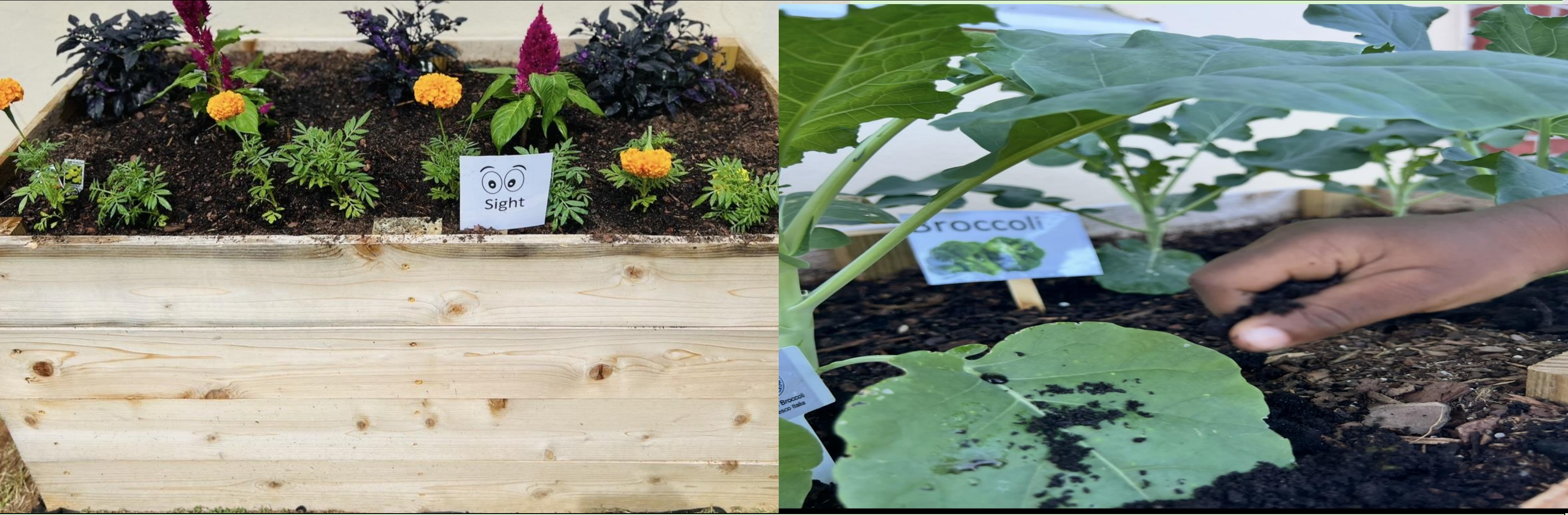


From Roots to Results: Exploring Early Childhood Teachers' Journeys Through a Farm-to-School Training Program

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Abstract: Childhood obesity is a pervasive health problem in the United States that persists despite national efforts to combat it. This is largely due to a lack of fruits and vegetables in children's diets. Farm-to-School Programs have been created to attempt to remedy this lack of nutrition and introduce students to gardening practices. This study explores the impact of a six-month professional development program on early childhood educators' self-efficacy and knowledge in implementing Farm-to-School initiatives. This study addresses gaps in the current literature by assessing the effects of a professional development program on the teachers' confidence and willingness to engage in a school gardening initiative. A qualitative, single-case research design was utilized. A farm-to-school training program was implemented among early childhood educators at the Early Childhood Center for Excellence. This consisted of gardening classes, on-going modeling, instructional coaching, and farm-to-school coordination. Data was collected in focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and observations. Data analysis is currently underway, but preliminary results highlight several key themes. First, professional development programs can drive meaningful personal and professional growth among educators. Second, institutional support is essential for successful implementation of a farm-to-school program. Finally, formal and informal reflective dialogue plays a pivotal role in inspiring innovative teaching practices and fostering deeper connections between educators and their desire to implement garden-based learning. This study highlights the importance of institutional support, such as dedicated planning time, and provides insights for the creation of teacher training programs. Future research can be conducted within educational policy to determine how school policy can further support teachers in their implementation of garden based and outdoor teaching.



Background:

- Childhood obesity is a serious national health issue with numerous risks including high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and mental health disorders which can lead to detrimental and life-long medical implications (Freedman et al., 2007; Halfon et al., 2013; Morrison et al., 2015; Whitlock et al., 2005)
- The risk of childhood obesity can be reduced with a healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables
- Early childhood is the critical period for forming dietary habits that persist through adulthood and influence long-term health outcomes (National Academy of Medicine, 2015)
- USDA Farm-to-School programs were developed to create opportunities for youth to form healthy eating habits in schools
- Farm-to-School programs involve the partnership of schools and local farms to supply produce for school meals while integrating agricultural education and school gardening activities into the school curricula
- This research aims to study how professional development training programs for educators relate to the effectiveness and sustainability of Farm-to-School programs
- This study explores how a training program influences educators' confidence in teaching gardening and nutrition as well as their own background and foundational beliefs on garden-based education
- This study and the findings that arise can be used to gain insights into the efficacy of this training in empowering early childhood educators to integrate agriculture education into their teaching practices, in hopes of closing the gap between educator self-efficacy and the administration of Farm-to-School programs



Methods:

- Single case-study
- Subjects included nine teachers and the director of the Early Childhood Center for Excellence (ECCE)
- Inclusion criteria: employed at the ECCE during the 2024-2025 school year, teach preschool students, and be available to participate in the Farm-to-School Training Program
- The Farm-to-School Training encompassed garden classes led by the Farm-to-School Coordinator (the researcher) and a trained garden teacher. It also included instructional coaching by the researcher, a three-day professional development program, and ongoing classroom support
- Data collection included focus groups, individual interviews, researcher's observations and notes
- The focus groups and interviews were then transcribed and scrubbed to ensure accuracy and confidentiality
- Data was analyzed through Atlas.ti to identify trends and patterns
- Identification of patterns and codes in these transcriptions provide a basis for determining and understanding the overall link between the impact of Farm-to-School professional development training on early childhood educators.

Preliminary Results:

- Data analysis for this project is ongoing
- Preliminary results show that teachers reported increased confidence and creativity in incorporating garden education in both their classrooms and personal lives
- Institutional support has been essential for the promotion of garden-based education and has included the scheduling of instructional coaching meetings, co-teaching opportunities, and structural reinforcement. This support increases the likelihood that outdoor education is sustainable and valued within the institution
- Reflective dialogue has played a large role in initiating innovative teaching practices and crafting deeper connections between educators and garden-based learning
- Findings emphasize that to support implementation, investments in professional development with a focus on outdoor learning initiatives must be prioritized and institutional frameworks must be established
- Future research could further investigate the relationship between institutional support and successful implementation of garden programs

References

