

# Exploring Food Justice and Civic Attitudes Among Black High School Students

Chrissy Pfeil<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*In this study, I explored how two Black high school students experienced a food justice curriculum and school-based gardening activities by examining student reflections, interviews, and classroom observations using a critical race theoretical framework. Findings suggested that in addition to learning key agricultural skills and concepts, participants learned more about food justice and considered their roles in the food justice movement. Findings also suggested that the experience may have changed how they view their civic attitudes as they relate to food justice. As a result, I argued that educators must provide Black students space in agricultural education programs and classes to explore pressing issues in their local communities, valuing them as epistemological contributors in classroom spaces.*

## Introduction

In recent years, civic education scholars have explored the roles, perspectives, and attitudes of Black students in civic spaces. In particular, civic education scholars highlighted the civic “achievement gap” between White and Black students (Levinson, 2010; Levinson, 2005). However, Ladson-Billings (2006) introduced the concept of *education debt* which provided a systemic analysis of the aforementioned “achievement gaps.” Ladson-Billings highlighted racist public policy; school funding disparities that primarily impact Black and Brown students, educators, and communities; the exclusion of Black and Brown folk from civic processes; and the moral and systemic impacts of horrors such as enslavement and the genocide of Indigenous peoples and nations as causes of “achievement gaps.” The concept of education debt can also be applied to civic education. For example, Woodson and Love (2019) cautioned against focusing on civic achievement gaps in research and practice. They explained, “Comparing Black children’s (understandably critical) civic attitudes to the more positive civic orientations of many middle-class White children makes Black kids appear disengaged, hopeless, nihilistic, and apathetic. It serves to legitimate character education, citizenship education, and other curricular interventions intended to instill neoliberal patriotic values” (p. 93).

This investigation explored the possibilities of using a food justice curriculum and school-based gardening experiences to promote the development of civic attitudes among Black youth, especially regarding the food justice movement. Mabry (1998) defined *civic attitudes* as feelings of responsibility to help others solve issues impacting society. This study employs this definition and attempts to work to disrupt the current emphasis on White civic attitudes and approaches as the ideal for civic education and engagement among Black students.

## Literature Review

In the literature review, I highlighted previous research that suggested school-based and community gardening can be potential pedagogical tools to promote youth involvement in their local communities,

---

<sup>1</sup> Chrissy Pfeil is a Ph.D. student of Teacher Education in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education at Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824. [pfeilchr@msu.edu](mailto:pfeilchr@msu.edu). ORCID#0009-0009-3334-9181.

especially regarding food justice efforts. First, I provided an overview of food justice and issues impacting our global food system to highlight the urgency of getting youth involved in addressing these issues. Next, I outlined the civic power of food and connected food to civic participation. Since there are limited studies that explored Black youth involvement in the food justice movement, this study attempted to investigate possibilities for promoting Black youth involvement in this struggle.

### **An Overview of Food Justice**

Gottlieb and Joshi (2010) defined *food justice* as “ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly” (p. 5). Subsequent scholarship has highlighted the intersectional nature of the food justice movement, linking the food justice movement to other social justice concerns such as worker exploitation, immigration, and deportation (Harper, 2011; Sbicca, 2018). Other social justice concerns included the systemic impacts of Indigenous land theft, chattel slavery, and federal exclusionary acts on food access and security (Green et al., 2011; Mares & Peña, 2011; Minkoff-Zern, 2011).

While community organizers are becoming more involved in the food justice movement, scholars argued the movement continues to be colonial, Euro-centric, racist, and classist, especially regarding proposed solutions to food crises worldwide (Guthman, 2011; Harper, 2011; Morales, 2011; Norgaard et al., 2011). These proposed solutions included supporting organic agriculture and shopping at farmers markets to support local farmers, directly putting the responsibility on consumers and avoiding important systemic changes (Guthman, 2011).

### **The Power of Food in Civic Spaces**

Engagement in collective gardening and cooking experiences resulted in community and civic engagement among community members, such as providing spaces for homeless shelters, serving as soup kitchens, and providing communal gathering spaces that promote feelings of belonging and inclusion (Awry, 2023; Chan & Sharma, 2023; Lane-McKinley, 2023; Li, 2023; Sbicca, 2018; Tovar, 2023). Historically, the practice of cooking and eating food in community among marginalized populations, such as people of color, immigrants, and queer folx, is linked to self-actualization, anticapitalist action, and emotional nurturance (Danis, 2023; Gálvez, 2023; mayam, 2023). When reflecting on their experiences serving food to activists and community members in need, Li (2023) described the “radical” and “revolutionary” nature of food. They stated, “I learned that food was critical and powerful and that food could be revolutionary; in fact, sharing food could be so radical that we were threatened with arrest and police violence, and simply persisting in sharing food in the face of repression was a really radical act” (p. 6). In a similar fashion, Sbicca (2018) described the Day of Dinners events held by the Dream Defenders - these dinners provided space for people to come together, eat good food, and discuss oppression and liberation. These examples showed the role food plays in nurturing civic efforts in communities and suggested that civic efforts would be difficult, if not impossible, without these food-based experiences and practices.

Culturally relevant foods and the experiences growing, harvesting, and cooking these foods, also allowed people, such as immigrants, the descendants of enslaved persons, and Indigenous peoples to connect with their ancestors and cultures (Mares & Peña, 2011; mayam, 2023; Norgaard et al., 2011; Ruiz, 2023). For example, Ruiz (2023) described the importance of traditional and ancestral growing, harvesting, cooking, and eating methods in collective liberation. mayam (2023) acknowledged her appreciation for okra, a vegetable native to Africa, because it holds “ancestral power” (p. 54). Mares and Peña (2011) told the story of a woman from Oaxaca who now lives in the United States. She grows the same food she did in her previous garden in Oaxaca, and she stated, “We can eat like we ate at home and this makes us feel like ourselves. It allows us to keep a part of who we are after coming to the United States” (p. 209). These personal anecdotes showed how food can be a powerful and influential means for folx in a community to connect with their cultures and ancestors in beneficial ways. These personal anecdotes also revealed the

power of the garden. In these examples, gardening allowed members of a community to grow culturally relevant and significant food that may not be available in traditional grocery stores or farmers markets or may be expensive and inaccessible (Guthman, 2011). Also important, the *process* of growing, harvesting, cooking, and eating provided cultural and ancestral connection, feelings and emotions that cannot be purchased. The garden provided an avenue for folk to explore ways their ancestors grew these crops, allowing for a meaningful connection to the past and the importance it plays in both the present and future.

### **The Importance of School-Based and Community Gardens in Civic Life**

Broadly, gardening is linked to important life lessons for both youth and adults such as perseverance, the development of agricultural skills necessary for community development, and cultivating healthy eating habits (Allen & Wilson, 2013; Hacker, 2018; Jauk-Ajamie & Blackwood, 2024; Kelly & Brannlund, 2024; Sbicca, 2018). Historically, gardening and farming jobs have been connected to promoting worker solidarity, resistance, and revolutionary thought, primarily through the production and preservation of food (Bergamin, 2023; Costello, 2023; Lane-McKinley, 2023; Mares & Peña, 2011; Tognola, 2023). Specifically, Costello (2023) stated, “The garden is so significant because, again, food equals power. And when your food supply determines your power, the garden becomes a weapon” (p. 125). Similarly, Tognola (2023) described the importance of not only growing and harvesting, but also preparing the food: “It is after dinner that is the most important moment in the history of social struggles. Strikes, revolutions, marches - everything takes place when digestion begins” (p. 16). In contemporary times, organizations such as Community Services Unlimited, Freedom Freedom, Growing Power, and Planting Justice promoted the spiritual, physical, and emotional health and well-being of Black individuals and communities through sustainable and culturally relevant agricultural and culinary practices (Allen & Wilson, 2013; Broad, 2016; Sbicca, 2018; Quizar, 2018).

Scholars described how community members fought to keep gardens in their communities at the risk of demolition, showing how the effort to preserve gardens can be an inherently civic act (Awry, 2023; Mares & Peña, 2011). Community gardens both made urban and rural locations both aesthetically pleasing and served community needs such as whole food production (Broad, 2018; Gálvez, 2023). Gálvez (2023) used the Bronx as an example: “Growing food in the Bronx is not only a way of reclaiming territory to produce nourishing and culturally relevant food, it is a form of symbolic reclamation against portrayals of the Bronx as a industrial wasteland, toxic and unproductive, ruined and made uninhabitable by waves of scorched-earth exploitation and pollution” (p. 34).

Some scholars argued that youth participation is vital for the long-term success of the food justice movement, and this suggested that the school can play an important role in connecting youth to their local communities and the food justice movement broadly (Broad, 2016; Steel, 2011). In educational settings, participants reported increased excitement and motivation in classes as a result of gardening activities (Blair, 2009; Gallavan & Bowles; 2012; Langhout et al., 2002; Lekies & Eames-Sheavly, 2008). Previous studies also revealed how school-based and community gardens can result in civic awareness and community engagement among participants, such as planting fruit trees in communities and becoming involved in sustainability efforts, showing youth are involved in the food justice movement (Broad, 2016; Cloutier et al., 2023; Kingsley et al., 2019; Langhout et al., 2002). For example, Broad (2016) described how Rooted in Community (RIC), a youth-led food justice organization, drafted the Youth Food Bill of Rights (YFBR), a document that asserted culturally relevant and sustaining food is a human right, the right to food-based education, the right to save seeds, the right to healthy and safe food subsidies, and the right to directly support local, sustainable farmers and their practices.

Similarly, Broad (2016) described how Community Services Unlimited, a non-profit organization that works toward food justice in southern Los Angeles, offered youth development programming that has led to greater understanding of food systems, security, and importance of healthy eating among youth in addition to ensure students had access to locally grown and produced fresh, whole foods. In their

programming, the organization and educators stressed the importance of ensuring student participants were able to think critically about other social, political, and environmental issues. Likewise, Sbicca (2018) described Planting Justice's Food Justice Education program as "liberatory" because it combined practical gardening skills with a root cause analysis of justice issues and struggles that impact the food justice movement.

School gardens allowed students to connect with people in their local communities, such as veterans, community organizers, and local farmers and participate in community-based projects, such as developing and distributing community cookbooks (Berlow, 2015; Gallavan & Bowles, 2012; Hoffman et al., 2007; Lanhout et al., 2002). Gardening in educational contexts was also linked to an increased interest and commitment to sustainable food practices, among both participants and their families (Blair, 2009; Diaz et al., 2018; Schocker et al., 2016).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The literature review outlined the benefits of food and food-based experiences in civic action and the struggle for liberation. An important aspect of this struggle is ensuring marginalized populations have access to appropriate foods. I argue that Black youth must be involved in these efforts, and that requires civic action. There are few studies that explored how Black students' civic attitudes evolved as a result of engaging with a food justice curriculum and school-based gardening activities. This research topic offers important insights on possibilities for connecting Black youth to their local communities and the food justice movement, a movement that continues to be dominated by White epistemologies and ideals (Guthman, 2011). In this investigation, I explored the following research question: How did Black students' civic attitudes shift after exposure to a food justice curriculum that included school-based gardening experiences?

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this investigation, I utilized a critical race theoretical framework to examine how participants' civic attitudes evolved as a result of participation in a summer school course focused on food justice. Critical race theory (CRT) consists of multiple principles, but one, voice, is central to this investigation. Other themes of CRT, such as its action-oriented nature, are also emphasized. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) described voice as the unique and vital perspective of folk of color. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) described the essence of voice as "... The assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge" (p.10). Bernal Delgado (2002) highlighted how students of color are holders and creators of knowledge but do not feel like their voices are heard and valued in schools. These practices can lead to what Scheurich and Young (1997) defined as epistemological racism, the exclusion of knowledge creation and ways of knowing by people of color by continuing to value, reinforce, and uphold Whiteness as the epistemological ideal in our global society. To reinforce this point, Almeida (2015) stated, "Eurocentrism as a dominant perspective circulates and re-circulates mainstream stories about race, which constitute knowledge" (p. 92). Tyson (2003) also highlighted the impact of the invisible nature of epistemologies and "'ways of White folks'", allowing for these ideals to become institutionalized and seen as the norm (p. 23).

I used CRT in this study because it provided a framework to analyze how schools, and particularly agricultural education programs, can better serve Black students. In this investigation, I explored how the classroom can act as a safe space for Black students to examine their ideas and passions related to the food justice movement. This investigation considered the possibilities of providing a space for Black students to explore their civic attitudes, the strengths they bring to civic spaces, and research issues impacting their local community. Blaisdell (2005) emphasized the action-oriented nature of CRT scholarship, and the food justice course stressed the importance of civic action and engagement. While researchers have argued that

a lack of civic education and engagement among youth is a pressing issue in a United States context (Atwell et al., 2017), these opportunities are usually analyzed using Whiteness as the representation and expectation of citizenship and civic action (Feng et al., 2023; Woodson, 2019; Woodson & Love, 2019). CRT provided a lens to attempt to disrupt these epistemological norms by valuing Black students as knowledge creators in classroom spaces.

### **Methodology**

I employ a case study approach to examine how the participants experienced and perceived a food justice curriculum and their school-based gardening experiences (Yin, 2003). A vital aspect of these perceptions was an analysis of how participants' perceptions of their civic attitudes changed over time. This investigation centered two participants as comparative cases of how Black youth may articulate and understand these experiences and perceptions, especially regarding a desire to work toward food justice in the future.

### **Contexts**

#### *Local High School Summer School Program*

This investigation took place during a four-week summer school course at an alternative high school focused on exploring food justice in the local community. During this course, participants learned about sustainable agriculture as a possible path toward food justice. Participants also brainstormed other ways to tackle food access and insecurity in the local community. Participants worked to establish a school garden during the summer school class. This garden included raised beds, a greenhouse, and hydroponic growing stations. Participants planned on using grown produce in the school cafeteria during breakfast and lunch.

#### *The Participants*

The study followed the experiences of two participants, Amir and Malcolm. At the start of the program, both Amir and Malcolm expressed disinterest in the class topics; they enrolled in the class to meet graduation requirements. Participants were purposefully sampled to show personal growth from participating in the summer school class, even amidst initial disinterest. Both participants were 18 years old and identified as Black men. Each participant chose a pseudonym to ensure de-identification.

### **Data Collection**

To triangulate the data, data for this study were collected from interview responses, class observations, and student work samples. Each participant was interviewed three times for approximately thirty-minute increments. The first interview took place at the start of the summer school course, the second interview took place after the completion of the first two weeks of the course, and the third interview took place at the end of the four-week course. The interviews were all semi-structured (Merriam, 2009). Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim using transcription software. The first two interviews were general check-ins about the structure of the program. In these spaces, Amir and Malcolm identified ways the program could be more responsive to student interests and experiences. We made programmatic and curricular shifts based on these insights. The final interview provided space for Amir and Malcolm to reflect on the summer course and what they learned. The final interview took place after final grades were submitted. Since this investigation is grounded in critical race theory, the final interview questions centered the participants' experiences in the class, focusing on what they learned from the course material and gardening activities. Interview question examples include: "If applicable, what did you learn as a result of your summer school gardening and course experience" and "Describe your final project. Why did you choose this topic? What did you learn?"

Data were also collected from in-class observations and analyzing student work samples. During the summer school class, I was the course instructor and participated in observations as a complete

participant. During the observations, I took field notes to document my thoughts and interactions. The observational protocol included both descriptive and reflective notes (Creswell, 2009). The observations were semi-structured.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview data were analyzed according to the narrative analysis framework outlined by McCormack (2000). During this investigation, I utilized McCormack's framework by responding to participants' comments during the interviews, sharing the story with participants for feedback, and summarizing the interview transcripts and my personal reflections by drafting an epilogue. To identify how participants described their experiences in the summer school program, I viewed the interview responses through multiple lenses to explore the various contexts impacting participants' stories.

I worked with Amir and Malcolm during the data analysis process. We used an inductive coding approach to determine themes. We utilized the coding framework proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). During the open-coding phase, we identified the following labels: food access, food security, food justice, civic action, civic attitudes, and community knowledge. We grouped interview quotes, observations, and responses from work samples according to theme. Next, during axial coding, we established the following categories: learning about food justice in the local community and working toward food justice. Then, we combined codes and categories during the selective coding process to determine the core category: the intersection of food justice education and civic attitudes. We reached data saturation because no new themes were emerging from the data upon analysis.

### **Qualitative Quality and Researcher Positionality**

To adhere to rigorous qualitative research standards, I utilized the qualitative quality framework outlined by Tracy (2010). This topic was worthy of investigation because it highlighted the perspectives of Black students in K-12 spaces and identified possibilities to engage Black youth in the food justice movement and civic engagement generally. This study met the criteria for credibility and rigor because I collected multiple forms of data (interviews, class observations, and work samples) and data analysis was grounded in existing theory, such as McCormack's (2000) narrative analysis framework and Strauss's and Corbin's (1990) coding procedures. This study also aligned with the sincerity and credibility criteria because it ensured participant de-identification and was transparent about research and data analysis procedures.

An important aspect of Tracy's (2010) criteria is researcher reflexivity and transparency, and it is important to disclose potential biases, assumptions, and personal experiences that may have influenced the findings and conclusions of the investigation. My personal experiences and identities as a researcher are also important to disclose. I am a White instructor and teacher educator, and the participants both identified as Black men. Previous research has shown that Black students are more emotionally vulnerable and authentic with Black instructors in classroom spaces (Duncan, 2020; Gershenson et al., 2016). Our racial differences and differences in lived experiences may have influenced comfort during interviews, in class, and in assignment submissions. Similarly, my identity as a White researcher impacted how I engaged with critical race theory, data analysis, and presented findings. During this experience, I believed it was vital for me to take a collaborative approach in the investigation. I listened to the participants' experiences and perspectives. To demonstrate how I made the process collaborative, I involved the participants in data analysis to help provide insight and credibility to the research findings. I also listened to their feedback on the structure and content of the course. By taking this approach, I attempted to value Amir and Malcolm as epistemological contributors in the classroom and research space (Tyson, 2003). This investigation may provide insight into how White educators and researchers can engage with Black students in more humanizing ways.

I did not know the participants prior to conducting the investigation, but I was considered the instructor of their summer school course. In some ways, I was considered an outsider in this investigation - I was not an employee of the school, and I am a White researcher working with two Black participants. I was invited to teach the summer school course by colleagues at a local high school. However, I attempted to mitigate possible negative manifestations of my outside status in this work. For example, when I was invited to teach the summer course, I spent time getting to know the participants prior to the start of summer school. To get to know the participants, I spent time with Amir and Malcolm prior to the start of the program by beginning to build the school's agriculture program. We worked on curriculum development to ensure the course was responsive to student needs and reflected their lived experiences, restored the greenhouse, and assembled the raised beds. This trust building phase lasted around three months, and I spent around four hours per week with Amir and Malcolm. I argue that trust building prior to the start of the summer school program was an integral part of the investigation. I tried my best to ensure the process was humanizing and not extractive by maintaining a relationship with both participants. As a result of our relationship and summer school experience, the three of us are currently working on a food justice project in our local community. We are co-leading this project, and this shows the evolution of my position as an "outsider" to more of an "insider" in certain aspects. In my view, maintaining relationships after a research project can potentially reduce harm, especially when the historical (and at times contemporary) mistreatment of Black individuals by White researchers remains a concern.

My authoritative role in the classroom, such as being in control of student grades and other benchmarks, may have influenced participants' interviews. However, due to the amount of time spent building trust with Amir and Malcolm, I argue that I was the best person to conduct these interviews. While I did my best to create a culture of acceptance and belonging in the class, this hierarchical difference could have influenced students' responses and attitudes, and ultimately the findings of the investigation. However, I attempted to maintain reflexivity during the research process by reflecting on my thoughts, feelings, and potential biases after interviews and class sessions. These reflections were added to interview transcripts as well as observation notes.

### **Findings**

The analysis revealed that Amir and Malcolm learned about food justice, notably about the importance of access to healthy, nutritious foods for community members. Also important, both participants expressed a desire to work toward food justice in their local community.

#### **Learning about Food Justice in the Local Community**

At the beginning of the course, Amir and Malcolm were effective in outlining the jobs in the food system. They were instructed to list each job in the food chain, mapping from farm to plate. In order, they identified "farmer, cleaner, pre-cooker, packager, trucker, stocker, cashier, chef, and consumer." Amir and Malcolm also addressed potential risks associated with each position, effectively linking the assignment to food justice concerns. However, their map stopped at the purchase of food and did not expand beyond the store or restaurant, such as cooking at home.

In class, Amir completed a brainstorming activity where he linked environmental concerns to food justice issues. Amir brainstormed how the depletion of groundwater could "lead to less plants and crops to be grown." As a result, Amir connected lower numbers of produce to the laws of supply and demand, and stated the rising demand for crops could lead to higher prices. In turn, these higher prices could lead to "less wealthy people having access to the right foods." In this assignment, Amir began to show an understanding of how agricultural and environmental concerns can impact food justice concerns, such as low-income individuals and families having less access to important foods than their wealthier counterparts.

Next, in an attempt to humanize the food system, Amir and Malcolm completed an assignment where they identified risks and challenges faced by food chain workers. These workers included farm workers, truck drivers, meat processors, and fast food workers. Amir and Malcolm effectively identified risks and challenges faced by each worker. For example, Amir outlined potential risks of working in a meat processing plant. According to Amir, these risks included risk of disease and injury caused by operating heavy machinery at a fast pace to meet quota demands. Upon reading some experiences of meatpackers, Amir was shocked by the “disloyalty” they faced by companies when they were replaced and lost jobs due to injury. Amir also learned that some employees worked at a location for over five years and only received a ten-cent raise during this time. “Wow, that’s crazy, and that’s wrong,” he said. Malcolm highlighted potential risks of working as a truck driver, citing crashes due to exhaustion and potentially being late to drop off. He also described how these risks can influence the profits and income of the drivers, further causing economic strain and impacting the quality of life of these workers.

In a reflection, Amir described how environmental issues can impact the food justice movement. Amir outlined the negative environmental impacts of cows that primarily consume grain. Amir stated, “Corn causes cows to belch more than normal. Grass is a better choice because it does not make them belch as much and because of their stomachs, cows can digest it.” Amir continued to describe how belching releases methane into the atmosphere, increasing global warming. Furthermore, based on his experiences in other class exercises, he was able to connect global warming to food insecurity, citing the increased prevalence of droughts and other extreme weather conditions on the food supply, and ultimately, access to food.

As part of his final project, Amir completed research about food access in the local community. Amir was surprised by his findings, especially regarding the number of people who used food services at the county’s homeless shelter. He reflected, “I still can’t believe the number of people who come and go at the homeless shelter, the number of people who are starving.” In another assignment, Amir conveyed concern over the relationship between industrial agriculture and food security. Amir wrote, “I believe that if the habits continue in agriculture the food system will keep getting worse and more families will starve.” Amir identified these habits as the labor exploitation of migrant farmworkers, pesticides and fertilizers harming the environment and workers, and the expansion of monocultures and their role in soil degradation. Amir’s response highlighted how he connected food insecurity to different parts of the food system, demonstrating how he is beginning to explore and understand the intersection of the food justice movement and other social and environmental justice concerns.

Amir and Malcolm reflected on their personal experiences regarding food access and security. These reflections provided a space for the participants to consider their personal experiences and how they relate to food justice, emphasizing the importance of voice in classroom spaces and assignments (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In a reflection, Amir wrote,

The issues of hunger and food security make me think of less fortunate people. Where we live it’s already hard to get the right healthy foods and when you start adding other factors like income, transportation, and the amount of money the family makes, it starts to sound bad. Another thing that bothers me are the grocery store prices. In a low income home where I live it’s almost impossible to keep the right healthy food in your home because of the store prices, lack of transportation, and the simple lack of healthy options around.

In this reflection, Amir used his personal experiences to draw connections to issues impacting food access in the local community, such as lack of transportation and income, both important concerns of food justice scholars and activists. His response showed an emerging understanding of the intersectional nature of the food justice movement. His response also highlighted how a curriculum that emphasizes personal

experiences may have positive impacts regarding the comprehension of course material (Bernal Delgado, 2002).

Reflecting on his involvement in building the school's garden, during his second interview, Amir recommended that each high school should have a garden, and each high school student should be involved in the care and maintenance of the garden. When asked to expand on this idea, Amir said, "Students should take advantage of any opportunity they have to learn more about the food we eat, because a lot of people don't know about our food system issues and why we are where we are now, and why we have so many obese people." According to Amir, the garden provided an opportunity to learn more about the food system and the benefits of fresh produce. Amir also began to reflect on the systemic causes of obesity, but this was a surface-level understanding that showed these analyses needed to be further emphasized in the course material and class discussions.

### **Working Toward Food Justice**

During an assignment, Amir and Malcolm identified possible interventions to food safety issues during the production, transport, and distribution of foodstuffs. Reflecting on possibilities to improve the safety of truck drivers, Amir recommended "building a highway made specifically for trucks and semis." To improve the working conditions for crop workers, Malcolm suggested increasing, and enforcing, the federal minimum wage. Malcolm asserted the minimum wage should be a living wage, highlighting the importance of crop workers in the economy and on quality of life for consumers.

A major emphasis of the course material centered food access and availability in the local community. Amir and Malcolm both identified the local community as a food desert. During an assignment, Malcolm brainstormed ways to address food insecurity and increase food access for community members. Malcolm advocated two interventions: increasing public transportation through city buses and adding additional grocery stores to other locations in the community. "I just can't believe there's only one grocery store here," Malcolm said during a class discussion. These activities provided an avenue for Amir and Malcolm to brainstorm issues impacting themselves, their families, and their communities, valuing them as knowledge creators and contributors in the classroom, and potentially, in civic spaces (Bernal Delgado, 2002; Scheurich & Young, 1997).

Amir remained hopeful about working toward food justice in the local community. Amir was especially passionate about the overabundance of fast food restaurants and lack of grocery stores for community members, and he described this phenomenon as a food desert, a term he learned in class. Amir expanded,

It's just like our society, our economy, is brainwashed into believing that we're getting the best food for us, but we're not. I believe if we have less fast food restaurants, people will survive longer, because you're not getting as many bad, artificial things in your body, instead of, like, chicken breast or vegetables.

Amir's response showed that he learned more about the health benefits of fresh produce and potential health risks of an overconsumption of fast food.

Amir and Malcolm described feelings of excitement about the future of the school's garden. They believed it could play a vital role in providing access to fresh produce to students and their families. While the initial vision of the school's garden was to provide produce to the cafeteria for consumption during breakfast and lunch, Amir and Malcolm hoped the harvest would expand to provide take-home boxes for at-home consumption. During the class, Amir and Malcolm set up the school's first hydroponic growing stations. They were excited about the possibility of growing produce year-round, especially about the

opportunities to provide year-round access to fresh produce for people who might not have regular access to these nutritious foods.

The experience made Amir think about his future in the fight toward food justice. Amir realized he is very passionate about food and the issues impacting our food system. He considered a career in education so he could teach future students about these issues. Also important, he wanted to be involved in brainstorming possible solutions to these issues with youth. While Amir was more excited about the role of education in promoting food justice in the community, Malcolm was eager to advance the interests of farmers, a group he described as “alone in the world.” Malcolm expressed concern over the lack of appreciation for farmers in an industrial and globalized economy. While he did not identify potential avenues for change, he described that he was interested in working in this area in the future. Also important, in a reflection assignment, Malcolm expressed the need to “improve on the tools and resources available for farmers,” citing the importance of a shift from a farming model that prioritizes monoculture to a model that emphasizes polyculture and sustainability. According to Malcolm, “Sustainability is basically being a good person.” These final reflections highlighted the hopes and dreams of two Black high school students who wanted to make the world a better place. These reflections also revealed the power of their voices in their assertions and desires to fight for a more just world (Blaisdell, 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

### **Discussion**

Amir and Malcolm learned about key aspects of food justice, such as access to food, environmental concerns, and labor exploitation. They also considered their roles in the food justice movement, showing a possible shift in their perceptions of their civic attitudes. These findings can inform how educators navigate spaces in agricultural education and extension programs to value Black students as epistemological contributors and creators in classroom spaces. In particular, I argue that school-based gardening should be paired with a food justice curriculum that centers local community needs and personal student experiences. This approach would allow students to learn fundamental reasons why school-based gardens are needed in schools and provide an introduction to root cause analyses of food, environmental, and social justice issues.

Amir and Malcolm described learning more about food justice in the local community. For example, Amir connected environmental concerns to issues of food justice, providing the example that the depletion of groundwater may have potential impacts on food access and security for low-income individuals and families. Amir and Malcolm described how food chain workers are impacted by unsafe and exploitative working conditions, a key aspect of food justice outlined in the literature review (Harper, 2011; Sbicca, 2018). Furthermore, Amir and Malcolm described the impacts of food access and security on themselves, their families, and their communities, providing a necessary opportunity for them to use their voices to share their stories (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). This example showed how a food justice curriculum can provide a potential avenue for Black students to share their truth and knowledge in classroom spaces and attempt to disrupt the historical trend of epistemological erasure of Blackness in the classroom and civic spaces (Scheurich & Young, 1997). This example also highlighted how a food justice curriculum that centers the voices of marginalized communities can provide a pathway to value the perspectives of these communities, an important goal of critical race theorists (Bernal Delgado, 2002).

Amir and Malcolm brainstormed potential interventions to food justice concerns in the local community. To illustrate, Malcolm described how the federal minimum wage should be both raised and enforced to improve the lives of crop workers, highlighting their vital contribution to our global society and economy. Similarly, when tasked with brainstorming interventions to food insecurity in the local community, Malcolm identified two: increasing public transportation options to increase access to grocery stores and providing alternatives to the limited locations that offer fresh produce and other nutritious foods. These proposed interventions highlighted an understanding of food justice concerns as well as provided a

space for Malcolm to act as a knowledge contributor, brainstorming solutions to issues directly impacting his community (Tyson, 2003).

At the beginning of the summer school course, Amir and Malcolm were disinterested in the course material. However, by the end of the course, they began to consider their roles in the struggle for food justice in their local community. Amir described possibilities of becoming an educator to work with youth to address food insecurity and access challenges. Malcolm discussed his interest in promoting polyculture and environmental sustainability while prioritizing the needs of farmers. These findings suggested that there may have been a shift in the civic attitudes of the participants. As outlined in the introduction, Mabry (1998) defined *civic attitudes* as feelings of responsibility to help others solve issues impacting society. Amir and Malcolm clearly defined food insecurity as a societal problem during the course. After acknowledging this problem, Amir and Malcolm envisioned their future roles in the food justice movement, brainstorming possible avenues for engagement. Amir and Malcolm also remained committed to the maintenance and growth of the garden, training other students in the care and maintenance of plants. The main reason Amir and Malcolm remained committed to the garden is their vision for providing people in need with fruits and vegetables, showing their sense of responsibility for food access may have shifted over time. Also important, their commitment showed how two Black students were taking direct action and using their voices to advance food justice in the local community, making the community a more equitable place (Bernal Delgado, 2002; Blaisdell, 2005).

### Recommendations

Educators must ensure Black students are able to explore civic attitudes and expression in classroom settings. Also important, educators should provide spaces for Black students to identify and explore possible solutions to issues in their community, such as food access and security. Black students must be aware of the unique strength and lived experiences they bring to civic engagement spaces, and educators must facilitate a space and curriculum that acknowledges this power. Agricultural education and extension programs that center Black students and their individual and communal needs can provide a humanizing and emotionally nurturing space for Black students to explore pressing social, agricultural, political, economic, and environmental issues.

### References

- Allen, W., & Wilson, C. (2013). *The good food revolution: Growing healthy food, people, and communities*. Gotham Books.
- Almeida, S. (2015). Race-based epistemologies: The role of race and dominance in knowledge production. *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*, 13, 79–105. <https://eds-p-ebshost-com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=26d723e0-b588-4250-8771-ee2eb8cf2565%40redis>.
- Atwell, M. N., Bridgeland, J., & Levine, P. (2017). Civic deserts: America's civic challenge. *National Conference on Citizenship*, 1–36. <https://www.unr.edu/main/pdfs/verified-accessible/divisions-offices/student-services/student-life-services/student-engagement/civic-deserts-health-challenge.pdf>.
- Awry, W. (2023). Abundance and other lessons on the lower east side. In W. Awry, Ed., *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 138–147). PM Press.

- Bergamin, A. (2023). Rehearsing for rebellion: On “Bella Ciao” and Italy’s radical rice weeders. In W. Awry (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 112–119). PM Press.
- Berlow, A. (2015). *The food activist handbook*. Storey Publishing.
- Blair, D. (2009). The child in the garden: An evaluative review of the benefits of school gardening. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 40(2), 15–38. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JOEE.40.2.15-38>.
- Blaisdell, B. (2005). Seeing every student as a 10: Using critical race theory to engage white teachers’ colorblindness. *International Journal of Educational Policy Research & Practice*, 6(1), 31–50. <https://eds-p-ebshost-com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=7192dae0-f02c-4e9a-9ea6-c8b5d66dc028%40redis>.
- Broad, G. M. (2016). *More than just food: Food justice and community change*. University of California Press.
- Chan, G., & Sharma, N. (2023). “Remaking the commons”: A history of eating in public. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 56–64). PM Press.
- Cloutier, G., Houde-Tremblay E., & Gaudet, S. (2023). Collective urban gardens: Growing, learning and fostering social engagement. *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 28(11), 1463–1477. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2023.2238725>.
- Costello, M. (2023). On the food of the West Virginia mine wars. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 56–64). PM Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Danis, L. (2023). Queer potlucks offer food for capitalist critique and collective action. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 102–106). PM Press.
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical race-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 105–126. <https://eds-p-ebshost-com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=698919b3-37f7-4b1d-9ca3-fed263b2cd33%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=edsgcl.82779404&db=edsggo>.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.
- Diaz, J. M., Warner, L. A., & Webb, S. T. (2018). Outcome framework for school garden program development and evaluation: A Delphi approach. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 59(2), 143–165. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2018.02143>.
- Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau, C. K. (2005). And we are still not saved: Critical race theory in education ten years later. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 7–27. <https://eds-p-ebshost-com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=698919b3-37f7-4b1d-9ca3-fed263b2cd33%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=edsgcl.82779404&db=edsggo>.

com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=bc57da0a-b41b-4f75-a412-5957d7045588%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=EJ719270&db=eric.

- Duncan, K. (2020). ‘That’s my job’: Black teachers’ perspectives on helping black students navigate white supremacy. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 25(7), 978–996. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1798377>.
- Feng, L., & Suzuki, S. (2023). Black youth value voting, have political ambition, face barriers to engagement. *Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement*. <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/black-youth-value-voting-have-political-ambition-face-barriers-engagement>.
- Gallavan, N. P. & Bowles, F. A. (2012). School-community gardening: Learning, living, earning, and giving. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 24(3), 13–16. <https://socialstudies.org/publications/ssyl>.
- Gálvez, A. (2023). La morada: When a restaurant is a sanctuary. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 29–35). PM Press.
- Gershenson, S., Holt, S., & Papageorge, N. (2016). Who believes in me? The effect of student teacher demographic match on teacher expectations. *Economics of Education Review*, 52(1), 209–224. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2016.03.002>.
- Gottlieb, R., & Joshi, A. (2010). *Food justice*. MIT Press.
- Green, J. J., Green, E. M., & Kleiner, A. M. (2011). From the past to the present: Agricultural development and black farmers in the American south. In A. H. Alkon & J. Agyeman, (Eds.), *Food justice: Race, class, and sustainability*. (1st ed., p. 47–64). MIT Press.
- Guthman, J. (2011). *Weighing in: Obesity, food justice, and the limits of capitalism*. University of California Press.
- Hacker, D. B. (2018). Replotting value: Community gardens and Bessie Head’s *A question of power*. In L. Nishime & K. D. Hester Williams (Eds.), *Racial ecologies* (1st ed., n.p.). University of Washington Press.
- Harper, A. B. (2011). Vegans of color, racialized embodiment, and problematics of the “exotic”. In A. H. Alkon & J. Agyeman, (Eds.), *Food justice: Race, class, and sustainability*. (1st ed., p. 221–238). MIT Press.
- Hoffman, A. J., Knight, L. F. M., & Wallach, J. (2007). Gardening activities, education, and self-esteem: Learning outside the classroom. *Urban Education*, 42(5), 403–411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085907304909>.
- Jauk-Ajamie, D., & Blackwood, A. L. (2024). *Gardening behind bars: Clinical sociology and food justice in incarcerated settings*. Springer.
- Kelly, V., & Brannlund, E. (2024). “I learned this in the gardening group:” The impact of a community garden on children and their families’ eating habits. *Irish Educational Studies*, 43(2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2024.2314312>.

- Kingsley, J., Foenander, E., & Bailey, A. (2019). "You feel like you're part of something bigger:" Exploring motivations for community garden participation in Melbourne, Australia. *BMC Public Health*, 19(745), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-710803>.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3–12. <https://eds-p-ebshost-com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=615368b9-ad88-41e5-a6b5-6f966938f620%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=edsjsr.3876731&db=edsjsr>.
- Lane-McKinley, M. (2023). Notes on utopian failure in the commune kitchens. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 131–137). PM Press.
- Langhout, R. D., Rappaport, J., & Simmons, D. (2002). Integrating community into the classroom: Community gardening, community involvement, and project-based learning. *Urban Education*, 37(3), 323–349. <https://search-ebshost-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ660356&site=eds-live>.
- Lekies, K. S., & Eames-Sheavly, M. (2008). Evaluating an initiative to increase youth participation in school and community gardening activities. *Journal of Youth Development: Bridging Research and Practice*, 3(2), 119–125. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2008.313>.
- Levinson, M. (2005). Solving the civic achievement gap in de facto segregated schools. *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly*, 25(1-2), 2–10. [https://content.ebscohost.com/cds/retrieve?content=AQICAHiyIJ\\_bvOB56hI8UzTN6Ryruh7a0kiIBN\\_ANwtaWYjmxwHB0hY4caeSZTK9la\\_gt3huAAAA4jCB3wYJKoZIHvcNAQcGoIHRMIHOAgEAMIHIBgkqhkiG9w0BBwEwHgYJYIZIAWUDBAEuMBEEDI3xtkii8\\_rY0wDD2wIBEICBmhYhsWHZVvGsBtfeZufUagxfAWFuM0fZPqT7MxwM1QKIdlwC-A\\_gUMr7MCqqiB1P-HnnIjH6mN0U6cWHI7XmVkBrP29P2ka5Vc9KC-DtDvE7iLJiNM7UiGX7OxB21PTn4\\_O2zcVI-amx9PWP7MtMkzc5izC43wY49GcGKI5zu\\_jJj9Pie78wLUHIGJARBtxTAzHPH7eH-x0D5aI=](https://content.ebscohost.com/cds/retrieve?content=AQICAHiyIJ_bvOB56hI8UzTN6Ryruh7a0kiIBN_ANwtaWYjmxwHB0hY4caeSZTK9la_gt3huAAAA4jCB3wYJKoZIHvcNAQcGoIHRMIHOAgEAMIHIBgkqhkiG9w0BBwEwHgYJYIZIAWUDBAEuMBEEDI3xtkii8_rY0wDD2wIBEICBmhYhsWHZVvGsBtfeZufUagxfAWFuM0fZPqT7MxwM1QKIdlwC-A_gUMr7MCqqiB1P-HnnIjH6mN0U6cWHI7XmVkBrP29P2ka5Vc9KC-DtDvE7iLJiNM7UiGX7OxB21PTn4_O2zcVI-amx9PWP7MtMkzc5izC43wY49GcGKI5zu_jJj9Pie78wLUHIGJARBtxTAzHPH7eH-x0D5aI=).
- Levinson, M. (2010). The civic empowerment gap: Defining the problem and locating solutions. In Sherrod, L., Torney-Purta, J., & Flanagan, C. A. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement* (1st ed., p. 331–361). John Wiley & Sons.
- Li, C. (2023). On feeding others as an act of resistance. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 4–13). PM Press.
- Mabry, J. B. (1998). Pedagogical variations in service-learning and student outcomes: How time, contact, and reflection matter. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 5(1), 32–47. <https://quod-lib-umich-edu.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/m/mjcs/3239521>.
- Mares, T. M., & Peña, D. G. (2011). Environmental and food justice: Toward local, slow, and deep food systems. In A. H. Alkon & J. Agyeman, (Eds.), *Food justice: Race, class, and sustainability*. (1st ed., p. 197–220). MIT Press.
- Mayam. (2023). On farming as a practice of abundance and liberation. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 49–55). PM Press.

- McCormack, C. (2000). From interview transcript to interpretive story: Part 1 - Viewing the transcript through multiple lenses. *Field Methods*, 12(4), 282–297. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ant&AN=555815&site=eds-live>.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Minkoff-Zern, L-A., Peluso, N., Sowerwine, J., & Getz, C. (2011). Race and regulation: Asian immigrants in California agriculture. In A. H. Alkon & J. Agyeman, (Eds.), *Food justice: Race, class, and sustainability*. (1st ed., p. 65–86). MIT Press.
- Morales, A. (2011). Growing food systems and justice: Dismantling racism through sustainable food systems. In A. H. Alkon & J. Agyeman, (Eds.), *Food justice: Race, class, and sustainability*. (1st ed., p. 149–176). MIT Press.
- Norgaard, K. M., Reed, R., & Van Horn, C. (2011). A continuing legacy: Institutional racism, hunger, and nutritional justice on the Klamath. In A. H. Alkon & J. Agyeman, (Eds.), *Food justice: Race, class, and sustainability*. (1st ed., p. 23–46). MIT Press.
- Quizar, J. (2018). Working to live: Black-led farming in Detroit’s racialized economy. In L. Nishime & K. D. Hester Williams (Eds.), *Racial ecologies* (1st ed., n.p.). University of Washington Press.
- Ruiz, N. (2023). Seeds planted by Nana Tota. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 161–164). PM Press.
- Sbicca, J. (2018). *Food justice now!: Deepening the roots of social struggle*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Scheurich, J. J., & Young, M.D. (1997). Coloring Epistemologies: Are Our Research Epistemologies Racially Biased? *Educational Researcher*, 26(4), 4–16. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1176687>.
- Schocker, J. B., Zook, C., & Hummel, D. (2016). Growing citizenship: Confronting the “civic empowerment gap” with a garden project. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 28(4), 27–31. <https://www.socialstudies.org/social-studies-and-young-learner/28/4>.
- Steel, A. (2011). Youth and food justice: Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement. In E. Holt-Gimenez (Ed.), *Food Movements Unite! Strategies to Transform Our Food System* (1st ed., n.p.) Oakland: First Books.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage.
- Tognola, V. (2023). Cooking revolutions in the popular pot. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 14–21). PM Press.
- Tovar, V. (2023). On fat activism and the power of being an outsider. In W. Awry, (Ed.), *Nourishing resistance: Stories of food, protest, and mutual aid*. (1st ed., p. 90–98). PM Press.
- Tyson, C. (2003). Research, race and an epistemology of emancipation. *Mid-Western Educational Research*, 16(1), 2–5. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42978079>.

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>.

Woodson, A. (2019). Racial code words, re-memberings and black kids’ civic imaginations: A critical race ethnography of a post-civil rights leader. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *50*(1), 26–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12277>.

Woodson A., & Love, B. (2019). Outstanding: Centering black kids’ enoughness in civic education research. *Multicultural Perspectives*, *21*(2), 91–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2019.1606631>.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Sage.