

THE WHY OF OUR WORK

The importance and impact of food education

Midwest Food Connection - by Molly Sowash

INTRO

In the fall, we walk into the classroom with a tall cornstalk in tow. The next week we hide root vegetables around the room for students to discover in an imaginary root cellar. In the winter, we paste beans to a map of the world and look at potatoes full of eyes. As the growing season begins in the spring, we schlep buckets of soil into the classroom to start seedlings that students tend before bringing home. As our mission states, “Midwest Food Connection brings educational adventures in food, cooking, and gardening to children and their families.” This is what we do. The question is why? How does a small non-profit of four traveling food teachers make a big impact? And why does food education matter?

HEALTH

We have a serious health problem in this country. One in five school-aged children is obese; a percentage that has more than tripled since the 1970s (“Healthy Schools”). In 2014, a report by the Commonwealth Fund put the United States last among eleven industrialized countries “on measures of health system quality, efficiency, access to care, equity and healthy lives” (Potyraj). Perhaps the most obvious reason for our work is to encourage healthy eating behavior in children. Food is the most direct route individuals have to impacting their health. Children who have limited say over their lifestyles, for example, might have the opportunity to make choices at the dinner table. Our job is to provide the knowledge, positive experiences, and tools to empower them to make healthy decisions.

MFC’s approach to food education centers around experiential learning. By bringing real food into the classroom, sharing stories, cooking together, and tasting delicious recipes, we encourage trying new foods in a fun and approachable way. As one classroom teacher said about our program, “You don’t say, ‘You have to eat your broccoli or you’re not going to grow!’” Instead, we create an engaging, sensory experience and give room for children to grow into a positive relationship with healthy foods. We emphasize that their taste buds are always developing, so it’s okay if they don’t like it *yet*. This growth mindset allows for the gradual development of good eating habits. According to a study by the *Journal of Consumer Research*, when children are told to eat a food because “it’s good for them,” they are less likely to eat it. This finding affirms our teaching approach to “focus more on the positive experience of eating the food” (Twist).

Article after article confirms the link between experiential food education and improved eating habits, both for the body and the earth. A long-term study examining the effectiveness of a

food education program called “cookshops” found that nutrition education that involved cooking in the classroom paired with cognitive learning and multiple exposures to the same foods in the cafeteria, increased the intake of whole grains and vegetables (Liquori et al. 312). The researchers highlight the importance of fun when confronting new foods; “The experience of having fun working together in small groups and enjoying eating what they (students) have personally produced,” the study says, “may have been important ingredients contributing to the effectiveness of CS in enhancing preferences for targeted foods (Liquori et al. 310).” Our program offers a similar educational method, incorporating explicit connections to foods that are served in the cafeteria so that students can make informed decisions about their food during lunchtime.

Obesity and health problems disproportionately affect those in poverty. However, poor families and individuals who suffer from poor diets often list nutrition education as a possible solution. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, found that SNAP participants are much less healthy than the rest of the population. Poverty stimulates a stress response which creates a mentality of scarcity, “defined as the diminished cognitive capacity to manage challenges, which when combined with decreased purchasing power for healthy food, adversely affect dietary quality” (Clinton). When asked to identify solutions to this negative feedback loop, participants asked for nutrition education and for SNAP to both incentivize healthy foods *and* exclude unhealthy foods for purchase. We are answering the call. To buy broccoli at the store, families need to know about it first, as well as how to prepare it. SNAP can subsidize fruits and veggies, but if a family member doesn’t have a positive experience with those foods, they will be unlikely to spend their limited money on them, especially knowing their children may reject them. This is where our educational program steps in. Parents of students who’ve had our lessons share stories of their children coming home and asking for avocados, leeks, and beets. “The parents of our kids say they want to grow tomatoes,” one classroom teacher told us, “They never want tomatoes!” A MFC survey of 81 students shows that 80% of our students tell their families about what they learned during our lesson and 53% of students had made a MFC recipe with their families. As another parent shared with us; “My first grader came home telling me about a salad he made in class and then offered to make our dinner salad this evening. Great stuff!” MFC gives the positive experiences and the hard skills to equip families to select and prepare real food.

ENVIRONMENT

To understand a food is to understand where it comes from, how it grows, and what it looks like in nature. Through our lesson content and our co-op partnerships, MFC directly and indirectly motivates environmentally-conscious behavior. In our early fall curriculum, for example, we teach a lesson called “Eat Local” which explores the many reasons for eating local foods. Students brainstorm these reasons and discuss the benefits of decreasing fossil fuel emissions, supporting local economies, and eating seasonally to care for the land. By bringing

locally-grown produce from the co-op into the classroom, we connect children to food that grows only a few miles away. Our students become inspired to eat the foods they learn about in our lessons and request these foods at home. As a result, some families choose to purchase these local options and in so doing, plug into the local food system. We move the needle on the demand for local foods, fruits and vegetables, and sustainable agriculture. As researchers from the same Cookshop Program reported of their similar curriculum, “The fact that a content that emphasized food and environment issues rather than personal health had an impact on dietary intake is of significance” (Liquori et al. 310). The connection that we draw between food choices and environmental impact empowers these “citizens of the future” to make healthy decisions both for their bodies *and* the earth.

Our work in this area is only deepening, as we roll out a new series of lessons entitled “Climate Conscious Cuisine.” This series exposes students to seaweed’s powerful role in cleaning water, organic farmer’s ability to work with nature when solving challenges, creative ways to conserve food, and local MN foods of long ago. As one classroom teacher said of MFC, “You fit right into the food movement even though you don’t say it explicitly. You are planting the seeds about where this food came from and all the work it took to get it.”

COMMUNITY

By learning about and plugging into a local food system, MFC students become connected to the greater MN community. Whether tasting a Honeycrisp apple in class, going to the co-op with their families, seeing pictures of local farmers, visiting farms around the Twin Cities during our field trips, or starting to grow food in their own neighborhoods, young people connect the dots of the food system. As one of our educators remarked, we bring the “human aspect” to food. We say, “think about the farmer who grew the food that you’re about to taste.” When kids learn about the support we give to farmers in our state or the sustainability of our collective actions, they begin to uphold one of the seven national co-op principles; concern for community (“Co-op Values & Principles”).

The impact of our lessons extends beyond the four-week series of lessons or even the schoolyear. Some of our students who have become inspired to think about their role in the food system grow up to make careers out of these roles. Recently, our executive director Uli Koester ran into a past student in the potato section while shopping at the Wedge co-op. This student, now a young man in his 20s, remembered his lessons with MFC and took great care in selecting potatoes. “I see the interest continues,” Uli commented. “Yes,” the young man responded, “I’m actually a chef at Grand Café!”

One of our past students and current volunteers recalls having MFC visit her second-grade classroom in 1999. “I remember sitting in a circle cross-legged with classmates, and I can still picture with perfect clarity the moment when the instructor sliced through a star fruit as we watched wide-eyed,” she writes, “It astonished me that something from nature could create such a perfect and beautiful geometric shape – and it tasted unlike anything I had experienced before!

That moment of realization and appreciation has stuck with me throughout my entire life." Reflecting on her path since that small moment of awe, she writes, "I now work in sustainable agriculture and food justice. MFC has a profound impact on the next generation, and I support their work 100%." Our students grow up to become chefs or work for food justice non-profits, carrying their early interest in food into their professional lives.

LIFE SKILLS

When examining the reason for this work, we cannot forget the basic skills that children are learning during our lessons. Given the hands-on nature of our teaching, students help us measure and pour, grind spices and cut vegetables, seed plants and water seedlings. As they prepare simple recipes or care for a seedling, they learn to cook for themselves and to grow food on their own. As a classroom teacher remarked, "It's a topic that comes up – food is a part of our everyday. It's something basic that we should know. Everyone sits down to dinner together." These are life skills that everyone needs to learn in order to feed themselves healthy meals.

Our hands-on approach resonates particularly with children who struggle with traditional learning modalities. MFC has often received feedback that we connect with students with learning disabilities or autism spectrum challenges. One parent shared with us that her son is part of the autism program and after coming home from a MFC lesson, she was amazed to hear from him about the potatoes they had learned about and how good they were. He had never eaten a potato at home. Similarly, a Special Ed teacher told us about how after our spring unit with second graders at Groveland Park, she saw something that "melted her heart." She was accompanying a boy home from school and had to return back to his house because she accidentally had some of his belongings. When she got to his house she saw that he had many little cups with seeds all out on his front step and he was carefully watering them all. She said he was "the last kid she would have ever imagined doing this." A teacher from Dowling noted that these kids with special needs can often only assert themselves around food and their ability to reject it. By presenting food in a fun way, we excite all children about enthusiastically choosing healthy foods.

CULTURAL AWARENESS

Food lies at the intersection of health, environment, community, and culture. By taking a holistic approach to food education, we broaden the world view and historical view of children's thinking. As our winter series "Gifts of Many Cultures" expresses in each lesson, many of the fruits, vegetables, and dishes that we enjoy eating in the US have been brought here by immigrants and refugees. We explore the history of the potato in Ireland, the soybean in China, and millet in Western Africa. We learn about the Native farming practice of growing the "three sisters" of corn, squash, and beans together. "We're not only increasing children's exposure to more healthy food," executive director Uli Koester explains, "we're also showing them how to

be sensitive to other cultures and be aware of where our food is coming from.” For a young generation that is growing up in an increasingly multicultural world, we celebrate foods from many cultures and in so doing, validate them. As Uli reflected, “We’re not always just giving *new* choices, but we’re also validating the choices some students have already made.” Whether trying the Indian dish of dhal or biting into a Mejdool date, MFC students from kindergarten through 5th grade have learned to hold up multiculturalism as a gift.

ACCESS TO FOOD EDUCATION

Junk food advertising permeates our culture. Children from a 2004 study viewed an average of one food commercial every five minutes of TV time, adding up to as many as three hours of food commercials every week (Mary Story and Simone French). These food commercials disproportionately promote junk foods such as soft drinks, chips, cookies, and candy. In stark contrast, elementary students receive an average of just 3.4 hours of food and nutrition education a year (Jacobson). This explains why fewer than 20 percent of adolescents eat the recommended five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily (Smelkova). How can we expect to foster a healthy generation of eaters if children view three hours of junk food ads a week, yet receive only three hours of healthy food education a year? MFC is responding to a real and pressing need. We counteract the pervasive influence of junk food messaging and we increase the opportunity for students around the Twin Cities to receive this education.

CLOSING

We are in the business of getting kids interested in the details of food. By situating food as a subject of study, we show that it is worthy of our minds and our attention. During our lessons, food is not another boring part of a daily routine or a list of vitamins and nutrients that we must eat, but rather, a vital component of life -- the life of our bodies, our plants, our soil, and our ecosystem. In addition to the impact we have on our students’ health, environmental-consciousness, community engagement, cultural awareness, and life skills, we pass on a sensitivity to the special place food has in the world. We empower young people to care for themselves, for the land, and for each other.

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