

## **The Truth About an Inclusive Program**

### **Introduction**

While it is well documented that School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE) can create a strong family feeling in their classes for some students, it is currently struggling to reach youth who fall within contemporarily and historically marginalized populations (Moser, 2023; Wood et al., 2023, pp. 195-196). In addition, following the 2016 U.S. presidential election researchers observed the “Trump Effect” in K-12 schools (Journell, 2022, p. 137). This effect resulted in Trump-supporting students nationwide being more publicly outspoken about their support of dividing and excluding based upon identities. Previous work points to SBAE as reflecting the homophobic and heteronormative cultures of rural schools (Moser, 2023; Vincent and Austin, 2021). Youth from marginalized populations have reason to not feel a sense of belonging in schools offering SBAE.

The case in this study, Garden Sun Institute (GSI), is a non-formal agricultural education program that is positively connecting with youth participants from marginalized identities, breaking out of the exclusionary norms found in current K-12 schools. Therefore, results from this study can inform how formal School-Based Agricultural Education programs cultivate inclusive learning environments for marginalized youth, which may result in greater marginalized youth participation in SBAE.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

This qualitative study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm and influenced by the concepts posited by Strayhorn’s (2018) Sense of Belonging Theory. According to Strayhorn (2018), the seven core elements necessary to develop a sense of belonging are physiological needs, motive to drive behavior, variance in importance, feeling as though one matters, identity, results in positive outcomes, and continual changes in conditions. Using the constructivist paradigm, the researcher works under the assumption that realities are unique and created per individual based on their own lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The creation of the findings is developed together between the researcher and the participant because each influences the knowledge of the other, which means that the researcher’s input cannot be fully removed from the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

### **Research Questions**

This paper is part of the lead author’s master’s thesis. This single instrumental case study sought to explore the sense of belonging of historically and contemporarily marginalized youth within the non-formal agricultural education space at GSI. Pseudonyms are used in this study to refer to both participants and the center to maintain anonymity. This article focuses on how GSI staff strive to create an inclusive space. Research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do youth describe a sense of belonging at GSI?
2. How does GSI engage with youth, family, and staff?
3. How do those engaged with GSI describe a sense of belonging within agriculture?

## Methods

The research study used a single instrumental case study following the checklist by Rashid et al., (2019). In this case study, four staff members were interviewed twice; three full-day observations were made (each occurring a week apart); and the center website was analyzed. The interviews occurred via recorded Zoom sessions with the camera and audio both on, with recordings later transcribed by the researcher. Data from the website; observations of the youth; and observations of the physical location including posters and educational spaces were also included. After each interview and observation visit, the researcher recorded memos related to the researcher's initial thoughts, research problems, and plans for the study. During interviews, the researcher summarized what was said and asked clarifying questions to perform member checks. Each participant was also sent the transcript of their interview to confirm agreement on what was said and allow for the removal of any data they did not feel comfortable sharing.

The Critical Pedagogy of Agriculture (Hartmann & Martin, 2021), Trauma-Inclusive Pedagogy (Lynch & Wojdak, 2023), and Learner-Centered Pedagogy (Milliken, 2022) helped provide structure and parameters to codes and themes identified during analysis; however, they were loosely used as the researcher was using a constructivist paradigm as much as possible. During interviews and observations, the researcher was open to other topics that emerged that the participants felt were important to their sense of belonging at GSI and in agriculture. In the constructivist paradigm, researchers are assumed to influence the understanding of the research, as the research influences the researchers (Holmes, 2023) and "re-story" these experiences through publication. The relationship between the researcher and the participant was critical because of the co-creation of research meaning found in the interviews and being an observer.

## Findings & Results

After coding the interviews, observations, and website, five themes emerged relating to creating an inclusive space: Mindset, Reflection, Engagement, Leadership, and Holistic. Quotes were kept to a minimum due to abstract size limitations.

### Mindset

Growth (Yeager & Dweck, 2020) and family mindsets were heavily discussed in all four interviews with staff participants. All four staff participants discussed the incorporation of the scientific method in problem-solving and the idea that the only failure is to stop trying. Adonis discussed an example of how they encourage growth mindsets when a student faces a mistake,

"Like, I could make a mistake over here, but they're not going to fire me. They're not going to yell at me. They're going to pull me back to the side and be like, 'Hey, this is the mistake that you made. How do you think that you could have done better at this? Oh, you don't know... how you could have done better at this? Okay, let me walk through this with you. And then I want you to know that when you do it the second time or when you do it, like, if you do it again, we're not going to yell at you, but we're going to bring you back and we're going to revise everything that we talked about during this meeting and see how you can better, well, like just incorporate it into your day-to-day life or your work life.'"

During observations, students would frequently exhibit behaviors related to growth mindset, being vulnerable, and demonstrating creativity. According to Strayhorn (2018), for an individual to reach their fullest potential and reach a stage in which they are being creative, they need to feel a sense of belonging. Students would practice self-regulation, and co-regulation, and focusing on the process rather than any failure.

## **Reflection**

During the observations, the students were tasked with weeding, and many students expressed being frustrated, tired, hot, or distracted. However, during the reflection portion of the day, students were able to recognize what they did well, what they needed to work on, and how to prepare for the heat in the future. These answers showed that students may have been uncomfortable with the current situation, yet they were looking forward to planning for future activities and problem-solving on how to make hot days enjoyable. One of the key elements of Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging is that it is a continuous process that can fluctuate in importance and can be impacted by different contexts and situations.

The theme of reflection also came from categories related to reflecting on agricultural, community, and individual history and taking true action. Daniella discussed how reflection can be used to think critically about the space and how certain students may have different relationships with the environment.

“It’s sort of different when you think basically about an urban setting, particularly an urban setting that is so impacted with soil concerns regarding toxins and all of the sort of different problems that need to be solved or concerns that need to be addressed... I think it’s impacted that way of thinking that it’s not just as easy as you just go into your backyard and dig in the dirt. And that is, again a reflection of access to agriculture and access to participation in agriculture and who has it and who doesn’t and how that then impacts all of the thoughts on, of how we relate to food, and how we relate to nature.”

## **Engagement**

Strayhorn (2018) suggests that outcomes like engagement are a direct result of a felt sense of belonging. The active engagement by involved youth to think critically, work honestly and dutifully, and continually ask questions to learn about what interests them all suggests that there is a strong sense of belonging among GSI youth. Student engagement could be influenced by parental pressure to have students take advantage of a program such as GSI, although the researcher's interpretation that the level and vulnerability of the engagement suggests that sense of belonging is what encourages students to stay. Similarly, the pay could be a reason students stay within the program or get involved initially, but the ability to share creatively and explore personal interests is what the researcher interpreted to be the main reason individuals stay.

On the website, GSI places an emphasis on empowerment through youth leadership. This was evident through observations where students created rules and goals that were hung on the walls, and designed and painted a mural with expert assistance to demonstrate proper mural painting techniques. The goals posted on the walls of the GSI facility related to the elimination/reduction of gun violence, minimum wage, fighting back against the demonization of other cultures, making

efforts to include different perspectives, focusing on mental health, and advocating for the resolution of domestic violence. When asked about how they tackle discussions relating to these posted goals, Daniella said:

“You, you can’t just sit around and pretend it’s not happening. It’s ridiculous. You get an opportunity to focus on critical thinking. You can, you know, you can ask questions and tease out, and you can either say you’re either telling them, ‘This is a space where you guys can talk about these things and I’m not going to stick my head in the sand and pretend it’s not happening,’ or you’re going to tell them as an adult, ‘My job is to just to pretend nothing is wrong’...if you stick your head in the sand and pretend nothing is happening and try to walk 100% down the middle, then they, then young people are going to just say you’re in denial, you don’t care, or you’re a fool.”

Engagement with GSI directly impacted all four staff members' sense of belonging within agriculture, and how the center engaged with them was the main reason for their shift toward belonging in agriculture. GSI students would express that they were “agriculture,” and so a sense of belonging in agriculture at GSI is present for students; however, their sense of belonging in a broader agricultural field is unknown due to inability to interview the youth. Two staff felt a lack of belonging within broader agriculture as illustrated by companies seeking to engage with the center as a token diversity emblem without having any other connection or knowledge about the community, students, staff, or center as a whole; therefore, meaningful and intentional engagement seems to be the requirement for sense of belonging to be felt by study participants.

## **Leadership**

The theme of leadership can be found in both observations and interviews. During observations, students had freedom of choice whether they participated in physical work or activities, if they shared their responses, answered questions during daily highs and lows, or end-of-day reflections. During observations, one student expressed not wanting work anymore, and Daniella stated that that was their choice, they would just be choosing to not get paid that day, then asked if they still wanted to not work. The student responded that they wanted time to think during their lunch break to decide, and Daniella supported them in making that decision whenever it felt right. The student decided they wanted to work and also used breathing techniques when they became overwhelmed when working after the break.

In staff interviews, it was discussed that GSI engages in leadership development for students by providing opportunities for more leadership roles during a student’s time in the program, although this is not required for students to still be supported and cared for by staff. All four staff members shared that GSI engages with its leaders in similar ways as students recognize the impact of personal lives, as well as providing support and resources for staff interests so that they feel uniquely important rather than just a body that can be replaced. All four staff members expressed a strong sense of belonging repeatedly throughout both sets of interviews and were also heard during observations by other staff members who were not included in the interview.

## **Holistic**

The theme of viewing individuals holistically came up in all four staff interviews, during observations, and through website analysis. The website focuses on addressing and helping individuals physically, mentally, and spiritually, as well as through the development of character and the use of a trauma-inclusive approach. GSI's website also discussed that an individual's interests, passions, dreams, and cultural expression were important to their participation at GSI. Youth and staff were observed expressing their deep knowledge of each other through what each person liked, disliked, sounded like, what their plans were, friends and family outside of the center, allergies, spiritual beliefs, and what their worries were. Daniella summarized well:

“It matters to us what is going on with students. It matters to us when they don't show up... We want to see them make it through this phase of life, and to be able to pursue things that are their gifts and their dreams and their interests. We want them to be functioning adults and we want to give them those skill sets to do that. But it also matters to us that they're people that are empathetic, and people that want to give something back to the community, and that are willing to see the world not just from a singular, 'my goal is to have a good job and pay my bills'.”

## **Recommendations**

Data revealed that GSI has intentionally fostered a sense of belonging within the program and more broadly in agriculture for both youth participants and staff. The center uses pedagogical practices that support growth and community mindsets, reflection that leads to action, transformative engagement, develop leadership skills, and support the student holistically. Research supports that a growth mindset has an association with how individuals can succeed and that the association is stronger within marginalized communities (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). Growth mindset research (Westby, 2020) also supports the premise that personalized responses per student with a focus on the steps rather than the final goal help in the overall educational experience of the student. There are currently minimal studies that show support for a family-centered approach to creating a sense of belonging and inclusion with individuals, however, the descriptions of family-oriented environments cultivated by GSI including content like care, support, mattering, and relationships that directly tie into what research has shown to help create a sense of belonging.

While the study took place in a non-formal agricultural education setting, learning is taking place with the support of using sound educational pedagogical practices. GSI is also reaching a population that is not currently being reached by SBAE, meaning that there is room for SBAE to adopt some of the practices discussed in this paper. Therefore, recommendations for research would be to determine the impact of using practices found in non-formal settings on SBAE's sense of belonging in the classroom. Research is needed that focuses more on the voice of marginalized young people and determines what they need for a more inclusive classroom. Research should also investigate best practices to determine accountability for students and staff when incorporating critical, trauma-inclusive, and student-centered pedagogies. While GSI was able to incorporate these pedagogies, there were still instances where student and staff members did not adhere to best practices.

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