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# Justice-Oriented Learning: Reconfiguring Experiential Education with a California Farmworker Community

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## **I**ntroduction

Increasingly, educational institutions at every level are being charged with cultivating students' commitment to deeper learning, reflection, and action on issues related to justice. Much of the scholarly research on social justice and environmental justice has portrayed these issues as discrete, fragmented concerns with separate solutions (e.g., Adamson, 2018; Sze & London, 2008). Recent approaches, however, reframe the supposed dichotomies, uncovering inherent connections between societal injustices and environmental degradation. The divergent approaches to concerns about injustice are rooted in differing views of exploitation: either the exercise of power by one group of people over another (social injustice), or the callous exertion of excessive power over nature (degraded ecosystems). Growing numbers of education researchers and practitioners point out that we cannot address these critical issues in a vacuum and comprehensive approaches to teaching and learning that advance social, racial, economic, and environmental justice are being explored in many schools, universities, and communities (e.g., Backman et al., 2018; Bahá'í International Community, 2012; Beltrán et al., 2016).

The urgent issues impacting the U.S. and global communities today open new horizons for deep inquiry into relevant, timely curriculum content and for re-examining parameters of education's role in the cultivation of new mindsets. Finding common ground will mean translating conceptions of justice from societal equity to environmental sustainability and back again, that is "... fundamentally an ethical challenge and must also be addressed at the levels

of people's values" (Dahl, 2012, p.18). The co-authors of this article explore the contributions of an innovative experiential learning program in a California farmworker community to the development of integrated solutions, working toward a food/agriculture system that acknowledges the "complex terrain at the confluence" of both social and environmental justice concerns (Campbell, 2013, p. 76).

## **ALBA: 'Dawn of A New Day'**

The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) has been operating for over 20 years on a 100-acre organic farm and agriculture education center in California's Salinas Valley, the 'Salad Bowl of America,' famous for its ideal growing climate, where billions of dollars in produce (strawberries, lettuce, grapes, and a diverse array of vegetables) are cultivated and harvested every year. California's predominantly Latinx immigrant community has comprised an overwhelming majority of the field labor in recent decades, yet these farmworkers own just 4% of farms and earn an average income below poverty level (Brillinger, 2020). Economic opportunity for these workers is limited by structural barriers, including lack of access to land and social/professional networks.

Over 35% of the organic fruits and vegetables produced in the Salinas Valley originate from ALBA ('dawn' in Spanish), a highly productive organic farm, and educational center with a visionary mission: "to help farmworkers and other limited-resource aspiring and beginning farmers become farm owners" through land-based education in the heart of the Salinas Valley; its programs serve aspiring farmers, over 85% of whom are Latinx current/former

farmworkers averaging 30 years of age, with average annual income under \$38,000 (NSAC, 2017, p. 60).

Combining classroom instruction and guest lectures with experiential, land-based education, ALBA's educational programs are embedded in a larger system connecting farmworkers, families, and community members with a regional community college in a multi-pronged approach leading to a variety of outcomes, including academic credit for program participants working on college degrees (e.g., Associate of Science in Small Farm Operation and Management). The curriculum components are carefully designed integrating experiential learning principles and a values-based framework (Kolb, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2008), addressing social and environmental justice issues.

The five-year ALBA program starts with a 300-hour Farmer Education Course, 'PEPA' (*Programa Educativo para Pequeños Agricultores*), which takes place over one year and covers all aspects of running a farm business, organic production, and whole farm planning. Classroom instruction is bilingual, provided by ALBA's experienced staff and guest speakers from the organic farming sector. The final project includes each participant's presentation of a crop plan and financial projection for her/his first year of farming. All graduates of the PEPA course are then eligible to launch a farm enterprise, the 'incubator' phase, leasing land and equipment at subsidized rates. For up to four years, they practice, and gradually master organic growing, marketing, and business management skills needed to prepare for successful transition into independent farming.

## Exploring Pathways to a Sustainable Future

At a time when American farm numbers are near all-time lows, ALBA provides land-based, organic farming education and resources to help low-income, aspiring farmers develop new knowledge and skills, and the opportunity to pursue the dream of farm ownership. The curriculum integrates timely and relevant topics within an innovative experiential learning framework. As educational theorist Dewey (1938) indicated over 80 years ago, "[T]he central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (pp. 27-8).

The program is committed to social and environmental justice; underlying the entire system is the conviction that immigrant farmworkers have solid farming experience, strong work ethic and values. The curriculum seeks a balanced approach between

conventional and sustainable farming practices, shifting from traditional techniques with overreliance on linear thinking to a critical thinking approach embracing complexities, "... contrasting perspectives, different possibilities, and often, non-univocal solutions" (Concina, 2019, p.4). For example, these adult learners develop new knowledge and understanding of environmentally sound practices that are often disregarded by conventional farms such as integrating cover crops (i.e., plants that are cultivated to enhance sustainability rather than for the sole purpose of being harvested and marketed for short-term profit) into their crop plan and financial projection. As they implement this practice into their farming, they develop appreciation of the value of cover crops in increasing soil organic matter and fertility, reducing erosion, promoting water infiltration, limiting pest and disease outbreaks, and improving overall soil structure. Furthermore, this practice contributes to long-term environmental benefits, including decreased reliance on fossil fuels and a healthier ecosystem (UC Davis, 2017).

## Participatory Community-Based Methods

This study explored ALBA's approach to land-based experiential learning with current/former Latinx farmworkers and families, to develop a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives on program content, processes, and impacts. The voices of three fully engaged ALBA insiders, a group of voluntary co-researchers, are highlighted throughout. Maria and Marco (pseudonyms) were born in California, children of immigrant farmworkers with deep roots in agriculture. Program director and lifelong learner, Ed (pseudonym), has trained hundreds of aspiring farmers on organic production and small farm business management over the past ten years.

A defining feature of community-based participatory research (CBPR) is collaborative inquiry to implement change by working in partnership with study participants in all phases of the study design (Farias et al., 2017; Strand et al., 2003). In 2020, the first author approached ALBA to explore interest in investigating the program's educational processes in collaboration with higher education partners. As a result, she was invited to join ALBA's instructional sessions, attend meetings with program graduates, and engage in educational program activities with the community of learners. Over a six-month period, she and co-researchers Maria, Marco, and Ed have collectively conducted qualitative interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and document reviews in collaboration with other unnamed participants. Due to Covid-19 regulations, many group sessions were held

on Zoom; the farmlands were opened for outdoor hands-on learning during the summer 2021 term, opening opportunities for some face-to-face meetings.

We examined the following research questions:

- In what ways has ALBA's curriculum design impacted program participants' knowledge of and commitments to social/environmental justice in agriculture?
- How do these participants describe the aspects of the program that have most impacted them both personally and professionally?

In this community-based participatory research project, co-researchers were program participants in various roles; each one brings unique experience and knowledge of obstacles faced by immigrant farmworkers in California. Growing up with Mexican/Mexican American parents and family members in both the U.S. and in Mexico who fostered love for the earth and for farming, Maria and Marco each found their way to ALBA through higher education. Marco enrolled in the regional community college, selected an agriculture course that offered hands-on learning at ALBA's farmlands (unofficial satellite college campus) for credit, and identified deeply with the land-based learning program, the people, the mission. Maria transitioned directly from high school into a four-year public university, majoring in agriculture. After realizing that her college courses failed to offer hands-on learning, she sought out experiential learning opportunities on her own, discovered the ALBA Program, and applied for an internship. Both individuals have completed bachelor's degrees in Agriculture at four-year universities and are now fully integrated members of the ALBA team. Program director Ed is a part-time instructor at the regional community college and serves on several advisory committees related to beginning farmer and socially disadvantaged farmer advancement. The voices and insights of these ALBA insiders as voluntary co-researchers provide insights into many of the complexities emerging from participants' lived experience.

### *In Our Own Words*

Throughout this study co-researchers used a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Qualitative researchers advocate, first and foremost, a concern with the phenomenal role of lived experience, with the ways in which members interpret their own lives and the world around them (Cannella & Lincoln, 2012). Data collection and analysis are

not sequential, separate phenomena in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Reflecting about findings was an ongoing activity throughout the study and took place both in the field and online during quarantine months of Covid-19. ALBA staff members provided tutorials on technology skills and loaned out laptops to participating students and families, keeping program participants, farmers, educators, guest speakers, and co-researchers connected throughout the lifetime of the study.

In the context of this study, a series of collaborative in-depth interviews provide data serving as "snapshots" (Wong, 2014) of important incidents in individuals' lived experience as ALBA participants. In this section, we outline key themes that emerged from the primary research questions, examining program participants' reflections on (1) curriculum content and processes, and (2) short- and long-term program impacts.

### *We Are All Interconnected*

Many aspiring farmers enrolled in community college come to ALBA with very little practical experience beyond the confines of classroom lectures and laboratories. Regional colleges offer coursework and degree programs in agriculture but limited direct connection to farmlands for hands-on practice. As an outreach arm of the college, the land-based PEPA program has been integrated into the college's program of studies for agriculture majors. Highlighting the interconnected experience for all involved, Ed and Marco point to how and why this arrangement is mutually beneficial, adding value to the ALBA program, and exposing college students to new perspectives and possibilities. Ed describes ALBA as a satellite campus, a living laboratory for the college and, in Marco's words,

It [ALBA] is not just about production, it's not just about harvesting. [Participants] are learning everything . . . entrepreneurship skills, developing a business, how to manage staff . . . time management skills. . . if you want to learn about laws and policies, there are so many laws and policies. Laws about water, your rights as a worker – so many things that most people just don't know, until they try it. . . I consider myself to be a plant doctor – you know, they [plants] have a cardiovascular system, there's a xylem, there are so many things. . . like how to do surgery, cutting crops open – there are so many possibilities!

### *Relational Learning*

Dewey (1938) described limitations of traditional education programs that teach in terms of dichotomies, conceptualizing subject matter knowledge in isolation, disconnected from lived experience. He wrote that this kind of learning fails to give genuine preparation

to learners no matter how thoroughly ingrained at the time. Marco spoke expansively about his professional growth at ALBA, where people work and learn together in community. Throughout his experience, contextualizing and applying the learning in real world settings has created opportunities for integration of updated agricultural science with the wisdom of older farmers who have years of experience, many of whom he views as valued mentors. Learning in the field allows participants to see other people's and their own realities through new lenses. Structured reflection with peers and mentors, built into program design helps these aspiring farmers link theory and practice, enhancing their ability to apply new knowledge and deepen their understanding in new ways (Eyler, 2009).

#### *Values-Based Framework*

Programs like ALBA are grounded in the perspective that immigrant farmworkers bring multiple strengths to the agricultural community, challenging the assumption that persistent social inequities are a function of cultural deficits. This perspective on the important contributions of social, spiritual, and cultural values helps to move immigrant farmworkers from the margins to the mainstream (O'Sullivan, 2008), recognizing them as stewards of the land who cultivate a direct and custodial relationship with the earth and develop sustainable practices in a culture of reciprocity and commonality with diverse others. According to Maria,

Farmworkers are land stewards who bring generations of knowledge about the land with them; and they have strong desire to improve the land for future generations. . . Many of these aspiring farmers connect the organic farming experience here with what they learned from their homelands, from their grandparents in their native land. . . learning to take care of the soil, to have biodiversity, to integrate beneficial insects, microorganisms that help plants grow and thrive... [While] preparing compost for the soil, weeding, even talking to the plants, feeling like they are connected to a bigger system... many of them feel like this is more connected with how they used to do things in Mexico.

#### *Ethics of Shared Decision-making*

Ethical and moral concerns must be addressed when studying people's lives, and particularly within immigrant communities. The decision to abstain from or delay in publishing certain materials was an option that was kept open throughout the study. All participants have had the right to withhold or withdraw personal information from the study at any time and we agreed that pseudonyms would be used. Furthermore, we have attempted to present findings that protect participants from harm and

avoid deception (Giles, 2014). This has meant being honest with each participant in the study about the purpose, processes, and potential outcomes of the research project, including making clear to all who agreed to be interviewed that excerpts from their narratives could be disseminated and published. Methods and procedures were reviewed and approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

## **Moving Towards Justice**

Critical scholars argue that the social structures of contemporary American life tend to reinforce inequities in society today by privileging certain groups over others (e.g., Irizarry & Ortiz, 2016). The notion of deficit-thinking, for example, assumes deficiencies in communities of color, discounting the knowledge, values and 'cultural wealth' inherent in diverse communities (Yosso, 2005). Based on false speculations about innate abilities, deficit-thinking has shaped social policies leading to blaming the poor for opportunity gaps and structural inequities built into institutions and systems (Valencia, 2010).

#### *Transformative Education*

The program we have explored in this study strives to transform the content, as well as the lived experience of land-based education in a farmworker community, forging connections among participants' teaching/learning processes, interactions with the earth and with other farmers, and fostering engagement in the possibilities of 'transformative education' (Mezirow, 1991, p.196). According to Marco,

The coolest thing about PEPA is that we have a one-acre demo field where we get to put what we learn in practice. . . I've heard comments [from co-participants] like, "I used to lay 20 acres of pipe . . . or my bosses would tell me, "Irrigate for two hours, for three, for five, or for whatever the case may be." But now, with this program, [ALBA learners] have learned HOW and WHY [we] actually irrigate for so long.

In essence, what these Latinx aspiring farmers are engaged in is a new culture of learning, developing individual capacity, building stronger relationships with the earth and the community, and participating in transformative change that will affect chances for a more sustainable future for the earth and for the wider society. Such learning is essentially ". . . participatory and experiential; participants use multiple modes of learning both to help them read their current reality and to try . . . to change it for the better" (Hanley, 2014, p. 137).

### *A Justice-oriented Model*

The land-based experiential program design engages learners in connecting and utilizing course content to address local environmental and social injustices with wider impacts on the prosperity health, and vibrancy of the global community (BIC, 2012; Sze & London, 2008). Over the past 20 years, more than 350 aspiring organic farm owners have completed ALBA's PEPA Course and over 38% of program graduates are transitioning from farmworker status to independent farming (NSAC, 2017); in a 2021 survey of current PEPA students, 94% indicated strong interest in learning more and applying new knowledge about organic farming. Members of this learning community are planning for continuous program improvements and considering future developmental phases, including systematizing the mentoring component to strengthen long-term connections with program graduates as mentors and building in a youth component for high school students.

### *Reclaiming Our Future*

Education that is justice oriented is not simply the addition of equity or sustainability concepts to the curriculum, but a shift in consciousness, transforming the way we think about teaching and learning. According to Raskin (2016), "When we think critically about why we think and act the way we do, and then think and act differently, we transform ourselves and our destiny" (p.111). ALBA's approach to education is experiential and land-based, and is informed by a posture of continuous learning, framed by systems thinking, connectivity, and complexity. Curricular elements include theories of capacity building, adaptive management, values, and long-term vision with openness to change at all levels (Backman et al., 2018; Hanley, 2014; Zinga & Styres, 2012). For Marco, the educational design provides much more than an innovative training program. In describing the program's contributions to equity and justice he expanded on this point,

We are learning about farming [at ALBA] in a way that leaves the land in a better way for our children, for our children's children, not just replicating the status quo. . . It's very different from conventional practices. . . We consider the role farming plays in impacting climate, for example, just as we are trying to make a difference in balancing the role of minorities in agriculture.

Experiential learning in this context implies putting relationship back into the teaching/learning process, seeking synergy between all aspects of education: curriculum, pedagogy, resource utilization and community networks—with emphasis

on values such as trust, participation, collaboration, openness, and respect for the environment.

### **Conclusion**

The community-based participatory research project has engaged a broad and inclusive coalition, including community college students, instructors, community members, and researchers from diverse sectors. This study has outlined preliminary findings while pointing to the need for further research on the role of experiential learning in moving towards an "ecological, humanistic and transformative worldview that assumes interdependence and interconnection" (Podger et al., 2010, p.340) in education.

In recent decades, the field of experiential education has played a visible role in redefining and reconceptualizing adult education in culturally diverse contexts (Kolb, 2015). This investigation aimed to develop deeper insights into an innovative experiential education program grounded in principles of social and environmental justice with immigrant farmworkers and college students preparing for careers in agriculture. Community-based participatory research projects like this one engage participants in collaborative problem solving through cycles of action, research, and reflection. However, due to the highly contextualized nature of this study, the findings cannot be generalized universally. Further research is needed on the impacts of land-based experiential learning in helping the next generation think critically, prepare for successful careers in agriculture, and explore sustainable practices that treat people and the earth equitably, moving towards justice. ■

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