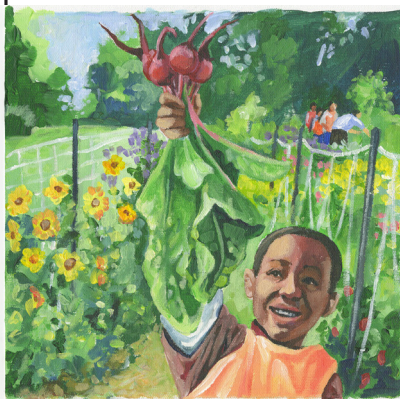


Success Story: Beyond the Plants

Successful Garden-based Education Needs More Than Plants



The anecdotes and stories we collect from educators and students across Wisconsin illustrate time and again that garden-based education provides very real benefits to students: hands-on learning, meaningful physical activity, exposure to a variety of vegetables, pride for the accomplishment of growing food, and so much more.

But even the most beautiful, well-kept youth garden can't be successful if it does not meet the needs of the kids and the community.

Maria Moreno of University of Wisconsin-Madison's Latino Earth Partnership is helping garden and outdoor education programs address this issue. The program works with educators in largely Latino communities, providing professional development in planning outdoor education projects for schools and communities, putting in gardens, and using the Earth Partnership curriculum. Latino Earth Partnership is an extension of the well-established Earth Partnership, which has a strong history of place-based environmental education that focuses on local needs. "Success comes from asking what do you need, what's your interest, what's your focus?" explains Moreno.



Daniel Graves was teaching second and third grade at Escuela Fratney, a dual language school in Milwaukee with an active school garden program, when he participated in and co-taught with the Latino Earth Partnership program.

Graves reflects on his time teaching garden-based education at a bilingual school. "The fact that there isn't a curriculum in Spanish made things much harder," he said. "The challenge is that if you're creating it all from scratch, then that's all you're focusing on. If there are existing materials, you can take them and innovate, you can push the limits of what the kids are capable of – and what you as an educator are capable of."

Graves did find innovative ways to engage students in outdoor education. He connected with a teacher at a Madison dual language school, Nuestro Mundo, and together they created a pen-pal

June 2017

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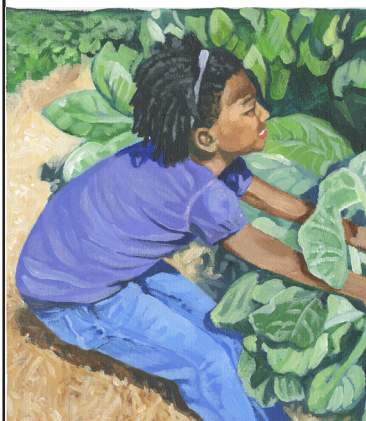
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partnership between their students. The students each chose a spot on the school's grounds to be his or her "special spot" and wrote monthly pen-pal letters in Spanish from there. "A lot of what outdoor education is about," explained Graves, "is feeling connected to something."

While Graves' school has helped students form a relationship to specific places and people, at Escuela Verde in Milwaukee, students are connecting to their environmental and culture through food. The school employs a student-led, project-based model of education, so all classroom lessons are taken by choice.

Escuela Verde does not yet have an established gardening program. Thanks to a recent grant from Whole Foods, they are beginning to establish garden beds. But student advisor Nayla Bezares is mindful that in their school's culture, a garden on the school's grounds needs to come from the students themselves. "Escuela Verde is a project-based school and, as such, a garden building project would be of value added to our community as long as it is initiated and maintained by the students."



Bezares notes that there are other ways to explore some of the connections to food and environment that a garden can facilitate. "We talk about culture through food," she said. Recently, students focused on food culture in countries that are in conflict with the U.S. and countries experiencing internal conflict and cook food from those countries. Students use ingredients that they can find at their local grocery stores and simple recipes that don't require special equipment. "Many of the foods, like Palestinian food, use spices that the students are unfamiliar with. They can take home leftovers and share them with their families while talking about what they learned."

And she offers reason why complementing garden-based education with other food-based learning can be powerful. "For many of us living in the city, gardening is not a tool or skill we can bring home and use as a means for better food choices. Thus, we lean towards offering activities that provide our students skills they can translate into actions in their home settings."

Bezares hopes to expand the cultural cooking lessons to her students' own cultures and experiences. "We

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haven't had parents in our kitchen just yet but we're interested in doing that," she says. "We're looking for ways to have a group of grandmas come to the school and spend time cooking with them and learning culturally relevant recipes."

Tatiana Maida of the Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers in Milwaukee also has experience working with communities to build programs that will work for them. Two years ago, she started the Healthy Latino School Initiative, which focuses on nutrition and culinary arts education for parents and students, as well as establishing and enhancing garden-based education programs.

Maida has already found significant barriers to establishing lasting and sustainable garden programs at the schools in her area. "Unless there's a teacher who is excited about gardening," she notes, "it's hard to get started. And not everyone has much experience with gardens."

Like Graves, Maida has also seen firsthand that a lack of comprehensive materials in Spanish can be limiting. "When I search for materials to share, they're all in English. Or they're in Spanish but the translation is poor. Or they are translated into Spanish but they are not culturally compatible with the Latino population in our area. That's a turn-off and people in the community know that it's not meant for them."



But language isn't the only cultural barrier. "It can be hard to know what some communities want... Sometimes people might say yes when you offer something such as gardening options, but later do not show up to the programs. That is why it is really important to truly engage with communities and find out what they really want and need, even if that might not be what we, as organizations, would have planned."

Despite these barriers, Maida is forging ahead. She is hopeful that school garden projects can be a way to engage children in something that was, in many cases, part of their parents' culture. "Parents recognize the joy of gardening from the gardens they had at their homes in Mexico," Maida explains. And she has a larger agenda. "I think it is important for...Latino youth to see agriculture as a profitable career. We need to see more diversity in this area if we want to move forward as a society."

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