

CIRCLES IN THE KITCHEN

An assessment of *Cooking Together* Programming in the Circles
Kingston Pilot. 2018-2020

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Executive Summary

Circles is a poverty reduction program that assists participants who live in poverty (Leaders) to develop and follow a self-guided plan towards financial sufficiency. The Circles theory of change is that by providing programming and opportunities to build social relationships, Leaders will be able to achieve their self-determined goals to move out of poverty. Support for achieving these goals is offered through an intensive case management approach and weekly programming to improve skills and knowledge.

Kingston Community Health Centres (KCHC), in partnership with Loving Spoonful, developed a pilot program integrating Cooking Together activities within the Circles model. Participants would prepare healthy, affordable meals together and then share these meals alongside facilitated Circles programming. The rationale for this pilot was that by working together to prepare meals, the Cooking Together component of Circles Kingston would provide benefits that enhance the Circles model by increasing access to healthy food, and building knowledge and skills for planning and preparing healthy meals, leading to healthier eating practices.

Methods

Research was conducted by Participant Observation, focus groups, and individual interviews conducted at weekly Circles programming. Research was conducted to elicit Leaders' experiences of and reflections on Cooking Together programming at Circles Kingston. Participant Observation was carried out between Jun 2018 and March 2020. Focus groups were conducted regularly throughout this period. Interviews were conducted between October 2019 and March 2020. Interviews were transcribed and qualitative analysis was done based on Grounded Theory using atlat.ti software.

Results

Analysis showed that Cooking Together activities in Circles Kingston increased access to healthy food. Cooking Together activities enhanced overall food literacy, which includes not only technical

ability and knowledge for preparing food, but also the psycho-social components of confidence, satisfaction, pride, and social connectedness. These findings confirmed that a complex model of food literacy is needed to frame the full impact of community kitchen programming for participants. Food literacy is defined as a set of skills and attributes that help people sustain the daily preparation of healthy, appealing, affordable meals for themselves and their families. This model must include environmental influences as well as personal attributes. Food literacy is made possible through external support with healthy food access and living conditions, learning opportunities, and positive socio-cultural environments.

Key Findings-Food Literacy

Basic Food Skills: Most Leaders reported some improvement in their overall level of basic food skills and food literacy as a result of participating in Cooking Together activities at Circles Kingston though some Leaders reported that they already had good food skills before joining Circles. Improved kitchen skills included chopping vegetables, cooking techniques, learning new language to describe cooking techniques and ingredients, safe food handling, planning and budgeting, and confidence in the ability to prepare or adapt simple recipes with or without a recipe. Most leaders reported that they had tried, or intend to try skills or recipes that they learned at Circles, at home.

Nutrition and Knowledge: Most Leaders had tried new healthy foods as a result of Circles Cooking together activities, and had learned how to improve the nutritional value of dishes by adding new ingredients when cooking. Many Leaders reported that they already had good knowledge about nutrition prior to joining Circles. Many of these same Leaders reported that they did not consistently apply this knowledge to their planning and cooking activities at home, suggesting that nutrition knowledge alone is insufficient for preparing healthy food at home for people living in poverty.

Organizational Skills Leaders reported that through the program they had learned more about safe food handling, particularly with meat, as well as proper storage to minimize food waste. Participants expressed keen interest in learning more about food shopping on a budget, suggesting that this should be a more regular part of Circles programming.

Food Skills for Parents Circles parents were keenly interested in learning to prepare healthy child-friendly meals and they expressed frustration at the challenges this often posed. Parents appreciated that by including children in Circles Cooking Together activities, children were introduced to new foods, and seemed to be more open to expanding their palettes.

Psycho-social factors: All leaders reported feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment, confidence, and pride associated with Circles Kingston kitchen activities. They reported that the more time they spent doing Cooking Together activities, the more enjoyable it was, and the more confident they felt. Leaders felt pride in helping to prepare meals at Circles.

Key Findings – Social Capital

Cooking Together activities at Circles Kingston were very effective at building and enhancing social relationships among all Circles participants, within and across categories of Leader, Ally, Staff, and Volunteer. Leaders unanimously reported that the most valuable aspect of Cooking Together programming was in the enhanced social connections it facilitated. Leaders used words and phrases such as *family*, *community* and *friends* to describe their relationships. They attributed this sense of connectedness directly to working together with other Circles participants in the kitchen.

Social relationships developed through Cooking Together activities were reported to **help Leaders remain committed to their goals, encourage attendance at weekly Circles sessions, increase a sense of social belonging, and reduce feelings of social isolation.**

Leaders felt that without the Cooking Together activities it would have taken longer and been more difficult to get to know other participants.

Leaders appreciated having the opportunity to develop peer relationships with other Leaders, as well as with Allies, Staff, and Volunteers.

Factors that contributed to the success of Cooking Together activities to build social capital include:

- Informal instruction style
- Environment inclusive of all regardless of level of participation

- Opportunities for conversation with all other participants
- Children working with unrelated adults in the kitchen

Recommendations

The success of the Cooking Together activities within Circles Kingston suggests that similarly designed programming could be used in many social agencies to build food literacy and/or foster social connectedness.

Organizations should seek opportunities to enhance food literacy in new and existing community programs by building strong community partnerships and utilizing community resources.

In order to measure the true efficacy of community-based cooking programs, organizations should use a comprehensive definition of food literacy that goes beyond the acquisition of food skills and nutrition knowledge.

Conclusion

This study provides an analysis of rich qualitative data about the impact of Cooking Together activities in the Circles Kingston Pilot and assesses the Cooking Together elements of the Pilot as successful according to the perspective of Leaders and the goals laid out in the program proposal. Insights from the themes, narrative excerpts, and conceptual frameworks presented can inform community based kitchen programming. If implemented, the recommendations made in this study have the potential to improve food literacy and social capital for people living in poverty and other vulnerable populations.

Introduction

In 2018 Kingston Community Health Centres (KCHC) partnered with Loving Spoonful to develop a pilot to integrate community kitchen programming with Circles, a poverty reduction program that has been used with success in other jurisdictions in Canada and the US.

Circles is a poverty reduction program that assists participants who live in poverty (Leaders) to develop and follow a self-guided plan towards financial sufficiency. Once a plan has been established, Leaders attend a weekly Circles meeting. The Circles theory of change is that by providing programming and social relationships, people will be able to achieve their self-determined goals and will have the means to move out of poverty. Support for achieving these goals happens through an intensive case management or “coaching” approach, weekly programming to improve skills and knowledge, and by building social networks. Circles participants include Allies who are people with resources and connections that can assist Circles Leaders in meeting their financial self-sufficiency plans. In addition to Leaders and Allies, other Circles participants may include programming staff, the children of participants, and volunteers from the community.

Context

Loving Spoonful and KCHC proposed to implement a pilot program in which the host agencies would integrate healthy food programming with the Circles model. Participants would prepare healthy, affordable meals together and then share these meals alongside facilitated Circles programming. The rationale for this pilot was that by working together to prepare meals, the Cooking Together component of Circles Kingston would provide new benefits to enhance the Circles model including increasing access to healthy food, and building knowledge and skills for planning and preparing healthy meals leading to healthier eating practices.

This report focuses on the Cooking Together activities in Circles Kingston Programming. This research took place between June 2018 and March 2020.

The Researcher was contracted to work in concert with the Program Evaluator to assess the success of the Cooking Together activities of Circles Kingston. This research asks: Does the cooking-together component of Circles Kingston enhance the effectiveness of the Circles program? It also defines some of the specific benefits of the cooking-together component.

Program Description

The ultimate goals of the Circles Kingston Pilot are: to reduce poverty, increase food security, foster stronger social inclusion across socio-economic lines, and to promote the engagement of community leaders and organizations on poverty reduction solutions.

At the intermediate level, the goals of Circles Kingston are: to increase participation in training, education or employment toward self-sufficiency goals; to increase the resilience of people living in poverty to cope and adapt to negative events; to build support networks across socioeconomic lines; and to promote and support healthier eating.

Intermediate sub-goals relevant to the assessment of the Cooking Together programming at Circles Kingston are: increased access to healthy food and increased knowledge and skills in planning and preparing healthy meals with the assumption that this will lead to healthier eating practices.

Study Rationale

The goal of most community cooking programs is to build kitchen skills and/or food literacy in order to address food insecurity and improve nutrition. The proposal to pilot a Cooking Together component at Circles Kingston emerged from observations that community food programming seemed to provide benefits *beyond* building food skills and enhancing food literacy.

The Circles Kingston Cooking Together pilot was based on two hypotheses. First, it was suggested that by preparing meals together Leaders would gain food skills and knowledge which would help them to eat a more healthy diet under existing budgetary restraints. It was further hypothesized that working together to prepare shared meals would strengthen bonds across socio-economic lines, enhancing the Circles goal of building social networks that will help participants achieve their goal of moving out of poverty.

This report examines the Cooking Together component of Circles Kingston from its beginning in Jun 2018 until March 2020. This research asks: does the cooking-together component of Circles Kingston enhance the effectiveness of the Circles program? It also describes and defines specific benefits and challenges of the cooking-together component of Circles Kingston.

Through running other community kitchen programs with vulnerable populations, staff at Loving Spoonful had observed that participatory cooking programs may offer benefits such as combatting social isolation, building social bonds within the group, and providing a forum for discussion of shared issues (Chow, Sen, Telega, Stoneman & Stuart, 2018; Mara Shaw, personal correspondence, February 2018). In 2017, Loving Spoonful partnered with Addiction and Mental Health Services of Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox, and Addington, HIV-AIDS Regional Services and the Departments of Psychiatry and Public Health Sciences at Queen's University to implement the *Cooking Connections* program. This 10 week program was offered to people with mental illnesses who were longstanding users of the mental health system, and who were identified as being socially isolated and marginalized. Three sessions of the program were held in 2017-2018. The combination of cooking together, eating together, and talking about stigma and discriminatory treatment of people with mental illnesses was highly successful for program participants. Participants credited the program with not only conferring cooking knowledge and skills, but also improving their ability to manage stigma and diminishing their social isolation (Chow, et al., 2018; personal correspondence).

These findings, presented in the evaluation report for Cooking Connections (Chow et al., 2018), echoed suggestions presented by other community organizations

- In a brief available on their website, Community Food Centres Canada (CFCC) suggests that community food programming – including community kitchen programs – may reduce social isolation and help to build social networks for vulnerable populations. CFCC conducts surveys across Canada to assess the value of community food programs. Programs including community cooking programs, community gardens, and affordable produce markets. All have all been associated with enhanced social networks. According to their research, 82% of program participants surveyed in 2015 had made new friends

with other participants and 92% felt that they belonged to a community at the program they were attending (CFCC 2019, p4).

- In a review of literature on community cooking programs, Farmer et al. (2018) found that cooking interventions may positively influence psycho-social outcomes such as enjoyment, confidence, and self-efficacy.
- In a 2013 study of vulnerable youth and food literacy in Ontario, researchers found that psycho-social dimensions such as resilience, self efficacy, social connectedness were essential elements of food literacy (Desjardins, et al., 2013).
- In a review of literature evaluating cooking programs in the United States, Iacavou, Pattison, Truby & Palermo (2012) found that community kitchens may be an effective strategy to improve participants' social interactions as well as cooking skills, and nutritional intake.
- In a systematic review of the effect of cooking programs on psycho-social outcomes, researchers found that these community based kitchen programs can have a positive influence on socialization, self-esteem, and quality of life in addition to improving cooking skills and nutritional status (Farmer et al., 2018).

Background and context

In Kingston, Ontario over 15,000 people live below the Low-Income Measure After Tax (City of Kingston, 2016). According to KFL&A Public Health, a Kingston family of 4 relying on social assistance (Ontario Works) does not receive enough income required to eat a nutritious diet after paying rent (KFLA, 2019). In Ontario as a whole, food insecurity affected 64.5% of households reliant on social assistance in 2012 (Tarasuk, 2014).

It has been clearly demonstrated that for people living on inadequate incomes, costs such as childcare, transportation, heat, utilities, and clothing, may take priority over purchasing healthy food. Inadequate income is also likely to drive people towards a diet of inexpensive and calorie dense but nutritionally poor foods (Belyea, 2018).

Poverty and food insecurity are closely correlated and income is widely recognized as the primary determinant of food security (Gunderson et al., 2011; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013). In Canada, 70% of households that rely on social assistance are food insecure (Tarasuk et al., 2014). Food insecurity is a serious problem and a sensitive predictor of other social determinants of health including poor mental and physical health outcomes, poor learning outcomes in children, and social isolation (Melchoir et al., 2012).

As a long term goal, the Circles model attempts to address the root cause of household food insecurity by supporting Leaders on their individual path out of poverty. In the short and medium term, the Circles Kingston pilot attempts to mitigate the effects of food insecurity by improving food skills and food literacy.

The Scope of this Study

This study explores the experience that Circles Leaders had in the Cooking Together programming of Circles Kingston. As this research progressed it became clear that we needed an expansive definition of food skills and food literacy in which to analyze Leaders' experiences at Circles. We also needed a way to frame the rich data collected about the important social dimensions of Cooking Together programming.

Concept_Food Skills and Food Literacy

Food skills are those skills necessary to provide regular, healthy meals for one's household and/or one's self. They are a combination of *techniques* (ability to use cooking implements and appliances, handle food ingredients); *knowledge* (nutrition for good health, interpreting food labels, following/understanding instructions, ingredients and recipes; food safety; awareness of food origins and characteristics); and *planning ability* (organizing meals; food budgeting, shopping and storage). Canada Community Health Survey (CCHS) data on food insecurity shows that household food insecurity is not correlated with self-reported food skills. People living with food insecurity in Canada do not report having lower food skills than do those who

live in food secure households. This suggests that food skills training alone is not a sufficient response to household food insecurity.

The concept of Food Literacy is a more comprehensive concept. According to the model elaborated by Desjardins et al. (2013), Food Literacy is a set of knowledge and attributes that help people sustain the ability to prepare healthy, appealing, affordable meals for themselves and their families. Food literacy builds **resilience** because it includes food skills (techniques, knowledge and planning ability), as well as the **confidence** to improvise and problem-solve, and the ability to **access and share** information. Food literacy is made possible through external support with healthy food access and living conditions, broader support and learning opportunities, and positive socio-cultural environments.

While evidence is clear that the primary cause for food insecurity is inadequate income, limited food literacy, including a lack of food skills, can be an impediment to healthy eating.

Evidence-based cooking interventions have been used successfully to improve nutritional status, weight-related outcomes, and to improve cooking skills, often in low-income populations, or in specific patient populations such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer (Aycinena et al., 2017; Rees, Hinds, O'Mara-Eves, & Thomas, 2012; Reicks, Trofholz, Stang, & Laska, 2014). A review of 28 research studies found cooking interventions led to favorable changes in health status and dietary intake of fat, fiber, and sodium, and these interventions yielded positive changes in cooking self-efficacy as well as attitudes and behaviors toward cooking (Reicks et al., 2014).

In their study of vulnerable youth in cooking programs in Ontario, Desjardins et al. (2013) found that low levels of food skills and food literacy can:

- add strain to limited food budgets
- reduce personal creativity and control over daily meals
- limit the capacity to creatively adapt recipes for healthier meals
- reduce enjoyment or satisfaction with cooking activities and outcomes
- and encourage the consumption of highly-processed convenience foods.

As we engaged with participants in Circles Kingston for this research it became evident that we needed a Food Literacy model to frame the broad range of experiences described by Circles Leaders. We have adapted a model of Food Literacy developed Desjardins et al. (2013).

According to this model, Food Literacy encompasses four distinct personal dimensions and is shaped by four environmental sets of determinants (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

The Personal Dimensions of Food Literacy are:

- **Food Preparation Skills:** ability to use recipes, ability to use food preparation utensils and appliances; ability to improvise with ingredients.
- **Food and Nutrition Knowledge:** knowledge about how to read labels, how to choose healthy foods, basic information about food safety, and about where food comes from.
- **Organizational Skills:** knowledge about budgeting, planning, purchasing and storing food.
- **Psycho-social Factors:** confidence, resilience, sense of control over one's food environment, enjoyment or satisfaction, creativity and social connectedness around food.

These dimensions of personal food literacy work within larger social and physical environments which act as determinants of food literacy. These determinants support and/or present barriers to personal food literacy.

External or Environmental Determinants of Food Literacy overlap considerably, but can be roughly framed this way:

- **Socio Cultural Environment:** food experiences in the home, normalization of skills, instructional support
- **Food And Facilities:** food availability; meal provision; cooking facilities
- **Learning Environment:** literacy, numeracy, experiential learning, , engagement
- **Living Conditions:** income, employment, housing.

For a comprehensive understanding of food literacy, both the *personal* and *environmental* dimensions of food literacy must be taken into account.

Figure 1: **Personal Dimensions of Food Literacy**

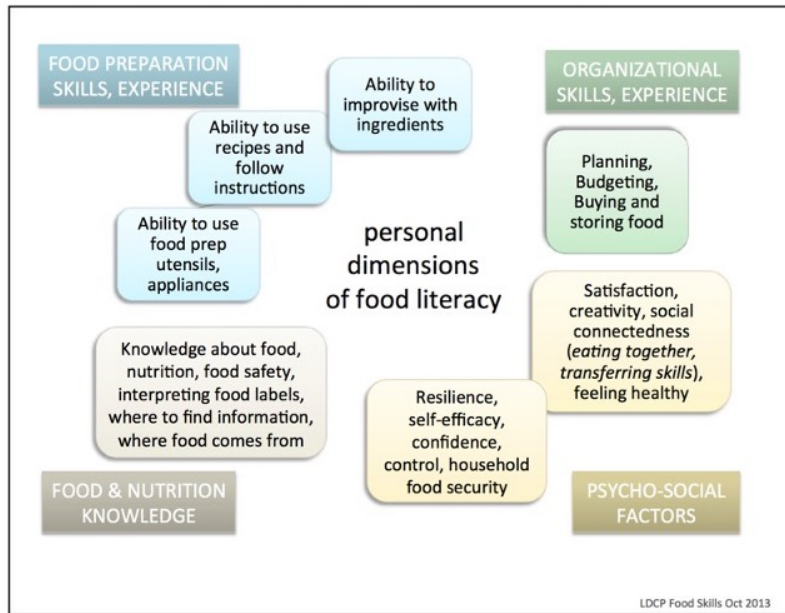
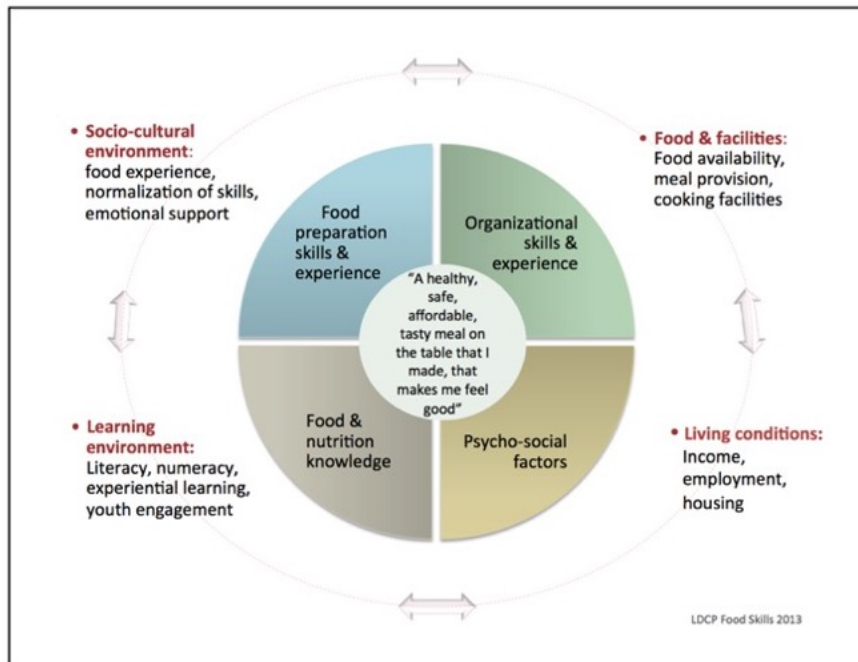


Figure 2: **Environmental Determinants of Food Literacy**



Concepts _ Social Capital and Social Isolation

The above model of food literacy incorporates social connectedness as one part of food literacy. For the purposes of this study, though, we identify enhanced social connectedness as a distinct, (though very much connected), outcome of Circles Kingston Cooking Together programming.

Social capital is the term used to describe the *value* that social connections bring to us, and so is a useful term to use in assessing the Circles model which proposes that building social relationships across class lines is a key element in helping Leaders move out of poverty. Enhancing social capital can have many different benefits for people living in poverty. For example, new social relationships built between Leaders and Allies - *Bridging Social Capital* – can put Leaders in contact with people who may be able to help with job searches, give advice about education and training, and help to identify and access resources.

But research suggests that social capital has many benefits beyond the concrete ones of assistance in job seeking, professional networking, and problem solving. Both *Bridging Social Capital* - connections between people from different backgrounds, and *Bonding Social Capital* – connections between people from similar backgrounds (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001) can help to combat social-isolation which is a determinant of health linked to poverty and food insecurity.

Social isolation is a complex issue linked to physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, and is influenced by personal, community, and societal factors. Social isolation is a condition in which an individual lacks engagement with others, has few social contacts, lacks quality and fulfillment in their relationships, and lacks a sense of belonging (Nicholson, 2009).

Building social capital in order to combat social isolation is an important goal for poverty reduction. People living on low incomes often derive their sense of community from social and community agencies, as well as from making connections with people in situations similar to their own (Stewart et al., 2009).

Social isolation is correlated with poverty. In Canada, low-income people are among the most vulnerable to social isolation. Research has shown that social isolation has damaging impacts on health, well-being, and overall quality of life (Stewart et al., 2009). Conversely, being more socially connected has a positive influence on physical and mental health and wellbeing

(Nicholson, 2012). At a societal level, greater levels of social connection are associated with better economic performance, lower levels of crime, improved public health, and more effective government institutions (Nicholson, 2012).

Programs and policies that reduce income inequality by tackling root causes of poverty may reduce social isolation and increase sense of belonging for vulnerable populations (Stewart et al., 2009). Of particular importance to this research, it has been found *that group activities that target specific populations, and interventions that include some form of educational component* (such as learning to cook) can effectively counter social isolation and loneliness (Cattan et al., 2005). It has also been shown that involving low-income participants in program planning and delivery, and giving them greater control in the process effectively reduce social isolation and exclusion (Stewart et al., 2008; 2009).

Research Methodology

In February 2018, Loving Spoonful contracted the Researcher to carry out an independent evaluation of the value of the Cooking Together component of Circles Kingston. They used a mixed-methods, participatory approach. Research tools and processes were developed with input from the primary evaluation consultant.

For the purpose of this research, the organizations hosting Circles Kingston were seeking evidence based on the perspectives and experiences of Leaders. Supporting research was done by interviewing staff members and analysing notes taken during focus groups with Circles Allies and program staff, along with participant observation field notes

Slow growth in the participant numbers and a revised timeline changed the research design of this component of the evaluation. Over time, the research design shifted from a survey-based approach to an approach based solely on interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. With a small sample size, this approach allowed us to foreground the lived experience of participants in Circles, especially Leaders, and better capture nuances that would be missed in a survey-based analysis.

Research consisted of Participant Observation, focus groups, and individual interviews conducted at weekly Circles programming. Participant Observation was carried out between June 2018 and March 2020. Focus groups were conducted regularly throughout this time. Interviews were conducted between October 2019 and March 2020.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is a qualitative research method in which the researcher participates in the activities of the group being researched over an extended period of time. Participant Observation aims to gain a close and nuanced familiarity with the group and their practices. A participant observation approach can be a valuable research method for identifying elements in group dynamics and experiences that may not be evident from a survey, interview, or focus group environment.

The Researcher participated in Circles as an Ally from the initial Circles sessions June 2018 until early March, 2020. Participation included attending Bridges out of Poverty Training and attending and participating in regular weekly Circles activities including kitchen activities and programming. After each Circles meeting the Researcher made field notes recording observations. The Researcher also attended some meetings with project stakeholders, the principal evaluator, and program staff. All participants (Leaders, Allies and Staff) were informed and frequently reminded that the Researcher was conducting participant observation research while participating in Circles activities.

The Participant Observation method worked in concert with the focus groups and interviews. Because the Researcher was available for casual conversation outside the interviews and focus groups, many participants took the opportunity to share aspects of their experiences at Circles with her outside of the more formal interview or focus group processes.

Focus Groups:

Focus groups were conducted as part of the primary evaluation process in order to minimize the number of research interventions into Circles Kingston. The Researcher drew on material from these focus groups to inform this report. Several focus groups were held with Allies and with

Leaders. These helped to contextualize the Cooking Together component of Circles Kingston within the other aspects of the Circles program. One focus group was conducted towards the end of the research process (March 4, 2020) to capture the experiences of a newer group of Leaders.

Interviews

All interviews with Leaders were held between October 2019 and March 2020. The Researcher explained to each participant the intention of the interviews and research participants were given the option to decline without penalty. All participants were asked for permission to have the interviews audio-recorded. Participants were assured of anonymity and that they did not have to answer any questions with which they felt uncomfortable. If they agreed, they signed a copy of the Interview Schedule (see Appendix).

Interview Tools and Process

The Researcher used an ethnographic interview approach based on Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) to encourage open expression and reflection by each interviewee about their experience with the Cooking Together activities at Circles Kingston. In consultation with the primary evaluator, the Researcher developed a set of questions as a guideline for interviews. The guide aimed to help participants to reflect on their participation and experiences with the program. While the guide was used, the interview process was fluid and followed the train of thought of the respondent; i.e., questions were not asked in a prescribed order, and sometimes we circled back to topics that had been glossed over initially. Conversations often veered far from the guide, providing rich information that otherwise would not have been collected.

Leaders were interviewed after attending at least 6 Circles sessions. This was to ensure that there had been significant interaction with the kitchen activities, and with other Circles participants to generate thoughtful responses. This also allowed research participants to reflect on changes in their Circles Kingston experiences over time.

By the time of the interviews, the Researcher was well known to most of the interviewees. Each had had at least some interaction with her in Circles kitchen activities. The participant observation method created a level of trust and informality that enhanced the interview conversations.

All interviews were conducted privately in the building where Circles was held. Recruitment for interviews was done randomly among Leaders, based on who was available and interested on a given evening. With the permission of the Leaders, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The Researcher also took notes during the interview. Transcriptions were anonymized and coded by the Researcher. Upon transcription, audio-recordings were deleted. No compensation was provided for participating in the interview.

Note on Program Facilities:

Circles Kingston began programming at Kingston Community Health Centres at 263 Weller Ave, in June, 2018. The kitchen was small and removed from the larger meeting room which inhibited the ability of all Circles participants to engage in the cooking activities together. In October 2018, Circles programming moved to the Katarokwi Learning Centre at 38 Cowdy St. This research focuses primarily on activities at the Katarokwi Learning Centre.

Research Findings

Characteristics of Study Participants

Throughout the period of this research there were 19 active Leaders in Circles Kingston. Eleven participated in individual interviews and 4 others took part in a focus-group in March 2020 which utilized the same interview questions as a guide.

Research participants were engaged in Circles Kingston as part of their strategy to move out of poverty. Most of the participants were on social assistance when they began the program, though some were already attending college or other training. Some Leaders started businesses or gained employment during the period of this research.

Parents in the program who had young children typically brought them to Circles where they were cared for in a separate space. Until late in the fall of 2019, the children did not regularly participate in food preparation and did not eat with the adults. Starting in the fall of 2019,

children were formally integrated into food preparation activities (for those who were able and willing) and ate at a table in the main room, attended to by designated paid caregivers. Of the 15 Leaders who participated actively in this research through interviews or focus group, 4 had children (n=5) who regularly attended Circles.

Program Description

The Circles Kingston Cooking Together pilot was based on a hypothesis that working together to prepare meals in the kitchen could provide benefits that enhance the Circles model. It was hypothesized that participants would gain food skills and food knowledge which will help them to eat a more healthy diet under existing budgetary restraints, and that further, working in the kitchen could help to build and strengthen social bonds among all program participants.

Circles Kingston meets 3 - 4 times per month on Thursdays from 4pm – 7pm at the Katarokwi Learning Centre in Kingston, ON. Circles Kingston was not presented as a “Cooking Class” per se; rather working together in the kitchen to prepare a meal was understood as normal part of the activities of Circles Kingston.

The programming roughly follows this schedule:

4:00 - 5:00 Food Preparation

5:00 – 6:00 Circles Programming

6:00 – 7:00 Eating together, talking, and clean up.

For the purposes of this study, we focus on the food preparation, eating together, and kitchen clean-up components of Circles Kingston.

At a typical Circles Kingston meeting, participants arrive between 4:00 and 5:00. As people arrive, tasks for preparing a meal are shared informally among all program participants and staff. Leaders, Allies, Volunteers and Staff work together to prepare a simple, healthy meal that has been planned in advance by the Circles Chef. The Chef directs food preparation. Participants self-select for tasks and the structure of the programming is very loose. People who do not want

to participate may instead just hang out in the kitchen around the table where the food preparation is happening. Everyone is invited to participate in whatever ways they are able.

While recipes are sometimes printed out and available to all, most direction happens verbally with the Chef giving instructions to participants as tasks arise. “Can someone help chop onions?”; “I’d like you to break up the feta into small bits for the salad”; “Who wants to help me brown the meat?” and so on. When someone volunteers for a task, guidance is provided as needed either by the Chef, a staff person, or another program participant. Care is taken to avoid a formal “cooking class” instructional environment. The goal is that Circles Kingston Cooking Together programming should feel like a family that is working to prepare a meal together and learning from each other.

Children are encouraged to participate in the cooking. Typically the children work with an adult on baking muffins, desserts, grating cheese, mixing ingredients, or other simple age-appropriate tasks. When attention flags and/or when the task is done the children retire to the day-care area where they are supervised. Not all children are interested in/have the capacity to participate. Typically 2 - 3 of the 5 children who often attend Circles with their parent will be involved in food preparation on a given day.

Once most of the food preparation is completed, some Circles members clean up, wash dishes, and put items away. Others set the table for the meal. Participants self-select for clean-up tasks and table setting.

Once the meal preparation is nearly complete, Circles participants engage with the planned Circles programming and staff and volunteers take over any remaining preparation tasks. When the programming is over, participants gather around the table to eat and talk. After supper participants are invited to take leftovers home with them. The evening ends with some Circles participants doing dishes and cleaning the kitchen.

This model creates an atmosphere with little pressure, and ample opportunity for informal chatting and visiting alongside learning and participating in food preparation and kitchen clean-up.

Findings

This study sought to identify the value of Kitchen Programming in Circles Kingston from the perspective of Circles Leaders. Interviews and focus groups with Circles Allies and program staff reinforced the findings.

In this section, the research findings are presented on 2 major themes: Enhanced Food Skills and Food Literacy, and Social Capital.

Findings: Enhanced Food Skills and Food Literacy:

Predicted outcomes related to Cooking Together activities were *increased access to healthy food and increased knowledge and skills in planning and preparing healthy meals leading to healthier eating practices*. According to self-reported data collected from Circles Kingston Leaders in this research, these outcomes were largely achieved.

Overall, Leaders reported that they acquired new food skills and achieved a higher level of food literacy by participating in the Cooking Together activities of Circles Kingston. Some reported significant changes. In other cases, particularly for those who may have had confidence in their food skills coming into the program, or who were not interested in cooking, the change was less dramatic but still present.

As per the model presented on page 5, food literacy/food skills can be broken down into the following overlapping themes and subthemes. This framework was useful for categorizing the broad range of responses to questions about food skills and food literacy from the interviews and focus groups.

Based on themes that emerged from interviews and observation during this research, we have added new elements to sections as appropriate (in red).

Food preparation skills

- Ability to use recipes and follow instructions
- Ability to use food preparation utensils and appliances
- Ability to improvise with ingredients

- Use of acquired food skills outside the program

Food Nutrition and Knowledge

- Knowledge about food safety, nutrition, food sources, etc.
- Familiarity with a range of ingredients

Organizational Skills

- Planning, budgeting, buying and storing food
- Food Skills for Parenting

Psycho-social Factors

- Satisfaction or enjoyment
- Confidence, resilience, creativity
- Control; self-efficacy
- Perceived value of having food skills – impact on self esteem

Findings_Basic Food Skills

Basic food preparation skills, such as the ability to follow a recipe and use common kitchen tools are important tools for cooking healthy meals. Overall, Leaders were very satisfied with the food skills they acquired through Circles.

Using recipes and following instructions

The ability to follow a recipe is a basic food skill, as recipes are commonly viewed as an easy and effective way to pass on information about food preparation. Because they are widely available in magazines, brochures, cookbooks and the internet, recipes are a common vehicle for introducing new methods, flavours and ingredients.

The Cooking Together programming at Circles Kingston often, but not always, provided pre-printed recipes that were distributed to the group. The recipe helped participants to know what was being prepared and to identify what tasks would need to be done.

Some participants found the recipes helpful and liked taking them home, saving them, and using them.

“The recipes Cindy comes up with are really good and easy and I can even make them at home if I have the things I need”.

“I wish we had recipes for all the meals, I mean, sometimes I want to make something and I don’t remember what we did exactly”

Others found that they did not rely on the recipes, and instead preferred to receive verbal instruction and demonstration from the Chef. Some noted that recipes don’t give you all the information you need and that demonstration and personalized instruction is more helpful.

“They don’t tell you really how to do things – like brown meat – like what does that even look like? What are you going for? When is it done? It’s better if [chef] shows me how to break up the ground beef with a spoon, and then stir it around, and she can tell me if it’s ready or not, like what to look for”.

“The recipes might be good but I don’t know what “dice” means – like what size does “dice” mean? And I don’t know if it matters if you get it the right size. I don’t have a lot of confidence to follow a recipe and it doesn’t usually work out that good on my own”

“people say ‘look on the internet’ but there are just too many recipes and how do you know what ones are good?”

Ability to use utensils and appliances

Circles participants were given guidance in using typical kitchen utensils and appliances. Many Leaders said that due to their experiences at Circles, they felt more confident with skills such as using knives, managing food on multiple burners, and adjusting the heat on the stove,

Ability to improvise with ingredients

Many Leaders expressed interest in customizing recipes to suit dietary needs, taste preferences, or ingredient availability.

The Circles Chef often talked about customization as we cooked and this became a major theme in food preparation. Many meals were built from on-sale items from the grocery store, so altering ingredients on the fly was frequently part of the process.

Many of the meals were built around customization and included multiple options for “build your own” meals – e.g. burritos; salads, and buffet style serving which gave people options to try foods that were new to them. For example, there might be choices of cheeses (cheddar, feta), or a choice of meat or vegetarian fillings or toppings.

In interviews, several Leaders reported that learning how to customize meals for their household budget, likes/dislikes, and food sensitivities was a very important skill for them to learn.

Use of acquired food skills at home

One measure of the efficacy of cooking programs is whether or not participants use the skills they learn to prepare meals at home. According to our study participants, planning and preparing meals in the home every day can be a challenge. Limited budget, limited kitchen facilities, and time constraints add to the challenges of meeting personal preferences in the home. Unique household situations presented multiple challenges including juggling multiple roles (work, school, parenting) managing food allergies and food preferences. To support Leaders in cooking at home, Circles Kingston host organizations made some essential tools and ingredients available to Leaders throughout the program and provided recipes much of the time.

Most leaders expressed that they either had tried something they learned at Circles in their home, or were intending to do so. Some of it was very simple:

“I always just used salt before, and now I have cumin and garlic powder and I use those when I make chicken now”

“Oh my goodness, so many things! I am always taking ideas home to try. And sometimes I don’t even realize it until I’m in my own kitchen and doing something. Then I realize ‘hey, I learned this at Circles’ – like using different spices, or thinking I’ll just add something new to a recipe that’s not written down. And it’s just casual, like, I’m confident. And I didn’t even know that I had the knowledge, you know, until I was in my own kitchen”

“I didn’t know before that you could add peppers and onions to ground beef when you cook it, so I do that now”

Other Leaders tried full recipes that they had learned at Circles:

“I tried the pork loin; [Chef] said it was on sale so I went and got one and I cooked it just like she showed us, and made potatoes and everything to go with it”

While most Leaders found the skills and knowledge gained at Circles to be helpful in their own kitchens, some found it difficult to adapt the recipes they learned at Circles for home use. In particular, several found that the “build your own” options that they enjoyed at Circles didn’t lend themselves to one or two person households.

“I really liked the burrito night, but like, you can’t make all those things just for yourself. That would be a lot of cooking, the beef, and the beans, and the rice and different cheeses and sauces... The fun is in trying everything. It wouldn’t be fun, just having one option.”

Food Nutrition and Knowledge

Encouraging a healthy diet was a goal of Circles Kingston. Food prepared at Circles is made from scratch and meals are balanced and nutritious.

Some Circles Kingston Leaders had pre-existing knowledge about nutrition before attending Circles. Most Leaders were aware, for example, that they could improve the quality of their diet by increasing vegetable intake, substituting beans for meat as a source of protein, and limit their intake of salt, sugar and fat. These topics were occasionally discussed during kitchen programming. Some Leaders expressed sheepishness that they did not try to make their diet more healthy, which suggests that knowledge about nutrition is not the main, or only factor for preparing healthy food at home for people living in poverty.

When asked in interviews, most agreed that because of Circles Kingston food programming they had tried new healthy foods that they had not previously tried. Specific foods mentioned included winter squash, zucchini, feta cheese, spinach, kale, mushrooms, quinoa, and various herbs and spices. Leaders also mentioned new and/or healthier combinations of foods including cauliflower and potato, adding vegetables such as peppers, spinach and mushrooms to tomato sauce, and adding nuts and cheese to green salads.

Organizational Skills

Planning, budgeting for, shopping for, and proper storage of food are key skills to support healthy eating.

Planning, Budgeting and Storing Food

Many participants said that they were interested in knowing more about how to buy healthy food on a budget. Leaders and Allies both felt that this was an element of food literacy that Circles should and could address more directly. During focus groups and in some interviews, participants suggested that learning more about food shopping on a budget should be part of Circles programming. Suggestions included a round table with Circles participants sharing budgeting tips and field trips to grocery stores.

“We all know something, I mean, some peopel use Flipp [a coupon app], and some know the best days to shop... We should be talking about those things here”

“I find that with the Circles and [Chef] being the mastermind behind the cooking, I find that she is introducing stuff that you can work with within your budget ... you're getting everyday ordinary stuff that you can hopefully go to the market and not pay an extraordinary amount for.”

“I’d love to tag along with her sometime to see how she shops. I think it would be a really cool field trip for Circles to go to the grocery store and just see how [Chef] shops... Cause I don’t do recipes on the fly. I don’t have that thought process – it would be interesting, just to see the wheels turning in her brain. That would be so cool. It would be something we could all benefit from. I want to see how that lady shops on a strict budget. Like, to get out of poverty that’s what we have to do.”

Food Skills for Parents

Four of the Leaders who regularly came to Circles Kingston had children who regularly attended with them. These leaders were interested in learning more about preparing kid-friendly meals, and how to encourage their children to try new foods. Some parents felt that the food prepared at

Circles was not always kid -friendly. The definition of “kid friendly” varied across the participants.

“He just won’t eat it; so I don’t know why I would cook it for him? I’ll just have to go back and make a grilled cheese or plain noodles”

“I know exactly what she will and what she will not eat, you know? And it changes sometimes, but it’s not up to me – it’s her. She decides what she likes and she just isn’t going to try new things if she doesn’t want to. I can’t make her! And I am not going to go out and buy all the food and make the whole meal if I know she isn’t going to eat it – it’s just a waste,

“She just likes regular plain food, kid food, you know? And we have enough troubles at the table, I don’t want to make food the big issue, right?”

“It’s hard to experiment because, like, what if they don’t like it? It’s just time out the window. And money. Right out the window. And then they still have to eat! So you go and make a whole other meal. It’s a lot of work”.

On the other hand, some Leaders were delighted that their kids had tried new foods at Circles that they wouldn’t have tried at home.

“Oh my goodness, she just tells everyone now how much she likes kale! I think she just likes saying it, but it’s also that she will eat it now if I buy it. She just thinks it’s great”.

From Field Notes (November 2018). There is a broad definition of “kid friendly” meals among the parents. Even pizza, if prepared from scratch, or tacos using unfamiliar seasonings or new ingredients were considered by some not to be “kid friendly” because it was different from what their children were used to. It seems that many participating children eat a limited diet and are adverse to trying new foods. While parents publicly express a desire to have their kids try new foods, they usually to prepare plates that they know the kids will eat. This was observed during Circles; when asked in interviews and focus groups new information came forward about children trying new foods.

From Field Notes (January 2020): Incorporating the kids into food prep appears to be working as B and R both seem to enjoy the cooking activities, as well as the attention from adults. I don't know if this is making them more likely to try the foods they help to prepare or not.

Psycho-Social Factors

While improved functional cooking skills and enhanced knowledge about nutrition are predictable outcomes of cooking programs, psycho-social factors are equally important and have been recognized as dimensions of food literacy. (Farmer et al., 2018; Desjardins et al. 2013; Crawford & Kalina, 1997; Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007; Lee, McCartan, Palermo, & Bryce, 2010; Marquis, Thomson, & Murray, 2001; Tarasuk & Reynolds, 1999). The psycho-social elements of food literacy are deeply intertwined and may include: Satisfaction/Enjoyment; Confidence, Resilience and Creativity; a sense of Control; and Pride in having acquired kitchen skills and knowledge.

Positive feelings associated with kitchen activities can make a difference in the acquisition and retention of food skills and food literacy. All Leaders reported feeling satisfied by their participation in Cooking Together activities at Circles. Further, several commented that the more time they spent doing Circles kitchen activities, and the more they developed connections with other participants, the more enjoyment they felt.

“At first I didn't like it, like I didn't know what I was doing and I worried I might ruin the meal! But I got more confident and I got to know people so it was fun”

“It just feels so good, you know? It's like a shared project, all working together to make something that we all get to enjoy. And I know I did my little part, grating the cheese or whatever, and that so-and-so did their little part, and it feels really like we accomplish something every week. It's satisfying to me.”

“I didn't know at first, really, what to do. And I didn't know anyone except [Staff]. So I just hung back, but now I'm right in there and it's fun. Every week it's fun!”

In interviews, Leaders consistently reported having more confidence in skills such as using recipes, making substitutions, using a knife safely, handling meat, and monitoring food on the stovetop. Confidence level was usually discussed in the context of improved food skills and knowledge, and was closely linked to enjoyment of cooking.

Most Leaders expressed interest in continuing to learn more food skills through Circles, in particular skills around planning, budgeting, and substitutions in recipes.

Some also expressed awareness that better food skills would allow them to better prepare healthy foods on a limited budget, giving them a better sense of control of that aspect of their life. Leaders stated, for example, that knowing about how to use more herbs and spices, or to make substitutions made them feel more able to prepare interesting and varied meals.

Some leaders mentioned that having better food skills would help them to be in better control of their budgets and their individual and families health. Leaders also reported pride in having improved their food skills. Parents, in particular, were highly aware of the importance of having good food skills and the confidence to be able to provide their children with healthy food.

Results: Overall Food Skills and Food Literacy

Overall, Circles Leaders reported that they were very satisfied with food skills and food knowledge acquired through Circles.

Most Leaders reported at least some improvement in their overall level of food skills and food literacy. Improved kitchen skills included chopping vegetables, cooking techniques, new language to describe cooking techniques and ingredients, safe food handling, reading recipes with confidence, planning and budgeting, and new confidence in the ability to prepare simple recipes with or without a recipe. All leaders reported feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment, confidence, and pride associated with Circles kitchen activities.

Findings _ Building Social Capital

While Circles Kingston Leaders noted that enhanced Food Skills and Food Literacy were important outcomes of Circles kitchen activities, Leaders unanimously reported that the most valuable aspect of Cooking Together programming was in the enhanced social connections it facilitated. In an open-ended question asking what they liked best about Circles, Leaders used words and phrases such as *family*, *community* and *friends* to describe the relationships they had built. They attributed this sense of connectedness directly to working together with other Circles participants in the kitchen.

Overall kitchen activities at Circles Kingston were very effective at building and enhancing social relationships among all Circles participants, within and across categories of Leader, Ally, Staff, and Volunteer. **Social relationships developed through kitchen activities at Circles were reported to help Leaders remain committed to their goals, encourage attendance at weekly Circles sessions, increase a sense of social belonging, and reduce feelings of social isolation.**

Social Capital

Social capital is a term used to describe the value that relationships bring to us. It is a useful term to apply when looking at the Circles model, which proposes that building social relationships across class lines is key to helping Leaders move out of poverty. This report finds that for Leaders in Circles Kingston, working together in the kitchen helped to quickly build networks of social relations and all the benefits that accrues.

Here we look at some dimensions of the Leaders experiences of Social Capital accrued through Circles Kingston.

Heightened Sense of Belonging and Connection

Leaders at Circles Kingston recognize and frequently talk about the importance of the network of close social relationships that have emerged in the group. Leaders frequently referred to the “Circles Family”.

Circles Leaders said that building strong social networks was a very important aspect of Circles and they talked about the importance of having relationships with people who “*believe in you*”, or who “*know your kids – you don’t have to protect anyone from their crazy antics*” or who can “*just give you a high-five – and you don’t have to always have this big conversation*”.

A commonly heard sentiment was that “*in the kitchen you don’t know who is a Leader and who is an Ally*”. At Circles Kingston some Allies and Staff were not particularly accomplished or confident cooks, which helped to foster an environment of equality in the kitchen. All participants worked side-by-side to prepare the meals. This created a sense of meal preparation being a shared project rather than an instructional setting.

The Importance of Kitchen Activities for Building Social Capital

From Field Notes December 2019: Leaders, Allies, Staff, Volunteers and the children of participants work together around one large table to prepare the evening meal. The majority of this time is spent in casual conversation. It’s a low-pressure environment; people get to know each other, follow up on previous week’s news, and learn about each other’s lives outside Circles. There is always laughter and a sense of comradery. Some participants more from task to task; some do only one thing; some don’t participate in the cooking, but join in the conversations just the same.

Leaders credit this time in the kitchen – preparing meals and cleaning up afterwards – as the aspect of Circles that most facilitates the sense of “family” or “community”.

In interviews, several Leaders talk about how the kitchen activities made it seem like a “real Canadian family dinner”. Whether or not Leaders had had personal experience learning to cook from family members, many expressed that that was how Circles kitchen activities made them feel, and that it was an experience that they value.

“This is how it’s supposed to be – everyone in the kitchen working together. Like family”.

“And there we are, just learning from each other, like it was a family and not a program you signed up for, just like a family teaching each other.”

“Back in the day this is how it was. I don’t know about you, but I always remember my grandma, and her kitchen, cooking big meals for Christmas or whatever, and that’s what this feels like sometimes. Like ‘ok, you’re on the carrots and you go do something with the potatoes’ – just casual but all working together and you know it’s going to turn out great. And it’s not all on you. It’s a shared thing. It’s family”.

Even Circles members who didn’t always participate in meal preparation were perceived to be playing a role:

“Oh, [name of Leader], she’s like my Aunt Peg. Just sat there, smoking, and bossing everyone around, giving orders and never picked up a knife! But that’s part of it, isn’t it? A role for everyone and no matter who you are, it’s fine.

The casual nature of the kitchen programming meant that some leaders rarely if ever felt compelled to participate in food preparation at Circles. These participants still received the benefits of the community building aspect of kitchen activities as they were able to congregate around the table and engage in conversations with others who were doing food preparation

Many leaders said they thought that it would have taken much longer to get to know other Circles participants if they weren’t participating in the activity of cooking together.

“What would Circles even be without the cooking?”

“It’s just easy, you are just working side by side and you get chatting – I don’t even know everyone’s name, but I know something about them all!”

“It’s like anytime you have a shared work task and you are working along-side someone and it’s easier to talk than if it’s all, like, sitting across a desk and answering 20 questions”.

“You’re at the sink doing dishes which isn’t necessarily the most fun, but you’re talking and shouting at someone else and then someone comes and dries, and then there’s more

people and it's just, it's easy and it, well I don't want to say it's fun, but it feels like sisters or something, you know?"

Circles Leaders with children frequently expressed appreciation at having more adults engage with their child(ren) through cooking together.

"I didn't really want [child] to be in the kitchen because honestly, I thought it would be me that had to work with her – that sounds just awful doesn't it? – but anyway, it turns out that she listens better to others anyway! So it's fun to have her here and I don't have to do the work but she has fun, and other grown-ups are happy to help her so that's a relief".

"I think [child] gets a lot of confidence from other adults who aren't her mom helping her, like they probably have more patience or something. But she likes [cooking] more than I thought she would and so who knows, this might be the best thing for her"

Social Networks and Leaders Commitment to Circles

Regular participation in Circles programming is a key aspect of the Circles model. Several Leaders stated that the strong social connections forged in the kitchen keep them coming back to Circles each week and help them stay committed to their plan.

"Oh, some days I don't want to leave the house, you know? Get on the bus, get the kid dressed and it's winter, but I know that when I get here and walk in and see everyone at the table working, it will be worth it"

"I worry if I can follow my plan, but I know that everyone here believes in me – and I believe in their plans too - I know you believe in me right? Because we were talking last week at the sink and I was telling you? And I think if you think I can do it, then maybe I can, if that makes sense".

"I know that my Circles family has my back. But I also think I have to do my part, you know? And come and cook and share and do my part to be in the Circles community. I'm an introvert so it doesn't always seem easy to me, but I don't want to let anyone down"

Bridging and Bonding Social Relationships.

Social Capital can be *Bridging* – relationships developed across a recognized divide such as social class; or *Bonding* – relationships developed among members perceived to be from the same group. Leaders noted that Cooking Together activities at Circles Kingston facilitate both kinds of relationships.

Leaders recognize the value of Bridging Social Capital – i.e. social relationships developed with people from a different socio-economic class. They spoke about the importance of having people to draw on who had experience in the job market, to help with resume writing and conducting mock interviews, or to talk through and problem-solve housing, schooling, and legal challenges. Leaders believed that the relationships they had developed with Allies other than their matched Ally were largely a result of working together in the kitchen.

“Oh, gee, everyone is so helpful and friendly. Honestly. I mean [matched Ally] obviously has a lot of help to give me and is so nice and helpful and I can call them anytime, but really, all the Allies are so supportive, asking me about my life and how this is going or how that is going. It really feels like everyone is paying attention, not only to their own match but to all the regulars”

Leaders also recognized value in developing Bonding Social Capital - social relationships with other Leaders at Circles Kingston. In particular, some of the parents of young children shared the importance of new peer-to-peer relationships with other parents.

“It’s just, we are all in this together, you know? And we have to be careful, there can be a lot of negativity out there.... But here, everyone is on their path, everyone has a plan, and, it’s rocky, but everyone can help each other, like with the kids and food, and sharing ideas. It would be hard if I didn’t know [names of two other parent] I just don’t feel alone in this.”

Conclusions:

With this study, Circles Kingston has addressed its objective of assessing the Kitchen Activities component of the Circles Kingston Pilot Program. Through this research:

1. We have verified that through the Cooking Together programming at Circles Kingston Leaders learned food skills and gained food literacy.
2. We have verified that adding kitchen programming to Circles Kingston enhances the Circles model by fostering the establishment of a multiple social connections, thereby building social capital which can help Circles Leaders move out of poverty according to their individual plan.
3. We found that Kitchen Programming contributes to all Circles Participants enjoyment of and commitment to, the Circles program, and encourages regular attendance among both Leaders and Allies.

Further Observations and Recommendations

In order to measure the true efficacy of Cooking Together programs, organizations should use a comprehensive definition of food literacy that goes beyond the acquisition of food skills and nutrition knowledge. Evaluation of Cooking Together programs should be based on Food Literacy Models such as that developed by Desjardins et al. which encompass psycho-social factors and environmental as well as individual measures.

In interviews many Leaders alluded to the importance of the casual atmosphere of Cooking Together activities at Circles Kingston. This was also mentioned frequently in the participant observation field notes. Elements of this include the lack of pressure to participate in all activities, ample opportunity to converse with other participants, the sense of “learning without being taught”, and relief at it not feeling like a classroom setting.

While this research was focusing on the impact of *having* kitchen programming, this emerging theme suggests that the *style* of kitchen programming is an important consideration, particularly for building social capital among participants.

While this research looked only at Cooking Together activities in Circles Kingston, it adds to the evidence found in the literature that incorporating Cooking activities may be an effective means for increasing social connectedness within other groups.

Limitations of the Study

This study recruited participants through convenience sampling – i.e. by interviewing and observing participants who were available. Due to the small number of Circles participants, the creation of a random sample was not possible in this exploratory study, and it was not our original intent to do so.

This study captures only the experiences of Circles Kingston Leaders who remained committed to the program, and who attended Circles regularly. It does not capture the experiences of those who attended Circles only very occasionally, or those who stopped coming before interviews took place.

This study would have been impossible (and much less enjoyable) without the committed participation of all Circles members. A huge thank you to the Leaders, Allies, Staff and Volunteers for making space for me to participate in Circles Kingston.

Appendix

Susan Belyea April 2019.

CODE: _____

Circles Kingston Interview Guide

Preamble:

The purpose of this interview is to understand the impact of cooking together at Circles.

All information collected today will be anonymous and we won't share any details that identify you. The results will be seen by the evaluation team (Bren and Myself) and will be included in a report for the funder of Circles. A summary of what we learn from this interview will be also be shared with the organizations that lead Circles in Kingston.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. We can stop at any time.

I will be taking notes as we go, and with your permission, would also like to record this interview to ensure accuracy. The recording will not be shared with anyone and will be erased once the report is written.

[Verbal consent] _____

1. Which Circle are you a part of?

- Circle 1 - Thursday evening at Katarowki Learning Centre
- Circle 2 – Tuesday evening at Princess St. United Church

2. What is your role at Circles?

- Circle Leader
- Circle Ally
- Other (please specify) _____

3. How often do you attend Circles?

- I attend most weeks
- I attend some weeks
- I rarely attend
- This is my first time

The following questions are open ended. (Interviewer checks all that apply and writes notes.)

4. Which meal-related activities have you been part of at Circles?

- Helped prepare and cook food for the meal (chopping, measuring, cooking etc.)
- Helped with misc tasks eg. setting table , pouring water, inventorying pantry, etc.

5. What do you like the best about food related activities at Circles?

- Working alongside other Circles members to prepare the meal
- Getting to know other Circles members in an informal setting
- Learning food skills and knowledge from Kitchen Coordinator (Cindy) [prompt for examples]
- Teaching other circles members skills/ sharing my knowledge about food
- Other _____

6. What do you like the least about food activities and Circles?

- I don't feel comfortable participating in food activities. (prompt for why)
- It adds too much time to Circles
- I don't enjoy food activities (cooking, cleaning)
- I don't always like the food that is offered
- I have food preferences or food allergies that make it hard to participate
- Other _____

7. Has your participation in Circles improved your knowledge and skills for healthy eating ?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

8. If yes, which skills for healthy eating have you improved through Circles? (may emerge in Q 7)

- Cooking skills (chopping, measuring, controlling heat on stove etc.)
- Menu planning
- Budgeting for healthy meals
- Reading a recipe
- Reading nutrition labels
- Making meals/recipes healthier (for example, reducing salt or sugar, using whole grains, adding healthier ingredients like fresh vegetables, reducing fat etc.)
- Using ingredients that are new to me
- Other (please specify) _____

9. Have you eaten healthy foods at Circles that you had not tried before?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- If yes, what new healthy foods did you prepare or try? _____

10. Have you taken a food idea or recipe from Circles and tried it at home?

- Yes (prompt for details) _____
- No
- Not sure

11. In your view, what is the most important result of cooking together in your Circle?

- I have learned new skills or knowledge about cooking
- I have had a chance to get to know the Circles participants through cooking together
- I feel connected to the people in my Circle
- Other _____

12. Let's imagine that Circles operated differently. Right now, each week, Circles participants cook the meal that we eat together. But imagine if the meal was prepared by someone else, so that we ate together, but we didn't cook the meal together. In your view, what impact, if any, would that have on Circles?

- I think it would be about the same
- I think it would be better. [Prompt for why].
- I think it would be worse. [Prompt for why].

13. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about the impact of cooking together at Circles?

Thank you for participating.

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