



## Research paper

# Opening garden gates: Teachers making meaning of school gardens in Havana and Philadelphia



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Comparative case study of garden educators in Havana, Cuba and Philadelphia, United States.
- Educators navigate the challenges and opportunities in local school settings and the larger policy and social contexts.
- Educators create gateways to garden education through situated pedagogical frameworks.
- Havana garden educators focus on group collaboration and work-study education.
- Philadelphia garden educators focus on child-centered engagement and science education.

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 23 May 2016

Received in revised form

1 December 2016

Accepted 5 December 2016

## Keywords:

Environmental education

Comparative education

Teacher thinking

Curriculum

Pedagogy

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how garden educators in Havana, Cuba and Philadelphia, United States navigate the challenges and opportunities provided by local school settings and the larger policy and social contexts to think about and explain garden education as valid and valuable pedagogy. Havana and Philadelphia educators explain their own perspectives on school garden programs by drawing on situated pedagogical paradigms about the contributions garden programs make to schools and the schooled individual. In so doing, they build personally relevant meaning and public validation of garden work in institutional and community settings, creating gateways for implementation of school gardens.

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## 1. Introduction

Today presents an opportune moment for comparative examination of urban school gardens. While schools around the world have long engaged in gardening, in recent years such programs are increasingly given new and greater roles in addressing urgent needs for food security, better nutrition, and environmental protection (Blair, 2009; Guitart, Pickering, & Byrne, 2012; Sherman, 2010; Wake & Birdsall, 2015; Williams & Brown, 2012). Given their interactive and collaborative nature in involvement with a real-world pursuit, school gardens are easily congruent with key goals of environmental education, including ecological knowledge, issue awareness, and the development of pro-environmental

attitudes and skills through civic engagement and outdoor experiences. Such goals have defined environmental education on the international stage since the late 1960s (Hungerford, Volk, & Ramsey, 1994) and have more recently been promoted by the United Nations as part of its Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014). This article examines how teachers engage with school gardens through a comparative case study of teachers' conceptualizations and self-reflections on garden education in two cities with unique programs: Havana, Cuba and Philadelphia, United States. In particular, this article focuses on the following research questions: How do teachers explain and promote school garden programs? How do teachers navigate the opportunities and challenges within their school, social, and policy contexts to implement garden education?

While each location by itself would provide rich opportunity for insight into how teachers think about and explain a particular type of environmental education program, a cross-national analysis

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allows for deeper comparison of situated localized responses to increasingly global challenges. Havana is recognized as having one of the most widely developed urban agriculture programs in the world, marked by organized attempts to promote local food sustainability through informal and formal education venues (Chaplowe, 1998; Peña Díaz & Harris, 2005). Philadelphia is sometimes referred to as a “grande dame” of urban community gardens (von Hassell, 2002) and has an extended, but fragmented, history of integrating gardens into schools.

With significant histories of urban farming and educational gardening, Havana and Philadelphia contrast in their current education policies and broader social contexts related to school gardening specifically and environmental education more generally. Havana provides a salient example of a case where teachers involved in urban school garden programs, which proliferated during a time of acute socio-economic crisis (1990s), implement national policy focused on revolutionary social values and group collaboration as an extension of pragmatic local sustainability. Philadelphia, which has a long and recently revived tradition of community gardening but no official school garden policy, provides a relevant case city for examining how teachers promote gardens to enhance academic instruction in the sciences and encourage holistic learning opportunities. Despite these distinctions, in both cities there is a similar conceptualization of garden education as a mechanism for urban ecological renewal and what local teachers see as pedagogical best practice. The way that teachers in each city draw on discourses in these areas provides insight into how their conceptualizations and self-reflections on garden pedagogy are embedded in a local context.

## 2. Conceptual framework

While outdoor, nature-based education has a long history of integration into school systems around the world, starting in the 1970s the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) organized a series of international conferences to promote sustainability as a global education agenda. The 1977 Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education in Tbilisi, Georgia produced a uniform definition of environmental education focused on knowledge about the environment, awareness and motivation to care for the environment, learning through outdoor experiences, and civic engagement to resolve environmental challenges. This basic framework for environmental education has remained relatively stable within UNESCO documents (Hungerford et al., 1994; Wals, 2009).

With its broad conceptual goals, environmental education takes many forms, including garden education, which itself is varied and may connect more or less to the various aspects of the environmental education script (Gaylie, 2011; Pivnick, 1994). Sherman (2010) calls attention to this variation by pointing out the history of garden education is one of “diverse aims, changing practices, (and) fluctuating commitment” (p. 5). Phillips and Roberts (2011) note that despite a “seeming international consensus that school cultivation can enhance learning and community development,” approaches to such programs “have diverged immensely across local and national socioeconomic contexts” (p. 71). Likewise, Gaylie (2011) reports that school gardens have emerged “from a wide range of community interests as diverse as the gardens themselves” (p. 2).

Teachers have much to do with this global variation in school gardening. As Desmond, Grieshop, and Subramaniam (2002) assert, garden-based learning is “defined by the practitioners” and the meaning and goals of garden programs are situational to their practice (p. 15). The extent of practitioners’ roles in shaping garden education is further illuminated by the fact that such programs

require special resources and expertise and their implementation is often unsustainable without the support, motivation, and daily efforts of at least one teacher. Moreover, given their often interdisciplinary approach to real-world situations and practical problems, school gardens often conflict with the organization and norms of formal schools, a challenge that scholars have noted for environmental education in general (Smyth, 2006; Stevenson, 1987/2007; Williams & Brown, 2012). Even in places where much has been done to integrate gardens into existing curriculum, “the battle for recognition of their educational value continues” (Sherman, 2010, p. 5). While school gardens are internationally lauded as significant opportunities for educational and community-based sustainability projects, teachers are key actors in shaping school gardens and must often give particular attention to building support for their implementation and to translating policy into pedagogical practice. In short, it is teachers who are primary actors in catalyzing and implementing school gardens.

## 3. Contextual background of the cases

Havana and Philadelphia provide informative cases for comparative examination of how teachers think about and rationalize garden education. Cuba has a globally-unique history of agricultural-focused programming in schools. Most widely recognized through the “Schools to the Countryside” program, in which secondary students spend approximately four weeks combining agricultural work with academic studies at rural “camps,” agricultural programs became a cornerstone of “work-study” education in Cuba shortly after the 1959 Revolution. Policy-makers and political leaders ground the praxis of work-study pedagogy in the educational worth of manual labor, a value associated with José Martí (Nassif, 1994), the 19th century philosopher, poet, and leader of Cuban independence from Spain, as well as Marxist-Leninist theory promoting the dignity of work. Revolutionary leaders saw education that combined manual work with rigorous academic study as an opportunity to ameliorate the social divisions of the past while cultivating social solidarity. Additionally, by setting aside school time for students to participate in manual-agricultural work, the principle speaks to integrating students into national economic production (Ministerio de Educación de Cuba, 2005). Blum (2011) explains that through socially useful activities work-study education has sought to create “a classless, egalitarian society ... the student was to develop the values required of the working class, the new society” (p. 53). Yet state leaders and policy makers started phasing out the Schools to the Countryside program in the late 1980s and early 1990s, partly as a practical response to the difficulties in transporting students long distances across the island. At the same time, on-site *autoconsumo* (self-subsistence) school gardens acquired even greater pragmatic importance in Cuba during the 1990s, an era of severe agricultural, food, and energy shortages precipitated by the rupture in Cuban support by the fraying Soviet Union and the tightening of the United States embargo. As Weinberger (2013) notes, between 1991 and 1995 “when Cuba lost access to fossil fuels, food imports and the agricultural inputs it depended on, food availability declined by around 60%” (p. 851). During what became known as the “Special Period in Peacetime,” the Cuban state, as well as local community organizations, used a range of small-scale urban agriculture projects as a practical response to a national socio-economic crisis.

Cubans have had enormous success in localizing subsistence practices (Chan & Freyre Roach, 2012; Funes, García, Bourque, Pérez, & Rosset, 2002) and Havana in particular is a globally premier example of low-impact, organic urban farming (Altieri et al., 1999; Clouse, 2014). Moreover, national interest in local sustainability has been fostered by broader international attention to

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