Interview with Greta Ciesla Part One
April 8 2008
Interviewed by Jennifer Boun and Cindy Moore

0-21:00 minutes

Interviewer (I): How do you implement gardening techniques into your classroom?

Greta: Ok…um..luckily third grade curriculum is uh gardening, soil and for the science. Social studies is for the communities, and we have lots and lots of books about gardening stories around gardening and the theme is community gardening and then we have stories around community gardens, where the theme is working together. Another one of our science units is the sun and the moon relationship with the Earth, so we study a lot about the light, and how light affects the plants. That's all easily tied in, and of course math concepts like perimeter, area, and weighing the dirt and seed packets to see how many grams..sorting seed packets out into groups of tens, you know, just any math that you can throw in there. Dividing the garden into quarters into equal squares to see where you can plant more greens. So for reading, planning how long it will take, using the calendar, you know allowing two weeks for the starters to sprout. Taking the temperature of the soil, taking it daily. We talked about gardening by the moon cycle, we've talked about the Three Sisters garden, which is the cultural, Native American system of companion gardening, so these are some of the ways..

I: Have you had any challenges from administrators or parents?

Greta: Um, mostly the challenges are because of end of grade tests, you know third grade is a gateway year, and their so young, the still have to take that test, so they want our academic day to be you know, you have to explain everything, so just making sure it all aligns, and that it really fits in there, and I can prove that it really fits in there. Also, um, having this school and a lot of Asheville City schools, we have assistants that we have to share, between two other teachers, it's hard to find the time to take the students out on your own, it can be done, we did it today, and but by now, they do know what they are doing. But at the beginning of the year and during, and if I need to be in here for reading, it's hard to find the person that can go out and be with that small group. Now at the beginning of the year, we had Moe, and she was doing her internship here, in Asheville, and it was through community gardening, and she adopted my classroom and would take the kids out, so that was easy. But, yeah, the biggest obstacle is being able to get out there all the time and justifying it, cause sometime we were just moving things to get it prepped.

I: What motivates you to do the garden for your class?

G: Um, well, third grade, I think they need snack, they get up so early and work so hard, by the time 10:00 rolls around they've used up anything they've eaten for thinking and doing what their supposed to do, and so I asked them to bring in snacks. So a couple of years ago, with the different snacks they were brining in, I thought, oh, we can make our

own snacks, and save on wrapping, and it would be homemade, local, fresh, all that stuff, so we started a snack garden. The snack garden was like my baby, I wanted pumpkin seeds so we could make pumpkin bread, cake...whatever..,muffins, and roast the seeds, sunflower seeds, pesto, basil for pesto, um, so I wanted them to be a part of..., snow peas..we just brainstormed all of the stuff that we could use for the snack garden. They love the salsa garden, plus it implements measurement and capacity. So mostly, that's what motivated me to. I was like oh, most of these kids aren't getting fresh foods. I use my daughters for an example, I have a five and a seven year old, and a lot of time we don't to have to cook greens for dinner, because we'll be out in the garden picking sorrel and They just discovered they like dandelions last night. So they made like a vinegar, olive oil, and lemon...and then my daughter, Valerie, said it's called "spring lemon" or "lemon spring" and she's making up...The kids here do the same thing. They'll say "let's do this, or let's make that". Mostly, the kids love it, their like "We love it" and you see other kids and their like "we really want to be in your class because we want to garden". You may get to this, but this year another teacher has stepped and had wrote a small grant, she's not a full-time teacher so she's able to work with all of the classrooms. So, we're pulling her in to introduce the other teachers, to get their students out there. And, they're becoming experts like fourth grade it taking salsa. And the Spanish teacher's helping. We have three fourth grade classrooms, so she is having one to cilantro, one do onions, and the other do peppers, and then the regular classroom teachers will do all tomatoes. So, they'll all have different types of peppers...or tomatoes..but that's their thing. So, I'm so excited that other teachers are helping, uh, first grade their going to do different kinds of lettuce, in four different lettuce beds so they can compare color and size and taste and time, how long it takes. Their getting the first time, they're hesitant, their wanting to, so that take Bridgett and I up here on the weekends, and other parents, you know prepping the gardens. 'Cause it is intimidating, the especially with the End of Grade tests, everyone has to pass, so they're like "I can't fit one more thing in". So by having that person kind of help out. And parent team is helping a lot too, we've come up with a garden committee, they're going to come in and help teachers also, you know, with numbers... "I'll take these five kids, I'll make sure they don't get hit with a shovel".

I: What impact do you think the garden has on student's learning?

Greta: Oh, definite learning. Like today, we were talking about perimeter, cause we have that nice stone out there, so I was like "if we wanted to put the perimeter" , so they're able to remember, "oh, Mrs. Ciesla said if we wanted to put a fence around it". Also,they wanna do research, and it really has made them more inclusive in it. They want to do experiments, like, I have so many students that are like "I want to do experiments with seeds.." , so she went over there and found them and did an experiment. And, it's so cute, they're like "can I take this home.. I want to give it to my mom...I want to put it in my house". Or, if they live in the project or something, they'll say "I want to put it outside my door". They want to take it home.

I: Do you think that some of your students have never been in a garden?

Greta: Yeah, I up until this year, and it's so neat to see how relaxed they become with it. Like before they were like "oh I can't touch anything", and now, their like "I'm doing it' and their knees get all dirty and they just get real excited.

I: What kind of advice could you give people about gardening?

Greta: Um, we work with them and we have an updated map, which you can have a copy of, if you'd like, cause, actually, were going to re-update it, because on Sunday, we came and planted four paw-paw trees, four figs, and a bunch of grape vines on the fence, so we're really trying to make lots of fruit for the kids, like to run around and pick them. But, to answer your question, we kind of just, my motto is that it's an easy place to mess up. It's very forgiving, we've had to move things all of the time. It's a learning environment for the school and the community. So, there's really no right or wrong, so we try to get that message there, like you put it too deep there, well, next time you know. I didn't know anything about gardening, my grandma did a lot, but growing up in the city in Florida, it's like I didn't know anything about it, but being up here and seeing the kid's needs. Definitely, we have developed a professional gardening library, so parents can go there, and we have some written in Spanish too, so it's bilingual, so it's available for parents who speak Spanish. Mostly, just getting out there, usually people say "I don't like getting my hands dirty" they love it because it's a place where the kids have some much fun because they're doing something., either watering or chasing each other. The parents love it, they're like "gosh, this is so nice" because from the garden, you can see directly down to the playground where we can watch them at all times. The moms and dads love being able to get together and talk, you know what I mean. Some parents come in thinking "yeah, we're going to grow stuff" but they come out of it like "we had so much fun, we had a chance to give ideas, share ideas". But yeah, just getting in there and getting dirty is the best advice.

I: How many of your parents live in walking distance, I know you do?

Greta: Lots, yeah, there's a lot. That's come about recently with the magnet change. We were a classical studies, and the generation that came up with that one, you know times changed, so we wanted to make sure that people knew that Vance had really good things to offer. We got the community involved also, and we wanted to focus on ecology and human diversity so once people around the neighborhood were like, that's exactly what I want, I can come anytime I want. Yeah, a lot more people are deciding to go our local school rather than wasting gas and driving some where else.

I: How did you find the land?

Great: Well, I didn't realize at the time it would be an issue sometime, it hasn't been an issue yet, but people that are in gardening clubs, like bountiful cities and stuff, are like "it's good that you secured your land, because it could easily be expanded on." So, it's already started, we were looking today at a parametrical board, and were showing the kids an aerial view of the garden, [coughing] but yeah, we were starting right outside of my room, but as we started coming up here more, and there were already four boxes that

belonged to the first grade teacher who was like "oop, those are ours". So then were like, "let's start a new plot". So we started digging and digging, and someone else was like "I have these seeds", and I was like I wanted food that kids could eat. So that was our goal, and other people were like, it's a community garden now, so let's grow spaghetti squash, summer squash, tomatoes, and so many people came up and ate out of it this year, we were so excited.

I: Are you still doing gardening club?

Greta: Nope, no that has finished, we have finished. My class is getting out there at least two days a week. We have a student intern, wanting to be an assistant, and that was one of her goals, she wanted to, she doesn't know anything about gardening and wanted to challenge herself, and wanted to get out there twice a week.

I: Do you have any specific moments or memorable moments that stick out from the past year?

Greta: Well, there's so many..it's so neat to see the kids, something that we've been doing, is letting kids take out cameras with them, so we write about their pictures that they've taken. So, that's really neat, so looking back at the pictures, it's like "oh that's so neat", and just writing about it... Cause we got a grant last year, and this one grant I let them respond in writing and take pictures, and it was so cute, this one little girl said "I realize that gardening is a big job for such a little girl" it was so cute. Then, um, just some of them are like "what, that comes from the ground?" or "can I go start a seed?" Some are like "I want to start something for my mom on mother's day", so you know they consider that a present to give somebody, something that they've grown, which is exciting.

I: What season would you say is the best time to get started?

Greta: Um, probably April. This is a great month, we started some inside, but they say you not supposed to..well, um, like don't put out tomato plants until after mother's day, that's in this area, that's the safe, but we haven't got our frames out there. But for the, um, three sisters gardening, for the corn, they say don't plant corn until the oak leaf is as big as a rabbit's paw. So, that's good cause they get to use nature and observe, like "oh, look there's an oak leaf". Then, the beans you plant next, they grow up the corn stalk, and then after that you plant any kind of squash to protect the roots. So, I thought that was neat that you look to the signs around you to see when to start certain things. But, usually April is a good month to start things inside, and then lettuces and collard greens, which they love, most of the time, you don't think kids like that. Last year, we grew so much and the lunch room people cooked it up for us, and we made them homemade corn bread and we just shared with them and they shared with us and it was so nice. All the kids were like "can we have some?" and the teachers love it, so you know..

I: How do you keep rodents out?

Greta: [Laughing] Surprisingly we haven't, I don't know if it's the way it's set up with loud kids throughout the day, I don't know..we haven't had a problem. Even just at my house, the squirrel's come and eat and it's a pain, but we haven't had it. And, we had some parents that just wanted to start school wide composting. Now, my students do it everyday. They collect it, they weigh it on the scale, and they take the temperature of it, it's a compost soil thermometer. So, their keeping track of that, cause temperature they have to know too. So, what I'm getting to, if they wanted to start a school wide you can only do it if you had a place that's enclosed to keep out rodents, cause you wouldn't want them to get bitten by anything. So, no, we haven't had any problems with it..[coughing]. No, groundhogs, but we can grill them up..[laughing]

I: What do you do with what you grow?

Greta, So, um, there's a couple of things. Second grade, this year, started a food pantry and then they did Stone Soup play to kind of get the school involved. So, from there we were thinking, "Stone Soup, that's perfect", so we were asking them to take over the root vegetables. Cause before it was my class trying to plant everything, so we're trying to divvy it up. So second graders are taking over root vegetables...

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Greta: Second graders are going to take the fruit garden so what they get, they are going to eat for snack, they'll also have a table set up for kids to take home for their parents in a bag. You know just have it out there, and there was a parent, this year, she got us signed up in the Westgate tailgate market on Wednesday afternoons. And they were excited, they were like oh yeah we haven't had a lot of school yet, you know we won't have a lot at first. Bring your school like bags and t-shirts and art work that kids make. So some of our—and that was a little hard—we were like first of all we want our kids to have it. Because we wouldn't be like making money off of it, putting it at the Westgate, I mean the tailgate market. We would just be putting our... Vance out and like oh look what we're doing.

So yeah it's mostly making snack food and the other stuff like in the summer. My husband is in a band here and they pick the tomatoes and they have made sauce, spaghetti sauce. So throughout the summer we had made homemade pizza. So yeah just try to encourage everybody and say "Come come pick tomatoes." Because last year so many tomatoes went without being picked you know what I mean? That was just crazy, so we're trying to let people to just come get it. But then if you have any extra....

Cindy: So what band is your husband in?

Greta: No they're still just practicing, it's just for fun.

Greta: I don't know have ya'll brainstorm any? I mean I don't know. Yeah if that's something you're interested in doing. And we've gravitated towards uh, and now we've got uh technology grants so now we have laptops for all the kids so they just bring them in and that's just... ok cool.

Cindy: We have these prints that we made in class. I didn't know if you all wanted them?

Greta: Oh yeah definately that would be very good.

Jenn: How do you finance the garden?

Greta: Well we are constantly or continuously getting writing grants, you know our biggest goals are to have maybe two part time positions. One like a garden manager you know that keeps up you know like oh this hose has a hole or we need new you know what I mean? So it's not the emergent running out of "Oh we need this or we need that." But it has gotten better. We have our garden blog, which has helped with some communication, but yeah we would love to have someone that could manage that. And for the second position we would need the academics. Someone that really knew and

would come to the class and say ok I'm here and taking five kids, you know what I mean. We would have it all set up on a schedule. That would be perfect because that would be covered. It would be small groups and it would be beneficial for the children to get out and get fresh air. We also want a green house and that would be another grant and we know where we want it. And it would be a big enough green house that at least two classes could be in there at one time and the person in charge of the garden, that would be their classroom too. So if it were inclement weather and they would still have a place and still let kids. We're still working on our cobb garden shed. But we didn't know what we were getting into there. Yeah and then just lots and lots of fresh fruit. I don't' know if you knew we had 22 blueberry plants and we have 50 to 70 raspberry plants. And you know just make it that their first choice is to just pluck it, then dry it, and just eat it. I wouldn't mind having that position but I've been teaching sixteen years, I can't just you know what I mean? It'll be hard to do something different. So we'll see, but it's really neat to see the… I mean we knew it that how can these little kids, they learn patterns in nature way before letters and alphabets and numbers. So this past year, I wrote this grant to get an ecologist, you know an ecology teacher, and give each student in each class about 10 hours of ecology lessons to get them outside to support our magnet theme. That's worked out nicely, I mean it didn't go exactly the way I planned, but they did get teachers up and science organized.

Greta: He's a parent, he's a local, you know he use to work for Quality Forward, so a couple people interviewed him. I didn't get to interview him. That I mean, I would love to see someone do that, full time.

Cindy: How do you plant when it's still cold outside? What are some preseason ways to get started?

Greta: Well, there is container gardening. But like I know that there are some teachers that are like we don't have any place to do it and I was like well you can get a bunch of these pots. There are also a lot of luck in this area like ASAP.

Jenn: What kind of advise can you give to beginners?

Greta: There's different resources, but you could go to, I know that if you are really interested in starting a garden, but I was trying to think of what else. What was your question? Like advise for them? There's some good books like postage stamp gardens, three sisters, or garden visitry... there's some good books that are like for teachers and for kids which has been helpful for me.

Greta: Yeah that's a whole other question, uh grants, now parent team. A lot of parents, they want this kids outside, you know what mean? You know it's hard to be stuck inside all day. So that's where we have our parent team, when we have our Cinco de Mayo festival, we'll have fundraisers. A chunk of money, not enough yet but we'll get there, because I haven't gotten used to ask, not use to asking yet because for awhile parent teams have grown. So its you know its good to see that there's that support. Grants... lots and lots of grants and then donations. Just sending out even on our blog, we need hoses.

Two hoses were donated last week, a soaker hose for the fruit tree... yup... donations. Bountiful Cities, Turtle, he has a tiller so he'll come out if we need a tiller. So it's a lot of begging and... please come out. A lot of.. I mean for a while there it did come out of my own pocket. I mean it still does but its worth it you know what I mean? I mean its like ok this is my donation as a parent, because I do have a child and I have two here next year so it's worth it. Yeah so in order for it to be more sustainable it can't just come out of a few peoples pockets. It like what a parent keeps telling me, you know you can't keep doing that, but you know its just it's ok. You know what I mean, cuz if you don't have it, you can't just stop it. You have to just push things. But lots of seed donations, um Seeds of Change, you know ASAP gives us seeds, Turtle, from Bountiful Cities, gives us seeds, parents give us seeds.

Greta: Yeah Bill Whipple, he yeah and that's his job and he give donations. So then he needs a place to put them. He's offered me pruning lessons and all kinds. Propagations, but we're all out there already. We had a tree that was just ornamental and allergens were so bad, you know it's just not a good so what we could do is, you know it's a watermelon fruit tree, we can like tug it. We can tug it from like the other apple tree and we can put it in there, and then next year maybe we can have a whole new tree. I know it's something new we are learning about and it's awesome.

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