



## **Can They Escape from Hot Cheetos & Takis? Black Appetite, White Food: Examining Issues of Race, Democracy, and Place**

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### **Introduction**

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When school lunch provided to the students of Hearne Elementary is confronted with disdain and groans, it is primarily those foods on the higher end of the nutritional spectrum. Why do they turn their noses up at the healthier food options or not consider trying new foods to know if they like it or not? Is it possible that due to the lack of whole foods and farmer's markets, they are limited in their knowledge of the deliciousness of these food choices, or is it because of their race and class they are not provided healthier food options as a community? This unit seeks to explore if the district of Hearne is deemed a food desert compared to other schools and not given equitable access to foods that could boost their learning and development is fair in a democracy. Drawing from conversations and readings taken from the seminar led by Ian Shapiro, writing standards will be addressed for 4th-grade students when they compose an opinion essay on why they are deserving of whole fresh foods at fair prices compared to neighboring towns.

As I observe my students pick over their lunches with looks of disgust on their faces, I wonder what I could do as their teacher to persuade them to venture from their current palate and try something new. The school's demographic makeup causes me to question why the few White students I teach so willingly enjoy the healthier snacks provided by the district and the Black students begrudgingly try them at all. Is it because their adults have not introduced them to try fresh produce as a snack, or is it because the options in the community do not exist for them?

My students are aware of the endless food choices due to having weight loss surgery three years ago. I share the consciousness of my food choices and how it is a lifestyle and not a diet. They are curious when they see me eating clean and enjoying produce unknown to them, such as mangoes, celery, peanut butter, snap peas, broccoli florets, baby carrots, blueberries, and raspberries. It is exciting when they try foods that may be foreign, and they find them enjoyable.

Providing students with opportunities to research where they live and limiting their accessibility to fresh foods hinders them. Could the lack of availability be causing food-related issues that affect their learning, their development and keeps them at the bottom of the metaphorical totem pole of knowledge? The inequality that affects the diets of my students will, I hope, spark change in them to advocate effectively for themselves and demand change. That change can have a ripple effect on the school, the district, the community. Jamila

Lysicott poses several questions for not just me but other educators to ponder as well, "How will your classroom be remembered on the other side of the history that we are inscribing at this very moment? Fifteen years into the future, will your students recall a space where rampant racial injustices of our society went unacknowledged in your classroom? Where the different racial identities in the room and dynamics associated with these differences went unaddressed? Where the content of the curriculum ignored the cultures of their communities?"<sup>1</sup> Providing my students with the content this curriculum unit will provide will answer most, if not all, of those questions for me while diligently teaching them to prevail in their society, a society that is increasingly brown in juxtapose to a majority-white world nationally.

When allowed to research and compare the food choices of their community to neighboring ones, students will critically think of solutions to the issue(s) they face with regards to the foods they eat moreover the foods that are available as options for them to consume.

Although I will teach the unit to 4th graders, other teachers can adapt the curriculum for different grade levels and communities whose socioeconomic breakdown is synonymous with Hearne Elementary.

Rich classroom discussions of the meanings of the words: food desert, democracy, inequality, and equity. Conversations that will deepen their understanding of what those things mean specifically for them as a community. Exposing students to literature through books, articles, and excerpts examine the lenses of what they are facing, why they are facing such a challenge, and what that means for them specifically as a society.

This unit could potentially be the springboard of adopting a proposal for students to create and start their whole foods market by planting, growing, and sustaining the foods typically unavailable to them for consumption. The garden could also earn money for the school while teaching students gardening, cultivating, and financial literacy skills.

## **Rationale and History**

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While Covid-19 had many restrictions for the students when they returned to in-person learning at Hearne Elementary school, it did come with a great benefit to them and me by having lunch together daily. Part of my professional goals was to build and maintain relationships with students while teaching in a pandemic. It became clear to me that lunch would serve that purpose. My students and I began a dialogue with one another where we discussed the foods, they ate in comparison to the foods I would bring from home for my lunch. Another inherent concern was their lack of knowledge about foods that I sometimes took for granted as always being readily available to me, such as fresh mint leaves, mangoes, blueberries, raspberries, Brussel sprouts, snap peas, ginger roots, or cotton candy grapes.

The knowledge they lacked about the different varieties of apples sparked the expository writing lesson of how to make homemade crockpot applesauce in the classroom to expose them to Gala, Granny Smith, Red Delicious, Honeycrisp, and Pink Lady apples. Suffice it to say, that writing lesson was a huge hit, especially when the students could eat the applesauce after I was done cooking it.

It was during these daily lunch sessions that I began to observe what the students who brought their lunch to school with them had continually and what the students who refused to eat who had lunch provided to them

from the district. Recalling a seminar session led by Ian Shapiro, one question puzzled me concerning those daily lunches held with my students, why so much inequality under majority rule? The students do not get to vote on their lunch choices, but someone does. Who is that someone, and why is there not systemic redistribution from more affluent school districts to poorer ones as Hearne, where 100% of the students receive FREE lunch? Does it have to do with power and access, or is the nutrition distribution a rigged system for those who do not know how to advocate for themselves effectively? If the economy is market-based and that market says that there will be people who are successful and some who are not, does the same ring true for accessibility to fresh and Whole Foods at affordable prices; there will be people who are successful at acquiring those types of foods and prices and those who are not? What matters to the constituents of Hearne Elementary with regards to food options and why? Is the system set up to keep disadvantaged students underserved and underprivileged? If the answer to any of those questions leads a single student to feel or remain oppressed, then as an educator, do I not owe it to them to provide them with this curriculum unit and spark demand change?

When beginning the research for this unit, an NBC news article was suggested as a read and I found that there is a discrepancy with even how food companies choose to market specific foods and to whom they were targeting. Shamard Charles, M.D. contends, "...junk food advertising continues to disproportionately target black and Hispanic youth, contributing to health disparities."<sup>2</sup> It was also found at the University of Connecticut that food companies hardly, if ever, advertise or market fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables. Kumanyika told NBC News that, "The marketing is so pervasive that it's almost invisible, I'm not sure it's really wide known in black communities that this amount of money is being used to promote unhealthy products."<sup>3</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Grade students of Hearne Elementary deserve to know that poor nutrition is another factor amongst minorities who live in poverty and that communities that are similar to theirs with high numbers of black and Hispanic neighborhoods do in fact have fewer large supermarkets and the stores they do have do not offer wider varieties of healthy alternatives than stores in neighboring cities and towns provide. According to the website, Hearne fits the very definition of what a food desert is considered to be according to the government. "...an area where 33 percent of a city's residents live more than one mile away from a supermarket and 20 percent earn salaries below the poverty line. Many residents of food deserts - which are disproportionately located in communities of color - do not have cars and lack access to public transportation, making it difficult to get to a grocery store."<sup>4</sup>

Another perspective to expose the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade students to is the dramatic toll that obesity has on black communities and the study on junk-food ads and how those ads are increasingly targeting black teens and children. A study done at the University of Connecticut's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity found that, "...black children are exposed to more junk-food advertising than white kids are - - as much as 50 percent more, in fact, among teens."<sup>5</sup> The demographics of Hearne will lend itself to this staggering analysis and spark the rich conversations to be held in the classroom and throughout the teaching of the curriculum unit so that it initiates a change in the mindsets and diets of those who want a different diet that will contribute to a healthier lifestyle.

## Background Environment

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In Hearne, Texas, Hearne Elementary School had 401 students for the 2019-2020 academic school year, with 66.1% considered at risk of dropping out of school. Those considered to be English learners and enrolled in bilingual programs were 22.4%. All students who attend Hearne Elementary receive free lunch, but according to the data found on the Texas Tribune website, 99.5% of those students were said to be economically disadvantaged.

I have taught at Hearne Elementary School for the past nine years with the advantage of also being a high school graduate from the district. My close ties to the community allow for students and their parents to know me on a more personal level as I went to elementary, junior high, and high school with most of them. Because of this, most parents request me specifically, or the students hold me in such high regard that they ask me hopefully in the hallways, will I be their teacher next year?

To capitalize on the time spent together during lunch with my students, my sentiments mirror those of Marjorie DeVault in that, "Throughout my adult life, I have struggled with conflicts between my ambitions and my commitments to care and connection."<sup>6</sup> Building lasting and effective relationships with my students has come at a cost and often my advocacy is considered hostile or aggressive when DeVault also eloquently expresses, "For generations, women's caring work has sustained life and community...It has meant involvement in low-status, often unpaid work that has limited women's entrance into more lucrative work."<sup>7</sup> I want my students to take from this curriculum unit what I took from one of the many esteemed conversations held in a seminar during the insensitive session if over time the executive branch gained power when the Founders were most afraid of faction and insurrection, then they too even as students can accomplish the same. The students of Hearne Elementary can gain power and use the power of their written words to change the inequality they face by not having access to quality foods in their school and even in their local grocery stores perhaps.

According to Alison Hope Alkon, "Rosalie, a white, female North Berkeley market manager in her late twenties, described the farmers market as 'somewhat of an exclusive community [because] if you don't have the money to come to the farmers market' you will not be a part of it." (Alkon, 2012. 112) Am I to tell students of Hearne Elementary that because of their race, class, and socioeconomic statuses, they are not given healthier food options? They cannot be part of such societies and remain thirsty for foods rich in benefits that could even curb some of the health issues more prone to Black and Hispanic ethnicities? Issues of class, while they should not, do, emerge in farmer's markets. While the relationship between whiteness and market participation exists as a site of environmental privilege, it should not be ignored where my students are involved. Alkon further contends, "Thus clustering of race and class privilege reinforces the farmers market as an affluent and white space." (Alkon, 2012. 117) I owe it to my students to present them the information about such disparities and be solution-oriented in our responses to them.

<b>Race &amp; Ethnicity</b>	<b>African American</b>	<b>American Indian</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Pacific Islander</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>2 or More Races</b>
<b>Numbers &amp; Percentages</b>	<b>176 43.9%</b>	<b>0 N/A</b>	<b>0 N/A</b>	<b>193 48.1%</b>	<b>1 0.2%</b>	<b>26 6.5%</b>	<b>5 1.2%</b>

Table 1-Breakdown of students who attended Hearne Elementary School

## Objectives

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This curriculum unit, stemming from the Democracy and Inequality: Challenges and Possible Solutions seminar taken with Ian Shapiro, will address if the community of Hearne is a food desert. Questions may arise of if the food choices from local grocery stores are limited because of 4th-grade students' race, class, or both. The options and habits surrounding the diets of 4th-grade students who attend Hearne Elementary will be thoroughly scrutinized and examined through extensive research. According to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills or TEKS, standards addressed will include but not be limited to Reading and Social Studies standards for Texas.

## The Problem

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Students arrive at my classroom thirsty for knowledge yet deprived of such essential experiences and tastes for foods that many others have grown to know and love. Why are they withheld from such rich, wholesome foods as different apples, grapes, squashes, greens? As I began to challenge my students to expand their taste buds and minimal palates of carbohydrate filled snacks such as Hot Cheetos and Takis to fresh broccoli florets and sugar snap peas, it dawned on me that some didn't even know what those foods looked like, let alone the tastes of them.

The more time we spend together during those pandemic mandatory in-class lunch periods, the deeper I found the problem to be. It was not simply an absence of knowledge; it was more than that; it was a systemic business of targeting minorities and the poor. Alison Hope Alkon quotes market founder David Roach as saying, "The market is about community, and it's about land, and it's about business in the community that provides basic needs. Your economy can become more prosperous because of food. Food is connected to land, connected to health, and also connected to enterprises in the community."<sup>8</sup> According to that, the students of Hearne are in significant trouble considering there are no markets available to them or their families for at least 20-30 miles, and most of them do not own a vehicle.

Just as discussed in the seminar session, I had to question my motives for tackling this issue or if it was even a dilemma that needed attention to be drawn to it. What if I wanted more for my students because I saw something better in the community where I lived versus the community in which I taught? I may not be far removed from my students in terms of socioeconomic status, so is that why I compare or advocate for what should be fair for them, or should I mind my own business, teach and go home? Is the problem of not having access to quality fresh foods at reasonable prices my own because of my motivations and what I care for. Is their loss of this a more powerful motivator than the opportunity to gain a farmer's market? Alkon further contends, "But green is not only the color of trees; it is also the color of money. The green economy promises economic as well as environmental benefits through the creation of new products, brands, and services. For this reason, going green might better be described as growing green."<sup>9</sup> I concluded that my students do have a problem. It is a need for food justice, being provided equal access to healthy food while addressing the structural inequalities in the food system and the broader distribution of environmental benefits.<sup>10</sup>

As the voice of my students, it is up to me to advocate on their behalf and create a curriculum unit that

speaks to the lack of their community not having food justice activists who, according to Alkon, "...work to create green economic opportunities for low-income people of color to distribute local organic food in communities otherwise lacking access to it."<sup>11</sup> That solution could remedy students' taste palates to become more expansive to foods foreign to them. Just as discussed in the seminar, my students are facing an inequality matter on a local level which matters more than global issues tend to. Should I teach them to approach the solution or remedy by being race conscientious and treat the symptom of not having access to quality foods that promote healthy lifestyles by demanding change of the system? Is the real smoking gun a manner in which to keep black and brown people at the bottom of the metaphorical totem pole by not giving access to the green foods which promote learning and development? The research will answer the questions posed in this section by students and will drive their instruction on the writing of their informational essays at the end of this unit.

## Content

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I will be introducing students concepts from the book, *The Prize*. While this book is not developmentally appropriate for 4th-grade students to read independently, I will for sure lead some classroom discussions on the generalities and realities of children and public school. Talks will provoke delving into whether the school my students attend could be considered a prize and, if not, how it could be deemed as such. Dale Russakoff remarks, "...decades of research had shown that experiences at home and in neighborhoods had far more influence on children's academic achievement than classroom instruction. But reformers argued that well-run schools with the flexibility to recruit the best teachers could overcome many of the effects of poverty, broken homes, and exposure to violence."<sup>12</sup> I want students to explore the similarities of that statement, their realities on how to overcome such an obstacle. I have pondered the reaction I would get from my administrators, colleagues, and students if, at the beginning of the new school year, I introduced myself as "Debra" as Cami did in the book, displaying a lack of deference to the local custom of our school campus. Hearne Elementary's silent rule is that there is, as the book states, a veneer of respectfulness undisturbed by the district's tarnished history of referencing one another as Mr., Mrs., or Dr, unlike the language of the Yale National Initiative. Would that bode well for me and the mutual respect of those I came into contact with, and would it impact how much or little to be learned from the students?

As I further delved into the reading of *The Prize*, I noticed the similarities in teaching styles I had with McPherson when texting parents or going about things in untraditional fashions to help even one student succeed a prize indeed. Action plans such as the one mentioned on pages 144 and 145 of the book will move the needle of our school and will matter more because of the relationships being built between students and their families. Hearne Elementary School has the resources to give students intensive, specialized interventions but not the staffing to effectively do so. Students can expand their learning to question why this is such and discuss solutions. Speaking life into my students as Williams did will be paramount in furthering their knowledge on the content of issues addressed in this curriculum unit and what they take away from it as showcased in their final informational essays. Students will have the opportunity to show their brilliance.

## The Unit

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It should take approximately 4-6 weeks to teach this curriculum unit in its entirety. The research required for the 4th-grade students to complete should encompass one of those weeks to ensure thoroughness. Students will be devoting two weeks to utilizing the mentor texts and moving diligently through the writing protocol using the strategies included in the writer's workshop. I will know more about the time frame once I am given from the school district a specific role of what my teaching schedule will consist of for the upcoming school year and how many instructional minutes I will have at my disposal daily as outlined by the Texas Education Agency's guidelines. At the end of the unit, students will have written one informational essay inclusive of the steps the writing process encompasses as defined by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards.

## Teaching Strategies

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### **Vocabulary Word Webs for the following words:**

1. Democracy
2. Equity
3. Inequity
4. Nutrition
5. Farmer's Market
6. Organic Produce
7. Social Justice/Injustice
8. Food Desert

Vocabulary word webs will help to support student understanding by comparing and contrasting the words mentioned above. They will use those words in context when engaging in classroom discussions, and this strategy will also help learners acquire and use academic words, those tier two and tier three words that so hinders the learners of Hearne Elementary.

Anchor charts are tools utilized by teachers to support instruction and to move students towards maximizing success in the lessons being taught in the classroom. They can be powerful tools for both students and teachers and academic support for visual learners to help them review concepts taught or learned and maintain the learning expectations set forth. When I create anchor charts in my classroom it is to highlight the important elements of the lesson. They help me focus on, and my students to remember the most important concepts and skills that are being taught. The rationale for creating anchor charts is that they improve students' comprehension and are designed to scaffold their learning. There are three specific anchor charts that I will be making for this curriculum unit. I typically use colors and not just black and white to make the anchor charts come alive for the students. A strategy within this strategy is that I make a copy of the anchor chart and give it to the students to put inside of their reading journals. This is done so that if students need to reference it for any reason, it is always accessible them. Sometimes anchor charts get covered up with other anchor charts due to limited wall space inside of the classroom. If an anchor chart is covered up, students always have access to a miniature version of it inside of their reading journal.



## **I will use the following Mentor Texts in the curriculum unit:**

1. Baby Goes to Market
2. Feast for 10
3. Bring me Some Apples, and I'll Make You a Pie
4. The Bagel King
5. World Pizza
6. Thank You, Omu!
7. Notes From a Young Black Chef
8. Bilal Cooks Daal
9. Magic Ramen: The Story of Momofuku Ando
10. Hot, Hot Roti for Dada-ji

Mentor texts are pieces of children's literature used to return to and reread by teachers and students to be studied and imitated. Mentor texts can help students learn how to take risks with their writing styles and challenge them to be different writers in the future than the level they are currently on.

Turn and Talk, is an instructional strategy teachers use to have students speaking and listening about a topic and then rephrasing the information. It helps them think more deeply about the discussion topic and provides involvement of a group of students rather than just talking directly to the teacher. When students engage in this strategy, it is to provide oral language support. By doing this, students can formulate and share their ideas and thinking in a low-risk setting. When students turn and talk, I am always listening for two critical things: are the students speaking in complete sentences, and are the students using academic language? If so, publicly acknowledge them (it encourages other students to do so). If not, I model for students how to correctly do it and explain that we speak in complete sentences because we read and write in complete sentences. Modeling the correct way allows students to participate in the classroom discussions without the entire student body listening to them speak, which could prove miserable for some students.

Writers Workshop is an instructional tool used to help students become more confident and capable writers by giving them time to work independently and with their classmates by selecting topics, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing their finished writing sample.

## **Classroom Activities**

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Students will be given opportunities to engage with the curriculum unit by completing the following activities:

1. Students can work in groups of 3-4 to virtually purchase foods from a list provided by the teacher from grocery stores or farmers' markets in their community and surrounding communities. They will discuss if they can find the item at the grocery store assigned to them, the price of it, and why it is or is not equitable for the item to be accessible to them as consumers and why.
2. Students can bring in one of their favorite or traditional recipes from home to research the availability and accessibility of the items, their nutritional values, the price of those items compared to local grocery stores, online merchants, and surrounding areas.
3. Students will research how to write a grant and take the essential parts from their research to write a persuasive paper on obtaining funding for a garden to grow foods for their consumption or sell to



promote financial literacy in the humanities.

4. Students will read food and nutrition labels to better comprehend to whom the food may be appealing and if race and ethnicity play a part in determining that.
5. Students will count the number of food ads that are shown in a 1-hour time span, foods that are not necessarily considered to be nutritious and compare the commercials they saw versus how many I saw during that same block of time (an at home assignment-to be brought back to school)

## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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There will be reading and writing the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) that will be integral for the planning and execution of this curriculum unit. The TEKS included are as follows:

4.11ABi, Bii, C, and D address the writing standards that 4th-grade students are expected to master by the end of the school year. After classroom discussions and exploration of food deserts, equitable accessibility to nutritious sustenance, and investigation of democracy for the community the students live in, they will plan the first draft and develop an informational piece that is focused, structured, and coherent. Students will then revise and edit their work, model the peer review method utilized in the seminar with Ian, and publish it for an appropriate audience.

Collegiality prevails and makes the hard work worth doing in the Yale National Initiative, and that will be reciprocated in my classroom with my 4th-grade students. This unit will set the tone for how the expectation of reading, researching, and applying that knowledge to an informational essay is the goal or purpose for acquiring this newfound knowledge.

(4.11) Composition: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts--writing process. The student uses the writing process recursively to compose multiple texts that are legible and uses appropriate conventions. The student is expected to:

(A) plan a first draft by selecting a genre for a particular topic, purpose, and audience using a range of strategies such as brainstorming, freewriting, and mapping;

(B) develop drafts into a focused, structured, and coherent piece of writing by:

(i) organizing with purposeful structure, including an introduction, transitions, and a conclusion; and

(ii) developing an engaging idea with relevant details;

(C) revise drafts to improve sentence structure and word choice by adding, deleting, combining, and rearranging ideas for coherence and clarity;

(D) edit drafts using standard English conventions, including:

(4.12) Composition: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts--genres. The student uses genre characteristics and craft to compose multiple texts that are meaningful. The student is expected to:

(B) write informational texts, including brief compositions that convey information about a topic, using a clear central idea and genre characteristics and craft;

(D) compose correspondence that requests information.

(4.13) Inquiry and research: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student engages in both short-term and sustained recursive inquiry processes for a variety of purposes. The student is expected to:

(A) generate and clarify questions on a topic for formal and informal inquiry;

(B) develop and follow a research plan with adult assistance;

(C) identify and gather relevant information from a variety of sources;

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Charles, Shamard, and M.d. "Junk Food Ads Disproportionately Target Black and Hispanic Kids, Study Finds." NBCNews.com. June 20, 2019. Accessed August 10, 2021.  
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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Dewey, Caitlin. "Study: Black Children Are Exposed to Junk-food Ads Way More than White Kids Are." The Washington Post. April 29, 2019. Accessed August 10, 2021.  
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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Alkon, Alison Hope. *Black, White, and Green: Farmers Markets, Race, and the Green Economy.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

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