

**A Critical Look at the Elements of Community Based Research in the
Action Plan for a School Community Garden at Wickaninnish Elementary**

Supplemental paper prepared for Environmental Studies 400C
(*in conjunction with the* “Action Plan for a School Garden at Wickaninnish Elementary:
A resource kit and discussion of what has worked in other communities”)

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Schools play an integral role in community development and healthy and active schools therefore help to grow a healthy and vibrant community at broad (Froelicher 1955: 162). It is cliché to suggest that our children are our hope for the future, but on all accounts, that is very true. Understanding the importance of enriching the educational experience for our children, we must ask ourselves how to go about accomplishing this. Of course this could be achieved in an infinite number of ways, but one such relatively simple way is through the process of school (or community) gardening. The multitudinous benefits of school gardening are well documented by academics, community organizations, teachers, parents, children and all; in fact, criticisms are hard to find. Therefore, in compiling this resource package it was my objective that I might be able to simplify the work of implementing a school garden for some inspired, dedicated individual or group. This brief, supplemental paper will look at the ways in which the resource kit and the process of compiling the kit reflect and oppose concepts of community based research. The first section will discuss its reflections of community based research and the second section will explore the ways in which it opposes concepts of community based research.

1. The Ways in Which the Resource Kit Reflects Community Based Research

First of all, how does school gardening itself reflect community based research (CBR). Once again there are multitudinous directions I could take this, but in reviewing academic documentation of school gardening, the most interesting of these is extrapolating gardening as an emancipatory process. Perhaps these are big words to attach to school gardening, but Kurelek (1992) discusses participatory research (also CBR) as “stimulating critical consciousness among oppressed peoples so they would take actions to liberate themselves.” (Kurelek 1992: 82). Similar to this, the academic literature on school gardening focuses on the benefits to students with special needs, juvenile offenders, children from poor urban environments and so on.

The literature does not suggest that school gardening is more beneficial for students with special needs but there is a disproportionate focus on the effects upon such people. For example, an article by C. Chemic et al. (2002: 77) reports: “Participants of the Green Brigade program (juvenile offenders) significantly improved their horticultural knowledge.. (and) also had significant improvements in their environmental attitude scores after completing the program”. Therefore, we see that gardening can help to empower juvenile offenders which is an important component of CBR according to Cyrillic (1992). In another article, Taylor et al. (2001) discuss Attention Restoration Theory which suggests that contact with natural environments can improve attentional functioning, in their study, particularly among youth with attention deficit disorder (Taylor et al. 2001: 55). Another such article comes from Schmelzkopf (2002) about land rights and community gardens in the ghettos of New York City. In sum, his article shows how, “The city, operating from the perspective of entrepreneurial governance, claimed that the gardens represented a loss of exchange value and potential housing.”(Schmelzkopf 2002: 323). He goes on to argue that there is in fact much more at stake: “the gardens and gardeners represented a treat to the hegemonic project of the government to maximize exchange values and to beautify and sanitize the city.” (Schmelzkopf 2002: 323). In a culture that is rapidly forgetting connections to the land and the sources of foods, gardening is a direct way in which communities of people can reclaim their connection to the earth. Therefore, by engaging in the simple act of gardening, we see the simple reflection of some of the roots of CBR (or at least according to some definitions).

Next is the issue of the literature sources that I chose to include in the resource kit. I made the conscious decision to use only community sources of literature in order that both the literature and the language remain accessible to all (or at least most). I found many articles which reflected the facts proposed by community organizations but chose not to include them in the kit realizing that most Clayoquot Sound residents do not have access to resources such as the University library or understand how to conduct online journal searches. Academic sources also seemed inappropriate in that peer reviewed information is not necessary to implement a school garden. In the kit I have encouraged interested peoples to engage in independent research and if they are familiar with academe they may choose to conduct such research.

The resource kit also very loosely follows some of the points outlined in the Standard of

Conduct for Research in Clayoquot and Northern Barkley Sound Communities (Clayoquot Alliance for Research, Education and Training: Draft, April 2003). The kit emphasizes the importance of seeking permission from the central region Nuu-chah-nulth Nations, particularly if they are to implement a garden which includes native species of cultural significance (deemed important on page 2). The resource kit has attempted to encourage local suppliers of garden materials as much as possible (page 3). The kit, if deemed acceptable, will be returned to the community to do with what they will (page 3). The kit expresses the importance of having the input from as many community members as are interested in coming to the initial information session which will help to build a more sustainable community network. The initial information session interestingly acts as a focus group as discussed in class by Sharmalene Mendis (Lecture: May 29, 2003). The kit emphasises the importance of parental consent for their children's involvement in the project as well as for their photographs being taken (page 4). Above all, the act of gardening helps to foster two of the cornerstones of this important document- the Nuu-chah-nulth concepts of *lisaak* (living respect) and *Hishuk ish ts 'awalk* (everything is one or everything is connected) (page 3). A garden, as has been shown by the resource kit, helps to foster respect for earth and for each other and begins to demonstrate the interconnectedness of things—like clean water, sunshine and rich soil to the health of a plant and child.

Above all, the resource kit reflects concepts of CBR in that a school garden would be difficult and challenging to implement. Readings and lecturers have emphasized the time consuming nature of CBR and the project outlined in the resource kit would no doubt be the same. But as further discussed by these sources, the end result of such a labourious process is incredibly rich and rewarding. In conclusion of this section I would like to express that it was challenging to bridge wanting to compile something that is useful to actually developing a proposal and wanting to simply provide information so that an individual could experience the skill and knowledge building that occurs when you start from the ground up. If I had written things as a more concrete proposal then it would be a less empowering experience for the persons involved in conducting the project. By providing resources and a rough outline I hope that involved persons will be able develop a stronger sense of ownership over the project

2. The Ways in Which the Resource Kit Opposes Community Based Research

This section is much more brief than the former because there are few sources that discuss what community based research is not. In the resource kit I chose the most straight forward definition of CBR that I could find: Hall defined it as “a three pronged activity: it is a method of social investigation involving full participation of the community, an educational process, and a means of taking action for development.”(St.Denis 1992: 54). In many ways the resource kit satisfies (in part) the later two activities but most significantly fails to involve full participation of the community. Below are the ways in which this work overlooks full community involvement:

- it was not conducted by a community member
- it was compiled by a single individual
- it was written in Victoria and Sooke, far away from Tofino
- it was not initiated by a community member
- it does not involve the contributions of any community members
- it involves Victoria based community organizations rather than Clayoquot Sound based ones

Therefore, while the resource kit is by no means community based research in itself, it can be seen as a tool to facilitate community based research. As Ryan and Robinson (1990) suggest, the most important role of the researcher is to work themselves out of a job, and not that I ever had a job, but I have certainly completed the kit without one (Cyrillic 1992: 82).

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