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## Nutrition Education as a Tool of Empowerment

Claire DeVries

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Nutrition Education as a Tool of Empowerment

Claire DeVries

A Project Submitted to

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Professional Master of Arts in Social Innovation

School of Community Leadership and Development

December 2022



The signatures of the individuals below indicate that they have read and approved the project of Claire DeVries in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Professional Master of Arts in Social Innovation.

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the nutrition education programs implemented by organizations that operate Fresh Markets in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with the goal of connecting empowered nutrition education to a food justice context. A review of scholarly literature reveals that there has been limited published work within the last three decades that integrates empowered nutrition to a food justice context. Analysis of interviews conducted with the four organizations indicates that nutrition education is used as a tool of empowerment in a food justice framework. However, this study reveals that nutrition education cannot be used alone as a tool of empowerment, rather it is a small part of a larger structure, fulfilling a specific role to empower communities. Further research is needed on the role of nutrition education in communities being empowered through transformative food justice work.

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## **Introduction**

The Fresh Markets are affordable retail food markets that are working on transforming the local food system away from a charitable model and towards access to fresh produce. They were designed to be a transitional and transformative approach to the work being done by food pantries. The program started from a collaborative grant through Access of West Michigan in 2017. Five organizations piloted the program to develop a Fresh Market within their organization as an added resource to the communities they serve. Through the Fresh Markets, the goal is to shift from supplying food in food pantries to offering locally sourced, affordable fresh food to improve the overall health of each neighborhood while supporting the local agricultural economy. The Fresh Markets are an innovative way of transforming food justice. The purpose of this project is to investigate the nutrition-based education programs implemented by the Fresh Markets with the goal of connecting empowered nutrition education to a food justice context.

The research questions that guide this study are: What nutrition-based education programs do the Fresh Markets implement? Why do they include these programs as part of their institutional goals? The goal of this project is to: assess the current state of nutrition-based education programs at the Fresh Markets and their alignment with a food justice framework; and to consider how the Fresh Markets could implement nutrition-based education as a tool of empowerment. With this data, I seek to add to the knowledge and study of food justice work by utilizing the Fresh Markets in Grand Rapids as a case study of a transformative food justice-centered approach.

## Literature Review

There have been many studies and publications on nutrition education in the food reform or food security framework. The published work indicates that important terminology for food movements is often used interchangeably, leading to the need to define those terms related to food justice work as well as expand on the framework around critical nutrition. Additionally, there has been very little research conducted on nutrition education as a tool of empowerment from a food justice perspective.

**What is food justice?** Food justice has gained familiarity and popularity within a variety of disciplines. While the issues that food justice works to address have been around for centuries, food justice has gained both academic and social interest in the past thirty years (Hayes & Carbone, 2015). Initially, the food justice movement emerged as a result of the environmental justice movement as well as the civil rights movement (Gordon & Hunt, 2019; Hayes & Carbone, 2015).

Because food justice is a multidisciplinary movement, it can be defined through different lenses. However, food justice maintains an intersectional perspective because it informs many areas of study, thought, and action (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Gordon & Hunt, 2019; Hayes & Carbone, 2015). Food justice is a vision of social, environmental, and economic justice - seeking to eliminate disparities and inequities through transformation of the food system (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Hayes & Carbone, 2015). It focuses on eliminating disparities and inequities and seeks ways to intervene against structural inequalities (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015).

**Food Justice vs. Food System Reform.** It is important to differentiate food justice from other types of food reform because it is often used interchangeably in both food movements and academics with food system reform and food security (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Gordon &

Hunt, 2019; Hayes & Carbone, 2015). Food security refers to the ability of all people to have access to enough food for an active, healthy life and is concerned with accessibility of food (United States Department of Agriculture, 2014 as cited in Hayes & Carbone, 2015). It seeks to strengthen existing links within the food chain in order to increase accessibility, promote community engagement and contribute to sustainability (Gordon & Hunt, 2019). Key food system reform terminology includes food pantries, food banks, and food deserts (Hayes & Carbone, 2015).

Food system reform emphasizes food system equity but is not focused on the systemic causes of food inequities, which is the focus of food justice (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Gordon & Hunt, 2019; Hayes & Carbone, 2015). However, focusing on food system reformation may tend to “neglect more structural criticisms of poverty, uneven decision-making and systemic racism” (Gordon & Hunt, 2019). Food security does not consider where food is grown or the conditions it is produced and distributed, but food justice work involves communities to exercise their right to grow, sell and eat healthy food that is grown with the wellbeing of the land, workers, and animals (Change for Children, n.d.; Just Food, n.d., as cited in Gordon & Hunt, 2019).

Because food justice is a term used generously by scholars, it is important to define the difference between food justice and food reform work to avoid confusion (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015). In order to create a framework that incorporates critical nutrition education, empowerment, and food justice, it is necessary to first establish the groundwork of defining the differences between food justice and food systems reform.

**Empowerment.** Empowerment is a concept that can be used differently in many disciplines and practices (McLaughlin, 2016 as cited in Bornemann & Weiland, 2019).



Empowerment includes practices that engage people to bring them into positions of influence in order to communicate their concerns about individual or societal issues (Bornemann & Weiland, 2019). It is a social action process that promotes, at an individual, organizational and community level, the gain of autonomy or control over their lives within the community and at a larger scale (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). Within the food justice field, Paulo Freire's definition of empowerment is often used as a framework. According to Freire, "...empowerment occurs through a slow group process or problem posing and critical reflection, which brings about a new consciousness/awareness that one's life and the world can change " (1987 as cited in Russness, 1993). Freire's theoretical framework of empowerment is a grounding theme in many publications focused on nutrition education within the food justice perspective. It can also be applied as a critique to traditional nutrition education programs.

**Critical Nutrition Education.** Critical nutrition education is an emerging field in many disciplines. It is place-based, meaning that it "understands nourishment as something that is deeply embedded in daily life struggles for power, resources, recognition, and meaning" (J. Hayes-Conroy & A. Hayes-Conroy, 2017). Critical nutrition education recognizes the many definitions of food and its complex power (Guthman, 2014). Furthermore, it recognizes that traditional nutrition education imposes both "white and Western specific" contexts and definitions of nutrition (Kolavalli, 2019). Nutrition education must be integrated with the root causes of poverty and powerlessness (Russness, 1993). It is contextual, looking at current circumstances and concerned with social and political environments (Kent, 1988). It involves critical analysis and dialogue that "encourages local people to participate in the interpretation and analysis of their own situations" (Kent, 1988).

**Empowered Nutrition Education.** Critical nutrition education can be engaged through a Freire theoretical framework of empowerment. Traditional nutrition education programs use what Freire describes as a “banking” model of education, where “the student is an empty vessel in which the teacher deposits knowledge” (1970, as cited in Travers, 1997). Empowered education based on Freire’s framework involves group participation “to identify their problems, to critically assess social and historical roots of problems, to envision a healthier society, and to develop strategies to overcome obstacles in achieving their goals” (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). Traditional education assumes that the student has no previous knowledge, but an empowered education approach levels the field by promoting participation as “equals and co-learners” (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). Empowered nutrition education is an important part of food justice work because it seeks to engage communities to reflect on their own experiences and explore the root causes of food system inequities.

**Conclusion.** Based on my review of the scholarly literature, there is a multitude of research exploring nutrition education from food reform and food security frameworks, yet there has been limited published work within the last three decades that introduces empowered nutrition in a food justice context. The aforementioned themes and concepts all are interconnected with work being done by scholars and activists related to food justice, yet there are no “system level intervention strategies reflected in the literature” (Hayes & Carbone, 2015). Therefore, there is a need for the study of participatory practices in food justice (Caruso, 2014). Along with a need for research to identify best practices to support food justice initiatives and sustainable community practices (Hayes & Carbone, 2015). My work seeks to add to the knowledge and study of food justice work by utilizing the Fresh Markets in Grand Rapids as a case study of a transformative food justice-centered approach.

## **Participants**

Fresh Markets are pilot affordable retail markets that are working to make local produce available in neighborhoods with limited food access. These markets are transitioning away from traditional pantry services and towards making local fresh produce available and accessible equitably for their local communities. Of the five organizations that currently run Fresh Markets, four organizations offer nutrition education in some capacity as part of their programming, post COVID. All four organizations described below participated as part of this research.

### **North Kent Connect**

North Kent Connect is located in Rockford, Michigan, serving people living in northern Kent County, including Sparta, Kent City, Rockford, Belmont, Cedar Springs, and Sand Lake, since 1973. Their mission is to improve the lives of all people in northern Kent County by providing access to basic needs and promoting economic independence. North Kent Connect works towards their mission through a variety of programming and opportunities. They currently implement individual case management to connect those in financial crisis with resources for partner food pantries, utilities, rent/mortgage assistance, as well as several food programs, including a food pantry, senior pantry, and federal commodities. They operate a thrift store and a Fresh Market that are open to both clients and the general public. Their Fresh Market, known as the Farm Stand, opened in 2017 as part of the Access of West Michigan pilot program. With the completion of a recent building expansion in 2020, North Kent Connect provides space for partner community organizations that complement their services and mission, including West Michigan Works!, Arbor Circle, Kent County Health Department WIC North County Clinic, and a Family Promise Day Center. They consider themselves a “one-shop stop” for northern Kent

County residents because of the programs that they offer as well as the resources they are able to connect residents with through the partner organizations located in their building.

### **The Other Way Ministries**

The Other Way Ministries is a community development organization that has served those who live on the Westside of Grand Rapids, Michigan since 1967. They work to remove barriers, increase access to basic needs, and empower neighborhood families through building relationships and a variety of programs and services, including early childhood and youth education programs, counseling, and resource referral and management. They also offer several food-focused programs, including a food pantry, a food cooperative, known as the Agape Co-op, as well as a Fresh Market. The Agape Co-op is a member-led program designed to build community and make healthy food options and household products more accessible. Members pay a monthly due to access the benefits of the co-op, which include bi-weekly share of food and products, along with opportunities for community building with other member families and leadership opportunities. The Fresh Market opened in 2017 as part of the Access of West Michigan pilot program, and is overseen by the co-op.

### **United Church Outreach Ministry (UCOM)**

United Church Outreach Ministry (UCOM) is located on the southwest side of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and serves the Roosevelt Park and Black Hills neighborhoods of Grand Rapids, in addition to the cities of Wyoming and Grandville. The mission of UCOM is to build relationships and foster community leadership by offering essential resources and providing educational opportunities to enhance health and well-being through financial literacy education, work skills training, a clothing pantry, and several food support programs. Their food support programs include a Healthy Choice Food Pantry, which is a food pantry focused on providing

healthful, nutritious options for neighbors, a Fresh Market, known as the Farm Stand, and a neighborhood initiative focused on sustainability and self-sufficiency, known as Growing Green Neighbors. UCOM's Fresh Market opened in 2017 as part of the Access of West Michigan pilot program.

### **United Methodist Community House (UMCH)**

United Methodist Community House (UMCH) serves people living in the 49507-zip code, located on the southeast side of Grand Rapids, Michigan, since 1902. They provide opportunities for children, youth, adults, seniors, and families to succeed in their diverse community through their four core programs tailored towards children, youth, seniors, and food access. They operate a Child Development Center, which delivers early childhood education, afterschool and summer youth activities, and a Senior Center which includes transportation, meal, and healthcare assistance. UMCH opened their Fresh Market in 2020 and was not part of the Access of West Michigan pilot program. Additionally, UMCH does not operate a food pantry along with their Fresh Market. Located in a documented food desert, their Fresh Market is open to the public and supplies access to healthy, locally grown fresh produce.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with staff from each of the four organizations that run Fresh Markets. Please see Appendix A for interview questions. Interviews took place either in-person or via Zoom based on staff availability and preferences, following IRB protocols. Please see Appendix B for Informed Consent document.

### Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed before analysis was completed via coding. No personal identifiers were collected. Both inductive and deductive coding approaches were utilized, as well as thematic analysis. Codes were derived from the interview questions (Appendix A) as well as themes that appeared across the interviews during analysis. Please see the table below for a list of the codes and subcodes.

Table 1: Codes

CODE	SUBCODES
<b>NUTRITION EDUCATION PROGRAMMING</b>	
	<i>Health Improvement</i>
	<i>Cooking Skills</i>
	<i>Gardening</i>
	<i>Future</i>
<b>CONSTRAINTS</b>	
	<i>Community Interest</i>
	<i>Teaching Space</i>
	<i>Funding</i>
<b>COMMUNITY INPUT</b>	
	<i>Surveys</i>
	<i>Relationships</i>
<b>GOALS &amp; MISSION</b>	
	<i>Fresh Market</i>
	<i>Healthy Food Guidelines</i>

## Results and Analysis

### Code 1: Nutrition Education Programming

*“One of the beauties in some of the classes we’ve been able to offer is that they offer opportunities to gain food skills and food knowledge, then you can take and change the way you see food, interact with food, eat food, purchase food”*

- UCOM

During interviews, the four organizations were asked to describe the types of nutrition education programming that they offer. The types of classes offered can be defined by the following categories: health improvement, cooking skills, and gardening programs. While the organization’s programming can be defined by these three categories, it is important to note that one program can integrate components all of three categories. Descriptions of the programming that the organizations hope to do in the future is included as well, since most of the organizations are just starting to rebuild their programs post COVID.

#### *Code 1 Subcode 1: Health Improvement*

The first type of nutrition education programming that the organizations offer is focused on health improvement. Health improvement nutrition programming is focused on providing education on the impact that food can have on different health concerns. UMCH described that they look at the health issues, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, for the demographics that they serve, which influences their choice of classes to offer.

For UCOM, they have done a variety of programs focused on health improvement. One such example is the six-week Good Food Challenge that they hosted last spring. Each week of the challenge focused on a different health topic and provided applicable nutrition education for participants to incorporate in their own lives. Weekly challenges included eating whole grains,

adding fruits and vegetables to their meals, as well as water and hydration. They have also partnered with Spectrum Health to offer classes with registered dietitians on different health and nutrition topics, such as salt-free eating, holiday eating, and coping with stress.

### ***Code 1 Subcode 2: Cooking Skills***

The next type of nutrition education programming that the organizations offer focuses on cooking skills as it relates to preparing and cooking good foods. North Kent Connect describes that, for their organization, this type of programming was developed out of a need that was identified as they started introducing fresh produce in both their pantry and Farm Stand. As they started introducing new produce options, they discovered that many of their clients did not know how to cook with the new options. They partner with organizations such as Spectrum Health, Michigan State Extension, and YMCA to offer cooking classes. In addition to their cooking classes, North Kent Connect will often do food demonstrations and recipe tastings, along with provide different recipe cards in both their Farm Stand and pantry that complement the produce that is being offered at that time. For their seniors, they offer a “Cooking for One” program that focuses on how to cook meals for just one person, as seniors transition from cooking for a family to living alone.

UMCH incorporates food skills-based education into all three of their primary program areas: the Fresh Market, Child Development Center, and the Senior Center. Since the opening of their Fresh Market in 2020, they have offered a quarterly educational series focused on cooking using seasonally available produce; produce which is also available in their Market. Additionally, they invite the families of their Child Development Center to participate in cooking classes, where they learn how to cook different recipes and then have a meal together. The recipes introduced in those classes use produce from the Fresh Market and are then introduced



into the lunch menu for the children in the Development Center. Furthermore, they offer classes for their Senior Center on creating healthier versions of classic cultural dishes.

For UCOM, a main program that they have offered is a cooking club, called “Eat Healthy to Be Health”. Neighbors from the community act as the host for each class. They select the recipe that will be featured, and during class, do a cooking demonstration of the recipe. The health benefits of the recipe are highlighted during the cooking demonstration, and then all the participants get to sample the recipe. UCOM describes that the recipes often highlighted produce that is available seasonally at the Farm Stand, so that participants are able to easily access the ingredients to try the recipe at home.

### ***Code 1 Subcode 3: Gardening***

The third type of nutrition education programming that three of the organizations implement is gardening. This type of programming is specific to providing education and opportunities for their community to grow their own food. The Other Way Ministries coordinates a community garden that operates seasonally as a space for neighbors to “sow and harvest together”. Neighbors can purchase plots in the garden at a low cost for the season and that includes access to tools and water.

For North Kent Connect, they describe their gardening program to be one of their most popular programs. They have eight garden beds in which they grow a variety of produce, as well as provide seedlings to clients to grow at home. They also partner with a local farm, Plainsong Farms, to provide gardening education for participants. Plainsong Farms also provides space on their farm specifically for North Kent Connect participants to learn and grow their own produce.

As part of their Growing Green Neighbors Initiative, UCOM implements a Square Food Gardening program, with the goal that their community can become more self-sustaining. The

organization distributes raised garden boxes, soil, and seeds to participating community members. The participants choose what produce they would like to grow in their garden and have opportunities to learn from experienced gardeners or farmers during monthly meetings at UCOM. As part of the program, volunteers will visit the families at their homes throughout the growing season to address any specific concerns that they have with their gardens.

***Code 1 Subcode 4: Future***

What the organizations hope to do in the future with regards to nutrition education is important to include due to the impact of COVID. When describing the programs that they currently offer, all four organizations also described the programming that they hope to do in the future now that they are rebuilding their programming post COVID.

For North Kent Connect, they are looking forward to rebuilding the programs that were popular for their clients pre-COVID, specifically their gardening program. They are hoping to offer more cooking classes since they now have an expanded teaching and cooking space (more details to follow). They are looking for opportunities to engage other members in their community to help with their nutrition-based programming, specifically those that do not utilize the services offered at North Kent Connect. One example that they described was having children from the community come participate in a cooking class with their senior clients.

Before COVID, UCOM offered a variety of programming related to nutrition education. They hope to re-start their community-led cooking club model as well as find a new partnership in order to offer more formal classes on different health topics, led by health experts such as registered dietitians. They desire to offer more skill-focused classes along with their cooking classes, such as a knife skills focused class or a class on different cooking techniques like sautéing.

For The Other Way Ministries, the focus is on continuing to support the co-op to encourage participant leadership and autonomy. In the future, they would like to see more recipe sharing classes, where co-op members have opportunities to teach each other and share food samples. Another opportunity is focusing on home-cooking and budget meals made with less meat, as “meat is so expensive right now and the people that feel the pinch the most are already in dire financial straits”. Overall, they are looking for opportunities to integrate nutrition education in a more authentic way into their programming.

For UMCH, who just opened their Fresh Market in 2020, they describe that they are still in the pilot stage for their nutrition programming and working to implement new initiatives that are embedded into their other programs. With the recent addition of new cooking equipment, they look forward to offering more cooking classes, such as cultural cooking classes, as well as classes focused on the preservation of food, like canning. One important type of program they are hoping to offer includes programs that are derived from, or led by, their clients. For instance, they described a relationship that they have built with a community member that purchases produce from the Fresh Market and makes their own salsa. They would love for this community member to lead a workshop on making homemade salsa. They are also looking to embed more nutrition education into both their child and adult day center programs, one example being a chef demonstration of making your own smoothie during snack time.

### **Analysis of Code 1: Nutrition Education Programming**

All four organizations engage in nutrition education programming, though it may look different for each organization. In describing the programming that they offer; the organizations conveyed the purpose behind the programming. The organizations provide different types of nutrition education programming to meet needs and interest of their specific community. Health

improvement, cooking skills, and gardening focused programs are all opportunities to build knowledge, skills, and self-sufficiency. All three are needed and important.

UCOM and The Other Way Ministries both have distinctive models for community-led programming. The Other Way Ministries' co-op is a closed group that provides access to food as well as community-building opportunities through different events and programs, primarily focused on the topics discussed above. Like the cooking club that UCOM implements, The Other Way Ministries is looking to find ways to engage their community in more community-led events, such as recipe sharing. Both programs demonstrate that the organizations are looking for ways to engage their community and provide opportunities to meet the needs in their community, while keeping their communities at the center.

UMCH has a unique perspective since they do not also operate a food pantry. As the newest Fresh Market, they are still in the pilot stage of their programming. Their efforts are focused on building up the community for their Fresh Market, in addition to integrating nutrition education into the other services that they provide. As they look to rebuild their programming, all four organizations described opportunities to put community voices at the center of their future programming, which is complimentary to the transformations happening in the community through the Fresh Markets.

## **Code 2: Constraints**

*“People that realize that want to come back to classes and get more, but people who haven't been to the class haven't realized the value of that class”*

- UCOM

The four organizations were asked to describe the constraints that they have faced including nutrition education as part of their organizational programming. As the organizations

described the barriers that they face, there were three main issues that attributed to the constraints in implementing the programming, including community interest, the physical space for programming, and funding.

### ***Code 2 Subcode 1: Community Interest***

For three of the organizations, community interest has been a barrier to offering nutrition education programming. These three organizations operate both a food pantry and the Fresh Market. The Other Way Ministries describes that it has taken time to build trust with their community, especially the co-op. The strong relationships that they have developed with the co-op members means that the members are more likely to engage in the programs that The Other Way offers, but they describe that they have had to “alter [their] expectations somewhat of the activities and the classes we put on as part of the co-op and not expect everyone to be interested in in everything we do”.

North Kent Connect describes their biggest constraint as community interest in new and unfamiliar foods. As they introduce new foods into both their pantry and Fresh Market, they have to focus on including nutrition education so that their clients not only had access to the foods but knew how to cook with them as well. They describe that their “clients are more open to trying things now because it’s been a five-year process”. By providing nutrition education opportunities, they were able to create interest not only in their programming, but in the foods that they offer, although it took years to build that trust and interest.

For UCOM, interest is multi-faceted constraint for their community. They describe that their neighbors have “a little harder time making consistent commitments”, which makes it hard for them to offer series classes where participants need to register and attend consistently. Another major constraint is community interest as it relates to availability. They find it hard to

find a time that works for their neighbors, given the variety of ages and stages of life that their community is in. They also struggle to present their nutrition education classes in a way that creates interest in the community, describing that “people that haven’t been to the class don’t realize the value of that class”.

### ***Code 2 Subcode 2: Teaching Space***

When describing the space that they have for programming, three of the organizations describes constraints that they face due to the functionality of their space. This limits the types of classes that they can offer. UCOM describes that they have a community room that they use for programming, but because they don’t have a kitchen teaching space, they have to set up a “makeshift kitchen” on a podium. They are restricted to recipes that can be done on a hotplate for their cooking classes.

UMCH has several spaces that their nutrition programming takes place, depending on the audience. For their children’s programming, events take place in the classrooms during mealtime. For their Senior Center, most programming will take place in the cafeteria. They also have a meeting space behind the Fresh Market that they utilize for nutrition-based programming. However, they are limited in the types of classes that they could offer due to a lack of equipment that would allow participants to cook along with the instructor. Currently, they are only able to offer demonstration style cooking classes, where participants would watch the instructor make a recipe and are provided the ingredients to try the recipe at home.

The Other Way Ministries has both a small kitchenette and a kitchen. However, neither space is a licensed kitchen, so they are not supposed to provide food out of either of those spaces for public classes. They are able to utilize the kitchens for their co-op

North Kent Connect is the only organization with a space specifically designed for nutrition-based programming with a licensed teaching kitchen. When the organization expanded its building in 2021, the space was designed so that they would be able to accommodate both cooking classes and educational programming in a teaching kitchen and an adjoined classroom space.

### ***Code 2 Subcode 3: Funding***

None of the organizations receive grant-funding to specifically offer nutrition education programming. In the past, UCOM received funding from a specific organization to offer health focused programming. At least three of the organizations Fresh Markets receive funding from Heart of West Michigan United Way, which they can utilize to offer programming as part of the Fresh Market.

For The Other Way Ministries, their overall budget was reduced significantly a few years ago due to a major funder cutting their support. Because of this, they “struggle to source the foods that people want for their regular shares, setting aside anything extra, like special ingredients for cooking classes...that’s a challenge”. The pantry, Fresh Market, and co-op have all been impacted by the budget reduction.

### **Analysis of Code 2: Constraints**

The constraints that each organization expressed demonstrates the work that they have done to implement nutrition education programming, successful or not. One constraint that will continue to require ingenuity and creativity in order to navigate is the space for programming. For most organizations, their space for programming is not a resource that can be modified. However, when North Kent Connect renovated and expanded their space in 2021, they purposefully designed a multi-use licensed teaching kitchen and teaching space that would

accommodate and enhance future nutrition education programming. While not all organizations have the opportunity or funding to do this type of expansion, for North Kent Connect, it demonstrates a commitment to continuing nutrition education programming and eliminating organizational barriers to do so.

UMCH continues to be an outlier here, as the barriers that they discussed were related to bigger food systems change, growing their Fresh Market to be in competition with the big food stores. However, through seeking intentional grant funding, they were able to broaden their cooking class programming through the addition of new cooking equipment to provide an expanded opportunity for their community to be cooking hands-on during the classes.

There are many opportunities for these organizations as they rebuild their programming post COVID. The programming that they hope to do in the future is built on all they have learned and the constraints that they have experienced, as well as the experiences of their community.

### **Code 3: Community Input**

*“And so, there were ideas that I wouldn’t have thought about myself because we brought it to the people and talked about it”*

- *The Other Way Ministries*

During interviews, the organizations were asked two questions related to community interest. The first question was “How do you decide what types of classes to do?”. The second question was “Do you provide opportunities for participants to give feedback on programming?”.

#### ***Code 3 Subcode 1: Surveys***

Three of the organizations described that they conduct a participant survey at the end of each program or event. The purpose being to give participants an opportunity to reflect on their



experience, describe what they liked about the class, and what could have made the class better. All three organizations describe that feedback surveys are a routine part of their programming.

### ***Code 3 Subcode 2: Relationships***

In addition to surveys, three of the organizations described that the relationships that they have built with their communities impacts the classes and programming that they offer. North Kent Connect describes asking their clients what they are interested in learning more about, which influences the classes and programs that they implement.

For UCOM, this type of participant feedback is informal. As they build relationships with their neighbors, they are able to learn more about what their neighbors are interested in learning about through conversation. The cooking club, “Eat Healthy to Be Healthy” is led by community members that UCOM has a relationship with.

The Other Way Ministries describes that for their co-op, community input is central. The goal of the co-op is to be member led, with a leadership team made up of community members. One requirement of being part of the co-op is attending mandatory quarterly meetings. Staff describes that the “have gotten really excited the last few times we met, the ideas coming out of people and seeing more buy-in and that makes me genuinely excited to keep asking for feedback because I see it actually being useful”. The co-op model provides opportunities for feedback, both informally through relationships and intentionally through membership meetings.

### **Analysis of Code 3: Community Input**

Community input is vital to having community-centered programming, especially if the goal is to have community-led programming. The relationship aspect of this is key. Community voices are influencing the programming offered by the organizations.

Through the Co-op, The Other Way Ministries has a unique opportunity to provide avenues for community leadership and autonomy in both the programming that is offered and the decisions that are made for the co-op. UCOM has similar opportunities with their cooking club program. Surveys are an important way to gather program feedback, but it through building relationships that the community can have real influence in the programming being offered by the organizations.

#### **Code 4: Goals & Mission**

*“The market supplies fresh produce, and you make it more accessible both geographically and affordability wise, but that alone is not always enough, so another piece of the puzzle is helping people gain food skills and food knowledge, and nutrition education is a piece of how that happens”*

- UCOM

The four organizations were asked if nutrition education was included as a goal for the Fresh Market or for the institution as a whole, as well as to describe how nutrition education fulfilled the goals and missions of the organization. There were two main reasons why nutrition education was included a goal for the Fresh Market or the institution as a whole.

#### ***Code 4 Subcode 1: Fresh Market***

For the organizations that opened Fresh Markets as part of the 2017 Access of West Michigan grant, nutrition education programming was a required component of the initial grant funding. Since the end of that funding, it is at the discretion of each Fresh Market to continue nutrition education programming. For The Other Way Ministries, nutrition education is not an established goal for any part of the organization since the funding ended, but it is something that the staff internally would like to continue. For UMCH, who opened their Fresh Market in 2020

and was not part of the original grant, they describe that nutrition education is a goal for their Fresh Market as well as an institutional goal.

#### ***Code 4 Subcode 2: Healthy Food Guidelines***

Two of the organizations both have healthy food guidelines that provides detailed guidance to the ways that the organization will provide access to healthy and affordable foods. According to both organization's websites, their Healthy Food Guidelines are based on the Michigan Good Food Charter.

For North Kent Connect, their organizational Healthy Food Guideline was developed alongside their Farm Stand, as a result of the nutrition programming requirement in the Access of West Michigan grant. Embedded in their Healthy Food Guideline is educational programming to "support healthy lifestyles and teaches community members how to grow, raise and access local foods". As they started to introduce good food and fresh produce in both the Fresh Market and pantry, they had to include nutrition education to educate their community "so that people would want to buy these foods and not only just buy them but know how to eat them and why they are good for you and make it simple". One of their goals, especially for their pantry, is offering as much fresh as possible. Along with providing access to fresh produce, they describe that, "and then hopefully we are doing a good job of educating people on how to use that food and what it does for their body to help them move forward in life".

For UCOM, their Healthy Food Policy informs their organizational "Culture of Health". They describe a critical part of their culture of health is "seeing how health plays a role in the root causes of poverty". Their Health Food Policy not only details the implementation strategy for the food they choose to purchase for their food pantry, but also demonstrates commitment to activities that support healthy living such as nutrition education programs, community gardens,

movement classes, and health screenings. Their Healthy Food Policy goes beyond their commitment to those they serve but also promises to provide opportunities for their board members and volunteers to learn about the Good Food Charter and food as a key social determinant of health.

UMCH does not have a written policy or guideline on health foods for the Fresh Market or other programming, as many of their programs are still in their pilot stages; but they utilize external standards, such as the Michigan Good Food Charter, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) as guides, until their programs are more established. The Other Way Ministries did not share a formal or public policy on food guidelines, though it is evident that the Michigan Good Food Charter is a foundation for their Fresh Market as well as other parts of their organization, as noted on their website.

#### **Analysis of Code 4: Goals & Mission**

Institutional goals and mission guide the work that these organizations do. For the original three organizations that started Fresh Markets, many of the objectives of the pilot program were established by the grant, which may or may not have carried over since that grant ended. For The Other Way Ministries, nutrition education is not an established goal for any part of the organization since the funding ended, but it is something that the staff internally would like to continue. For small organizations, there are many other objectives that take precedence. It comes down to staffing and resources, which as described earlier, is limited for this organization.

Food pantries also play a significant role in this. The organizations that have food pantries, like North Kent Connect and UCOM, have had to develop a Health Foods Guideline or policy that informs all the food work being done in their organization, as they transition to including a transformative and accessible model of food justice in addition to their pantries. Both

North Kent Connect and UCOM described the value that their institutions see in including nutrition education as a goal as part of their Health Food policies.

UMCH is the outlier here. Without an established food pantry, there has not been a need for a Healthy Food Guideline in the same way. Health food policies, like the Michigan Good Food Charter, still informs the work that they do, but they are able to build that into the foundation of their Fresh Market while it is in its formative stage. In this pilot stage, it is apparent that nutrition education plays a significant role for UMCH as it establishes the Fresh Market and integrates it into the other services offered.

### **Purpose**

*“The nutrition education is an opportunity to really create exposure and to educate them along the way on how they can achieve better health which is ultimately going to impact their ability to succeed community and the things the things that they have to do right.”*

- UMCH

Through this analysis, it is evident that there is a common underlying theme. The connector that ties it all together is *purpose*. In describing the nutrition-education programming that each organization implements, it illuminates the *why* behind the work that the organizations execute. Through the types of programs offered, the constraints that they have faced, the ways that they have sought community input, to the Health Foods policy that informs their work, the organizations demonstrate that this is part of something bigger than just cooking classes, that it is a tool for empowerment. If purpose is the common theme through this analysis, it leads us to ask the question: *What is the purpose?*

## **Empowerment**

*“So, the role we can play with food is that piece of the puzzle in addressing the root causes of poverty, so how can we help the food that we provide be something that generates health and leads towards health. And just again, food alone can’t do that, there needs to be other pieces to the puzzle and the nutrition education is one of the pieces that plays into the health aspect combined with food.”*

- UCOM

The purpose is empowerment. The goal of this study was to investigate if nutrition education is used as a tool of empowerment, and the answer is yes!

Empowerment may look different for each organization. Each organization offers programs that try to meet the needs of their specific communities. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to this work. While not in explicit food justice terms, it is evident that the work being done by all four organizations, through their Fresh Markets and other programming, is transformative food justice work. Transformative food justice work is just that, transformative. It’s going to grow and change and adapt. The organizations are all at different stages of this work and working with different communities, but overall, it is apparent that they are on the same path to using nutrition education as a tool of empowerment.

### **Who is being empowered?**

*“We want to nourish people, the whole person, so through food, education, intensive case management, we want to make sure the whole person is being serviced, and we believe fresh food and healthy food is a huge part of moving people forward”*

- North Kent Connect

Another important aspect to consider is, who is being empowered? The audience is important to consider when evaluating tools of empowerment, like nutrition education. Who are

these organizations empowering? Who are they wanting to engage? This is revealed in the nuances of how each organization name the actors in their space.

For The Other Way Ministries, their community is those who live on the Westside. However, the depth of relationship and input depends on the programs that community members participate in. The co-op is a unique member-led program, which became the primary focus of the interview, namely, this is where The Other Way Ministries has opportunities to engage nutrition education as a tool of empowerment. Although it has come with mixed success, letting the community be leaders means that they aren't doing the same types of programming that other organizations implement. Staff describes excitement that although it has taken years of building trust and relationships, the community leaders in the co-op are now taking ownership of their program and working together to solve issues within the program.

For UCOM, their community is their neighbors. I think this is a really unique and dignifying way to bring empowerment to a community, showing even the ways we choose to name those we serve is important. Their cooking club is a great example of addressing the barriers that exist while providing opportunities for neighborhood leadership.

North Kent Connect stood out in the way that they engaged and named different parts of their community. There are two apparent distinctions that were revealed during analysis. Engagement and empowerment seem to be specifically different in this case. They described their clients, who utilize their services, such as the pantry and Fresh Market, differently from their community, which seems to be their donor base and local residents. Part of the work they are doing includes exploring new ways to engage and integrate the local community into the work they do; to have their community come along side in support of North Kent Connect, be that through donations or supporting their Fresh Market. As they developed and implemented

healthy food guidelines across their organization, the nutrition education piece was crucial in helping their clients not only want to purchase new foods but know how to cook with them and how they impact their health.

For UMCH, nutrition education seems to play a crucial a role in attracting more people to their organization. Because they do not also operate a food pantry, their perspective on operating a Fresh Market is different from that of the other organizations and is seemingly focused on competing with the stores of the big food system, while also providing equitable access in a low resource area. This means that the audience they are trying to reach with the Fresh Market is also different. UMCH's Fresh Market is a competitive but accessible local grocery store model, in comparison to a transformative step into food justice for the organizations that also operate food pantries. They described that the more that they offer nutrition programs and do special activities, it brings more people into their Fresh Market. For UMCH, nutrition education is a tool for broader community engagement, which in turn, supports their Fresh Market by increasing the purchase of foods at the full price point. This allows them to continue to provide the sliding scale model for those in need. In this case, nutrition education is used both as a tool of engagement and empowerment, as they leverage the programming to provide exposure and education to locally accessible foods.

The role of the food pantry is important here. Having a diversity of outputs for food seems to be successful in building and engaging the community, and now in the transition to an equitable model, empowering the community. This could also be due to the long-standing history of the food pantries established in the community which provides a foundation for the Market.



## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

As I started out on this project, with the goal of connecting empowered nutrition education to a food justice context, nutrition education was my main and only tool. I sought to uncover if nutrition education is used as a tool of empowerment. And discovered that the answer to that question is yes. Nutrition education can be used as a tool of empowerment and is used as a tool by the organizations that operate Fresh Markets.

But not on its own.

While nutrition education is a tool for empowerment, it can't be used alone. Nutrition education is a small piece in a larger structure, fulfilling a specific role to empower communities. The Fresh Markets are providing access, but as the organizations described, that alone is not enough. Nutrition education is an important piece in helping communities gain food skills and knowledge, which compliments and supports access through both the Fresh Markets and food pantries. All the pieces come together, with the ultimate goal being community empowerment.

This is a critical time for the organizations as they rebuild their programming post COVID. My recommendation to the Fresh Markets is to continue to engage in relationships; provide opportunities to engage with the community and give space for the community to lead, though it may take time to develop that trust and relationships. Looking at the co-op and the cooking club; these community led programs, that is where empowerment and food justice shows up.

My hope is that this study can continue to add to the small but growing literature on the role of nutrition education in communities being empowered through transformative food justice

work. More steps need to be taken to document the stories, both successes and failures, of organizations as they move towards more community empowered models of service, and the role that different programs and services can play. The next step in this work is to engage with the stories and experiences of the community. Community empowered work needs community voices at the center.

## Appendix A – Interview Questions

- Are nutrition education classes included as a goal for the Fresh Market?
  - If so, what is the goal?
  - If not, is it part of a different program?
- How do you see this type of programming fulfilling the goals/mission of your organization?
- What are some constraints you face with including nutrition education classes/programming?
- Do you receive grants to run these classes/events?
- What types of classes/events do you do around nutrition-education?
- How do you decide what types of classes to do?
- What are the most popular classes?
- Do you have space to do these programming?
- What types of classes do you hope to include in the future?
- How do you promote your events? / How do you reach out to people about them?
- Do you provide opportunities for participants to give feedback on programming?

## Appendix B – Informed Consent for Interviews



### **Informed Consent Document**

1. **TITLE** Nutrition-based Education as a Tool of Empowerment
2. **RESEARCHERS** Claire DeVries and Daniela Marini
3. **PURPOSE** The purpose of this research project is to add to the knowledge and study of food justice work by utilizing the Fresh Markets in Grand Rapids as a case study of a transformative food justice-centered approach.
4. **PROCEDURES**
  - Participants will be contacted via email to set up interview according to their availability.
  - Interviews will take place in-person at the Fresh Market or virtual on Zoom.
  - Covid precautions will be adhered to during in-person interviews.
  - Interviews will take approximately 30 minutes.
5. **RISKS** Electronic data (audio recordings) will be collected and/or stored for this research project. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there exists a minimal risk that data could be lost or stolen.
6. **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU** Findings from project will be shared with participants.
7. **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SOCIETY** Add to the knowledge and study of food justice work, using Fresh Markets as a case study.
8. **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION** Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate. You may quit at any time without any penalty to you.
9. **PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY** Your name will not be given to anyone other than the research team. All information collected from you or about you is for the sole purpose of this research study and will be kept confidential to the fullest extent allowed by law. In very rare circumstances specially authorized university or government officials may be given access to our research records for purposes of protecting your rights and welfare or to make sure the research

was done properly.

10. **AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE** By filling out the survey, you are agreeing to the following:
- The details of this research study have been explained to me, including what I am being asked to do and the anticipated risks and benefits;
  - I have had an opportunity to have my questions answered;
  - I am voluntarily agreeing to participate in the research as described on this form;
  - I may ask more questions or quit participating at any time without penalty.
  - I give my consent to participate in this research project.

11. **CONTACT INFORMATION** If you have any questions about the study you may contact:

NAME: Claire DeVries

E-MAIL: [devriela@mail.gvsu.edu](mailto:devriela@mail.gvsu.edu)

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the **Office of Research Compliance & Integrity** at Grand Valley State University, 1 Campus Drive, Allendale, MI. Phone: 616-331-3197. E-mail: [rci@gvsu.edu](mailto:rci@gvsu.edu).

This study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Grand Valley State University (Protocol #22-284-H).

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