

# Creating a Food-centred Curriculum that Promotes Activism: Lessons from the Field

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## Responses

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## Introduction

Good food. We can't seem to get enough of it and we can't stop talking about it. From the obesity epidemic to unsustainable growing methods and high prices that keep healthy food out of the hands of the poor, the list of problems seems endless. Awareness of how these problems intersect has increased dramatically in the past decade, thanks to authors Michael Pollan and his 'The Omnivores Dilemma,' Raj Patel's 'Stuffed and Starved' and chefs like Jamie Oliver — whose school dinner series on television helped awaken a desire to learn how good food can revitalize our health and ensure a sustainable future for our children. In addition to individuals who put the cause of good food front and centre, many organizations work to address food insecurity issues. Among them, The Stop Community Food Centre, located in Toronto's west end, uses food as a tool to help build community and health, challenge poverty and fight hunger. From planting and growing, to cooking, sharing and advocating, The Stop uses its activities to promote the view that food should be a basic human right.

## The Stop, and Education

I came to *The Stop* after working for a number of organizations that focused on environmental and human rights education. My main drive has always been to ignite passion in others about critical environmental issues in a way that can keep learners engaged and ready to take a lead. Myself and other educators at The Stop who are trained as chefs, social workers, urban growers, and advocates have come together to work in the neighbourhood of Davenport West – and reasons for working here are many. A large percentage of community members have low-paying jobs, are unemployed or live on government assistance. For example, the median after-rent income per person per day for participants in our program is \$5.80 and 73% of participants report not having enough money to properly feed their family after paying for housing (The Stop, 2009). Although The Stop's food bank provides a necessary and valuable service in the community, we strongly believe that food banks are merely a band-aid solution, as they fail to challenge the structural causes of hunger. Advocating for adequate social assistance, a livable minimum wage, and increased job security would do a lot to help fight hunger, but achieving these goals takes community resources and open discussion to transform people's support into action.

At The Stop one of the many programs I lead is the Sustainable Food Systems Education Program for grade five students. When it comes to encouraging people to participate or take the lead on issues that affect their community, children are often excluded. Schools generally do not provide an avenue for encouraging activism - teachers are busy meeting curriculum demands that focus on getting students to function within established guidelines set by the board. When teachers do get their students to take action, they often

involve them in simple ‘feel good’ activities like donating food to charity instead of encouraging the type of critical thinking that can lead to the reorganization of society along more equitable lines.

The education program introduces children to food – healthy, sustainably grown food that is accessible to all – as a tool they can use to organize and build a healthy community. The program provides hands-on food related activities through 5 workshop sessions throughout the school year while directly supporting the learning goals of the Ontario curriculum. The general goals of the program are: 1. teaching children where their food comes from; 2. creating a positive experience around growing and eating healthy food; 3. exploring how our well-being is interconnected with the health of our community and nature; and 4. empowering kids to become active agents of social change.

Designing and facilitating a food security program for fifth graders, especially one that intersects justice, political economy, environmental sustainability and health can seem daunting when you only have a short amount of time to get the lesson across. My training, like many other educators who work in neighbourhood and community centres, was not achieved though years spent teaching in a classroom and following ministry dictated guidelines. I often draw from my own experience as a failing student during my formative years before I began to succeed at university. Realizing that ‘how’ I was taught was the problem, I’ve taken great pains to understand the how of communicating and engaging children in a classroom. Feedback from teachers about the program has been overwhelmingly positive, which shows that not all effective educators need to be certified teachers – diverse experiences, knowledges and perspectives, coupled with some educational theory can complement the type of educational experience that children receive in the classroom.

<b>Housing - One bedroom</b>	<b>\$1,000 p/m</b>	<b>Food</b>	<b>\$250 p/m</b>
 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Close to supermarket, stores, restaurants &amp; TTC</li> <li>•Building is 15 years old</li> <li>•Some space for guests, decent kitchen</li> <li>•Laundry room downstairs</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groceries and fresh food</li> <li>•Need time to cook meals at home</li> <li>•Eat out at couple fast food places</li> </ul>
	 		
<b>Housing - Bachelor</b>	<b>\$750 p/m</b>	<b>Food</b>	<b>\$150 p/m</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Some groceries, limited fresh food</li> <li>•Need time to cook all meals at home</li> <li>•You go hungry often</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Fairly close to supermarket, fast food restaurants &amp; TTC</li> <li>•Building is 80 years old</li> <li>•Occasionally have to deal with mice and cockroaches</li> <li>•Laundromat two blocks away</li> </ul>			

Figure 1: *The Game of Real Life*: Two (of 5) Options for Housing and Food.

The program took a year to develop, often trying and retrying activities while consulting with the children on what they liked the most. We used the theme ‘Good Food For All Forever’ to connect food with justice and sustainability in every unit and activity. Throughout the program, students explore the steps involved in getting food from field to table, examine sustainable and industrial methods of food production, cook a meal together inspired by First Nations stories, share their own food traditions, investigate the process of composting from start to finish, plant seeds and harvest greenhouse produce to make healthy snacks.

Out of all the activities in the program, the most contentious and thought provoking is called ‘The Game of Real Life.’ The goal of this game is to help children understand decisions people are faced with when they live in poverty and whether charitable programs offer tangible solutions.

Before my volunteer team and I start, we establish the fact that poverty exists in Toronto – 51.6% of lone-parent families in the city live in poverty and one in five two-parent families live in poverty (UW, 2008). We briefly ask them to think about why poverty exists and we encourage any type of answer. Often we hear “people are poor because they don’t have a job.” But, just as often, the children mention reasons like “poor people don’t work hard enough,” “poor people are lazy,” and “poor people don’t know how to manage their money,” etc.

After writing down their thoughts on why people are poor, the children are placed in small groups and each group represents one of the following characters: a) lost their job and is on social assistance of \$580<sup>1</sup> per month, b) has a permanent disability, is unable to work, and is on social assistance of \$1,040; and c) has a full time job earning a minimum wage and takes home \$1170<sup>2</sup> per month after taxes. Each team receives monopoly money, a spending sheet and a calculator to keep track of their spending and the children are instructed to visit five tables where they will find their basic needs. Figure 1 illustrates two of five options for housing and food<sup>3</sup>. We discuss what people’s basic needs are – food, shelter, clothing, transportation – and we also talk about why it may be important to have access to news sources, a telephone and internet when you live in a large metropolitan city like Toronto. The tables displaying the basic needs have a range of options they can choose to purchase – the cheapest item generally offers the least desirable choice and the most expensive offers the preferred choice.

When the game starts, debating among team members always ensues. “We can’t afford \$350 of food, we still have to get housing!” or “A monthly transit pass would be ideal but we can only afford 20 [transit] tokens for \$60,” or “We want the one bedroom apartment with the gym and pool but we can only afford to live in a rooming house for \$250 per month.” Some team members are attracted by frills like a new car only to have their team mates crush their dreams when they are reminded that they only have \$580 per month and cannot afford to spend \$1200 on transportation!

Within the space of 10-15 minutes the children are forced to make a lot of decisions based on real life figures. In the end, each group does a presentation about their experiences — and other facilitators and I ask additional questions, such as: How much food do you need to be healthy? What kind of living conditions do you need to prepare good food? If you are looking for work, do you need a personal phone with voice mail so employers can reach you? If you have a disability, can you live in the same type of housing as an able-bodied person? While some kids disagree with each other’s spending decisions, many notice that what the government has set for them as “adequate social assistance” is far from it. The groups on government assistance have to choose between adequate housing or healthy food, or decide to get the worst option in every category. Even the group on minimum wage, which is able to cover basic needs at an

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<sup>1</sup> Social assistance (welfare) for a single person in Ontario is \$585 and for a single person with a disability \$1,042. (ISAC, 2009). These rates are simplified in the game to make the math easier for children to play.

<sup>2</sup> \$1170 full-time monthly wage is based on \$9.50 per hour. The minimum wage in Ontario was increased to \$10.25 as of March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> These options are imaginary but based on the real life experiences of staff, volunteers and community members.

acceptable level, cannot afford to set aside money for savings in case they cannot work in the future. We ask the children what would happen if the person earning minimum wage got sick, or had a child? The children tend to shake their heads knowing they would not be able to make it without additional income or a partner to support them. The children talk about how choosing between healthy food and shelter makes no sense when one is looking for work. Looking for a job is hard enough, adding hunger and a substandard quality of life would make it even harder.

After their presentations, we go back to what they said in the beginning about the causes of poverty. I ask: "Is poverty a sign of laziness or lack of financial management?" "How do government welfare programs have the potential to prevent a person from getting a decent quality of life on their own terms?" After learning first-hand the amount of money it takes to live with health in Toronto, the children are clearer about the fact that \$580 is definitely not enough when a small bachelor apartment is going for \$700. For a person with a disability, \$1,042 per month cannot cover all potential costs associated with special needs. While persons on these programs may manage to exist, they certainly are not given the chance to live with dignity and respect.

Following this discussion, we do other activities where the children learn more about how charitable activities operate in the context of poverty: food banks only give a few days worth of food for the month, drop-in meals require money for transportation and time for people to get them, etc. The students identify with these solutions because they have been heavily encouraged to support them in the past. But, we juxtapose these solutions against others like advocating for a change in social welfare and minimum wage by engaging those with the power to do something about it or teaching people how to cook and grow food. The children understand that the latter are much more difficult to implement but would go much farther at beginning to solve the problems of poverty and hunger.

At the end of the school year, when the children were asked to evaluate their experiences during the program, the 'Game of Real Life' placed at the top of the list of most memorable activities. While they raved about the hands-on cooking and greenhouse activities, the children talked about how getting the freedom to spend money while negotiating with others to make important decisions made them feel grown up and gave them information they would otherwise not have access to at home or school.

## **Lessons Learned**

1. Children like to be given the opportunity to lead, to make decisions and to negotiate what direction they would like to pursue. Being entrusted with handling real life situations (even if it is just through make believe) can make children feel empowered and energized to learn more about how adults make decisions in the real world.
2. Being part of a game that has the potential for multiple outcomes because of differences in opinions can create confusion but also increase interest and concern about an issue. For example, not every child agreed that the internet was a necessity or that a monthly transit pass was the best way to get around the city. These differences in opinion and possibilities throughout the game can make it challenging, but the process gets them to think and ask questions about what is important to whom and when. I only learned how to engage in critical debate while in university. But, I would have appreciated, and probably been more successful in my elementary years if I had gotten a much earlier start at this kind of critical thinking.
3. Peer learning can help children learn how to cooperate and include different viewpoints to achieve the same goal. The children used their money and would ask each other what they felt would be the best buying decision given all other factors.
4. Playing fun games is just as important for the development of older children as it is for younger ones. Play is emphasized in early years but steadily declines in the classroom as children get older. The Game

of Real Life gave them a learning opportunity while having fun and this fun factor can have great potential for helping them to remember what they did and how it made an impact on their way of thinking.

5. Developing empathy and a sense of what is fair should be self realized (something that comes from within) instead of something one is told to do. Telling children that they should care about those less fortunate may not have as much of an impact as when they realize it for themselves. The Game of Real Life is complemented by additional games, a documentary showing the lives on people who live in poverty, class discussion and debate. The combination of activities takes the topic from an abstract realm — i.e., something that happens to others — into something that could happen to their family. When they begin to understand that certain issues can affect everyone equally, it can encourage more urgent thoughts to act.

In the end, the Game of Real Life and other activities that are part of this program cannot, on their own, permanently change the way children think. Yet, it can serve as an opening, a way to unravel their curiosity about the world and the situations they may face in the future. This game is not about how to solve specific problems or how to stay within budget; it's about thinking critically about what kind of life is fair and just. Students who are noticeably engaged and achieve an overall grasp of food issues at the end of the year are the students whose teachers have taken the time to instill these lessons into other school activities. With the support of teachers and other community educators, this type of learning can go a long way towards the development of future thinkers and doers — future leaders that will focus on creating a more just and sustainable city.

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