

The Poverty of Curriculum

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Last week, a friend and I went to see a documentary film about the South Central Farm in Los Angeles. The story *The Garden* tells starts in 1986 when the L.A. city government seized 14 acres of land to build an incinerator (compensation= \$5 million). In 1994, two years after the Rodney King riot, an African American grassroots organization, the Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles formed to stop the building of the incinerator. After CCSCLA's successful fight, the city then decided to sell the land to the LA Harbor Department. This agency, in turn, granted a permit to the LA Regional Foodbank to create a community garden. For the next seven years, 350 local residents, mostly Latino immigrants, fed themselves and their neighbors fresh farm produce from their individual plots.

In 2001, Ralph Horowitz, sued the city for breach of contract. Horowitz argued that when the city seized the 14 acres in 1986 from his company, the city agreed that his company had first right of repurchase during the period from 1986 to 1996. Horowitz claimed that the city's decision to sell the land to the LA Harbor Department in 1994 violated that agreement. Also in 2001, CCSCLA successfully supported the election of an African American, Jan Perry, to be the district's representative. Perry and the African American CCSCLA proved to be an important ally of Horowitz as events unfolded.

In 2003, the city made a secret deal with Horowitz. He paid the city \$5 million for the land and resold 2.6 acres of it to CCSCLA who promised to build an 800-seat recreation complex with a \$2.2 million state grant. [CCSCLA built a clay soccer field with six nets and no seating, instead spending the bulk of the money they had received from the state on "consulting fees" to the sons of the executive director.]

After the deal, Horowitz put his part of the land up for sale (for \$16.3 million) and gave the Hispanic farmers two months to leave. The farmers were stunned. Quickly, they organized, hired a lawyer, filed a counter lawsuit and raised money to buy the land. But, Horowitz refused to sell the land to them. The farmers eventually lost their court case and Horowitz had the garden bulldozed in July 2006. According to former Deputy Mayor Larry Frank, Perry facilitated the bulldozing of the garden because she did not want it to empower the Hispanic community and thus enable them to challenge Perry's African American "political machine." In 2000, Los Angeles' 9th district was 73 percent Hispanic and 21 percent African American.

As we left the movie theater, my friend asked me, "Why didn't the farmers start organizing when they first got the land? By organizing only in the last two months before eviction, they didn't have enough time to be effective!" My response: They didn't know what was going on until they saw the eviction notice. My friend protested, "Well, they should have anticipated what would happen!" My response: they could only do that if they had been studying how our power structure works, knowing what to look for – e.g., backroom deals, the importance of relationships, divide and conquer strategies and

the lure of patronage. And for that, they needed to be attending schools with a far different curriculum than that taught in public schools. For example, instead of memorizing all the U.S. Presidents and state capitals, children need to be learning the reality of how leaders are elected and what actually goes on in city halls and state capitals.