



Original Research Article

## Cultivating critical and food justice dimensions of youth food programs: Lessons learned in the kitchen and the garden

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### Abstract

In this article we present accounts of two youth food programs operating at a Community Food Centre. One program, *Kids Club*, engages children, aged 6 to 12, in cooking and gardening activities; the other, *Cookin' Up Justice*, is directed to adolescents (13 to 18 years) and explores food justice concepts through experiential group cooking. A variety of ethnographic methods including participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group and photovoice discussions done with youth participants and parents are used to document how the food programs incorporate innovative aspects of Critical Food Literacy and Food Justice. We address the successes, challenges, and opportunities in delivering youth food programs that incorporate both the “practical” and “political” dimensions of Food Literacy and Critical Food Literacy with particular attention to food politics that arise when working with racialized, newcomer participants living in a lower socioeconomic neighbourhood. We also discuss the challenges and opportunities in doing food programming with the adolescent demographic. We recommend that community food programs incorporate an analysis of the cultural, racialized, class, and gendered aspects of their staff and participants into the Critical Food Literacy and Food Justice dimensions of their programs to promote anti-racist and inclusive program design and facilitation.

Keywords: Food literacy; critical food literacy; food justice; youth; community food programs; food politics

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## Introduction

Food Literacy (FL) has become a commonly used term and concept in the realm of food, nutrition, dietetics, and education, particularly as it applies to youth, who have been described as a generation lacking knowledge and skills in the areas of food budgeting and preparation, making them more apt to rely on ultra-processed and convenience foods as they transition into adulthood (Colatruglio & Slater, 2014; Slater et al., 2018). FL is proposed to be a potential avenue for improving health equity and population health that moves away from a narrow focus on teaching nutrition to a more food-based approach (Colatruglio & Slater, 2014; Cullen et al., 2015).

Many review articles map out more precisely the definition of FL using concept diagrams and text definitions to encapsulate its multiple dimensions (Azevedo Perry et al., 2017; Colatruglio & Slater, 2014; Cullen et al., 2015; Truman et al., 2017a; Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014). A basic definition is: “A collection of interrelated knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to plan, manage, select, prepare, and eat foods to meet needs and determine food intake” (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2012, p. vii). Another more comprehensive definition is: “Food literacy is conceptualized as a set of food-related skills and knowledge that, if appropriately adopted, empower the individual to make informed choices about food and nutrition about the broader food environment, contributing to improved health” (Truman & Elliott, 2019, p. 17). FL definitions have been extended to incorporate concepts such as Community Food Security: “Food literacy is the ability of an individual to understand food in a way that they develop a positive relationship with it, including food skills and practices across the lifespan to navigate, engage, and participate within a complex food system. It’s the ability to make decisions to support the achievement of personal health and a sustainable food system considering environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political components” (Cullen et al., 2015, p. 143).

More recently the term Critical Food Literacy (CFL) has been introduced. CFL goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and the individual orientation to develop an “Understanding and awareness that allows people to perform actions related to food and think critically about their relationship to the broader food system” (Truman et al., 2017b, p. e213). Goldstein critiques FL as a “neoliberal consciousness paradigm” that privileges “individual responsibility and choice” (2016, p. 184). In contrast, Goldstein promotes CFL as a “critical consciousness paradigm” that encourages “active engagement and transformative learning in the food system and community and ecological health” (2016, p. 185).

We believe that Food Justice must also be considered in addition to and as part of CFL. A Food Justice lens is especially important when offering food education programs to equity deserving people who are living with food insecurity and who come to education programs with food traditions that may differ from those who facilitate them. An interpretation of CFL may be a narrow focus on promoting healthy population nutrition and ecological health. Cadieux and Slocum (2015) caution to avoid assuming that it is just a matter of buying local or organic food,

as many are unable to consume in this manner due to financial or other barriers. They point to four key components of Food Justice that span production to consumption and inform the transformation of the food system: “trauma/inequity, exchange, land, and labor” and they assert that food justice should be guided by “feminist, antiracist, and anti-colonial frameworks” (Slocum, 2015, p. e212). The insertion of Food Justice into the CFL framework thus enables programs to examine and make explicit structural inequities in the food system.

While FL, CFL, and Food Justice may seem like separate frameworks, Truman et al. (2017b) argue that we must consider multiple food literacies and promote ongoing dialogue. We agree that food education programs that incorporate CFL and Food Justice can still value teaching individual food skills that fall under the purview of FL. This may be even more crucial when delivering youth programs since many youth participants and their families want to learn these more practical skills even while engaging in broader understandings and activism around the food system and Food Justice. We concur with Classens and Sytsma (2020) who argue in their review of postsecondary student food literacy programs that the “practical” can be integrated with the “political”. That said, incorporating CFL into a youth food program may be challenging, as the political is often sidelined by the practical, as described by Goldstein (2016) in their evaluation of a Food Leadership for Youth program serving teen girls at the STOP Community Food Centre in Toronto, Ontario.

Though mapping out the conceptual pieces of FL and CFL is fundamental work, few studies describe and document how food education programs for youth can be actualized on the ground, or in the kitchen or the garden, as it may be. These accounts are particularly needed to begin the hard work of incorporating CFL and Food Justice into food education programs. This is particularly true when working with youth for whom the more theoretical aspects of CFL may be challenging depending on their age and developmental stage. Several studies describe and evaluate youth FL programs that incorporate cooking into the nutrition education curricula delivered in both elementary and high schools (Amin et al., 2018; Brooks & Begley, 2014; Ruiz et al., 2021; Walters & Stacey, 2009). Some others document youth programs that operate outside of schools in community settings, some of which are targeted to “at-risk” or “vulnerable” youth (Brooks & Begley, 2014; Butcher et al., 2021; Thomas & Irwin, 2011). Several reviews of FL youth programs attempt to determine whether they improve dietary quality or increase cooking at home with measurements such as pre-and post-program indicators of culinary skills or knowledge about food and nutrition (Brooks & Begley, 2014; Vaitkeviciute et al., 2014). These reviews offer mixed results, but it is important to note that they do not measure what may be potential changes to future or lifelong eating patterns that would require long-term studies to document (Brooks & Begley, 2014). What is missing in the studies of youth food programs, with the exception of Goldstein’s (2016) study described above, are case studies of programs that attempt to incorporate CFL frameworks into their pedagogical approaches. This may be because these programs are rare or because they haven’t been studied much to date.

In this article, we describe and analyze participant feedback gathered from 2019 to 2020 from two youth-based food programs offered at the Hamilton Community Food Centre (HCFC)<sup>1</sup> in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. The programs are *Kids Club*, for younger children (six to twelve years) and *Cookin' Up Justice*, for adolescents (thirteen to eighteen years). *Kids Club* has both cooking and gardening components whereas *Cookin' Up Justice* includes cooking only. The purpose of the study was to highlight the innovative programming components and education offered and to explore and document the youth participant and family experiences. In this article, we present the successes, challenges, and opportunities in delivering youth programs that incorporate both the “practical” and “political” dimensions of FL, CFL, and Food Justice. We describe how the program facilitators attempted to incorporate CFL and Food Justice into these food programs and how some aspects of these frameworks were reflected by youth participants’ feedback and perspectives. We also highlight positive behavioural and attitude changes to food culture, cooking, and eating among participants. While changes in participants’ diets were not the focus of this study, food/cooking-related behaviour and acquisition of knowledge and food skills were investigated with youth participants and their parents. The program challenges we raise in this article are those related to food politics arising from diversity in class, gender, culture, and food ethics among program facilitators and racialized newcomer participants living in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood. We highlight the need to address cultural diversity, racialization, and the positionality vis-à-vis gender, class, food ethics, and food traditions of participants and facilitators, when incorporating CFL and Food Justice into food education programs, and that this must be explicitly addressed in program design and facilitation. In addition, we explore the challenges and opportunities in working with an adolescent demographic.

## Methods

For this youth food program study, we used a variety of ethnographic methods including participant observation, qualitative interviews, and focus groups to create an in-depth case study from multiple perspectives (Bernard & Gravlee, 2015). The study was initiated and co-created by the principal investigator (PI) and the director of the HCFC. The HCFC director wanted to take stock of their youth-centered programs and to consider creating new youth food programs in the future. The PI designed the study methods with input and in consultation with the HCFC director and staff members to ensure that they were useful in terms of the feedback required and feasibility concerning program logistics and participant engagement. The study methods were reviewed and given clearance by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB #2344).

The PI and research assistants (RAs) engaged in participant observation by attending weekly sessions of both programs on a semi-regular basis for six months during which we

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<sup>1</sup> The HCFC is a division of Neighbour-to-Neighbour (<https://n2ncentre.com/>).

frequently engaged by assisting as program helpers. We recorded detailed observations about how the programs operated and were facilitated and, along with discussions with facilitators, we were able to describe from an “outsider-insider” perspective how the programs were designed and facilitated to incorporate multiple paradigms of FL, CFL, and Food Justice.

Interviews and focus groups were facilitated by the PI and RAs with youth participants and their families to obtain direct feedback about their experiences. For the *Kids Club* we conducted interviews with fifteen child participants and ran one focus group with five parents of children attending *Kids Club*. The interviews with children were done using a “draw, write, and tell” method, an age-appropriate and arts-based method for eliciting child participants’ experiences (Angell et al., 2015; Horstman et al., 2008). We asked children to draw and/or write on a piece of paper about their experiences at *Kids Club*, and we invited participants to talk about their drawing and/or writing in a one-on-one interview at a later session. Participants were also asked a series of questions about their experiences at *Kids Club* including some basic information about their age and the school they attended; how long they had been participating in *Kids Club*; their more and less favorite activities; the food they had prepared in the cooking portion of the program; what they learned from the program, including gardening and cooking skills, and whether they had brought any of this new knowledge home to share with their families; the feelings and emotions they experienced during *Kids Club* activities such as gardening, cooking, or nature walks; and finally what they thought could be improved in the program.

*Kids Club* parents were invited to attend a focus group discussion about their children’s experiences in the program, what they thought their children enjoyed and what they didn’t, what they learned, and generally what worked and what could be improved in the program. The five parents who participated in the focus group were also asked to fill out a confidential sociodemographic questionnaire to gather background information about their gender, age, occupation, income, education, household food security, country of origin, and length of time they had lived in Canada to aid in the analysis of the focus group discussion data. Household food insecurity status was determined using the six-item short-form food insecurity questionnaire (USDA, 2020). The focus group was run in English by the PI with bilingual research assistants present to interpret for those participants who preferred to speak Arabic. All recruitment materials, the sociodemographic survey, and the final study summary reports sent out to study participants were available in Arabic.

For *Cookin’ Up Justice*, we elicited teen participants’ perspectives using two methods. First, we conducted a focus group discussion with six participants to gauge what they liked and disliked about the program, the perceived impact of the program on their lives, and any suggestions for improvement. They also filled out a confidential sociodemographic questionnaire similar to the one described above for the parents of *Kids Club* participants. Second, we engaged in a photovoice activity with four, teen participants. Photovoice is an effective community-engagement research tool that has been successfully used in food-based research (Power, 2003) and works well with adolescent participants to record their own realities and to give researchers a

window into their food environments (Thomas & Irwin, 2013). They were instructed to take personally meaningful photos of foods or other food-related images at either the *Cookin' Up Justice* program or in their home, neighborhood, school, and/or community environments. Teen participants participated in two sessions with photovoice. In the first we gave out digital cameras to those who did not have a cell phone with a camera, and we introduced the activity aims and the rules of ethical conduct when taking photos. In the second session, participants were asked to choose their top six photos that best represented their views and present three of them to the group; for each of the three photos, they were asked to state where they took the photo, why they took it, and what it meant to them. This second session was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following this, a student research assistant compiled the photos and participants' anonymized quotes into a YouTube slideshow video for dissemination.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A coding framework was then developed by the PI and RAs based on the interview guide questions as well as major topics and issues that were noted while conducting and transcribing the interviews as described by Attride-Stirling (2001). To ensure consistency between the coding techniques of the two RAs, each RA coded the two focus groups separately and then reviewed similarities and differences between the coded results. It was determined that there was a high level of intercoder reliability and minor changes were made to the coding framework before proceeding to code the remaining interviews. The coded pieces of text were then analyzed by the PI and RAs to develop a thematic framework (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

## Results

### *Description of the programs*

The Hamilton Community Food Centre (HCFC)<sup>1</sup> is one of thirteen Community Food Centres across Canada funded by Community Food Centres Canada. The mission of the organization is “to grow, cook, share, and advocate for good food for all” and to “...create opportunities for community members, our partner organizations, and concerned individuals to join us in advocating for policies that reduce poverty, food insecurity, and poor health.” (CFCC, 2018, para. 5). The HCFC is situated in a neighborhood that has a slightly higher proportion of immigrants, a higher proportion of residents that identify as a visible minority, and an average total household income that is \$1,947 lower than the average household income for the City of Hamilton (City of Hamilton, 2019). The HCFC like other CFCs offers food programming for people of all ages, including programs that are fun and accessible community-building spaces for youth.

*Kids Club* is an after-school program offered at the HCFC that engages participants in cooking, gardening, and outdoor nature activities. From 2019 to 2020 the program consisted of

twenty children, two staff coordinators, and three adult volunteers. Most of the children and their families were racialized, with about half being recent immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries. Dishes to be prepared during the program by children were carefully curated by the program facilitators to be easily prepared by children in a group setting in a short amount of time and reflect a variety of cultural traditions; the food ingredients were fresh, vegetarian, mostly local and organic, and minimally processed. At the end of each session, children ate the food they had prepared together, and session facilitators, before eating, prompted children to reflect on what they were grateful for about the food they were about to eat. The program was designed to not only teach children about cooking and healthy eating but to engage them in exploring food aesthetics and its production. This was done through growing vegetables from seed and regularly visiting the Centre's vegetable garden, as well as activities that explore food origins and the sensory pleasures and cultural diversity of food and food ecology.

*Cookin' Up Justice* is also an experiential, hands-on program, offered in the evening from 2019 to 2020 to teens with approximately six to ten attendants on a regular weekly basis.

*Cookin' Up Justice*, as indicated by the program name, is firmly rooted in Food Justice and CFL frameworks. The program also incorporates core aspects of FL, since weekly programming includes preparing a dish from scratch, which is then eaten by the group. Recipes were chosen by the HCFC facilitator based on participant interest and feedback to be cooked by the participants in the Centre's large commercial kitchen. Recipes were adjusted to meet time constraints, and the "good food principles" of Community Food Centres Canada. Program sessions were designed to make "good food" accessible to participants who may not have access in their everyday lives. Facilitators, during food preparation and eating the food afterward, used experiential learning through recipes and ingredients that prompted conversations about the food system, the environment, food justice, food culture, and ethics. Programming was intended to explore with teens the impacts of food systems and systemic food inequity, the environment, and a variety of cultural food traditions.

### *Interviews and focus groups: Kids club*

The *Kids Club* focus group consisted of five parents, who were all mothers and had from two to three children attending the program. Four came to Canada within the past twelve years, one from Bangladesh, one from Iraq, one from Kuwait, and one from Pakistan; the fifth participant was born in Canada. Four of the five participants were, according to their responses to the six-item food security questionnaire, classified as experiencing moderate household food insecurity, and the fifth was categorized as food secure. According to interview responses from the fifteen children from the Kids Club who participated in the study, all of them attended one of two neighborhood schools, except for one who came from another area of the city. They were in grades one through five and had attended the Kids Club program for a few months to three years.

The results from the interviews with *Kids Club* participants and the parent focus group confirmed the valuable aspects of FL that were taught experientially through the *Kids Club* program. We divided findings into two thematic areas: “what they learned (new skills)” and “food-related behaviour change”. Regarding what they learned, children and parents reported children acquiring new food preparation skills—most important of these from many of the children’s perspectives was the ability to cut vegetables safely (using bear claw technique), as well as learning new recipes and using the oven and new cooking utensils. Children and parents also valued learning about gardening, particularly the ability to name vegetables and flowers that they had never been exposed to before, which extended to an appreciation of trying different foods and ways to prepare them. One child said: “I never knew some flowers were edible until we, I tried one.” More broadly, children learned about food ecosystems including not only the plants but also the creatures (e.g., worms) that are part of the ecosystem. Not specifically connected to food, but an important part of building and sustaining food and ecosystems, were lessons about how to work cooperatively as a team. As well, many children and parents commented on how safe and included children felt at *Kids Club*. Both parents and children also observed ways the program changed food-related behaviour. Some parents noted that their children were now more enthusiastic about helping to prepare meals, even making suggestions about preparing food they had learned to make at *Kids Club*. Children were also more open to trying new foods, and one parent stated that their child asked them to give them some healthy food, like vegetables, to take to school.

Children were asked about the foods they prepared at the *Kids Club* program and which they liked or disliked. Answers varied according to individual children’s tastes, but overall participants were positive about trying new foods and enjoyed preparing and eating a variety of foods from different cultural traditions, such as vegetarian sushi. In terms of dislikes, one of the points most frequently mentioned by children was the desire to prepare and eat “less healthy” food, for example, desserts with more sugar in them. Some parents also expressed their desire to be more included in the program, and they suggested that the program incorporate more traditional ethnic foods that are healthy and reflective of the group members’ cultural backgrounds with the opportunity for them to contribute recipes.

### *Focus groups and photovoice activity: Cookin’ up justice*

The six focus group participants ranged in age from fifteen to seventeen years and all respondents identified with a binary gender: two women and four men. Two participants were born outside of Canada, the rest were born in Canada, and one identified as Indigenous. According to their responses to the six-item food security questionnaire, two of the six were living in food-secure households and four were living in marginally to severely food insecure households.



In the focus group discussion with teen participants, they listed learning the following skills: cutting, food and kitchen safety, dishwashing with a restaurant-style heat washer, incorporating different food items into recipes, and different cooking styles. They also reported improving social skills such as teamwork and leadership, socializing with peers, and learning to appreciate diversity as important lessons they took away from the program. *Cookin' Up Justice* uses community building and trust to make the program relatable and to increase the experiential platform of cooking and eating to explore CFL. Weekly recipes were used as vehicles for teaching and exploring food issues. In the case of the adolescent participants in *Cooking Up' Justice*, this was done through conversation to explore the concepts of food justice and systemic inequities. For example, one week the group made a vegan “cheesecake”, which led to a discussion about the cost and the difficulty of making such a dessert when the ingredients are inaccessible to some people due to systemic barriers related to low-income. Focus group participants noted that they improved their awareness and knowledge of the benefits of using more organic foods and growing your own food, how foods are grown, the difference between local and imported foods, and animal versus plant-based foods.

The photovoice activity acted as a participatory research method to delve deeper into teen participants’ understanding and unique views on food justice, and to provide the tools to help them understand their experiences. Multiple themes surfaced from the four photovoice participants’ discussion of their photos. One main theme that arose was food affordability, or lack thereof, and how some foods are not accessible to all. For example, a photo of a Candy Cup container elicited this comment: “Why is that some food that is considered unhealthy is more accessible than what we consider healthy, like organic?” Another participant showed a photo of a meal in a “fancy” restaurant where her mom works and mentioned that not everyone could afford to eat at that restaurant. She then reflected on the fact that she herself has a part-time job at McDonald’s and that more people can afford to eat out at a fast-food restaurant if they want a treat, but it’s unhealthy. Related to this theme were expressions of gratitude for having enough food to be able to eat a variety of foods that provide good nutrition and can also be pleasing to the palate and the eye. One participant showed a photo of food items that had been laid for sushi prep during a session of *Cookin' Up Justice* and she remarked: “We used them, we used the food...so I took this picture because like, like we were using a lot of toppings for the sushi and I feel like, um, not a lot of people in the world can like use that many toppings...to like decorate or like you know, like freshen up your food. So, I feel like that's really important to add like more flavor to food.”

She went on to say, “Like, when you think about all of the uh, all of things that you're supposed to have in a day, however much fat or sugar or like calcium or iron, you don't find all of those requirements in like one food. So being able to have access to all of those basics, yeah, privilege.” This same participant pointed out how important it was for people to learn about vitamins and nutrition and felt we should have more cooking programs like those offered at the Hamilton Community Food Centre.

Others reflected on the cultural importance of food, which they pointed out is more than nutrition: “Venezuela is a Spanish country, and we usually make this one in Christmas. It’s like a traditional food and we call it pan de jamón.” Another participant showed photos of green bins to bring up the issue of food waste. In commenting on food and the environment, she said: “I think it changes the way I think about, like all your choices that go into what you’re eating, and what you’re cooking.... How has that affected the environment, even though it’s just a small thing for you, it could have a big effect.”

In the focus group discussion teen participants expressed some of the things they wanted to change about the *Cookin’ Up Justice* program. This centred mostly on dissatisfaction with some of the food that was cooked at the program, mainly expressed by the four out of six participants who self-identified as males. Though most participants welcomed the opportunity to try cooking and eating vegan dishes, some expressed discontent with making too many vegan dishes, and wanted a balance between animal and plant-based dishes; as one participant commented, he wanted to make “homey foods,” which he felt should contain meat.

Other participants were concerned about the lack of consistent participation from week to week and the need to attract new teen participants to what they thought was a great program. This was also noted from researchers’ observations when coming to the program. There was a core group of four to five participants who attended most weeks, but many were coming in and out of the program, and the program facilitator and fellow participants never knew for sure who would show up from week to week. Focus group participants suggested advertising the program through the high schools as well as on social media to reach a larger audience of adolescents and using group chats to plan recipes and get students to commit to showing up more regularly. This latter idea was also tied to the suggestion for teen participants to be more involved in recipe planning to take on more ownership of the program.

## Discussion

This study of two youth food programs serving a culturally diverse community living in households experiencing food security provides a detailed account of the successes, challenges, and opportunities in offering food programs that incorporate FL, CFL, and Food Justice frameworks. Our analysis of findings from participant observation and qualitative interviews and focus groups identified three broad themes that encapsulated the main results—integrating FL, CFL, and Food Justice, food politics into youth food programs, and the challenges and opportunities of working with an adolescent demographic.

### *Integrating FL, CFL, and food justice*

The youth food programs at the Hamilton Community Food Centre incorporate both the practical and political aspects of FL and CFL frameworks, as recommended by Classens and Sytsma (2020). Both programs teach basic skills and knowledge about cooking, eating, and food that are the core components of FL that youth can use in their lives as they transition into adulthood. *Kids Club*, geared to a younger age group, does not incorporate the political (in the activist sense) from CFL, but its program design, which is comprised of both exploring cooking and gardening, introduces children to the “personal as political” aspects of food and eating situated in the larger ecological and environmental dimensions of food systems. In particular, the program’s gardening activities enhance CFL components. Libman (2007) describes an educational gardening program offered by the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens that corresponds to what is promoted at *Kids Club* as well—agency in food choice, i.e., picking out raw foods from the garden to eat, using garden food to cook in creative ways, appreciating the hard work of growing food, and recognizing its freshness and connection to taste. The *Kids Club* program also emphasizes respect for the Earth, our bodies, and diverse cultural food preferences, reflecting critical aspects of FL that go beyond the narrow emphasis on healthy eating and “individualized prescriptions” to a recognition of our place within the social and cultural contexts of larger systems (Sumner, 2015, p. 135).

*Cookin’ Up Justice*, created for adolescents, is designed to reflect the lived experiences of youth surviving food injustices. Rather than employing a didactic, instructor-based method of teaching, the program invites youth to discuss their experiences through the experiential act of cooking a dish together and how that can lead to a conversation about food systems and food justice. The approach and the objectives of the program align closely with the definition of CFL that incorporates food justice offered by Yamashita and Robinson (2015) as “the ability to examine one’s assumptions, grapple with multiple perspectives and values that underlie the food system, understand the larger sociopolitical contexts that shape the food system, and take action toward creating just, sustainable food systems” (p. 269). The *Cookin’ Up Justice* program is an example of how increasing access to high-quality food through Food Centre programming exposes systemic food inequities and may empower youth to take action towards creating more just and sustainable food systems.

Goldstein (2016), in their case study of a teen FL program offered by the Stop Community Food Centre, found that there was little evidence that teens were engaging actively with dimensions of CFL in this program, highlighting the challenge of incorporating CFL and Food Justice into more traditional FL food programs. Though we did not directly measure acquired critical food system knowledge or action among youth participants in *Cookin’ Up Justice*, we did elicit teen participants’ thoughtful and critical ideas about the food system and its inequities through teen participants’ engagement in the photovoice activity. Whether or not these were a direct result of the *Cookin’ Up Justice* cannot be proven, but it does speak to the potential for transformative learning among adolescents. Observation of the weekly program and the focus

group discussion indicated that exposure to CFL and Food Justice concepts were not explicit but rather were woven into the program in subtle ways based on the choice of food cooked each week and the way the facilitator led informal discussions. The program could consider addressing food activism and critical pedagogy in a more structured and transparent way, but it is clear from the teen participant's feedback that teens would want to have active and engaged input into program design and educational lessons rather than it being a top-down program design.

### *Food politics*

Challenges and opportunities raised by some participants in both youth programs were the food and recipe choices used in the cooking activities. In designing the programs, the facilitators wished to communicate aspects of CFL through the choice of foods, e.g., ethically sourced, organic, local, fresh, and more plant-based food, with reduced sugar or with sugar alternatives such as maple syrup and honey. The values and preferences associated with the foods included in the programs, however, did not always match with those held by the participants. For the children in the *Kids Club* some mild dissent with the program's food choices was expressed by their desire to make baked goods or desserts with more sugar, and less "healthy" ingredients. What is considered "healthy" food is defined by national dietary guidelines that can be influenced by food industry conflicts of interest (Nestle, 2018). In addition, definitions of healthy food and food preferences are shaped by multiple identities ranging from socioeconomic class, gender, age, ethnicity, and political and philosophical perspectives (Bauman et al., 2019; Beardsworth et al., 2002; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Cooke & Wardle, 2005; Counihan, 1999; Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al., 2008). Therefore, consideration of diversity in taste and preference among participants and facilitators must be taken into consideration during food program designs.

Diversity in conceptualizing healthy food and food ethics also intersected with gender. In the *Cookin' Up Justice* focus group there was a lively discussion among teen participants about program food choices that were specially voiced by those who identified as male. They were adamant that they wanted to cook dishes with animal-based ingredients. And though all were excited to taste and learn to cook plant-based dishes, animal-based ingredients were more familiar to their senses and palates. Food preferences and proscriptions in all societies, including Western ones, are gendered (Counihan, 1999). Though gendered food choices should not be essentialized and may be fluid, as is gender identity, gendered food choice trends can be identified. One of the salient gendered dimensions of dietary choices and preferences among people living in Western societies focuses on animal foods; these may be related to multiple gendered perspectives on food including healthy eating and nutrition, ethics, and body image (Beardsworth et al., 2002; Counihan, 1999). In keeping with the pedagogical approach of the program, discussion about the ethics of eating meat was raised by the facilitator at a weekly

session of *Cookin' Up Food Justice*. While eating a meal that did contain some dishes with meat at the session after the photovoice activity, the program facilitator invited everyone to speak about their dietary choices with regard to animal and plant foods, describing their families' food cultures and experiences with eating meat or not, and their personal dietary preferences and food ethics. This skillfully led discussion allowed everyone to explore and reflect on the issue personally as well as listen to others' perspectives, allowing for an opportunity to express diversity in an inclusive manner.

The issue of food culture and racialized identities was an important finding in this research given the composition of the *Kids Club* participants, who were predominantly newcomers from South Asia and Arabic-speaking countries. Culture is considered part of CFL but is not explicitly addressed in the literature regarding food programs—this is especially important when the program facilitators do not belong to the same cultural groups as the participants. Parents of *Kids Club* participants suggested that their children make some dishes in *Kids Club* from their own cultural food repertoires. This seemed to be part of a desire to feel more included in the program and to share their knowledge and skills with program facilitators and participants, as well as to demonstrate the nutritious elements of their traditional dishes. Community organizations with multicultural participants can facilitate and enhance social inclusion through organizational changes built into the design of the program (Forde et al., 2015). For non-profit organizations engaging in food justice through food programming, there is work to do in terms of understanding how dominant culture plays out in programs and services. This involves centering the voices of diverse and marginalized community members, staff, and volunteers through allyship. It's also key that program facilitators educate themselves on what food justice is and how systemic racism and colonial oppression are tools that continue to prevent access to good food (Slocum, 2006). This lens can inform collaborative work that enhances the importance of inclusive food practices—a continuous process of learning.

### *Working with adolescents*

Brooks and Begley (2014) identify adolescents as a difficult group to motivate and engage. Indeed, one of our findings pertaining to *Cookin' Up Justice* was the challenge of consistently engaging adolescents in the weekly program. One of the participants who attended the program regularly was doing so as part of a co-op credit at their high school, and a few others were counting their participation in the program as part of their mandatory volunteer hours required to graduate from high school. Adolescents have many roles and responsibilities, and it is unrealistic to expect them to devote their leisure time to an educational food program. This may be even more acute in a lower-income neighbourhood, where many teens go to school full-time and hold down part-time employment. Building in school credit incentives as well as making the program relaxed and a fun social opportunity could incentivize teens to participate in greater numbers and more regularly. Obtaining secondary school credit for participation in community-based food

literacy programs was also advocated by youth participants in another Canadian teen food program called *Cook it Up!* studied by Thomas and Irwin (2013).

In terms of engagement, *Cookin' Up Justice* focus group participants suggested using social media to both advertise the program and facilitate better communication among existing participants. In a review of adolescent food literacy programs, the following innovative programming ideas to engage the adolescent target group are recommended: cooking competitions, the incorporation of learning about media in relation to food and health, and the use of technology including social media and computer programs (Brooks & Begley, 2014). Given the importance of including adolescents in food education programs, it is imperative that program facilitators continuously solicit feedback and ideas from participants in order to make the program relatable and keep them engaged.

## Conclusion

FL and more recently CFL and Food Justice are recognized as important approaches to improve population health and transform our food system to make it more equitable and sustainable. Providing youth with opportunities to learn FL, CFL, and Food Justice is crucial in achieving these goals since they can provide lifelong lessons for youth who will become adults and will be cooking for themselves and potentially their families and will be instrumental in making changes to the food system. We have presented details about the innovative youth food programs that are offered at the HCFC that demonstrate the value of incorporating FL, CFL, and Food Justice into the pedagogical approaches and programming. However, incorporating both the practical and political frameworks into food programming is not without its challenges, and even the most thoughtfully designed youth food programs may run the risk of having the CFL and Food Justice elements overshadowed by more individually based and neoliberal FL objectives.

When incorporating CFL and Food Justice dimensions into food programs, another challenge we identified is the negotiation of which foods to include in the cooking activities when there are diverse actors—both facilitators and participants—with a variety of tastes, cultural traditions, and ideas about what constitutes “healthy” food. The importance of food as a part of cultural, class, and gender identity must also be foregrounded in program design and food choices, particularly when working with culturally diverse and racialized participants. Given that food is so much more than just nourishment, and reflects various cultural, socioeconomic class, political, ethical, and social identities, it’s not surprising that it was raised by participants as what we have called in our analysis “food politics.” Rather than seeing food politics as a challenge or barrier, however, we suggest that they can be viewed as an educational opportunity to explore diversity, anti-racism, anti-oppression, social inequities, and Food Justice. We recommend intentional program design that is rooted in CFL and food justice principles so that participants’

feedback can be thoughtfully incorporated into staff perspectives and ideas into program design changes.

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