeding and serving her community, allowing the girls involved in the program (who are largely Latina and African-American) to see someone who looks more like them as the protagonist of the text. Old Man Hammer also represents a very valuable lesson in this text, illustrating the transformative power of gardening. According to Tunnell and Jacobs, City Green would qualify as both well-written and well-illustrated. The overall message of the book is very valuable to readers in general, as well as to this program specifically, presenting the positive results of hard work, the ability of one person to make a difference, the transformative power of a community garden, and the importance of community.

Our Community Garden

Plot Synopsis

Our Community Garden, written and illustrated by Barbara Pollack, tells the story of Audrey Aubergine and a group of her friends who participate in a community garden in San Francisco, California. Audrey and her friends work in their garden every day after school and throughout the summer. For them, the garden is a place for fun and games tempered by hard work digging, planting, and tending to the garden. Several of Audrey's friends have planted their own special crop for use in a particular food relevant to their family or culture. Tomás has planted tomatillos and hot peppers that he can use to make his own salsa. Alison Chin has planted asparagus beans to be used in her mother's tofu and bean stir-fry. Several children have also planted fruits and vegetables they like or find interesting. Cassandra has planted carrots and tracks their growth in a garden diary while Audrey comes to the garden every day to check on

the progress of her eggplants. When the plants finally begin to ripen, the children are very excited. They watch the plants carefully as they ripen and finally each of the children harvests the fruit or vegetable they grew. Using the produce they grew, the children work together to cook a giant pot-luck meal, for which each of them contributes a special dish. They share a meal of salsa, stir-fry, eggplant stew, potato pie and carrot cake, celebrating their harvest and their hard work and enjoying each other's company and culture as shared through their food.

Characters

The characters presented in Our Community Garden do not come across with particularly strong or distinct personalities, but rather serve to represent different aspects of gardening and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The characters are all children who live in the same neighborhood and all appear to be around the age of eight.

- Audrey Aubergine is the narrator and the main character of Our Community Garden. She is presented as having pale skin, freckles, green eyes and dark, black hair, usually in pig tails. She narrates the text, describing the activities that go on in the garden and the exploits of her fellow gardeners. Her contribution to the garden is to plant eggplants, which the reader can assume is inspired by her name -- aubergine -- being another word for eggplant. She demonstrates to the reader the importance of watering and weeding when growing vegetables. She describes how she sometimes digs for worms, encouraging a level of comfort with those bugs that typically inhabit gardens. Audrey is portrayed as very supportive of the efforts of her friends and fellow gardeners and is presented with the strongest voice in the text.
- Tomás is a young Latino boy depicted with tanned skin and dark brown eyes and hair, wearing a straw hat. He is responsible for growing tomatillos and hot peppers in the

garden for use in his own salsa, illustrating the connections between gardening, food, and culture as well as the independence and self-sufficiency made possible through his participation in the garden.

- Cassandra is Audrey's best friend and is also participating in the garden. Cassandra is depicted as an African-American girl with short, very curly hair. Cassandra is depicted as somewhat of a tom-boy, dressed in a plaid shirt, green shorts, and hiking boots, avoiding the gender binary often illustrated through clothing. Cassandra is planting carrots in the garden and keeping a garden diary, tracking their growth. Cassandra serves to present the activity of journaling as related to gardening, which is often used in school garden programs.
- Alison Chin, Audrey's next-door neighbor, is portrayed as a young Chinese-American girl. She is depicted with shoulder-length black hair, a flower head-band, and a broad smile. Alison is planting "asparagus" beans in the garden for use in her mother's tofu and bean stir-fry, which she imagines in vivid color. Alison again serves to represent the connection between gardening, food, and culture through her planned use of her produce in a dish special to her family, while also tying in a connection between food and family.

Illustrations

Pollack's illustrations in this text are bold, bright, and cheerful, utilizing a brilliant palette of colors for both the garden and the characters. Each page is full of vivid images of fruits and vegetables, different elements of gardening, and children playing and working in the garden. Several pages depict specific elements of gardening, such as pages 7-8 which clearly illustrate and identify the different tools used in gardening, including gloves, a trowel, a pitchfork, and a spade. Pages 17-18 similarly present the different bugs that can be found in gardens, illustrating

examples of each and presenting them as natural rather than scary or gross. These two sets of illustrations provide usable and valuable information concerning gardening to the reader and serve to teach it in an interesting and visually appealing way. The illustrations also serve to present activities that students can participate in or pursue in the context of a garden, including hide-and-seek, watering, digging, weeding, keeping a garden journal, harvesting their produce, cooking with that produce, and eating. By presenting these activities, the reader gains a sense of the responsibilities and joy that can be experienced through gardening. The reader is also able to follow and understand the entire process and life cycle of a garden, from planting all the way to eating the produce grown. In this way, the illustrations serve to teach valuable lessons about the various aspects of gardening in a bright and whimsical way.

Another significant aspect of the illustrations is Pollack's depiction of the various children involved in the community garden. Pollack presents a realistic presentation of the ethnically and culturally diverse children portrayed in the story, with each child exhibiting unique features and clothing. By creating each child as an individual of a diverse background with a specific appearance and unique interests, Pollack illustrates the value of embracing and celebrating diversity. Connections are also drawn, through her illustrations, between the produce grown and harvested, and the culture of the individual characters who imagine using their produce in a meal that is significant to them and related to their ethnicity or culture. Alison Chin is portrayed as imagining her mother's tofu and bean stir fry, when Audrey discusses Alison's plans to grow the asparagus beans that her mother uses in that recipe. Alison is presented as imaging a large, metal wok full of tofu, beans, peppers, mushrooms, and broccoli with a pair of chopsticks resting along the side, illustrating this unique dish and the way it is prepared.

One interesting aspect of the illustrations is the slightly surreal way in which the garden is depicted. Pollack uses bright, bold colors for all the images, with each page dominated by a different color. Pollack also plays with the proportions of the characters and the garden, depicting children playing among gigantic sunflowers, counting enormous lady bugs, or resting against human-sized asparagus and lettuce. These distortions are very effective in conveying a sense of child-like joy at the wonders of a garden, emphasizing elements that children might find interesting or beautiful. They also express the value of imagination and play in pursuing a garden, creating a sense of the wonder and magic of nature. In this way the illustrations clearly serve to illustrate the mood of text as well as provide a different viewpoint in that they present the world as these children see it, rather than as adults would see it, both of which are elements of good illustrations according to Tunnell and Jacobs (2008, 31-32).

Language

The language used in the book was rather simplistic and not particularly notable. Pollack writes largely to describe the actions going on in the illustrations, which are what really shine in this book. The sentences are short and generally lack complexity or descriptive language. Pollack uses no figurative language and makes use of a relatively simple vocabulary. There are few instances of more precise vocabulary when Pollack is illustrating specific concepts in gardening. The tools are described by specific rather than general terms, such as trowel and spade rather than just shovel, and cultivator, rather than hoe. Pollack also introduces a few new fruits and vegetables in the text, explaining what a tomatillo is and describing an “asparagus” bean. Overall the language used in this book indicates that it was written for a much younger audience than the 4th and 5th grade girls involved in the program. The language really seems to serve more of an

educational, rather than experiential function, utilized to convey facts rather than emotions and present information in an upfront manner rather than leaving room for the reader to explore.

Discussion

Our Community Garden, while rather simplistic in its language, presents a diverse group of students participating in a vibrant community garden through bright and engaging illustrations. Though the text is not entirely ideal for the group of girls with whom this program is being implemented, because it appears to have been written for a younger age group, it does represent a unique contribution to children's literature as it was the only text I was able to find that specifically discussed children's participation in a community garden. The text does not feature any adults and presents a more child-oriented view of a community garden, presenting the wonder of a garden, discussing the specific tools used, and featuring children carrying out all the activities and responsibilities involved in gardening. Through its illustration of a widely diverse group of students, this text serves to demonstrate and celebrate diversity and multiculturalism, a crucial aspect of Community Bridges programming. This book also draws significant connections between gardening, food, and culture, serving a valuable role in Lesson 4 and celebrating cultural and ethnic heritage through a celebration of food at the end of the text. Overall, while not perfect for my purposes, this book did provide an opportunity to address and engage with valuable issues we discussed while also presenting a group of children working independently in the garden, which was one of the overall goals of this program.

Curriculum

This curriculum was created to be implemented over 4 days, with each day focusing on a particular aspect of community gardening and involving a variety of activities and discussions. Jump Start Girls! Adelante Niñas! programming functions as a once-a-week afterschool club, so the curriculum was designed so that it could be implemented over a period of four weeks during the limited time span allotted to an after-school program. The curriculum consists of four lessons:

1. What is a Community Garden?
2. Where Does Our Food Come From? Local vs. Global Food Systems
3. Visiting a Community Garden or Local Farm
4. Community Gardening and Food as a Cultural Exploration

Lesson one is intended to introduce students to the idea of community gardening and provide some context for the rest of the curriculum. It involves the reading and discussion of City Green and an art project. Lesson two focuses on local vs. global food systems and impressing upon children the potential value of eating locally grown, through a blind taste-test activity as well as a world map activity in which students discover where their food comes from. Lesson three is intended to be the Garden-Based Learning aspect of the curriculum in which students are taken to a local community garden or farm where they will get a chance to learn about the location as well as participate in a hands-on gardening activity. Finally, Lesson four is intended to tie together gardening and cooking as well as draw connections between food, gardening, and culture through reading Our Community Garden and working to put together a cook book composed of family recipes from each student, representing the culture of their families. Through these four lessons, I had hoped that students would be given a brief introduction to community gardening and local food systems and sources and be able to make connections

between their food and their culture. Through providing this introduction, the intention was that students who were interested in the material or compelled by the information, would gain the tools and motivation to pursue their own gardening project, at home, at school, or in their community.

Along with the curriculum, I created a website that could be used by individuals or groups interested in pursuing a similar program. The website provides an introduction to the project, the curriculum that I created and links to useful resources and additional information. I also created a space where students involved in the program could find updates about our plans or further assignments to prepare for the program. However, since not all students had access to a computer or the internet at home, I chose not to use this section in the actual implementation of the program. Also available on the site are spaces for visitor comments, a survey in which visitors can participate, and a list of fun or interesting information related to the project, including news articles, pictures, and videos. The website can be found at:

<https://sites.google.com/site/jumpstartgirlscommunitygarden/>

Implementation

Through my volunteer position at Community Bridges, I was given a chance to implement the curriculum that I designed. After putting together the curriculum, I worked with my supervisor Crystal to format it to fit the time frame and requirements of Community Bridges programming, as well as create a few additional activities to engage the students in the material. Starting on Thursday, March 25 and Friday, March 26, we began implementing the curriculum in the afterschool programs at Arcola Elementary School (Thursday site) and Rolling Terrace Elementary (Friday site). We conducted three sessions of programming utilizing the curriculum I created. Lesson 1 was conducted March 25- March 26, Lesson 2 was conducted April 8- April 9,

and Lesson 4 was conducted April 15-16. We were unable to implement Lesson 3, Visiting a Community Garden or Local Farm because of logistical and financial issues, lack of transportation, and time constraints.

Discussion of Implementation

While the chance to implement the curriculum I created with a dynamic group of young women and through a unique program was an excellent opportunity and experience, the implementation of this program did not go off quite as I had envisioned. While certain activities and lessons proved very effective and enjoyable for the students, some did not succeed in their intended purpose and failed to garner much enthusiasm among the students.

Lesson 1- What is a Community Garden?

This first lesson received a very different response at the two implementation sites. On the first day, we implemented this lesson at Arcola Elementary and it was received very poorly by the students. We began the lesson with the game “Healthy Plate Round-Up” discussed on the website, which was intended to get the students physically active and focus on the element of food that would come up in the curriculum. Two students bumped heads during the activity and several others showed a lack of enthusiasm, resulting in a general dissatisfaction with the activity among the students. We then attempted to move onto reading and discussing the first text City Green. Several students voiced their displeasure with activity and refused to participate in reading the text out loud, arguing that they had already read the book, that reading it wouldn’t be fun, and that they felt it was too immature for them. While most of the students agreed with these critiques, a few students stated their disagreement and asked that we continue with the activity. These two students, along with Crystal and I, read the text aloud, while the rest of the students made clear their boredom and distaste for the activity. Because we were unable to engage all the

students and spent a fair amount of time trying to explain the value of the activity and convince students to participate, we were unable to fully implement the lesson plan for that day, setting us back in terms of the overall program. After the program on this first day, I was very upset and felt hugely discouraged. However, after a discussion with Crystal and reflection on the events of that day, I was able to conclude that the failure of this lesson was not entirely the result of poor planning, but was largely the result of social struggles within the group and the program and the peer pressure utilized by a member of the group of students who had become dissatisfied with the program in general.

Implementation of the first lesson was much more successful during the second day at Rolling Terrace Elementary. The students were very enthusiastic about the “Healthy Plate Round-Up” activity, requesting that we play several times. This activity was successful in encouraging the students to be physically active as well as work together and overall was quite fun for the students. Following the game, we returned to the classroom and began the reading activity. This activity also went very well, with each student getting a chance to read out loud to the group and other students offering positive reinforcement through attentive listening and assistance with words or concepts with which the reader had trouble. After each page, students were asked if they had any questions and encouraged to discuss what had just been read. The involvement of the entire group in the text, as illustrated by their visible enthusiasm for their chance to read out loud as well as their assistance to the students near them with difficult words or concepts, was a huge encouragement and further illustrated my conclusion that the failure of the activity the previous day was not a result of poor planning, but of pre-existing internal issues. After finishing the texts, students were broken up into pairs and given several questions to discuss. After a few minutes, they were asked to share their answers with the group. This

allowed the students to work, one-on-one with the text and engage with each other. Because we had overestimated the amount of time we had, the activity was cut short and students didn't have as much time as we had hoped to discuss the text or to engage in the arts activity planned for that day. Overall, this session was quite a success in terms of the activities we were able to complete and the students showed a strong enthusiasm for the activities presented.

Lesson 2- Where Does Our Food Come From? Local vs. Global Food Systems

The second day of implementation took place two weeks after the first day, as the students' spring break occurred March 29-April 2. On Thursday at Arcola Elementary, because we had not completed the lesson from the week before and asked students to prepare to the food map activity we had planned for Lesson 2, we had to adjust the lesson for that day. Instead of having students research an individual fruit, vegetable, or flower, we had students draw two of their favorite foods and then place that food on the map in relation to its origin. While this activity didn't quite relate the lesson of food miles that was the intention of Lesson 2, we were able to incorporate the art-oriented activity intended for the previous lesson and discuss somewhat the relationship between food and culture and the origin of students' families. While the blind taste-test, in which students would taste fruits and vegetables that were locally grown in comparison to others that originated from farther away and discuss the differences, this activity would not have been possible at this time of year, considering that the local fruits and vegetables I was able to find were limited to spinach, asparagus, hot house tomatoes and apples from earlier in the season. While this lesson went much more smoothly than the previous lesson, with less tension and disruption of the activities, the intended message of the lesson was largely lost in the need to accommodate for the lost time and logistical difficulties.

Lesson 2 at Rolling Terrace Elementary again went more smoothly and successfully, but time limitations and logistical issues also limited the effectiveness of the lesson. At the end of the previous session, we had sent home reminders with students asking them to bring in information for the next session about the origin of a particular fruit, vegetable, or flower they had chosen. They were asked to find that produce at the grocery store and identify its country of origin for the purpose of the food map activity. Only one student out of sixteen remembered to bring in the information. In preparation for the lesson, I had gathered information about all the produce that students had chosen to report on, just in case of such a situation. Students were again given time to draw their favorite food and those foods were then placed up on a map to indicate their country of origin. This map was purchased with funds I received in the form of a grant from the University Honors Program for the implementation of this program. After students had presented the food they had drawn and placed it on the map, we transitioned into the originally planned food map activity, distributing mock-ups of each of the fruits and vegetables the students had chosen and the information that I had gathered about that produce. Students then got up and presented the produce and taped it to the map indicating each item's country of origin, with most of the produce ending up on Mexico. Once this was finished, I introduced the concept of food miles and we attempted to initiate a discussion of what that meant. One student responded with a clear understanding of the negative impact of food traveling long distances in terms of use of fossil fuels and pollution. While this answer clearly illustrated an understanding of the lesson and synthesis of the information, most of the other students were rather distracted at this point. At the close of the session, we asked students to bring in a recipe for their favorite food (for example the food they had drawn in the earlier exercise) for the next week for the cook book activity.

Lesson 3-Visiting a Community Garden or Local Farm

As discussed previously, Lesson 3 did not occur for either group for several reasons. I had planned Common Good City Farm as the site of our trip, but after calling and e-mailing, I received no response. Also, I discovered that there would be a cost involved in visiting this site that might be prohibitive in terms of our ability to visit. Crystal and I discussed other potential sites, but it seemed that there was more planning involved in setting up such a trip than we had the time or the money for, as we would have to arrange transportation there and back, organize the visit with a tour guide at the site, and send home and receive permission slips from the students, among other things. These obstacles proved too much and we were therefore unable to implement Lesson 3.

Lesson 4- Community Gardening and Food as a Cultural Exploration

Lesson 4 was the final lesson of the curriculum I created for Jump Start Girls! Adelante Niñas! focused on drawing connections between community gardening, food, and the various cultures of the students involved in the program. Traditionally, community gardens have been sites where immigrant and ethnic communities were able to preserve their agricultural traditions and food heritage, through the planting of traditional crops and participation in agriculture. By providing a space to work together and build community, community gardens have served as spaces that maintain ‘cultural commons’ and family and ethnic history despite pressure on immigrants and ethnic communities to become “Americans” and conform to “American culture” while also allowing them to stake a physical claim on the land of America, their new home (Klindienst 2008).

Through reading Our Community Gardening and presenting and discussing the recipes for our favorite foods, which bear some connection to our family and culture, the intention was to draw a connection between gardening and maintaining ‘cultural commons.’ However, we

were unable to complete this lesson as planned. At Arcola Elementary, only one student remembered to bring in a recipe despite the reminder we had sent home and Crystal's effort to call each student's parents and inform them of the activity. This required that we use most of the program time finding recipes on the computer for the rest of the students. We didn't have access to a printer, however, so the only way they could complete the activity was to copy the recipes directly from the computer screen, limiting how many students were able to search for a recipe. This portion of the activity ended up taking the entire time, with only a few students finishing their recipe and others having no chance to find one. We asked that students take home the recipe pages we had provided and either finish the recipe they started or copy down a new recipe and bring in the sheet the next day to be picked up by Crystal.

The next session at Rolling Terrace followed a similar pattern, with all but one of the students forgetting to bring in a recipe. For this session, however, Crystal and I had prepared for this possibility, printing out a variety of recipes from various countries around the world as well as providing a few cookbooks, so that students would be able to at least have a choice of recipes and copy them down without limiting other student's ability to do so. This was also necessary as we did not have access to computers at Rolling Terrace. Again, however, most of the session was spent copying down the recipes and we did not have time to get to the book, missing a crucial aspect of the intended lesson. Another challenge was that many of the students were participating in a variety show and had practice for that show until 4:00, again imposing time restraints that limited our ability to meet the goals for that day. More of the students were able to finish their recipes this time, but several took them home to complete them and brought them back the next week.

Overall this lesson did not achieve its goal of connecting culture to food as time limitations prevented us from reading the necessary text and students forgetting to bring in the necessary materials resulted in a lack of the intended personal and cultural connection to the recipes included in the cook book. The copying of the recipes ended up being more of a task and students chose not to decorate their pages with art, as we recommended, because of what I would assume to be a lack of enthusiasm for the activity and a lack of personal connection to the recipe they copied. As an extension of this lesson and in response to students' enthusiasm for a cooking activity, Crystal and I asked the students at both Arcola and Rolling Terrace to choose a recipe to cook during a later session. My hope is that this will allow us another chance to talk about food and healthy eating and potentially make some connections between food and culture, which we were unable to do with Lesson 4.

Conclusion

In designing and implementing this program, I ran in to a number of challenges, both theoretical and logistical which prevented it from being carried out quite as I had envisioned. In terms of theoretical and philosophical challenges, I was first confronted with the critiques of critical literacy that were discussed above. In implementing this program with a clear political message and agenda, I was concerned that I was imposing my own values on the students, rather than allowing them to come to their own conclusions about the material. In dealing with this, I attempted to base the program and the information provided on clear facts, such as the impact of food miles and the proven benefits of community and school gardening. Sections that were not fact-based were left largely up to students to accept or reject, such as the information in the two selected texts and the art and recipe activities. One activity that posed an issue in terms of balancing fact and values was the local vs. global food taste test activity, where the intention is

that students will prefer the local food. This activity posed issues in terms of intention in that students were intended to come to a particular conclusion that would have been shaped by the fruits and vegetables that I chose. Because of logistical issues, we did not pursue this activity, avoiding some potential issues that could have arisen with imposing values and biasing students against food not grown locally. Another challenge in implementing a program that encouraged an appreciation and preference for local food was the issue of cost. Many of the students involved in the program come from low-income households where there may not be the funds available to purchase organic, locally grown food year round. While this was a consideration, in my own experience shopping at farmers markets in comparison to the grocery store, when fruits and vegetables are in season, the costs are relatively comparable. For this reason, there was some effort to encourage students to understand growing seasons and locations of some fruits and vegetables in order to be aware of the potential impact of their food choices. Because of potential issues of cost, I did not address the issue of organic food in this program, concerned that the lesson would be interpreted as a demand that students shop at Whole Foods or only purchase organic food. Another issue related to discussion of local vs. global food that I had not considered but discovered during implementation was that several students held strong ties to the nations where many of our fruits and vegetables are grown, including Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. This posed a challenge in terms of ensuring that the message of the local food lesson was not that food coming from these locations is bad, but that it is better for the environment to buy food from closer to home.

In terms of logistical issues, I encountered many challenges in planning and implementing the curriculum in its entirety. One major challenge was the time constraint of implementing the curriculum during an afterschool program. Limited to 1.5-2 hours left us little

leeway if activities ran over their intended time or issues arose. Also with a week in between each session, it was somewhat difficult to tie the lessons together and create consistency and continuity from one week to the next. Time and financial limitations, as well as logistical issues also prevented us from being able to implement Lesson 3, which would have involved a visit to a local community garden/urban agriculture site in Washington, D.C. This lesson would have been hugely valuable in engaging the students and bringing the material to life, but because we could not organize transportation and because of a lack of support for the trip, we were unable to implement this lesson. Increased planning and stronger pressure on my part coupled with stronger institutional support and enthusiasm could have allowed us a greater opportunity to pursue the trip. Challenges also arose with student participation, as discussed pertaining to the implementation of Lesson 1, which waylaid our efforts to implement the curriculum as a need arose to deal with personal and structural issues within the group as well as attempt to refocus students on the activities. Potentially a more involved discussion with students before the creation and implementation about the potential program could have allowed me to craft it more to their preferences and avoid some of the issues of lack of interest and engagement that arose. In analyzing the results of the program, it would have been very valuable to survey the students before and after the program was implemented, a conclusion I came to only after we had implemented the program. Another means of improving the program would have been to implement it as part of a summer program, rather than during the school year. This would have rectified issues related to the food tasting exercise and time restrictions as well as allow for the potential of actually pursuing a group garden as part of the project, an aspect which was not possible given the limitations of the Jump Start Girls! Adelante Niñas! program. In general, I feel that stronger planning on my part and a greater understanding of time and logistical constraints,

as well as increased input from the students could have done a great deal to improve the outcome of this program.

Overall, this project served as a fantastic learning experience for me. I was able to learn a great deal about educational philosophy and the creation of an effective curriculum through my research and writing. I was given a unique opportunity to craft and implement a curriculum with a dynamic and engaging group of young women and in the context of a highly relevant and valuable organization. Through working with Community Bridges, I was able to gain insight into the way in which a non-profit focused on education and empowerment functions while also acquiring hands-on experience in the classroom working with the students. I was able to better understand the joys and challenges of implementing educational programming through the direct experience as well as reflection. Seeing what worked for the students and what failed to encourage engagement and participation, I was able to understand how the program could have been implemented more effectively and adjust from session to session. While the implementation of the program did not go as well as I had planned and the impact on the students was not entirely clear, I found the creation and implementation of this curriculum to be a highly valuable and enjoyable experience.

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