

Plant Justice: A Case Study in Radical Pedagogy and Food Justice in an Alternative Education Setting

Nancy Neiman¹, Jean Schroedel²

¹Department of Politics, Scripps College, Claremont, CA, USA

²Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, USA

Email: nneiman@scrippscollege.edu, jean.schroedel@cgu.edu

How to cite this paper: Neiman, N., & Schroedel, J. (2019). Plant Justice: A Case Study in Radical Pedagogy and Food Justice in an Alternative Education Setting. *Creative Education*, 10, 1937-1952.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2019.108140>

Received: July 26, 2019

Accepted: August 18, 2019

Published: August 22, 2019

Copyright © 2019 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Through interviews and college student journal data, this article assesses an interdisciplinary food justice education program in terms of a set of connected goals: to create a truly democratic classroom space, to build strong trusting relationships (social capital), to build a sense of community within the classroom and at the school, and finally to leverage all of these goals into political capital that empowers the community to engage in oppositional politics to address environmental and social inequities facing the students' communities. Our investigation of the program suggests it has had positive effects in terms of increasing the self-confidence of students and building a stronger sense of community at the school and the local community. These outcomes appear to hold despite the fact that the majority of college interns struggle to identify or accept a clear mission for the program. We argue that it is in part this ongoing struggle that underscores the program's democratic, engaging, and political nature and has contributed to its success.

Keywords

Critical Pedagogy, Food Justice Movement, Alternative Schools, Environmental Justice, Racial Justice, Community Engagement in Higher Education, Critical Ecology

1. Introduction

The ways we experience our individual bodies may be shaped by larger economic contexts (neoliberalism) informing cultural ideas about self-discipline and health (Guthman, 2011). More specifically, food systems produce classed and racialized subjectivities (Omi & Winant, 1986; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). At their

best, food justice educational programs can offer a complex ethical arena in which to explore questions of personal and community autonomy and of social, political, and economic agency.

This article analyzes the impact of building a food justice education program on students at an alternative high school (high school X) and on the college interns at a small liberal arts college who have worked with them. In doing so, we hope to contribute a broader understanding of the possibilities and complexities of critical pedagogy in an alternative education setting. We also explore the possibility of a food justice program moving away from “teaching poor kids how to eat healthy” into the realm of oppositional politics and community empowerment around environmental and educational justice. Mirroring the larger debates within both the educational reform and food justice literatures, the Plant Justice program exhibits multiple tensions: between theory and practice, providing access to healthy foods versus oppositional politics, vocational training versus deep intellectual engagement, individualistic models of educational success versus community organizing and the building of social and political capital. We utilize qualitative methods with data drawn mostly from seven semesters of college intern journals and some interviews with the high school students, teachers, and administrators at high school X, to assess both the nature of the program and its impact on the life of the school and community. These interviews suggest the project has had positive effects in terms of increasing the self-confidence of students and building a stronger sense of community at the school and the local community, despite the fact that the majority of college interns struggle to identify or accept a clear mission for the program. We argue that it is in part this ongoing struggle to define the program that makes the program more democratic, engaging, and political.

High School X offers an alternative for students considered at risk of not graduating at the normal pace or within the standard system. “There is a growing interest in alternative schooling models as responses to access and equity, and increasing the rates of schooling completion for marginalized young people” (Mills & McGregor, 2014: p. 3). It enrolls approximately 100 students each year but with its high turnover rate the student population can fluctuate between 80 and 120. The high school is located within a relatively affluent city yet 73% of its student population qualifies for the federal free or reduced-price school lunch program which means that nearly 3/4 of the school earn less than \$29,000 per year for a family of four. The school tends to be majority minority with the Black and Latino population at approximately 74% and only 17% of students identifying as White (<https://highschools.com/directory>).

The Plant Justice program, which began in 2010 and ended in 2017, has offered students and college interns the opportunity to learn from one another as well as with professional chefs, food justice and environmental justice community organizers, and Native American elders. This hands-on, multidisciplinary class typically met twice a week for two-hour blocks at the end of the school day. However, the program went through a number of structural changes, first as part of a

PE class, then as an afterschool program, then as an extracurricular program in which students could earn credits, then as an elective class during the regular school day, and then partnering with the Regional Occupation Program from 2015-2017 to offer kids extra-credit as an extension of their Sustainable Agriculture Systems course. Since the Fall of 2010, Plant Justice built, planted, maintained, and harvested over 4000 square feet of raised-bed garden, a fruit orchard and a California native plants garden. The community-building efforts organized through the program led surrounding community members to see the school in an increasingly positive light and students to see themselves more as political participants in their own community.

We begin by setting the broader theoretical critique of food justice education and the Plant Justice program's struggle to define itself. We then focus on three key goals and defining characteristics of the program that have been central to its success: 1) A self-conscious approach to issues of privilege that exist within the classroom and the community; 2) investing in a non-hierarchical or democratic classroom space; 3) centering relationship-building not only as a corner-stone of student success but as a means of building community outside of the classroom; and 4) leveraging the very social capital that gets built through relationship-building into political capital. The building of political capital in order to organize for meaningful change in marginalized communities is at the very heart of Freire's critical pedagogy model (Freire, 2006).

2. Critiques of Food Movement-Based Education

There have been widespread critiques of both the food and environmental movements for being largely white middleclass. While the food and environmental *justice* movements have explicitly attempted to be more inclusive by focusing on race and class-based inequalities, emphasis on farmer's markets, community gardens, and environmental education has been criticized for its failure to combat the systemic economic and racial injustices of US food and environmental systems (Guthman, 2011; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). While these programs often fall prey to the kind of preaching about healthy living (healthism) that Guthman sees as a form of neocolonialism without ever engaging in an oppositional politics that might actually challenge systemic oppression, we believe school garden/education programs, properly (or perhaps reflexively) structured, as potential spaces where social and political capital can be created and powerfully deployed. Critical pedagogues have argued that critical pedagogy has the potential to empower students from marginalized communities to reclaim their cultural and social identities (Anyon, 2011: p. 40). Moreover, studies suggest that political activism by low-income students of color builds confidence and promotes academic achievement (The Forum for Youth Investment, 2004; Zeldin & Price, 1995). In other words, "organizing urban youth to work with others to improve their schools and neighborhoods gives teenagers connections, embedding them in constructive community networks" (Anyon, 2011: p. 102).

For MacLaren, successful critical education involves “creating a process that transforms the sites of learning/teaching as ‘sites for the production of both critical knowledge and socio-political action’”. Students must emerge from these sites as “active agents for social transformation and critical citizenship” (McLaren & Pericles, 2005: p. 103). In keeping with these insights, the Plant Justice program has sought to use food/environmental justice not as an end in itself, but instead as a vehicle for “the production of critical knowledge and socio-political action”.

Plant Justice operates in the hybrid realm of critical education, food justice, and community environmental justice organizing, continuously trying to create an educational space that both engages and empowers students. Adapting the metaphor of “woven space” from geographer Wright’s work describing diverse social movements coming together in order to respond to “globalization from above”, we articulate specific strategies for making community and school gardens politically as well as ecologically productive (Wright, 2008: p. 420). Our development of “woven spaces” (“spaces in which people of diverse backgrounds by race, age, class, gender, sexual identity and/or lived experience come together to learn and work on common concerns”) works to connect the classroom, kitchen and garden with the community, creating varied responses to racial and economic injustice. Our overarching goal has been to create community through shared labor and learning about growing, preparing, and consuming food as well as environmental justice organizing.

This article assesses Plant Justice with respect to a set of connected goals: to create a democratic classroom space, to build strong trusting relationships (social capital), to build a sense of community within the classroom and at the school, and finally to leverage all of these goals into political capital that empowers folks to engage in oppositional politics to address environmental and social inequities facing their communities.

3. Investigating the Program

Plant Justice vacillates between being understood and approached as a cooking and gardening program that seeks to educate marginalized youth about healthy and ethical food choices (a conventional understanding of food justice) versus one that seeks to educate and organize around food and environmental justice issues and discriminatory policies facing the low-income community of color in which it is situated. The latter has the potential to build a sense of political agency and ownership over students’ education, especially among students who have largely disengaged within a more traditional educational setting.

1) Grappling with Issues of Privilege in the Classroom and Community

The college interns grapple in particular with how to reconcile a focus on food (a movement often associated with white privilege) with realities of race and class-based structural injustices that working in a working-class community of color lays bare. One intern writes:

To say that there aren't enough minorities in the alternative food movement ... is not an indictment ... of the leaders in the food movement. It is simply a problem that requires a great deal of introspection by members of the movement, and a great deal more consciousness regarding the societal factors which may prevent many people from having a seat at the alternative food table.

Another stated that they "often leave class feeling both enlightened and more lost, as new questions and concerns are constantly arising, and [they are] challenged to reconsider how [their] preconceived notions about food justice may be problematic".

Race and class loom large among the concerns of the interns and often express themselves as an analysis of privilege.

My experience has made me more aware of my own privilege and the advantages and disadvantages that have brought me where I am. Working with the high school group has highlighted how I can effectively employ my privilege and knowledge to benefit the lives of the food justice students.

Another similarly writes:

I have begun considering the balance I must maintain while navigating my own privilege in relation to the high schoolers ... becoming aware of my own privileged position...using my privilege, experience and knowledge to create connections and foster skills among the students. But in doing so, I feel as if I risk devaluing their own backgrounds, behaviors, and methods of communication.

Both turn the question of privilege into a strategy for transferring benefits. But even this is fraught, as for the intern who wonders "whether my teaching comes off more like pushing my own understanding of the world on these students as something superior. This is one of my fears because a lot of the time I'm almost positive that I am learning more valuable lessons from the students than they are from me". We make no suggestion that the program resolves these issues.

Instead, we suggest that the constant grappling and self-reflection by interns served as an effective educational model. We see this also in how interns from working class backgrounds have grappled with complex issues of privilege in the context of teaching a program in a marginalized space within a broader context of attending an elite liberal arts college.

My experience has given me new insight into my position as a college student from a working-class family in my relation to my community... I undeniably come from a place of privilege (in attending this college, in being a United States Citizen, and in being white, for example) I have been struggling to understand what I should do with the resources, knowledge and growing passion that I have for this subject.

Another working-class college intern offers that "being at an elite small liberal

arts college has made me realize the importance of social capital and resources I have come to have in the past 3 years and how much more privileged my position in life has become as a result". This type of realization can have a transformative effect.

Interns have also been conflicted about how much to focus explicitly on race and class privilege in the program curriculum. While interns value a focus on environmental justice issues as a way of connecting student experiences to their education, they worry that doing so will leave students depressed about their own everyday lived experiences.

I am aware that a balance must be maintained in the classroom as we introduce the structural inequalities associated with food access. Accurately illustrating the situation and explaining complex topics with relatable examples is challenging to do without framing the students' lives in an overwhelmingly negative manner.

We contend that the program's success centered both on grappling with how to make education relevant to students' lives but also with the complex politics of doing so within already marginalized spaces.

2) The Challenges of Building a Non-Hierachal Classroom Space

Plant Justice not only struggles with what to teach, but even more importantly how to teach it. The program seeks constantly to disrupt traditional hierarchies in order to democratize the educational space. Critical pedagogy seeks to "challenge the discourse of hierarchy that legitimizes oppression as the natural order", in order to "develop learning content together with the high school students" (Malott, 2012: p. 35). Interns have been committed to the goal of democratizing education, while also struggling to strike a balance between disrupting hierarchy and encouraging "chaos".

Interns' attitudes toward students have tended to be one of respect and desire to take seriously diverse voices and perspectives: "creating a safe zone where no one's opinion is rejected and everyone's story gets to be told". Another describes their struggle as follows:

During our first few lessons, I found myself forming ideals and preconceived thoughts on how the students would react to the lesson. I was surprised to find many had different stories and frameworks than I had originally anticipated. Sometimes simply witnessing these stories is important, while still balancing reflexive and critical perspectives. These stories are often unheard and lay invisible to dominant views and systems. Before judging, let us listen first.

For another, the program not only aspires to democratic education, but achieves this lofty goal at times:

We've begun to introduce a more democratic educational framework. I do believe that we are offering something positive and uplifting, at the same time as we introduce more progressive democratic classroom dynamics, it's

important to remain self-critical and continually evolve and improve our educational style.

One intern's senior thesis describes how the program structure works toward a more democratic education:

Students bounced ideas off each other and appreciated their interconnection in the garden and kitchen groups and their varied ideas. Using small-group discussion to facilitate integration of new and prior knowledges and promote active consideration of new problems and possibilities is central to the project-based learning model and greater peer-sharing of ideas (Warren, 2014: p. 81).

For most, democratic education centers on everyone alternating in their roles as teachers and learners, in valuing different kinds of knowledge.

These educational and social methods of empowerment are both extremely valuable and challenging: I hope to contribute my knowledge to create an environment that improves the lives of the students without devaluing their backgrounds and contributions. All of this while finding common ground and interests with a group that I have begun to see more as peers than students.

Similarly:

I have experienced a style of knowledge sharing that flows in both directions between interns and students. Students are often more knowledgeable around the garden than interns and are quick to inform us about what's growing in a bed or which plants are weeds. Interns come every week excited to learn from the students.

For some, democratic education often came into conflict with providing a constructive learning environment.

I struggle to maintain a balance that facilitates a horizontal structure of information sharing, collaboration, and democratic learning without forgoing the power structure completely—in a high school environment, we need to maintain a somewhat ordered classroom and a legitimate lesson plan. Although structure is important to a certain extent, it is difficult to find a comfortable space that is effective, not oppressive.

This student recognizes the downside of leveling the playing field within the classroom, yet still values and continues to work toward a different type of educational experience. However, even when interns acknowledge their desire to encourage mutual learning and teaching, they often express confusion about the issue of authority and their appropriate role. One intern simply asked: "Like are we their friend, are we their teachers and their mentors?" Another articulates interns' desire to "give the students more control over the program", without "simply making the interns' authority less visible by 'acting like friends'".

For some, the challenge was not one of discipline but rather getting the students themselves to think outside the box and take full advantage of the educational opportunity. One suggested that “What is most challenging about these days is not ‘teaching the kids’, but getting them to realize that the class is their space for creative expression”. Another views the challenge as “encouraging the students to take risks and of creating a space where the students felt respected and listened to”. For one, “more important than any recipe or knife skill, Plant Justice offers opportunities … to grow … to try new things and to step out of their comfort zone is one way… This might be as simple as trying a new food, or it might be as nerve racking as giving a speech at the fundraiser dinner”.

Interns also spanned a broad range from those who felt responsible for controlling the chaos to those who felt more comfortable with a hands-off approach, as with one intern whose “favorite part is the chaos (though we try to keep it controlled chaos). Everyone is always buzzing around with activity and I have to constantly remind myself not to just admire all the great work but to be an active part in it”. Another thought “the chaos is, like a good thing, because … the goal is this collective energy and effort to produce something together”.

Some explicitly viewed Plant Justice as a place to do something different, to disrupt if you will, what was happening during the regular school day. They saw the democratic education goal as specifically counter-hegemonic within the mainstream educational system. The interns recognized the emphasis on discipline that tends to be the norm, especially at an alternative high school. “I think most of the students really enjoyed a break from the typical classroom experience”. But others recognized that the norms pervading the school could tend to work against the desired goals of creating a democratic classroom. “It’s difficult to create this democratic learning environment when the kids spend their day in a very different classroom format”. Indeed, some of the high schoolers, though far from the majority, felt that the Plant Justice classroom was no different from the rest of their school day. One stated that the program was “boring just like all [his] other [classes]”. For him, it was just another part of the school day where he was made to do “stuff [he didn’t] want to be doing”. Another viewed the program as similar to her other classes in terms of structure: “I learn things the same”. In contrast, another said that, “during the week, I always thought about what we were gonna do next”. And another offered, “I like coming to school now because every Wednesday I get to come to Plant Justice”. A third liked that there was “a lot more group work than there is in normal classes. We worked way more as team than in other classes”.

Finally, one intern’s analysis of the program goals centered around the desire to subvert the labeling of the kids within the mainstream educational system as “failures”. Yet the intern also recognized that “without these specific labels, there would be no need for a program that provides flexible credits and new potential educational opportunities to turn students from ‘failures’ into ‘successes’”. Thus, there was virtually no lofty goal of the program that could operate in an edu-

tional vacuum. While this represented a challenge for program assessment, it did imbue the program with a level of thoughtfulness and dynamism that somehow resulted in clearly recognizable benefits. Relationship building was one benefit that while not easily quantifiable was readily recognizable.

3) Relationship-Building as an Explicit Educational Goal

Independent of the content or pedagogy of Plant Justice, relationship building was an explicit goal from the outset of the program. If the education reform literature has achieved a consensus on anything, it is that "...quality teacher/student relationships are at the heart of quality education" (Mills & McGregor, 2014: p. 29). Smyth and Fasoli call for "a fundamental reworking of schools such that they have a focus on a pedagogy of relations" (Mills & McGregor, 2014: p. 29). Others speak of schools facilitating "networks of trust" (Reid, 2009: p. 11) and "restor[ing] the power of relations in schools" (Sidorkin, 2002: p. 80). Also, research on "at-risk" youth highlights the importance teachers' investment of "relational or emotional capital" in their students (Mills & McGregor, 2014: p. 29). Educators are certainly well positioned to "shape learning environments in order to facilitate the wellbeing and achievements of students, including those from the margins of society" (Mills & McGregor, 2014: p. 29). The program not only self-consciously engaged in the development of "relational or emotional capital" between interns and students, there was also a concerted effort to build a sense of community throughout the classroom, operating on the belief that "trying to fix the student in isolation from contextual influences will continue to falter" (Mills & McGregor, 2014: p. 29). One high school student felt so socially isolated prior to joining the program that she admitted she had attempted suicide. She revealed this during her speech at the annual fundraiser dinner, explaining that: "this program literally saved my life because I felt connected to people for the first time".

Interns readily recognized the success of the program with respect to relationship-building. "I cannot stress how much I have gotten out of this internship, building relationships with my fellow interns and the students". "I got even closer to some of the students, which made me feel a mission accomplished. By being there, and collectively but individually working in the garden and kitchen for months, we truly made some of these kids feel PROUD and SUPPORTED". Another recognized the unlikely relationships being formed:

One of the students ... had been ... cautious about opening up ... she often sat quietly in the back of the class. As I sat making guacamole, I started humming the lyrics of "Remix to Ignition". Suddenly, the girl looked up and, for the first time, she smiled at me—"I would never have expected those lyrics to come out of you!" This was the first moment at the internship that I realized how special communities like Plant Justice are. They create a space to form unlikely relationships... We have also had rich and complex conversations about religion, struggles with her family about her sexual orientation, and her career aspirations—I was stunned at how her insights

were changing my world-view.

Several believed that the focal point of food in the program facilitated community building. “The sharing of knowledge (particularly knowledge as necessary, personal, and intimately connected with life as food is) can establish a community of supported individuals who push each other to grow”. Another underscored that

While the food movement is important in and of itself, more importantly it can be used as a vehicle to have conversations about broader social injustices being experienced here and around the world. As much as I have enjoyed learning about who is “setting the table”, I must say that the connections made between interns and students really seems to be the bridging of the gap our society and communities have needed.

Another said the program led “back to one common theme: the formation of relationships and community”.

Plant Justice has also built community both inside the classroom and between the program and community partners. This “bridging capital”, facilitated the transfer of valuable resources like social capital from wealthier more privileged communities to resource-poor communities. The program also explored how this bridging capital leverages social and community capital into political capital. The question, addressed in the final section, is the extent to which successes in these areas have the potential to promote political agency and community organizing around environmental justice issues.

Plant Justice was often understood by participants to be a place where a strong sense of community existed. For one intern, it was “...a collective effort—which is what we are always aiming for in this food-producing project”. Similarly, “the projects in Plant Justice often required multiple people working together, multi-part organization of tasks, and some improvisation, and the fruits of the program members’ labor would be enjoyed together in an intimate way—we would eat our collaborative efforts”. Another came to this realization as “digging trenches at [the high school] to lay down the drip system for the native plant garden ... [informed my] newfound understanding of the power and strength behind grassroots organizing”.

Most often, participants realized the sense of community through the yearly fundraiser dinner when the students, interns and community members worked together. Intern testimonies ranged from “I was amazed to see how the community was brought together” to “students utilized each other and worked together” to “I was honored and surprised by how much was accomplished simply by utilizing what our community had” to “I can still feel the positive energy that ran through the entire event, and I know it will be a day that will highlight my college experience”. What stuck out in one intern’s mind was:

Seeing [Freddie] dance, [Kevin] doing a more professional job waiting

tables than any waiter I have ever had, watching [Janet] talk to [Grace] about elementary school teachers, going into the bathroom and seeing the girls preparing for their speeches, and seeing [Janet's] eyes get a bit watery when their Principal came and told them how proud he was of them after the dinner. It was such a strong display of the strength of community and of humanity in general.

Finally:

The day after the fundraiser dinner, I felt like we had reached a new level with the students, like we had all just went through the wardrobe into Narnia the day before, and now we were back in the real world with a new understanding of one another.

4) Leveraging Social Capital into Political Capital and Student Agency

How can we clear a space for human agency within global food systems, and how can we leverage community garden work to create broader social change? We believe the answers are related: that community gardens and programs like Plant Justice, effectively networked and extended, can be a site for amplifying community agency around issues of food justice and sovereignty. We are interested in investigating how such projects can be leveraged to build political capital at the community level and create actual policy change on a local or regional level. We note that the vast majority of interns highlighted the political nature of the program curriculum as a lynchpin and expressed a desire to increase the political content. We argue that woven spaces (where people of diverse backgrounds come together to learn and work on common concerns) create social capital that can be used to articulate politically effective responses to local, national and global systems of injustice (Wright, 2008).

Leveraging the food justice approach into political capital was not without its challenges. For some interns, the primary focus of the program remained one of cooking, gardening and access to healthier foods for the kids directly involved in the program. “The joys of cooking and growing: the feeling of soft dirt in your fingers and satisfaction in the sweet crunch of chard” were the highlights of the program. Another points out that “eating and making food seems to be something that the students look forward to every class. Oftentimes, they’d walk in the door and immediately ask about what we would be eating?” Yet, even those who defined the program as a food justice program primarily recognized the connection between cooking and gardening on the one hand and larger social justice and equity issues on the other. One intern saw the mission as “provid[ing] the students with healthy food, teach[ing] students about food justice, open[ing] up post-high school opportunities for the students, and incorporate[ing] their outside curriculum with that of the program’s through project-based cooking and gardening learning”. Another saw the goal as “connecting what we’re doing in the garden and kitchen back to broader issues of food justice”.

Most saw the building of political capital explicitly as reaching beyond food access.

Through the avenue of food justice, we are not only becoming critical citizens in terms of the food system, but also learning to use food as an avenue to broader social change... Perhaps some will leave the classroom this semester not only with a new knowledge of food and gardening, but also to use these issues as doorways into larger systemic change.

One expressed this as an aspirational goal:

I would like to see Plant Justice continuing to explore power structures and events in history that significantly shape our present-day. Using participatory approaches to lessons and activities seem to keep the students actively engaged and excited. I think it's important that we emphasize the "Justice" over the "Plant".

Another used curriculum planning as a starting point:

I am excited about making curriculum for the class. We came up with a whole grid that could help us understand structural oppression and resistance manifest at the international and local level in terms of food. There are four boxes and under oppression at the structural level we put in examples like patenting/Monsanto, and under oppression at the local level we talked about access to nutritious food. Then under resistance at the international level we put the Zapatistas, and at the local level we put in the local food movement.

After this lesson, an intern noted "the ways the students connected the metaphorical story to real life examples of injustices and civil disobedience".

Coming back to woven space, as "a different way of understanding contemporary social movements", the Plant Justice classroom emphasizes the power of collective individuals and their ability to resist hegemonic forces (Wright, 2008). The counter-hegemonic content of the curriculum constitutes a key link in the building of political agency that can be leveraged into a politics of change. To that end, the curriculum consistently underscored a broad counter-narrative in its critique of neo-liberal norms.

Interns identified the program as counterhegemonic in part because they saw the garden as a way of opting out of the commodified food system. "Plant Justice as a space where we are reclaiming food sovereignty... It feels empowering to have a community garden, where food is not the possession of one, but is plentiful for all". Another, however, suggested:

...this program really is about more than healthy food... I see it as being about community sovereignty; over our food, our bodies, and our minds. In class, we talked about the confining nature of the term "individual choice", and I think that Plant Justice breaks these confines. We do this in the microcosm of gardening. We create the choice of eating cauliflower pizza with

cauliflower that we grow instead of buying it at Vons. We also make the choice to make our own compost... These are small choices, but their meaning extends far beyond our humble garden. The interns are learning that there is a real way to fight the neoliberal ideology. The students are learning to live outside of those ideas in small ways before the habits are so engrained that it's impossible to think beyond them.

Some of the interns clearly had moved beyond the issues of food to think about social justice more broadly. The following is an excerpt from an intern journal entry that we think demonstrates how deeply political some of the interns have been in their approach. But it also underscores how aspiring to promote political agency and a democratic pedagogy requires continuous rethinking and adapting.

There is something about the Native Garden ... that disturbs me... Is having a Native Garden another form of "playing Indian"?... "The living performance of 'playing Indian' by non-Indian peoples depends upon the physical and psychological removal, even the death, of real Indians"... The plants and food are holders of collective memory. The sages, grasses, etc. in the native garden are someone's cultural ancestors... The plants and land are storied. What does it say to...cultivate a "native" garden without any mention of the original peoples connected to the plants, or the stories held by the landscape and plants? Does that reproduce structures of settler possession of indigenous identities?... So, is cultivating a native garden also performing genocide? I'm not sure. Maybe. I wonder if recognizing the plants and landscape as holders of memory, as storied, might play a role in deconstructing the discourse of property, a key component in decolonization... Would it be easier to try to incorporate those discussions while we prep food and are all around the table?

While this intern offers a powerful counter-hegemonic critique of the program itself, they do also end with a suggestion to discuss over a meal, suggesting that on some level the program has the potential to address systemic oppression through food. The key here is the extent to which the program adapted in order to address problematic issues such as the one highlighted above. For example, the semester after this entry was written, Plant Justice brought in a Native American ethno-botanist to situate the California native plant garden in a larger cultural, political and ecological context. While more could be done, the program remained committed to a reflexive form of education.

To what extent did Plant Justice encourage or cultivate political agency among its participants? This seems to us the key not only to promoting the educational success and empowerment of students, but also to a community that advocates for and organizes around environmental justice issues. Plant Justice has certainly led to a political awareness on the part of some interns:

Before this class, I would sometimes find it difficult to see what areas of my

life were political or politically motivated, but after this class and our internships I am learning that everything can be and if we have taught our students *anything*, I hope it is that they have a voice and that those voices deserve to be heard.

As for the high schoolers, most could easily identify barriers to accessing healthy foods in deeply political terms. One student observed: “We live in a world where everything is a secret”. The following day, one intern reflects:

...these secrets need to be critically examined to understand how invisible groups can be brought to the table. Taking a close critical reflection on this, and how privilege plays a role—takes a balance between acts of witnessing community voices and developing resources and conversations about how to create a diverse and inclusive alternative food movement.

Another intern wrote “...high school students actually have significant political power”, but then suggests “the hardest part is finding tangible outlets for action”. While this does not indicate that Plant Justice cultivated a sense of political agency among the students, it suggests that the interns considered this a program goal.

We would argue that by encouraging students to take their education and even their community’s future into their own hands, the program constituted a tangible benefit that addressed a serious educational gap in a working-class community. One intern noted that “students placed in higher educational tracks are often more able to engage in opportunities for developing critical thinking, analytical capabilities, and public speaking abilities in the classroom. The Plant Justice program explicitly has tried to supplement this lack of opportunities for friendly relationships and critical, analytical communication practices”. Another intern suggested that the garden itself modeled a political strategy that resembled one employed by one of the most successful land reclamation movements in the world:

What we do is a way of reclaiming traditions and our participation in the food system. It’s like a mini version of the MST movement. Sure, the plot of land is very small, but Plant Justice took over some unused land that belonged to the school district to engage with a much larger group of people.

The program more recently made a concerted effort to develop a political action plan to convince the district administrators to stop spraying Monsanto’s Round-up on school grounds. Students researched the health and environmental effects and the role that Monsanto as a company plays worldwide, resulting in a petition. The campaign raised a degree of political awareness at the school and eventually the school board voted to restrict the use of Round-up at all the district schools.

4. Conclusion

Through a number of participant interviews, this article has highlighted the

Plant Justice program's positive impact on the life of individual students, the school and surrounding community. The primary strength of the program, surprisingly, grows out of its greatest challenge, navigating multiple internal tensions. Interviews consistently showed participants grappling with a curriculum that straddled theory and practice, sought to increase access to healthy foods while also focusing on the root causes of that unequal access, provided vocational training (gardening and cooking skills) while also investing in deep intellectual engagement, and helped and connected with individual students while promoting a commitment to community organizing and the building of social and political capital. Overall, we believe this article contributes to a broader understanding of the possibilities and complexities of critical pedagogy in an alternative education setting.

Plant Justice, as it evolved from a food justice program into a multifaceted program with complex goals, aspired to act at the intersection of critical pedagogy, critical ecology, and a reflexive approach food justice. We believe participant reflections underscore some of the major tenets of critical pedagogy, "inaugurating new forms of social, educational, and political relationships". With respect to alternative education, the program suggests that for students from marginalized communities, alternative education can provide viable opportunities "especially if application of critical pedagogy is included in the alternative school's process" (Goodman, 1999: p. 13). According to Bourdieu, "failure to meet the educational and psychological needs of at-risk youth is a form of cultural reproduction" (Bourdieu, 1977: p. 198). Goodman explains that this cultural reproduction tends to "systematically devalue the cultural capital of students who occupy subordinate class positions" (Goodman, 1999: p. 18). Plant Justice remained committed to undermining such "cultural reproduction" both through critical content and the development of meaningful co-learning relationships. The literature confirms that "a close relationship with their teacher is the starting point for educational success" (Kohl, 1994). The program has for the most part rejected "the traditional view of instruction and learning as a neutral process antiseptically removed from the context of history, power, and ideology" and has acknowledged "a need to include race, identity, power, knowledge, ethics, and work into the curriculum" (Goodman, 1999: p. 24, 27; Giroux & McLaren, 1989: xxi). Finally, Plant Justice has aspired not only to make a difference in terms of educational outcomes, but also to affect social reform, believing that "social reform and educational reform go hand in hand" (Anyon, 1997: p. 12).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Alkon, A., & Agyeman, J. (2011). *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

- Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*. New York: Teachers' College Press.
- Anyon, J. (2011). *Marx and Education*. New York: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203829615>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction. In R Arum, & I. R. Beattie (Eds.), *The Structure of Schooling: Readings in the Sociology of Education* (pp. 56-68). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Freire, P. (2006). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Continuum (Original English Translation 1970).
- Giroux, H., & McLaren, P. (1989). *Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Goodman, G. S. (1999). *Alternatives in Education: Critical Pedagogy for Disaffected Youth*. New York: Peter Lang Press.
- Guthman, J. (2011). *Weighing in: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kohl, H. (1994). *I Won't Learn from You and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment*. New York: The New Press.
- Malott, C. (2012). Social Class and Rebellion. In R Kumar, (Ed.), *Education and the Reproduction of Capital: Neoliberal Knowledge and Counterstrategies*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- McLaren, P. T., & Pericles, P. (2005). Communities of Difference. In *Critical Pedagogy in the Age of Neoliberal Globalization* (pp. 69-103). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mills, M., & McGregor, G. (2014). *Re-Engaging Young People in Education: Learning from Alternative Schools*. New York: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315880433>
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1986). *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Reid, C. (2009). Schooling Responses to Youth Crime: Building Emotional Capital. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13, 617-631.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802094756>
- Sidorkin, A. (2002). *Learning Relations*. New York: Peter Lang.
- The Forum for Youth Investment (2004). *From Youth Activities to Youth Action* (Vol. 2, No. 2).
- Warren, J. L. (2014). *Growing Together Separately: An Analysis of the Influence of Individualism in an Alternative Educational Setting*. Senior Thesis.
- Wright, S. (2008). Locating a Politics of Knowledge: Struggles over Intellectual Property in the Philippines. *Australian Geographer*, 39, 409-426.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00049180802419104>
- Zeldin, S., & Price, L. (1995). Creating Supportive Communities for Adolescent Development: Challenges to Scholars. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 10, 6-14.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0743554895101002>