

At the Middle School

By Clara Liang '20

We start off trying to talk with them about food systems and Domino's pizza and money (because the ground is frozen, though it's April, and we can't yet start gardening in the afternoons. Also, Maria and I do not really know how to garden. Yet. But, since we lead an afterschool gardening club with the middle schoolers, it was presumed that we did indeed know how to garden). We talk about where all the ingredients come from, what goes into the pizza, how all these ingredients get to the stores and to the pizza parlors and to our homes, who grows the vegetables and who milks the cows to make milk to make cheese, and who drives the pizza delivery cars to our homes. The kids are chaotic and not paying attention, really, although they do write down all their favorite pizza toppings and say they've made pizza before and brainstorm all the people who go into making a pizza. But it's clear that the whole fake money stake-holding scenario that we had planned out won't work.

So I ask if anyone knows anyone who does any of those jobs — farmer, truck driver, someone who works in a grocery store, works at Domino's, works as a Domino's driver. And one fat nice boy's friends poke him and elbow him until he says he works at a dairy farm. They are laughing, the friends, so I feel bad and embarrassed and also very out of touch with the food system. I realize that the boy knows more than me. He says reluctantly that he works every Saturday at a dairy farm. He denies that he milks the cows and the other boys snicker. "Are you sure you don't pull at them?" they say. He says "NO," emphatically, "the machines do it." He says his mom works there every day. I say, "You're the expert on dairy farms, you tell us what happens

there!” and he talks about the milk going into big vats to get it at the right temperature, but he doesn’t want to say much more. He asks if he can take out his phone, and shows us pictures of a baby cow he saw birthed (“that’s called a calf,” says a shy small boy) and of little pigs (“They’re so *cute*,” from a very wild disinterested boy). They’re all in sixth to eight grade. The dairy farm boy says when he goes to Mexico where his dad lives his dad has pigs, and he kills the pigs with his dad. But he won’t say how he does it.

Then Sofia who is mature for seventh grade says that when she goes to Mexico, where a lot of her family is, they slaughter animals, too. She has killed chickens, pigs, and cows. She tells us in detail about the process — how her family has to tie the chicken’s feet in the backyard, and poke it in the stomach with a spike, and collect the blood, and put it in boiling water to get off all the hair. She says they even use the brain and the tongue, and the boys say “ewww” in disgust and glee, and she says at first she didn’t want to eat the animals because she felt nauseous. And her brother cried. But then she realized that eating is survival, and that you have to do it. I tell them I have never eaten meat in my life and they are astounded.

I ask them to think about the difference between killing an animal yourself and having it brought to you all packaged up or on a pizza, and the two kids who have killed animals say “It’s different, yeah, it’s different.” I ask if you might be less likely to waste food if you’ve grown the food yourself or killed the animal yourself, and the wild boy who didn’t care looks at me and says, “Yeah, cause you put in all that work to grow it so you wouldn’t want to just throw it away.”

Sofia seems to know about food systems and meat industries, and tells me that “in America you can’t just kill your own pigs cause you have to go to the government and get certified and stuff, but when I visit my family in Mexico we get to kill the animals ourselves and it tastes better.”

We talk then about their dining hall food, and where the waste goes, and they don’t seem to like the dining hall food very much. Then they begin to talk about how people don’t eat lunch because they are “starving themselves.” They talk about people they know who are “starving themselves.” Sofia says she didn’t eat lunch at all in sixth grade, and that her parents were worried she had an eating disorder so she had to see a psychiatrist. Ryan at that point left and told us it was because *he* had to see *his* psychiatrist. Anyway, now Sofia has to eat lunch with her brother who will “tell on her” if she doesn’t eat. The boys seem to know about Sofia’s eating disorder and listen solemnly (more solemn than they’ve been the whole time) with the look of children who know something is important but simply are not interested. Sofia says she doesn’t really know why she didn’t used to eat. She says people are embarrassed a lot to eat in front of other people, and I say that I remember that from middle and high school.

One sweet boy is really excited for when we start gardening, and I tell him I hope we’ll start next week as long as the ground is not frozen, and he says he has planted flowers before.