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Growing Youth Food Citizens

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Growing Youth Food Citizens

Abstract

How can youth be educated and empowered to become responsible food citizens? Evidence from a university-community partnership with youth in Michigan is presented to illuminate participatory approaches to youth engagement in food systems. We found that youth have valuable knowledge to enhance our understanding of food environments. At the same time, obstacles such as an ethos of individualism may stand in the way of youth seeing themselves as food citizens capable of improving their food environment. Cultivating youth food citizens must take into consideration youths' particular knowledge, while also helping them uncover their social responsibilities.

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Introduction

Interests and activity devoted to democratizing the U.S. agriculture and food (agrifood) system is growing (Hassanein, 2003; Wright & Middendorf, 2008). Youth can play a critical role in the democratization of the food system, as demonstrated by previous scholarship in the *Journal of Extension* (Voluntad, Dawson, & Corp, 2004). However, they need education to understand the complexity of the food system and its organization in local communities (Harmon & Maretzki, 2006) if they are to grow into responsible food citizens.

Rationale

Food citizenship is "the practice of engaging in food-related behaviors that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system" (Wilkins, 2004: 269). It is not only about food tastes and preferences, but a set of rights as well as responsibilities (DeLind, 2002; Lockie, 2009). Food citizenship should instill a sense of belonging and participation, moving individuals from the role of passive consumer to active citizen.

Youth are the most important target for food system education and action (Bissonnette & Contento, 2001) because adolescence is where humans begin to form their belief systems. Youth also have a

"unique concern for ecological integrity and food security, as they will inherit the systemic problems of environmental degradation and food insecurity" (Botelha, 1999: 233). Yet still needed are efforts to help youth "develop schemata on which to build more complex understandings required for democratic reform of the agrifood system" (Hess & Trexler, 2011:60).

The challenge becomes *how* to help youth understand the complexity of the food system and develop the skills to assume rights and responsibilities to food and their community. This was our objective. Committed to using participatory action research (PAR), we designed a research/engagement protocol that would allow educators and youth to co-construct a food system curriculum (Reason, 1994).

Program

First we identified a community with a vibrant organization working with low-income youth. We refer to this community as "Riverton" (a pseudonym). We developed a food system curriculum and presented it to nine Riverton youth, aged 13-16, who were paid \$100 for their participation. Payment of research subjects is typical protocol for many funded initiatives. Youth were recruited as research assistants, stressing they would be collecting data to learn more about the Riverton food system. Parents/guardians granted participation permission by signing consent forms. The curriculum was presented to the youth over 2 1/2 months, meeting at the community center.

We launched the curriculum introducing youth to the concepts of community food security, food environments, and food desserts through presentations, visuals, and hands-on activities. We used the Inquiring Minds List (adapted from Wilkins & Eames-Sheavly, 2003) to describe the different nodes in the food system, including growing, processing, packaging, retailing, and consuming.

Thematic GIS maps of Riverton, which included ethnic composition, home ownership, and retail food outlets, were used to introduce food disparities. We instructed the youth on how to create maps using Google Maps and had them identify the retail food outlets in Riverton. Later, we used this map as we surveyed each store.

Next, the youth surveyed adult friends and family to identify the top 11 fresh produce items routinely purchased. We used these 11 items to create The Fresh Produce Survey and collected data on the availability and cost of these foods at each of the 19 area supermarkets and convenience stores. In addition, a list of questions was developed to guide our data collection:

1. What is the quality of the food?
2. Is it easy to get to the store by walking, car, bus?
3. How does the surrounding area look? Is it safe, on a busy street, in a commercial or residential area?

To this list the youth added:

1. Is the store clean?

2. Where is the food located within the store?
3. Is the food well stocked?
4. What types of products does the store advertise?

The group split into two, each led by a university facilitator, to survey each store. Upon completion, facilitators compiled the data and created displays for the youth to analyze. We employed concept mapping and a sticky wall exercise (Rees, 2005) for organizing data and drawing conclusions. From this, youth created displays to summarize findings and present to the community.

Budding Food Citizens

Youth showed enthusiasm about food system issues and responded by asking stimulating questions. Many of their contributions eluded facilitators, but turned out to be valuable, such as when the youth taught facilitators that those having the longest travel to food were those in low-resource communities. Also important to youth were variables related to the aesthetics and environment of retail stores. Youth recounted strategies for avoiding some markets because "men hang out there" (making them fearful) or where they had to bypass alcohol aisles to access food. They also described what appealed to or offended them, such as the physical appearance of a store or if it "smelled bad" and "had leaking trash" by the entrance. Quality was also a concern; they quickly pointed out when produce looked "nasty," rotten, or moldy. They also documented instances where produce was "well stocked." In short, image mattered to these youth, but these variables were overlooked by facilitators. This suggests that youth have valuable knowledge critical to understanding how to construct an environment conducive to responsible food citizenship.

Challenges

Preventing the development of youth as food citizens was the lingering effect of individualism. Youth continually attributed personal eating habits and the food environment to issues of personal choice. They had difficulty seeing correlations between diet-related health disparities, differences in food cost and availability, and differences in the local environment that might shape life chances. Our experience with the lack of civic responsibility among youth aligns with other studies that demonstrate declining levels of civic participation (Galston, 2003). Such perceptions may be due to an over-emphasis in civic curricula on freedoms and rights to the exclusion of social obligations (Avery & Simmons, 2001). To replicate this work, consider enhancing a sense of community responsibility by taking the following steps:

- Ask youth to interview elders to inquire about food access strategies historically.
- Develop an initiative in another county/state to compare food environments. Facilitate interaction by Skype.
- Allow youth to probe their values and consider in what kind of society they want to live in a lesson on citizenship and ethics.

- Ask youth to access food for a day like individuals different from themselves.

Conclusion

Youth understand the importance of food systems and bring considerable knowledge to the study of food environments. There remains room for developing a sense of social responsibility to exercise food citizenship. Educating youth about the structure of their food environment must be accompanied by efforts to build citizenship skills.

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