Abstract

Much of the research on school gardens has focused on health benefits and academic outcomes. This thesis explores the possibility that teaching with, and within, the living web of a garden embodying permaculture ethics may offer further possibilities for learning, growth and transformation. Methodologically, it is centered around four narrative case studies of individual students enrolled in successive offerings of a Sustainable Agriculture 12 course situated in an alternate high school program in Vancouver, BC. As the teacher of the course, I also trace my own unfolding understanding of and relationship with the school garden, whose meaning for the students (and myself) was transformed by the introduction of chickens during the launch of the course, followed by the development of the composting system, the expansion of the beds, and the adaptation of the school’s cooking program to take advantage of the eggs from the chickens.

Interviews with the students led to the identification of themes of belonging (both working with and caring for others), nourishing growth, and renewal in and through community. Their growing awareness and understanding of the web of relationships among the garden’s more-than-human inhabitants, and their experience of themselves as positively contributing to that web through their care for the chickens, plants and soil, were accompanied by significant advances in their psychosocial well-being. Analyzing this process as movement between “nested domains” of social and personal ecologies helps to frame the teaching and learning process in ecological terms. Hermeneutically, the garden was revealed as a “co-teacher” capable of opening up a “third space” between the institutional classroom setting and the urban backdrop of the students’ lives. It also had a powerful influence on my own pedagogy and my capacity to recognize and support processes of renewal and regeneration. Overall, the study points to ways that teaching can itself become more “ecological” when it is brought into meaningful and caring relationship with self-renewing living systems.

Keywords: ecological education; narrative case study; sustainability education; well-being; permaculture; hermeneutics