

A Narrative Inquiry into the History and Current Scope of Farm to School in Georgia

Jade Frederickson

University of Georgia
129A Four Towers, 405 College Station Road
Athens, GA 30602
651.485.9064
jade.frederickson@uga.edu

Dr. Jason Peake

University of Georgia
130 Four Towers, 405 College Station Road
Athens, GA 30602
229.392.6097
jpeake@uga.edu

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Introduction/Need for research

The Georgia Farm to School Alliance (“the Alliance”) is the primary entity supporting statewide programming for Farm to School, a three-pronged school-based initiative aimed at introducing students to local food and healthy eating patterns (National Farm to School Network, 2021). The structure of the Alliance is not documented, though, and with over fifty partners and one-hundred members, members of one organization are often unfamiliar with the programming of another. Conceptualizing the history and scope of the Alliance is even more difficult for those who are outside looking in. Therefore, this study sought to identify the key stakeholders involved in Farm to School in order to document its origin in Georgia and capture the multitude of perspectives making up the Alliance. The end product of this line of inquiry aims to create a handbook that will aid educators in starting their own Farm to School programs.

Elements of Farm to School include local procurement, school gardens, and nutrition education. School gardens offer students opportunities to engage in hands-on, experiential learning, and nutrition education provides students with activities focused on agriculture, food, health, and nutrition (Blair, 2009). These elements overlap with the American Association for Agricultural Education’s (AAAE) National Research Agenda Research Priority 4, “Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments” as well as Research Priority 5, “Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs” (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

Conceptual framework

Narrative inquiry and analysis guided this study, where narrative inquiry roots itself in the experience and story of the individual(s) who experience a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). This form of inquiry focuses on telling – as much as possible – the entirety of a story surrounding a particular phenomenon. Beyond inquiry, Mishler (1995) proposed a typology for narrative analysis: One aspect of this typology is Reference and Temporal Order, which may also be referred to as “the ‘telling’ and the ‘told,’” where the researcher must decide whether the temporal order or the narrative construction of telling is more important for disseminating a phenomenon. Given the complexity of perspectives comprising the Farm to School space, these frames of thinking were considered appropriate for this study.

Methodology

The interview guide for this study used appreciative inquiry and was reviewed by experts knowledgeable in both qualitative interviewing and appreciative inquiry. According to Preskill & Catsambas (2006), appreciative inquiry is “a group process that inquires into, identifies, and further develops the best of ‘what is’ in organizations to create a better future” (p. 1).

Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS) (Heckathorn, 1997) allows researchers to effectively navigate the ambiguity of uncertain populations by drawing on related sampling techniques (e.g. key informant, snowball, and targeted) (Gile & Handcock, 2010; Heckathorn, 1997). The researcher selected the initial seeds, or the 0th wave, so the past and present directors of Farm to School for the leading Farm to School organization in Georgia were selected. Further waves were determined by asking each individual of the respective wave to provide two names.

Results/Findings

The Alliance *was, and still is, an opportunity*. Since 2007, the Alliance has been a hub for disseminating Farm to School information. Jenna shares, “We can sort of be most effective and the best at what we do because we've picked this one little lane to be in. And it's sort of mutually beneficial to all of us just to be like, ‘Oh yeah, let me send you to [my friend] in the [Organization].’” (33:09). Erin, one of the co-founders of the Alliance, comments, too, saying, “Building out the Alliance was, you know, hands down the best thing for the state and really created a culture of trust and sharing and also provided the framework for growth” (24:48). “Do you, do you have a board room with a table in it? Like, then you can do this...the foundation is building trust, building relationships, understanding what people want to do and finding common ground that you can build, build on” (40:58).

Though the Alliance encompasses a number of organizations across the state, many participants acknowledged that at the end of the day, it's the work of those on the ground that matters most. Thus, the Alliance *uplifts the work of school teachers and nutrition professionals*: “I was so in awe. School nutrition directors work so hard and for the most part, they're not often recognized for their work. So, I was in awe of the fact that there's this amazing group of people, who, for nothing but the joy of adding to their already very busy schedules, were so invested in Farm to School” (Kimberly, 18:31).

The Alliance further substantiates the research that school gardens promote agricultural and nutrition awareness among children (Blair, 2009). Gardens humanize these lessons, though, too, and *amplify connections between individuals, food, culture, agriculture, and the environment*: “Food is this great equalizer in so many ways, where no matter where you live around the world, you, you put food into your body, not just for energy, but for a ceremony and for our community and for connection” (Nichole, 20:12).

Finally, the Alliance represents a chance to *raise awareness about the need for food justice, culture, and equity*. Tasha Gomes, a long-time leader at FoodCorps comments, “I have a goal this year to try to get more young black members so that the students that they're serving see themselves reflected, you know? I'm really excited about elevating local leadership, bringing historically marginalized folks to the table in conversations, and just helping our service members have an awesome experience” (26:12).

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on profession

The results of this study act as a “living” literature review of the history and current scope of Farm to School in Georgia. Each interview offered perspective about the number of ways Farm to School manifests; called for further progress on integrating food, agriculture, and nutrition concepts into today's curriculum; and highlighted the teachers' and nutrition staffs' role in Farm to School. Mapping the study's participants' locations showed most were based out of Atlanta, which does not reflect the widespread and reputed work of such teachers and led to an inaccurate reflection of Farm to School across Georgia. Future research should examine the Farm to School initiatives of these individuals, then, to better understand the scope and reach of such programming. Further efforts should also consider how to bring topics of food justice, culture, and equity into Farm to School.

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