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Jason Mandala

Honors Thesis

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**Community Cultivation: Understanding the Value of the Partnership between Garden City
Harvest and Missoula County Public Schools**

Introduction

Farm to table, or even farm to fork, both phrases I had heard before Missoula. What seemed to be only an easy buzz phrase, “farm to…” became a part of my daily language as I integrated myself into the Missoula farming scene. At Garden City Harvest (GCH), a local farming nonprofit in Missoula, Montana established in 1996, we have a whole team claimed by my currently most familiar form of this term, Farm to School. GCH is known for its four neighborhood farms serving the community through CSAs, 11 community garden locations, and lots of community workshops and events. The Farm to School program has a wonderful team of dedicated folks which I was a part of for the past two years. We provide agricultural education to all nine Missoula County Public Elementary Schools (MCPS) in multiple ways but with a focus on three specific programs. GCH sponsors and helps operate eight MCPS elementary school gardens which staff maintain throughout the year. These gardens provide students and their families with produce as well as a space to use as an outdoor classroom. GCH staff plan and teach garden lessons on planting, composting, and putting the garden to bed, with students of all ages for spring and fall. In addition, another program offered is Farmer in the Classroom, where school garden managers visit second-grade classrooms once a month November-April teaching students about an aspect of Montana agriculture. Topics range from apples and honey to wheat

and cows. Finally, every second grader at an MCPS school attends two field trips up to the PEAS Farm, in both the fall and spring. During these field trips, students taste and even harvest some of their own fruits and vegetables. These field trips are insightful for both students and chaperones, showing them where their food comes from including livestock.

Background

Although our work now happens throughout Missoula's public education system, the Farm to School program in Missoula hasn't always been this expansive. A small glimpse of today's programming first began in 2005 with the first structured PEAS Farm fall field trips led by University of Montana students and an Environmental Studies graduate student. Initially, Missoula's 'Farm to School' scene was organized by the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition which hosted an Americorps Vista position that partnered with GCH's Community Education Program. Soon after, GCH offered a summer camp at the PEAS Farm which morphed and grew to become Little PEAS Summer Camps. Throughout the beginning of 'Farm to School' in Missoula, there were many shifts in employment, staff roles, leadership, and organizational guidance, making the formation of a substantial program difficult. In 2008, students in the PEAS Farm practicum class continued leading fall field trips with the addition of spring field trips led by GCH staff. This year also celebrated a big milestone as the first MCPS school garden was built in partnership with GCH at Willard Alternative High School. Although it no longer exists, it marked the beginning of school gardens in Missoula, which is one of the biggest components of the current Farm to School programming.

Elementary school gardens started being built in 2009 with Lowell Elementary School, all the way to the most recent garden built in 2022 at Russell Elementary School. In 2011 the Farmer in the Classroom program was piloted, and GCH officially changed the program name

from Community Education to Farm to School. Moving forward, more school gardens were built and GCH gradually built a more structured team to support this program. Another crucial aspect of this timeline occurred in 2014 when the PEAS Farm, located in the Upper Rattlesnake neighborhood, secured a 40-year lease from the school district to rent the 10-acre plot for only \$1 a year. This generous deal was created largely due to the growing support and initiatives that the GCH Farm to School program provided to the school district.

Fortunately, Missoula is one of many cities providing this type of programming. According to the National Farm to School Network, a Farm to School program consists of at least one of three parts: procurement of local foods for schools, a school garden, and relevant nutritional or food educational activities (National Farm to School Network 2021). Using these standards and data from the USDA Farm to School census for the 2018-2019 school year, the NFSN cites that 65% of U.S. schools partake in a Farm to School program (National Farm to School Network, 2021). While these programs can look drastically different from school to school and district to district, there is still a shared goal of educating and inspiring children using a hands-on approach to get involved with their own food systems and understand the value that local produce provides.

MCPS and the greater Missoula community are at an advantage with the Farm to School programming offered. As a Farm to School educator myself, I see firsthand the impact this work has on children and their families. During farm field trips, children see vegetables in a whole new light, leaving parents and teachers alike amazed at their interest in something typically refused at home or in school cafeterias. Our team also receives plenty of positive feedback from classroom teachers, expressing their gratitude for the knowledge shared, and the opportunity to teach in a peaceful outdoor setting.

To gain fully comprehensive feedback on our work it's important to hear perspectives from all members of the educational system. Up to this point, GCH has gained limited formal feedback on our programming from a principal's unique perspective. In my research, I aim to shed light on this component and gain greater insight into the impact of GCH's Farm to School programming.

The role of the administrator is to have a broad overview of all things going on within their school, and because of this, their perspective is critical to understanding our impact. While teachers provide valuable feedback, it is limited to their classroom or grade level. By focusing on the principal perspective, I aimed to understand the scope of our work with a more holistic and broad view.

Research Methods

Once I decided to focus my research on administrators, specifically principals, I was left with nine elementary school principals. Right away I decided to exclude Lewis and Clark Elementary School from the potential sample population as they are the one school without a school garden, leaving me with eight schools to pick from. To remove potential bias based on previous interactions between GCH staff and principals, whether positive or negative, I used a random selector tool online. I entered the remaining eight schools and the tool randomly selected 4 schools: Lowell Elementary School, Paxson Elementary School, Franklin Elementary School, and Hawthorne Elementary School. From there I reached out to the four principals individually by email asking to meet in person for a brief interview to discuss the partnership between GCH and their school.

When it came time to develop my script for the interviews, I separated questions into a few different categories based on theme. The four categories are a general overview, identifying

value, program improvement, and lastly school nutrition and education. I chose these categories because I wanted the principals to start by explaining the depth of their understanding of the programming we do, and for me to help fill in any gaps. The second category of identifying values of the programming addresses the core theme within my research while breaking it down into individual programs. Next, as part of any program of quality, assessing your weaknesses, and areas of improvement, is essential, and felt like an important component to bring up in these interviews. To round out the interviews I wanted to ask a couple of more broad-scope questions about nutrition and food education, within each school.

For further context before diving into the interviews themselves, I think it's important to have some basic background information on these schools and the principal's involvement. Starting with Franklin Elementary, located in the Franklin to Fort neighborhood, their school garden was first built in 2013, and later reconstructed and re-installed in 2018. The current principal Greg Harrison has been in his position for the past two years. Paxson Elementary School is located in the University District, and its school garden was first built in 2011. Similar to Franklin the garden was later deconstructed and re-installed in 2018. Paxson's current principal, Julie Robitaille, has been an administrator there for three years. Lowell Elementary School located in the Westside Neighborhood, had its school garden built in 2009 as the first MCPS elementary school garden, and again like Franklin and Paxson, was reconstructed and officially reinstalled in 2018. Rae Cooper, the principal, has been at Lowell for two years. Lastly, Hawthorne Elementary School residing in the Two Rivers Neighborhood had its school garden built in 2014. The principal, Brittnie Keillman has been working at Hawthorne for two years.

Analysis

To help ease into the interview and start with a common baseline understanding, I asked the principals if they felt like they had a good understanding of Farm to School programming (see Appendix I). Most principals did, and if not, this was when they expressed that they were new, or hadn't been able to participate in the programming as much as they would've liked. I helped provide missing information and gave each of them a briefing on my role at GCH and my project at hand.

For the second category of identifying value, I asked the principals about the value of three of our programs individually. First, we discussed the value of having a school garden and garden lessons (See Appendix I). Principal Julie Robitaille described the school garden lessons as authentic and place-based learning (Robitaille 2023). Place-based education is a huge part of the mission of Farm to School, as it helps students bridge the separation between their lives in and outside of school (Smith, pg. 213). Other principals noted that the garden was a space for students to see how food is grown and understand the work that goes into it, further helping them develop a sense of connection to their community through food. Principal Rae Cooper described the gardens as a place that “allows students that may not have that gardening space at their home to be able to experience growing vegetables or learning about them” (Cooper 2023). School Garden Managers encourage students to take ownership of their gardens in many different ways, such as adopting the garden for a week in the summer.

Students should know and feel as though this is their garden and a place where they belong. Principal Cooper described a peaceful moment she encountered in the garden; “I walked out one day and a third-grade class had just harvested some kale, and they were all munching on a kale snack while their teacher was reading a book aloud” (Cooper 2023). Similarly, other

principals described the garden as a place for all subjects to host class in an outdoor setting. As an apprentice, I remember finding a math worksheet left over in the Lowell Elementary School garden that asked students to measure and do calculations using the garden beds. These school gardens provide a space for students to go during recess, for quiet reading time, and any number of academic subjects including math, art, science, and so many more. It wouldn't be fair to talk about the garden's impact on a school community without mentioning the benefits for staff as well. Cooper described the garden as a sanctuary for staff and students (Cooper 2023), as it's a peaceful place to enjoy lunch.

Next, I asked principals what they thought the value of the PEAS Farm field trips was (see Appendix I). Notably, three out of four principals mentioned the value for children to see a real-life farm in Missoula. As Robitaille put it, students get an “Awareness of what is in our city” and what it has to offer, giving the children an opportunity to find a “connection to place” (Robitaille 2023). Similarly, Hawthorne Principal Brittanie Keillman described the PEAS Farm as a place where “Kids get to see what’s going on in Missoula right now” (Keillman 2023). As part of the field trips, students sample a multitude of vegetables and fruits, all depending on the season, and at some points even get to harvest their own sample such as a carrot or a tomato. Principal Cooper brought up the idea of exposure, and helping kids truly understand through examples where their food comes from (Cooper 2023), down to the point of seeing the carrot come out of the ground, or the apple being picked off the tree. Furthermore, Cooper explained that the PEAS Farm provides exposure to things kids don't see in their everyday lives (), such as feeding the pigs, seeing the neighbor's horses, or petting a chicken. On occasion, children get a glimpse of wildlife, like the bear in the apple tree across the street, or up above like the hawk with a fish freshly caught from the creek. The PEAS Farm also helps children contextualize the

difference in the amount of space needed to grow food for many more people, understanding that their school garden is just a glimpse of all of the many crops that can be grown here in Montana.

To wrap up the category of identifying value, I asked principals about the Farmer in the Classroom program (see Appendix I). Paxson principal Julie Robitaille described the value to her school community by saying, “I love that it’s seasonal and targeted to a specific grade level” & “a very developmentally appropriate time” (Robitaille 2023). For this program, three out of four principals mentioned the value of having the students learn from an expert. As principal Greg Harrison described “Anytime you’re able to put a face to a name, a face to a project, it brings a lot of power” (Harrison 2023). The Farmer in the Classroom program is the perfect opportunity for students to develop a connection with their farmer and that consistency from this program helps increase engagement with subsequent programming. Lastly, to sum up the Farmer in the Classroom program, principal Brittne Keillman put it best; “It’s the glue that ties it all together” (Keillman 2023).

The following category of program improvement focused firstly on me asking principals what they would like to see improved with the existing programming (see Appendix I). As mentioned previously GCH manages eight school gardens with only one MCPS elementary school without a garden. Principal Robitaille brought up the point of equity and suggested that all elementary schools should have a school garden. While Lewis and Clark Elementary School does not have a vegetable garden, they do have another sort of outdoor classroom/ nature play space. However, Lewis and Clark Elementary School still receives and participates in all the other farm to school programming. Another point Robitaille brought up is the sort of lull that summer brings, and she wanted to advocate for more family involvement in the gardens during the summer. Throughout our eight schools involvement varies greatly, and this is something the

GCH Farm to School Team is aware of, and are currently working to restructure summer programs to help this issue.

Beyond these recommendations, two principals used this time to share their gratitude for the programming. Principal Cooper at Lowell Elementary said “Anytime you can get kids excited about it (harvesting vegetables/specifically carrots) I think your program is doing something right” (Cooper 2023). Speaking from personal experience, the excitement children display is contagious and much appreciated by the farmers and teachers alike. Similarly, Principal Harrison commented on the community aspect saying, “I’ve been so impressed with the program and just the willingness to be part of it and to be part of the community. Honestly it’s been remarkable” (Harrison 2023). Part of what makes a partnership work so well is having great communication and appreciative partners who acknowledge the efforts from both sides.

Along with this theme, I next asked the principals what barriers exist that may limit this kind of partnership (see Appendix I). All four of the principals brought up money as a barrier and sometimes limiting factor for this partnership. GCH pays for staff to maintain gardens, plan and teach lessons, guide field trips, deliver materials for projects, and bus to and fro the farm. Other materials, such as tools and materials for the garden (excluding seeds and starts), are paid for by each school's school garden committee. While discussing funding, principal Robitaille brought up the lease that GCH has from MCPS for the PEAS Farm, but besides this agreement, GCH Farm to School services are offered for free. The other common answer to this question was that time is a limited resource. Especially in Montana when our growing season is so short, and doesn't align well with when students are in school, it can be challenging to have the programming and partnership reach its maximum potential.

Lastly, I wrapped up the interviews by asking principals broadly about school nutrition and education and started by asking if they think their students get enough nutrition/food education (see Appendix I). In response, three out of four principals said their schools aren't necessarily receiving enough nutrition education. In addition, the question of what is enough came up twice. For Hawthorne Elementary Principal Keillman believes their school is receiving enough through a couple of different programs, but says she's always open to more opportunities (Keillman 2023). On the other hand, at schools like Lowell Elementary where 70% of the school population qualifies for free and reduced lunch, Principal Cooper expressed her concerns are more focused on making sure her students even eat at all (Cooper 2023). At Paxson Elementary Principal Robitaille says that the responsibilities "fall to the classroom teacher, which is virtually impossible to fit one more thing in their day" (). Lowell, Paxson, and Franklin principals all mentioned their relationship with the Missoula Food Bank which provides empower packs, bags of food to take home, for families at these schools. Regardless of efforts from the administration level, there will always be disparities between schools throughout a city, but it remains clear that these principals continue to care and advocate for the health and well-being of their students.

The last question I asked the principals was if there was anything about school lunch/breakfast that they would change (see Appendix I). All four principals said they want more locally sourced fresh food options for students. Principal Keillman brought up the fact that the food provided coming from the district's central kitchen is simply being heated up, not actually cooked on site. Having only a reheating facility makes it difficult for the schools to use fresh local produce and incorporate it into meals. Another perspective that came from Principal Cooper was similar to her previous nutrition education answers in that her first priority is students eating, "I would rather them eat a muffin with chocolate chips than go hungry" (Cooper

2023). Most of the principals mentioned a desire for less pre-packaged, processed, and sugary foods. Changing school lunches feels like a daunting project to most, but rather it's something that should constantly be evolving for the benefit of the students.

Discussion

Throughout my time interviewing the principals, analyzing their responses, and synthesizing all these components, it became clear to me that there are three recurring themes. I analyzed common phrases used in the interviews and compiled that tallied list to create these themes.

First, place-based education is a big part of teaching in an outdoor setting, whether it's at the school garden or up at the PEAS Farm, this work helps root students in Missoula. Place-based education is rooted in real-world experiences. Opportunities like being in a school garden or up at the Peas Farm allow “the community to become both a setting for learning and a source of learning” (Smith, pg. 215). These connections also help foster a sense of environmental stewardship for the students. Second, exposure is a key recurring theme. At this developmental stage, exposure is everything, and thus a big part of why we always encourage children to at least try each vegetable or fruit we offer. In addition, not every child has a parent or guardian with a green thumb or access to outdoor gardening spaces. Being able to make those things accessible at school, as well as having access to an expert to help guide students is crucial. Finally, community connection is the reason for all of this work. It's exciting for students when they come to the farm and see their same classroom farm educator there, ready to lead a field trip. Or when they visit their school garden in the summer and are met by the same farmer. It helps build confidence in children in knowing that these are spaces outside of school where they can feel safe to connect with peers and other guiding adults.

Conclusion

The value of this partnership is exponentially great, not only to the students of MCPS but to the Missoula community as a whole. The value, expressed by principals, of our three main programs shows the individuality of each and the crucial role they play in the development of these children. Even more importantly, I learned through these interviews that the farm to school programming is utilized and interpreted differently from school to school, and classroom to classroom. These schools have different neighborhood incomes, and this factor can vastly affect the priorities of both classroom and farm educators in their work. Despite these factors, we still bring the same material and quality of education, so that all Missoula students get access to these services.

Truthfully, not all of these students will grow up to be gardeners, but maybe they'll remember the first time they tried kale and then proceeded to ask for 5 more helpings, or perhaps the time they learned the importance of pollinators. These small moments have the potential to affect their future food choices. Regardless, we have made an impact. Garden City Harvest has developed a very comprehensive and all-encompassing Farm to School program that serves the community wholeheartedly. Although Missoula is not the biggest city, this partnership is a fabulous example of integrating agriculture into urban settings and one that leaves a format bound to be repeated elsewhere.

As a college student coming from Chicago with little to no agricultural education, the knowledge I've gained at the PEAS Farm has forever changed me and continues to impact my daily choices. From personal growth and experience, I know how food brings folks together, and is a place where we can all agree. One of my favorite parts of leading 70 field trips at the PEAS

Farm is seeing young babies, and old grandparents alike enjoying the space and the bounty it offers.

Often I've wondered how we raise a generation to desire farm to table or to even care about where their food comes from at all. Through the work of Farm to School programs like this one we may see that desire grow.

Appendix I Interview Questions

General Overview

-Do you feel like you have a good understanding of the partnership between Garden City Harvest your school and MCPS as a whole?

Identifying Value

-Dive into three parts individually

-What do you think the value of your school garden and garden lessons are to your school?

-What do you think the value of the PEAS Farm field trips are to your school?

-What do you think the value of the Farmer in the Classroom program is to your school?

Program Improvement

-What would you like to see improved or enhanced about the existing programming?

-What barriers exist that may limit this kind of educational partnership?

School Nutrition and Education

-Do you feel like your students get enough nutrition/ food education? If not, why not?

-If there was anything you could change about food and nutrition education and school lunches/ breakfasts what would you change?

Works Cited

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