

How Community Gardening Impacts Multicultural Student Communities: A Case Study
Research

Elizabeth Abraham

Ph.D. Candidate, Agricultural Education
University of Minnesota
146 Ruttan Hall
1994 Buford Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55108

abrah475@umn.edu

952-465-4930

Introduction

Community gardens have been a part of the American culture since the late 19th century (Draper & Freedman, 2010). Over few decades, community gardens, are increasing in numbers across America, and are producing much more than food (Draper & Freedman, 2010). “Whether established to promote health or financial security, or for another reason, community gardens provide an effective means for community-based practitioners to carry out their roles within the areas of organizing, development, and change” (Draper & Freedman, 2010, p. 459). Research confirms that community gardens improves social networks and organizational capacity in communities, especially in multicultural and minority neighborhoods (Armstrong, 2000). However, the influence of community gardening on the lives of multicultural student communities has not been researched. This descriptive case study attempts to understand the effects of community gardening on the social and personal lives of multicultural students residing at one of the University of Minnesota’s student family housing co-operatives. Since the field of Agricultural Education is now increasingly focusing on teaching and training, culturally diverse secondary and post-secondary teachers of tomorrow (Doerfert, 2011). A study such as this, focusing on social and personal lives of multicultural student communities in American universities becomes relevant to research and practice in Agricultural Education.

Conceptual framework

Draper & Freedman (2010) did a content analysis on 55 articles that studied the benefits and purposes of community gardening in an American context. In this study, they identified eleven themes explaining the overarching benefits of community gardening: (a) health benefits; (b) food source/food security; (c) economic development; (d) youth education, employment, and skill development; (e) open space use and preservation; (f) crime prevention; (g) leisure and recreation; (h) neighborhood beautification; (i) social interaction/cultivation of relationships; (j) cultural preservation and expression; and (k) community organizing and empowerment (Draper & Freedman, 2010) The themes mentioned above where used to guide the research questions in this study.

Methodology

This descriptive case study was designed to understand how community gardening affected the social and personal lives of multicultural students residing at one of the student family housing co-operatives at University of Minnesota. In this study, data was collected from the target population with the help of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). All the international and out-of-state students (N= 45) engaged in community gardening at the student family housing during the year 2016 were notified through emails requesting their participation in the FGDs. The students were also sent two reminders about the FGDs and were also informed that these FGDs where voluntary and confidential and their identity would not be revealed in the report. 10 participants turned up for the first FGD and the second was attended by only two participants. Further FGD’s could not be planned because of the unavailability of students and end of growing season.

Results/Findings

The FGDs where transcribed and the emerging themes where organized under three major headings.

A. Increasing student social integration: 1. Developing relationships with other students residing at the co-operative. The majority of the residents at this co-operative were out-of-state or international students. Interacting and knowing the neighbors can be helpful for these students

to adjust to the new place and culture. Participants shared that working with other students at the community garden was helping them to know their neighbors and make new friends.

Relationships were built between the students by (a) Sharing garden information and excess produce, (b) Requesting neighbor's help with garden work and (c) Interacting on the social media (Facebook) group hosted by the community garden coordinators.

2. Inter-cultural interactions: students were learning about other cultures by observing the garden plots of other students and getting interested in the variety of exotic crops growing in other plots. In a multicultural student community, gardening together was enabling the students to learn about other cultures through the differences in their cultivation practices and food habits.

B. Family life and food choices:

- 1. Helping children connect with their roots in agriculture:* many students described growing up on farms or watching their families engaged in agricultural activities. Community gardening at the student housing was enabling the children in the community to connect with the land and enjoy gardening like their parents did when they were kids.
- 2. Access to produce of choice:* These community garden plots were the only cultivable land these students could access. In these garden plots, the students were growing a variety of chemical free vegetables and herbs. Some of the exotic herbs and vegetables grown by the students were either not available in the local markets or were too expensive to purchase.

C. Health benefits:

- 1. Impact on mental health:* Students expressed that community gardening was helping them to manage stress. Graduate schoolwork was often stressful and these students often looked forward to spend their evening in their garden plots. Some even said that watching their plants grow and produce vegetables was giving them a sense of fulfillment.
- 2. Impact on physical health:* Many students explained that community gardening was the only physical activity they never wanted to miss. They spent a lot of their free time in their garden plots either because they loved being there or because they had compulsory garden chores assigned to them by the garden coordinators. Overall, this was helping many students to get out of their houses and do some physical activity. Some students also mentioned that the garden chores seemed less rigorous when the students worked in teams or as a group.

Conclusion

This case study serves as a positive beginning in discovering the benefits of community gardening on multicultural student communities at American universities. Community gardening at student housing is not a common phenomenon and hence it calls for more rigorous research to understand more specifically how community gardening can help multicultural and international students to socially acclimatize to the American university setting. With more compelling evidence to support community gardens, this tool for change may someday become even more common in American university housing settings, and the social and personal benefits associated with gardening will be realized on a broader scale.

Implications

This case study demonstrates that participants in this particular study have recognized and expressed multiple benefits out of community gardening. Since social integration, improved quality of life and health benefits are important factors in a student life; this research topic warrants further research. If compelling evidence is generated through future research, the field of Agricultural Education can utilize the benefits of community gardening for the holistic development of its students especially the multicultural student communities.

References

- Armstrong, Donna. (2000). A Survey of Community Gardens in Upstate New York: Implications for Health Promotion and Community Development. *Health and Place*, 6 (4): 319-327.
- Doerfert, 2011. *National research agenda: American Association for Agricultural Education's research priority areas for 2011-2015*. Retrieved from <http://aaaeonline.org/resources/Documents/AAAE%20National%20Research%20Agenda.pdf>
- Draper, C., & Freedman, D. (2010). Review and analysis of the benefits, purposes, and motivations associated with community gardening in the United States. *Journal of Community Practice*, 18(4), 458-492.
- Ferris, J., Norman, C., & Sempik, J. (2001). People, land and sustainability: Community gardens and the social dimension of sustainable development. *Social Policy & Administration*, 35(5), 559-568.