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EMBRACING PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

Anybody can dig a hole and plant a tree. But make sure it survives. You have to nurture it, you have to water it, you have to keep at it until it becomes rooted so it can take care of itself.

(Maathai, 2006)

I get to work the soil and plant. It's hands-on instead of talking about it, I get to dig and get messy. That's my favorite thing.

(Student, Learning Gardens)

It is widely recognized that not all students flourish in a didactic, abstract, and reading- and writing-centric learning environment; many children and youth integrate new information best through practice or bodily engagement. The planning and planting of a school garden presents multiple opportunities to engage diverse ways of learning and brings all students into the conversation about life. Experience with the real world teaches us in profound ways. Active engagement, embodied learning, and practical experience are foundational to transformational education. In this chapter, we embrace practical experience in learning gardens as a dynamic form of engagement that animates teaching and learning and brings life to schools.

Life's Teachings in Soil

When children come into close bodily contact with soil in learning gardens, when they can actually feel soil "tilth," when they can personally compare the relative presence or absence of earthworms in different soils, issues of sustainable techniques are grounded in physical reality. The following sixth

grade students' comments describe the educational value of learning gardens as such:

It's about soil and science. We get to experience things. In class you get paper...

You learn about animals and plants, how to harvest, how plants take time to grow. [It is important] not just to go to the store and buy stuff. You get to see and know how plants grow...

In the gardens, we learn how not to fertilize, because it is not healthy to eat stuff that is artificially fertilized, it is healthier to eat organic.

The tempering and transformational qualities of experience are critical elements of an ecological perspective. The following eighth grade student's poem relates insights into the interconnected web of life that animates learning gardens.

Life

The sun powers the plants
 The plants are used by animals.
 The animals are used by us, humans.
 But when we die our bodies belong to
 the earth.

If you are not careful and you destroy
 one of these things you destroy the
 things that are in this cycle.

Insights such as those captured in the comments and poem above do not emerge from mental understandings alone; they are rooted in and nurtured by living experience.

Experience is not just about doing or hands-on learning. The ability to discriminate, make meaning, and learn is contingent upon pairing experience and reflection; this can teach a number of different ways of relating with life. For example, the same frost that kills some plants, such as pineapple sage, will ripen the fruit of others, such as persimmon. The occurrence of frost is neither good nor bad in its own right. Experience with it, paired with reflection, generates meaning and stimulates further questions such as: Why did one plant die and not the other? What makes persimmon ripen with frost, whereas other fruits need warmth to ripen? This experience presents a problem and contradicts what until this point might have been a taken-for-granted assumption that all fruit ripens with warmth; or that frost kills all plants.