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A Pedagogy of Provisioning: Urban Agriculture as a Mechanism for Community Renewal

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Abstract: This paper explores the significance of urban agriculture as a mechanism for teaching and learning to support the collective welfare of an inner-city neighborhood.

Urban agriculture is often understood by supporters as a key element in transforming neglected urban landscapes. Positive outcomes cited in the literature include, improved nutrition, food security and environmental beautification. However, the viability of growing food in these urban environments depends upon the relevance of urban agriculture to neighborhood residents. This study of the restoration of inner-city vacant lots through food production revealed two additional areas of primary importance to African-Americans who use urban agriculture as a mechanism for the transmission of cultural values and beliefs. First, the discovery that many liberating and unifying aspects of the Tuskegee Institute of Georgia are alive in the pedagogy of the study participants. Second, the role of spirituality as the primary pedagogical vehicle for community outreach through urban agriculture. It was found that each of these areas constituted the foundation for indigenous knowledge exchange among the study participants.

This study extended over three consecutive growing seasons. During this time a total of three gardens were developed primarily for food production. Major determining factors in the selection of the Milwaukee site was the newness of the garden initiative and because it was part of an established non-profit organization's vision for inner-city transformation. In addition, the three community leaders, as primary informants, had a broad range of experiences and perspectives on subjects ranging from urban agriculture, inner-city renewal, youth development and healthy lifestyles.

An ethnographic approach was used to explore how these community leaders used urban agriculture to transmit cultural values and beliefs. In addition, a neighborhood summer youth program was initiated which involved local youth in gardening. Data was obtained in two primary ways. First, daily fieldnotes were taken during or immediately following garden based work and activities. Second, I conducted a series of open-ended interviews structured around discussion of the local impact of the gardens and the youth program. The interviews were conducted at the end of the growing season with the community leaders, three neighborhood mothers, and some of the children who participated in the youth program. This data was subsequently coded which led to theme identification.

The pedagogical themes uncovered in this study were of special significance in the development of positive relationships in this neighborhood study. Of primary importance is the generation of new feelings people had about the space itself, and the value of the people who inhabit the neighborhood. As a public demonstration I discovered how urban agriculture fosters the spirit of unity based upon principled action. The true spirit of unity in this study was shown to be an outcome of personal transformation leading to public engagement that incorporates the belief in the intrinsic worth of others and of one's environment. This study ultimately became a reflection of Dr. Martin Luther King's "beloved community" (Cannon, 1988, p. 169). The children's program epitomized the beloved community as the street space became a place of balance and active involvement within the "larger principles of love and justice in the sphere of

practical action” (King as cited in Cannon, 1988, p.172). And it was from this centering place the metaphor of beloved community blossomed.

Continuing these projects is an ongoing concern in the urban agriculture movement and education is key to supporting many of these projects. Hopefully this study will aid those doing the hard work of developing and supporting these projects. In conclusion, this study leads us to consider the neglected agricultural legacy of African-Americans, which continues to contribute to the cultural integrity and uplifting of this Milwaukee neighborhood.

References

Cannon, K. G. (1988). *Black womanist ethics*. Atlanta: Scholar’s Press.