

Systems Thinking in Communities:

Understanding the Causes of Inactivity, Poor Diet/Nutrition, and Childhood Obesity in Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina



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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Healthy Kids Collaborative is one of 49 community partnerships participating in the national *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (www.healthykidshealthycommunities.org). The purpose of this *Healthy Kids Collaborative* project was to introduce systems thinking at the community level by identifying the essential parts of the Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina system and how the system influences policy and environmental changes to promote healthy eating and active living as well as to prevent childhood obesity. To accomplish this goal, community partners and residents participated in a group model building session and discussions. The group model building exercises were designed by staff from Transtria LLC and the Social System Design Lab at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri as part of the *Evaluation of Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. These exercises actively involved a wide range of participants in modeling complex systems and provided a way for different representatives (e.g., youth agencies, residents, government agencies, community-based organizations, foundations, schools) to better understand the systems (i.e., dynamics and structures) in the community (see the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities Group Model Building Facilitation Handbook*, www.transtria.com/hkhc). Overall, the evaluation was designed to assess policy, system, and environmental changes as a result of the community partnerships' efforts to increase healthy eating and active living in order to reduce childhood obesity.

Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina : Background and Local Participation

The Healthy Kids Collaborative focused on children and families living in Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina. These counties, located in eastern North Carolina, are largely comprised of small towns and rural areas. The HKC worked at the county level, as well as in specific cities and towns, including Rocky Mount, Pinetops, Red Oak, Nashville, and Spring Hope. The City of Rocky Mount straddles the county line and serves residents from both counties. While this provides a central location for many agencies and organizations, it also creates multiple systems to connect, such as county government with city government.

Nash and Edgecombe counties are largely comprised of low-income, minority families. Edgecombe County has a higher percentage of African-American and lower-income residents than Nash County. Nash and Edgecombe Counties, like the rest of North Carolina, are experiencing a fast-growing Latino population. The region is burdened by high unemployment rates, as well as limited access to nutritious food options and recreational resources.

Early onset of obesity is a growing problem in Nash and Edgecombe counties: Thirty-three percent of Nash County children and 27% of Edgecombe County children between the ages of 2-4 are overweight or obese. Nash and Edgecombe counties also face the highest adult obesity rate in the state. Nash and Edgecombe counties are two of the five counties in North Carolina comprising the Area L AHEC (Adult Health Education Center). The prevalence of overweight/obesity in this region is 72%.

The HKC was established in 2008 when DEPC saw a need for health to become a priority area for the organization. DEPC saw that health was connected to its overall mission of getting children ready for school. The Kate B. Reynolds Foundation, a major funder and partner of DEPC, also pointed out that health would be a good focus area for the organization.

The HKC was comprised of 70 members from 50 agencies including community agencies, organizations, local government officials, and other leaders that wanted to help children and families lead healthier, more active lives.³ The HKC established subgroups to help guide the work of specific targeted strategies. Each subgroup had a community member who served as leader of the subgroup. Subgroups met as needed to discuss strategies and develop action plans for their area of focus. Subgroups reported to the larger HKC at quarterly meetings. The five subgroups included:

- Faith-based initiatives
- Medical/health care
- Child care
- Access to healthy foods (i.e., farmers' markets)
- Policy (i.e., joint-use, community gardens, park adoption)

Healthy Kids Collaborative's Priorities and Strategies

The partnership and capacity building strategies of *Healthy Kids Collaborative* included:

- **Park Partners Program:** This program was launched by the City of Rocky Mount's Department of Parks and Recreation. HKC partners encouraged local faith-based organizations to adopt parks, allowing them to help in maintaining park conditions and to play an active role in the long-term park improvement planning process.
- **Capacity-Building in Healthcare Settings:** Informational resources on obesity prevention strategies were developed and distributed to families with children at risk of or already obese. In addition, patients and their families from pediatric clinics were referred to the DEPC Family Support Group. Finally, a Childhood Obesity Screening toolkit was developed that contained local resources, educational material, self assessments, and tips for physicians on communicating with patients about obesity.
- **Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities Summits:** The HKC held summits in 2010 and 2012 to share results of food and park assessments, engage community stakeholders and decision-makers, and promote innovative local, state, and national policies to combat childhood obesity.

The healthy eating and active living strategies of *Healthy Kids Collaborative* included:

- **Parks and Play Spaces:** HKC partners collaborated with groups from diverse sectors to transform a park into a model outdoor learning environment, renovate a park in a rural town, and establish a joint use agreement between Edgecombe County and Edgecombe County Public Schools.
- **Farmers' Markets:** Farmers' markets became more accessible to disadvantaged communities through efforts of the HKC. Three produce stands were opened and a bus route was re-located to the Rocky Mount farmers' market.
- **Nutrition and Physical Activity Standards in Child Care:** New nutrition and physical activity policies and practices were established in 16 Nash and Edgecombe County child care centers and homes.
- **Community Gardens:** HKC efforts led to three new community gardens, as well as the adoption of a city policy that supported community gardens in Rocky Mount.
- **Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Policies in Faith-Based Settings:** As a result of the HKC efforts, seven faith-based organizations adopted healthy eating and/or physical activity policies.

For more information on the partnership, please refer to the Nash and Edgecombe Counties case report (www.transtria.com/hkhc).

Systems Thinking in Communities: Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina

“Systems thinking” represents a range of methods, tools, and approaches for observing the behaviors of a system (e.g., family, community, organization) and how these behaviors change over time; changes may occur in the past, present, or future. Figure 1 illustrates a system of policies, environments, local collaborations, and social determinants in Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina that influence healthy eating, active living, and, ultimately, childhood obesity. This system and the dynamics within the system are complicated with many different elements interacting.

Models, such as Figure 1, provide a way to visualize all the elements of the system and their interactions, with a focus on causal relationships as opposed to associations. Through the model, specific types of causal relationships, or feedback loops, underlying the behavior of the dynamic system, can be identified to provide insights into what is working or not working in the system to support the intended outcomes (in this case, increases in healthy eating and active living, and decreases in childhood overweight and obesity). In system dynamics, the goal is to identify and understand the system feedback loops, or the cause-effect relationships that form a circuit where the effects “feed back” to influence the causes.

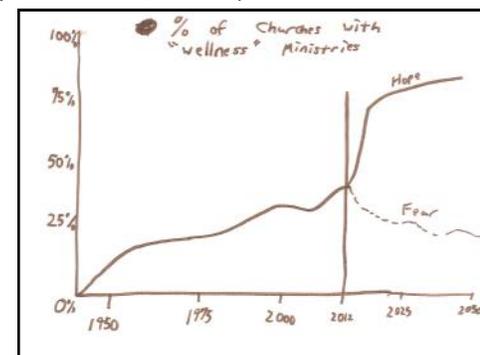
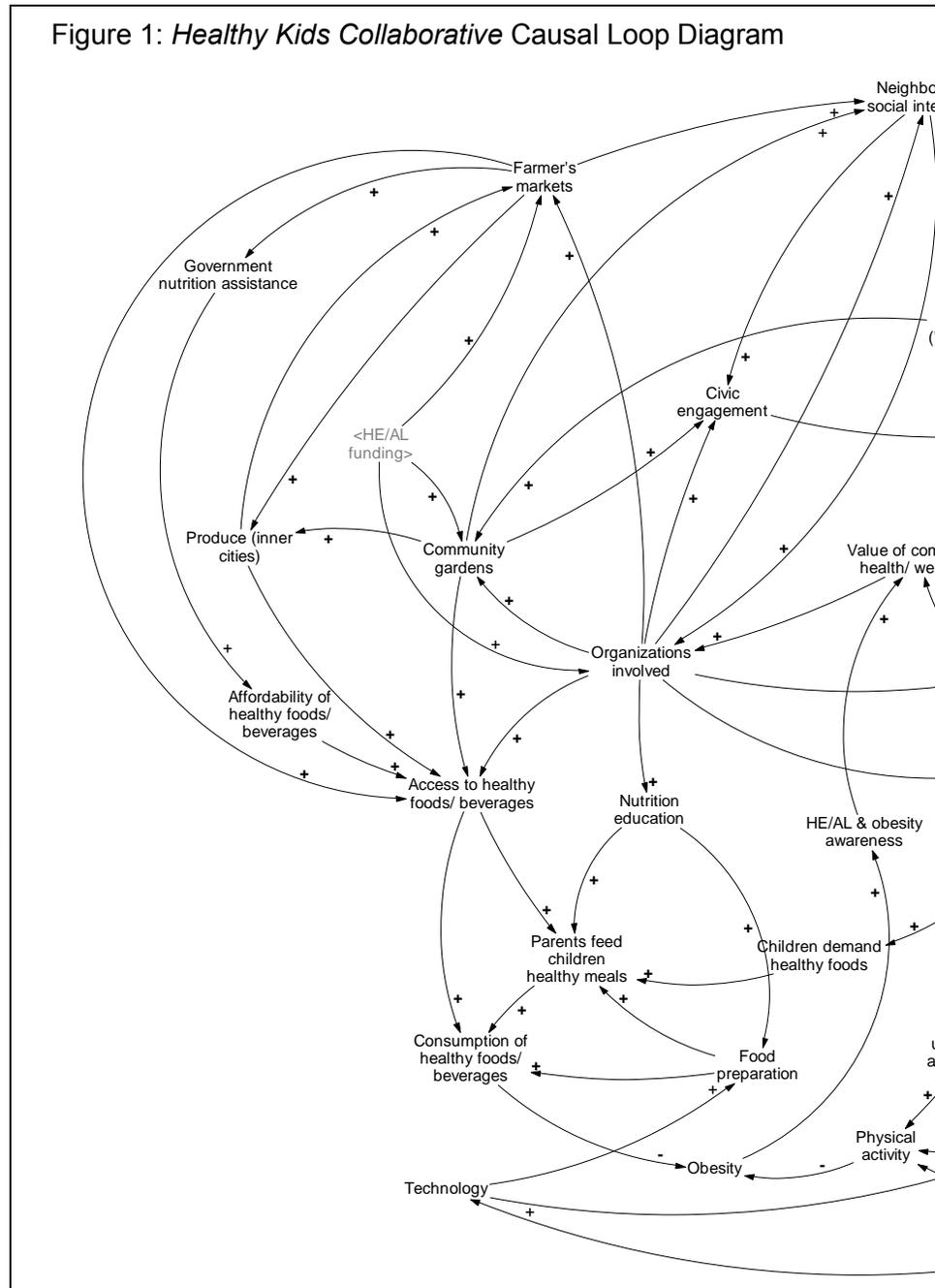
Group Model Building

Members of the *Healthy Kids Collaborative* partnership participated in a group model building session in October, 2012 and generated this system, also referred to as a causal loop diagram (Figure 1). Participants in the group model building session included residents and representatives from youth agencies, government agencies, community-based organizations, foundations, schools, and advocates. The group model building session had two primary activities: 1) a Behavior Over Time Graph exercise; and 2) a Causal Loop Diagram (or structural elicitation) exercise.

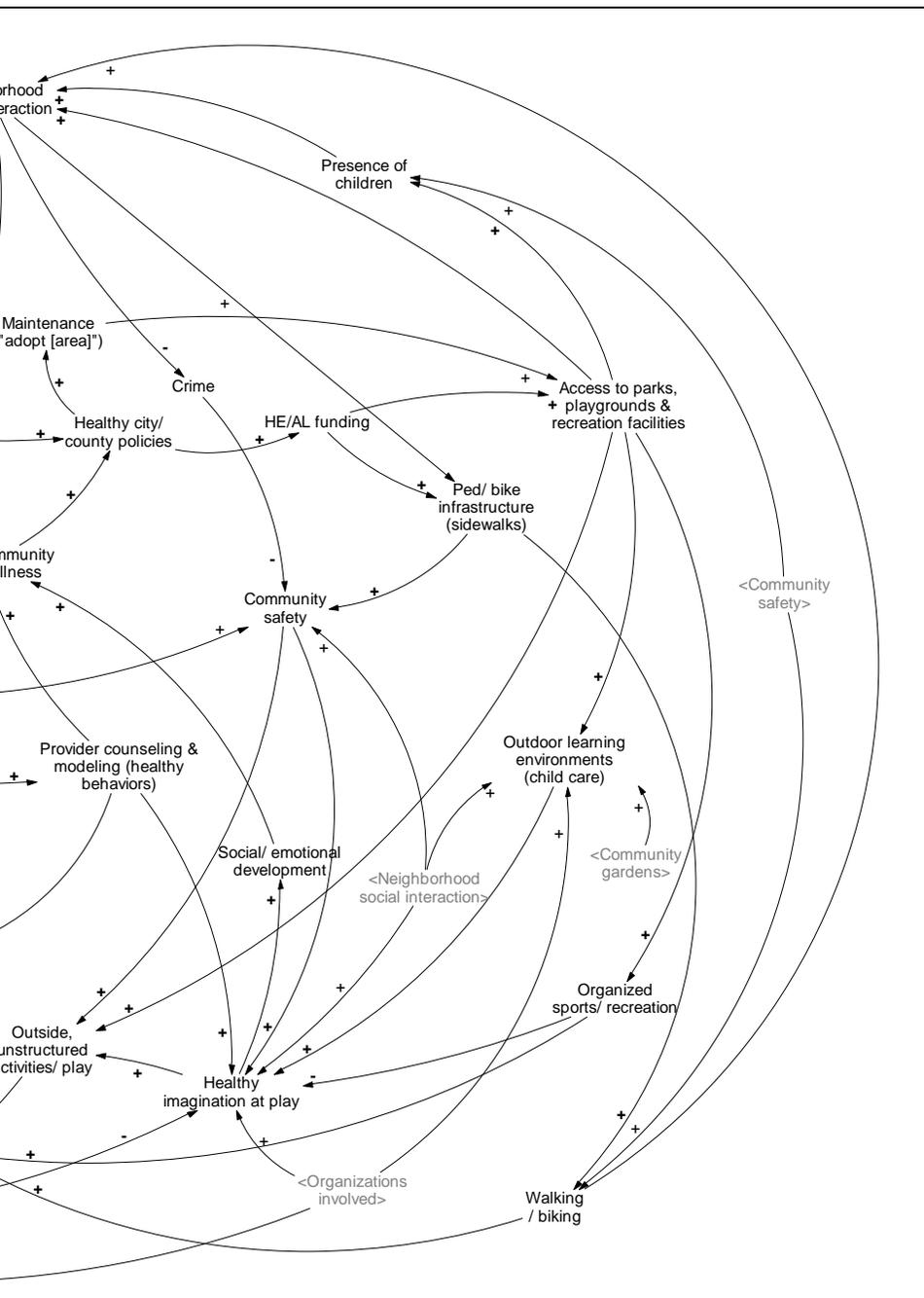
Behavior Over Time Graphs

To identify the range of things that affect or are affected by policy, system, and environmental changes in Nash and Edgecombe Counties related to healthy eating, active living, and childhood obesity, participants designed graphs to name the influences and to illustrate how the influences have changed over time (past, present, and future). In this illustration for percent of churches with wellness ministries, the number of these churches has increased since the 1940's and the participant hopes that this increase will continue to rise dramatically before it levels off.

Figure 1: *Healthy Kids Collaborative* Causal Loop Diagram



Each graph is a tool to increase the use of common, specific language to describe *what* is changing in the community as well as *when*, *where*, and *how* it is changing. The graphs capture participants' perceptions of the influence, or variable, and through the graph, the participant tells their story. These perceptions are based on actual data or evidence, or they are part of the participants' lived experience.



Causal Loop Diagram

To examine the relationships among the variables from the behavior over time graphs, participants worked together and with facilitators to develop a causal loop diagram. In Figure 1, the words represent variables of quantities that can increase and decrease over time (i.e., the behavior over time graphs). These variables are influenced by other variables as indicated by the lines with arrows. The lines with arrows represent causal relationships - this is what is known about the system and how it behaves.

One feedback loop is: organizations involved → provider counseling and modeling → value of community health/ wellness → organizations involved.

What is important to notice is that there are other feedback loops interacting simultaneously to influence or to be influenced by organizations involved. Some variables may increase organizations involved while other variables limit it. Determining the feedback loop or loops that dominate the system's behavior at any given time is a more challenging problem to figure out, and ultimately, requires the use of computer simulations.

Based on this preliminary work by the *Healthy Kids Collaborative* partnership, this "storybook" ties together the behavior over time graphs, the participants' stories and dialogue, and feedback loops from the causal loop diagram to understand the

behavior of the system affecting health in Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina and to stimulate greater conversation related to Nash and Edgecombe Counties' theory of change, including places to intervene in the system and opportunities to reinforce what is working. Each section builds on the previous sections by introducing concepts and notation from systems science.

Causal Loop Diagram for the Childhood Obesity System

The causal loop diagram (CLD) represents a holistic system and several subsystems interacting in Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina. In order to digest the depth and complexity of the diagram, it is helpful to examine the CLD in terms of the subsystems of influence. Because of this project's focus on healthy eating, active living, and childhood obesity, this system draws attention to a number of corresponding subsystems, including: healthy eating policies and environments (red), active living policies and environments (blue), health and health behaviors (orange), partnership and community capacity (purple), and social determinants (green).

From the group model building exercises, several variables and causal relationships illustrated in Figure 2 were identified within and across subsystems. This section describes the subsystems in the CLD.

Healthy Eating Policies and Environments (Red)

The healthy eating policy and environmental subsystem includes food production, food distribution and procurement, and food retail. During the behavior over time graphs exercise, the participants generated ten graphs related to policy or environmental strategies (e.g., community gardens) or contexts (e.g., government nutrition assistance) that affected or were affected by the work of *Healthy Kids Collaborative*. The variables represent participants' conversations from the behavior over time graph and causal loop diagram exercises.

Active Living Policies and Environments (Blue)

The active living policy and environmental subsystem includes design, planning, construction, and enforcement or maintenance related to access to opportunities for active transportation and recreation. For this topic, the group model building participants developed six graphs related to policy or environmental strategies (e.g., pedestrian and bike infrastructure) or contexts (e.g., access to parks, playgrounds, and recreation facilities) that affected or were affected by the partnership's work.

Health and Health Behaviors (Orange)

The subsystem for health and health behaviors includes health outcomes (e.g., obesity), health behaviors (e.g., healthy eating, physical activity), and behavioral proxies or context-specific behaviors (e.g., outside, unstructured activities/play, food preparation, parents feed children healthy meals, walking/ biking).

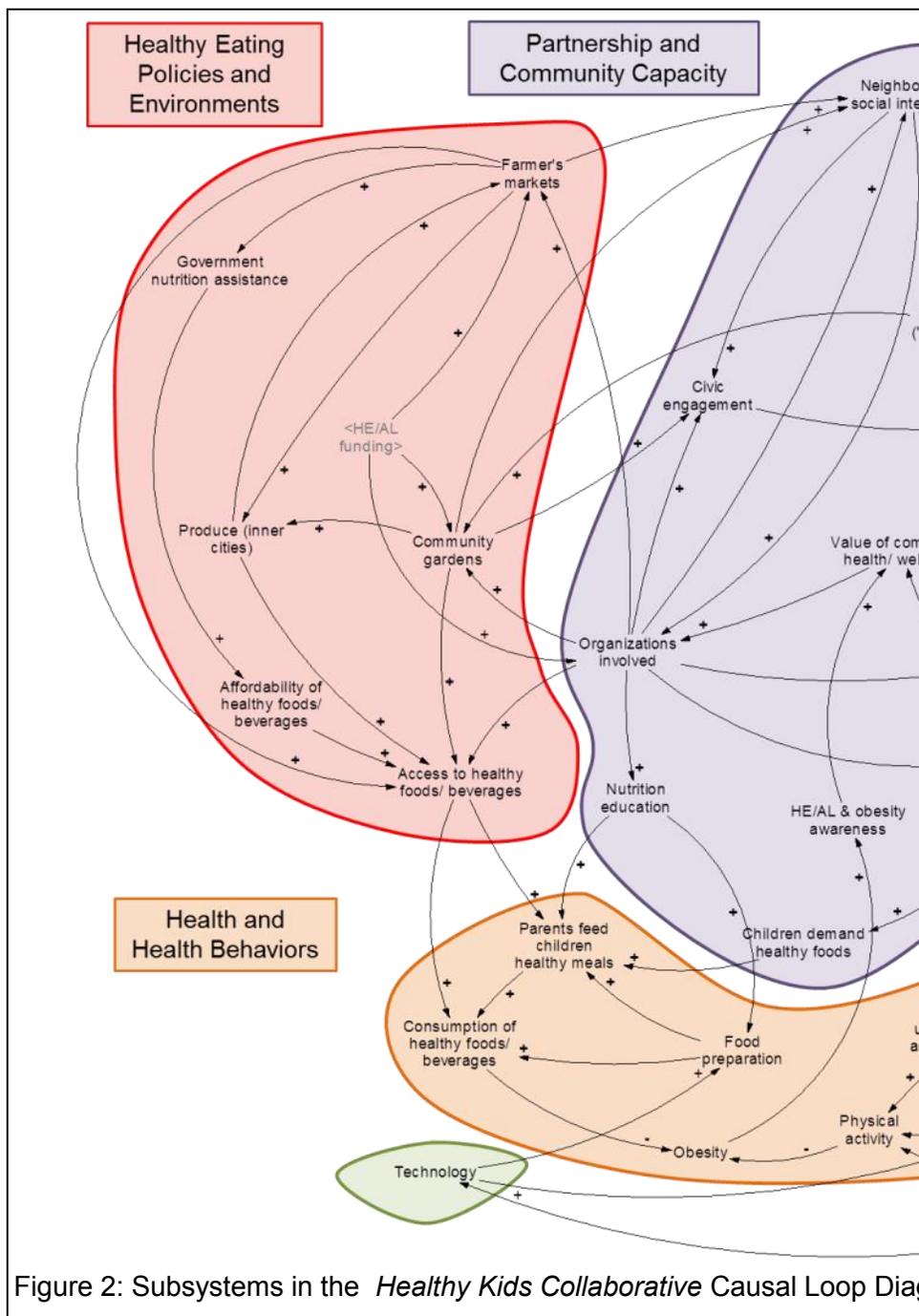
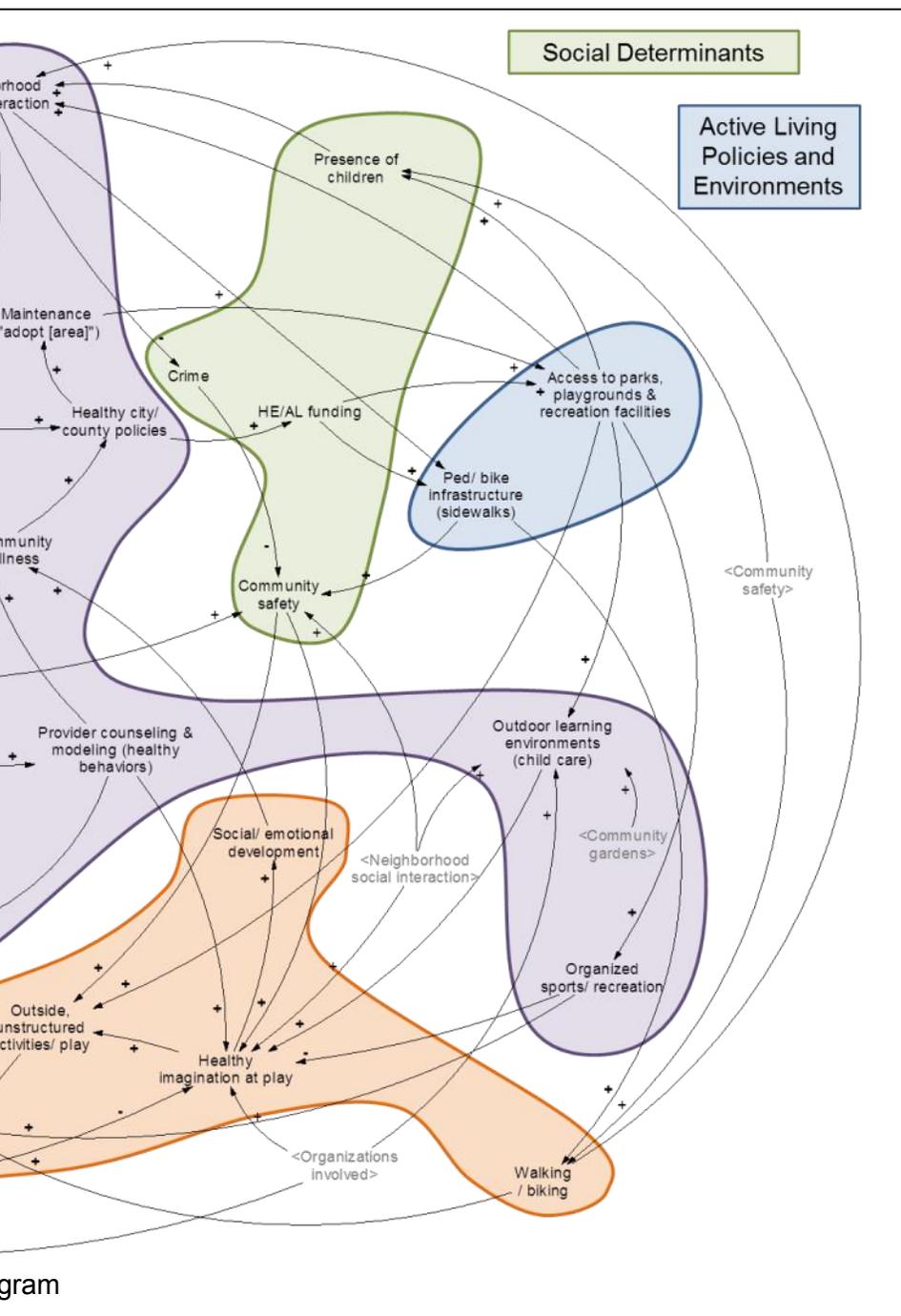


Figure 2: Subsystems in the *Healthy Kids Collaborative* Causal Loop Diagram

Partnership and Community Capacity

The partnership and community capacity subsystem refers to the ways communities organized and rallied for



changes to the healthy eating and active living subsystems. For instance, *Healthy Kids Collaborative* increased civic engagement through Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities summits. This subsystem also includes community factors outside the partnership that may influence or be influenced by their efforts, such as the value of community health and wellness.

Social Determinants

Finally, the social determinants subsystem denotes societal conditions (e.g., funding for healthy eating and active living) and psychosocial influences (e.g., perceptions of community safety) in the community that impact health beyond the healthy eating and active living subsystems. In order to achieve health equity, populations and subgroups within the community must have equitable access to these resources and services.

Each one of these subsystems has many more variables, causal relationships (arrows), and feedback loops that can be explored in greater depth by the *Healthy Kids Collaborative* partners or by other representatives in Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina. Using this CLD as a starting place, community conversations about different theories of change within subsystems may continue to take place.

The next sections begin to examine the feedback loops central to the work of *Healthy Kids Collaborative*. In these sections, causal relationships and notations (i.e., arrows, "+" signs, "-" signs) from Figure 2 will be described to increase understanding about how systems thinking and modeling tools can work in

communities to increase understanding of complex problems that are continuously changing over time, such as childhood obesity. At the end of this CLD storybook, references to other resources will be provided for those interested in more advanced systems science methods and analytic approaches.

Child Care Nutrition and Physical Activity Standards Feedback Loop

To simplify the discussion about feedback loops, several loops drawn from the Healthy Kids Collaborative CLD (see Figures 1 and 2) are shown in Figure 3. While the CLD provides a theory of change for the childhood obesity prevention movement in Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina, each feedback loop tells a story about a more specific change process.

Causal Story for Feedback Loop

Story A: In this case, the story is about child care nutrition and physical activity standards (orange highlighted loop in Figure 3). Partners from Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina established nutrition and physical activity policies and practices in 16 child care centers or homes. Participants described how outdoor learning environments in child care setting increase healthy imagination during play, increasing social and emotional development as well as physical activity. In turn, positive social and emotional development increases the value of community health and wellness, stimulating greater organizational involvement in providing outdoor learning environments.

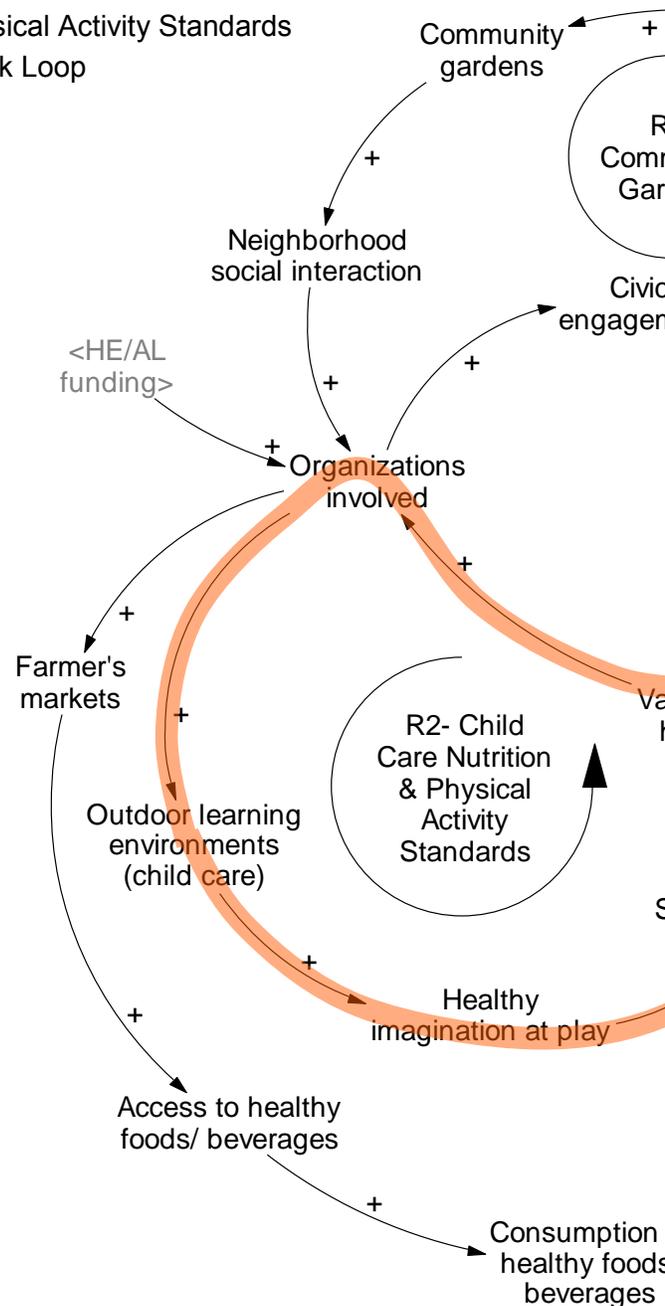
Story B: While the preceding story reflected a positive scenario for Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina, the same feedback loop also tells the opposite story. A lack of outdoor learning environments constrains the range of opportunities for children to engage in imaginative play, limiting their social and emotional development and, consequently, associated values of health and wellness. Thus, fewer organizations consider involvement or development of outdoor learning environments.

Reinforcing Loop and Notation

These stories represent a reinforcing loop, and the notation in the feedback loop identifies it as a reinforcing loop (see “R2 — Child Care Nutrition and Physical Activity Standards” and orange highlighted loop in Figure 3). The words represent variables of quantities that increase and decrease as illustrated in the stories above. These variables change over time and are influenced by other variables as indicated by the arrows. Each arrow represents a causal relationship, and the plus and minus signs on the arrows indicate whether or not the influence of one variable on another variable (1) increases/adds to (plus or “+” sign), or (2) decreases/removes from the other variable (minus or “-” sign). These signs are referred to as

“Our focus here is working with child care facilities and the outdoor learning environment; not having all the big, large equipment that we typically see on a playground but bring it more to the bushes, trees, sticks, and stones. We want to give children what we call loose parts out in the playground so that their imagination can grow so they can get out there and have unorganized play and, in turn, stay active, have a healthier social [and] emotional outcome.” (Participant)

Figure 3: Child Care Nutrition and Physical Activity Standards Feedback Loop



References for Systems Thinking in Communities:

Group model building handbook:

Hovmand, P., Brennan L., & Kemner, A. (2013). Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities Group Model Building Facilitation Handbook. Retrieved from <http://www.transtria.com/hkhc>.

Vensim PLE software for causal loop diagram creation and modification:

Ventana Systems. (2010). Vensim Personal Learning Edition (Version 5.11A) [Software]. Available from <http://vensim.com/vensim-personal-learning-edition/>

System dynamics modeling resources and support:

Andersen, D. F. and G. P. Richardson (1997). "Scripts for group model building." System Dynamics Review 13(2): 107-129.

Hovmand, P. (2013). Community Based System Dynamics. New York, NY: Springer.

Hovmand, P. S., et al. (2012). "Group model building "scripts" as a collaborative tool." Systems Research and Behavioral Science 29: 179-193.

Institute of Medicine (2012). An integrated framework for assessing the value of community-based prevention. Washington, DC, The National Academies Press.

Meadows, D. (1999). Leverage points: places to intervene in a system. Retrieved from <http://www.donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>

Richardson, G. P. (2011). "Reflections on the foundations of system dynamics." System Dynamics Review 27 (3): 219-243.

Rouwette, E., et al. (2006). "Group model building effectiveness: A review of assessment studies." System Dynamics Review 18(1): 5-45.

Sterman, J. D. (2000). Business dynamics: Systems thinking and modeling for a complex world. New York, NY: Irwin McGraw-Hill.

System Dynamics in Education Project. (1994). Road maps: A guide to learning system dynamics. Retrieved from <http://www.clexchange.org/curriculum/roadmaps/>

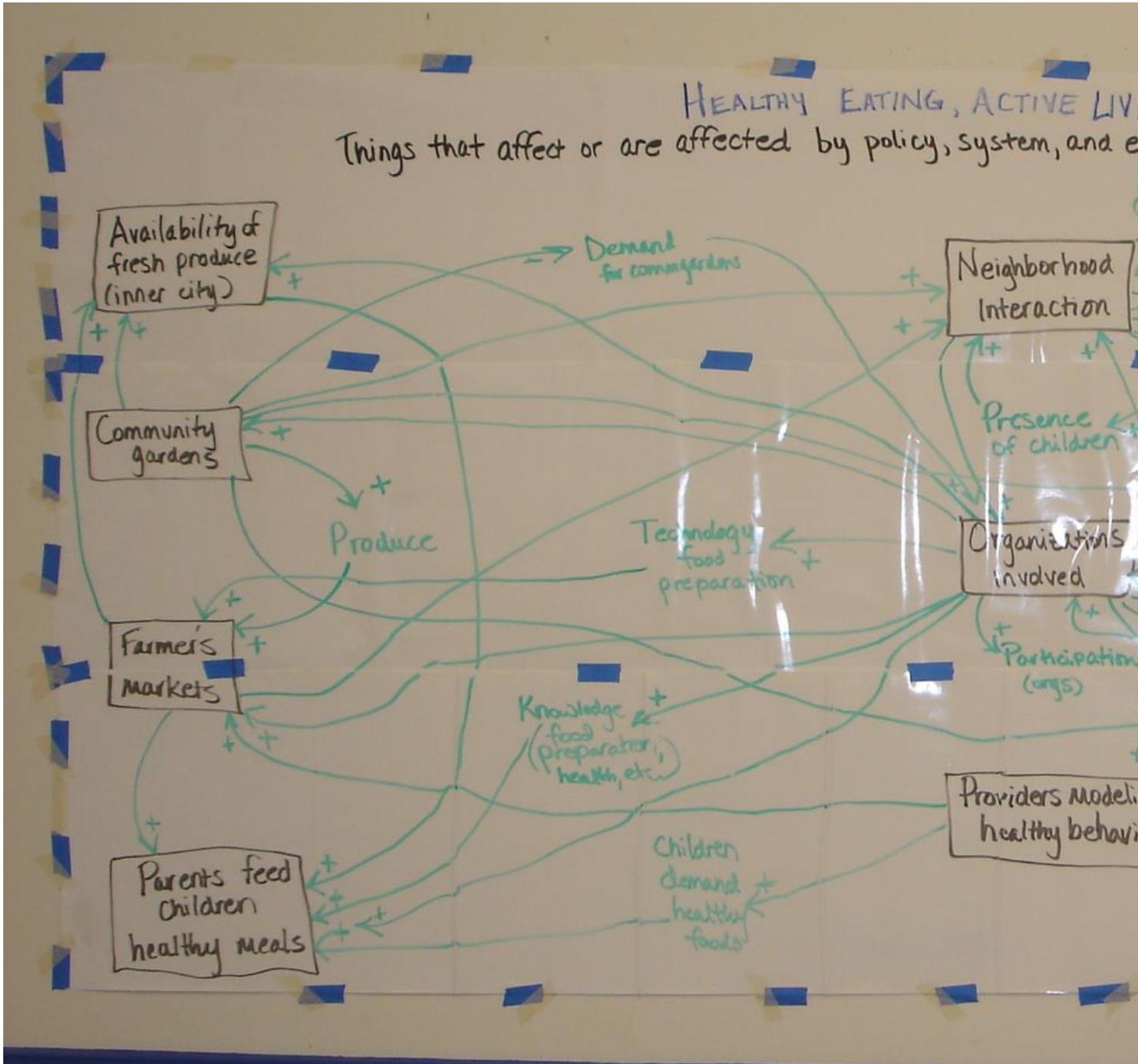
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Zagonel, A. and J. Rohrbaugh (2008). Using group model building to inform public policy making and implementation. Complex Decision Making. H. Qudart-Ullah, J. M. Spector and P. I. Davidsen, Springer-Verlag: 113-138.

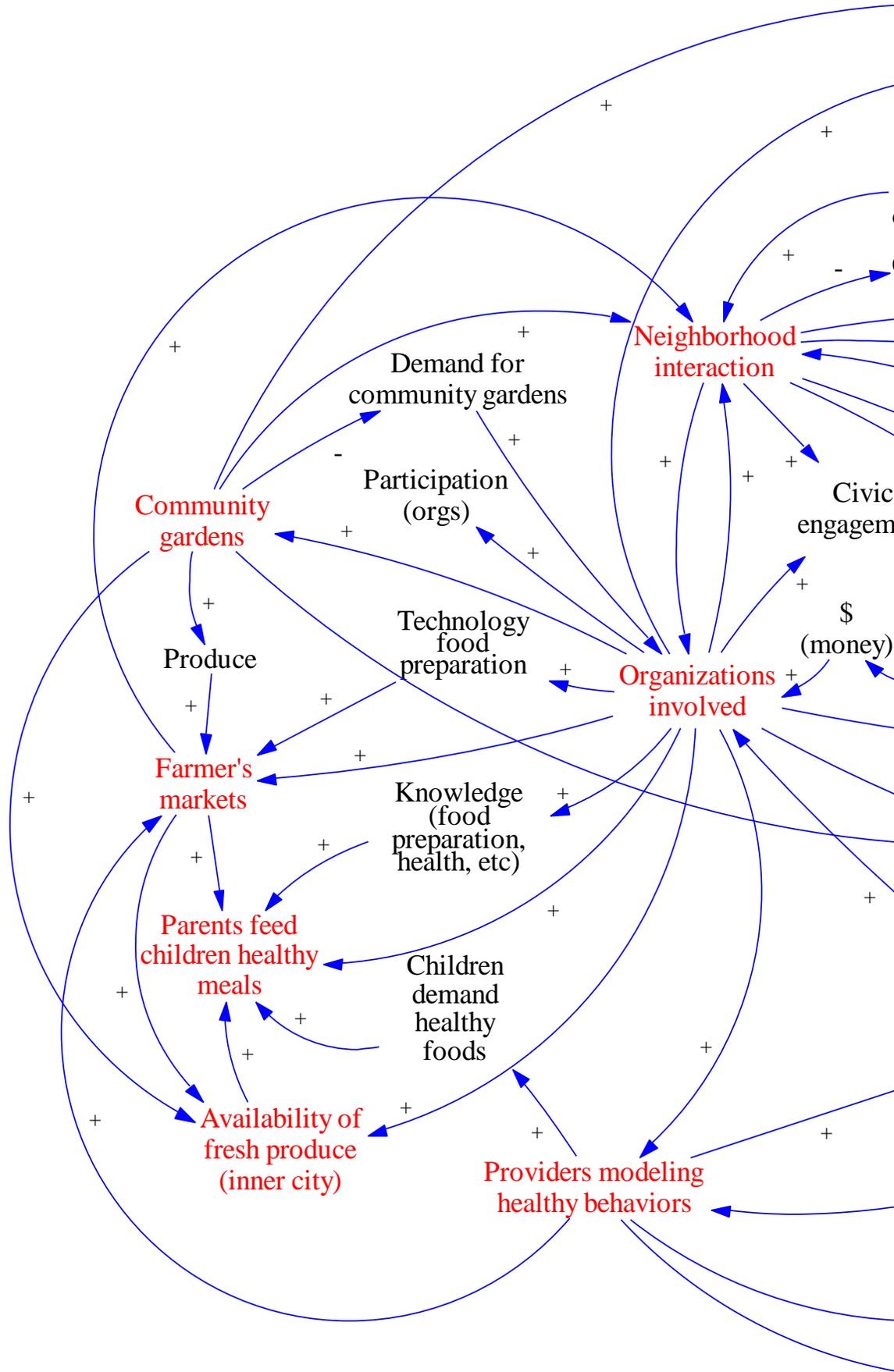
Appendix A: Behavior Over Time Graphs Generated during Site Visit

Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina: <i>Healthy Kids Collaborative</i>	
Categories	Number of Graphs
Active Living Behavior	5
Active Living Environments	1
Funding	1
Healthy Eating Behavior	2
Healthy Eating Environments	8
Marketing and Media Coverage	0
Obesity and Long Term Outcomes	1
Partnership & Community Capacity	2
Policies	5
Programs & Promotions (Education and Awareness)	7
Social Determinants of Health	1
Total Graphs	33

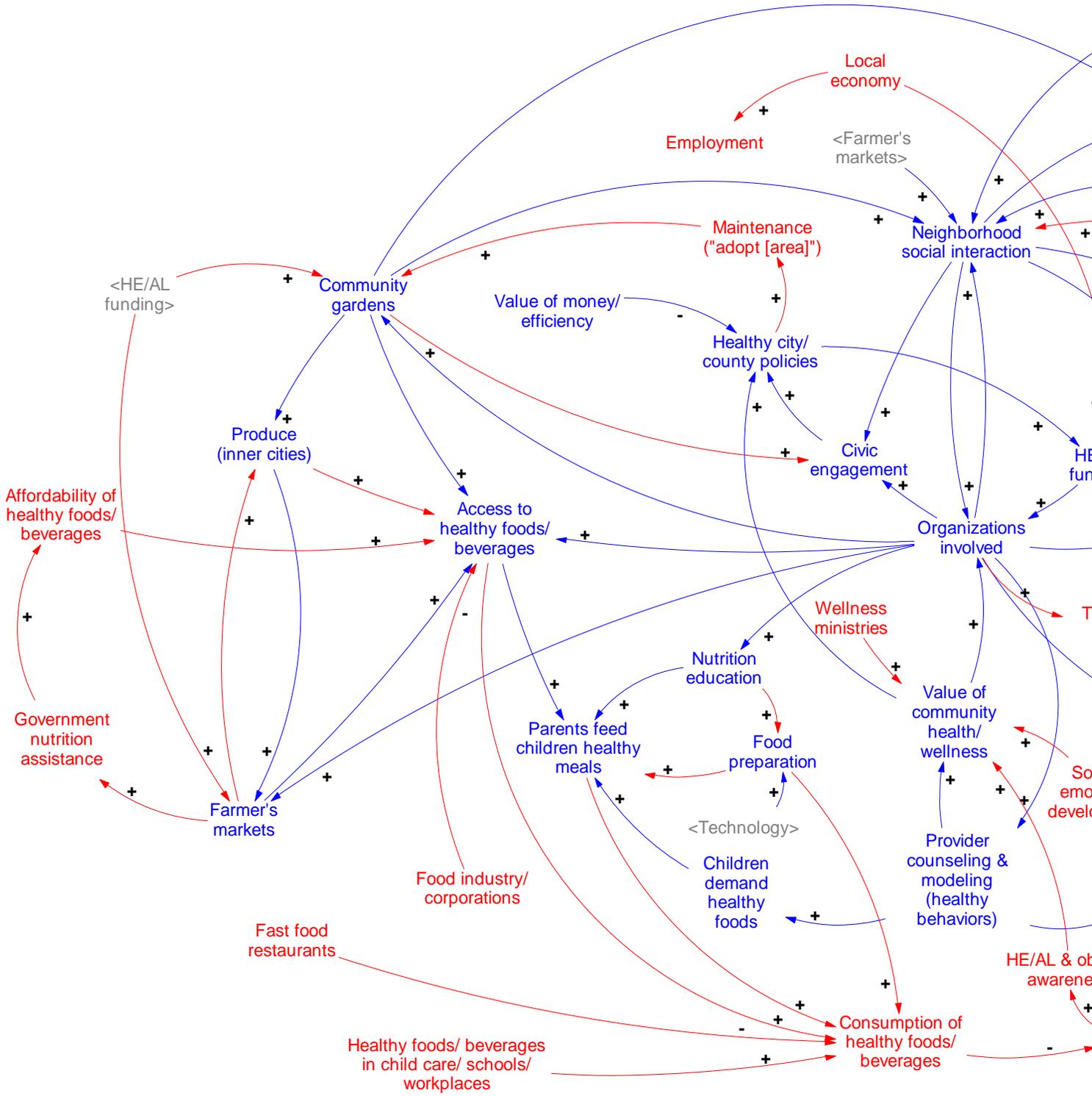
Appendix B: Photograph of the Original Version of the *Healthy Kids Collaborative* Causal Loop Diagram



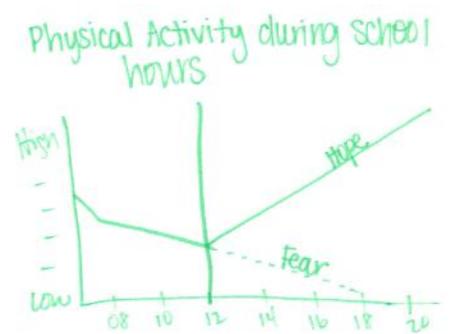
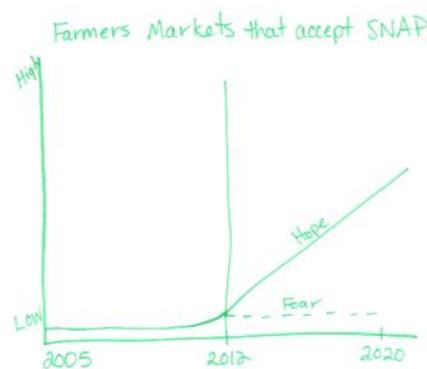
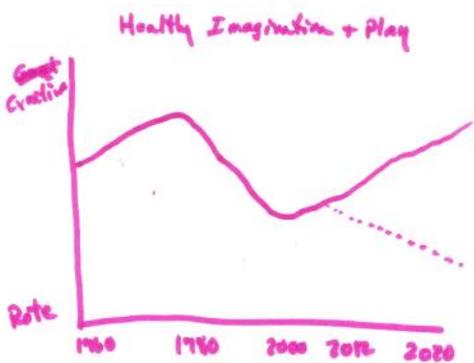
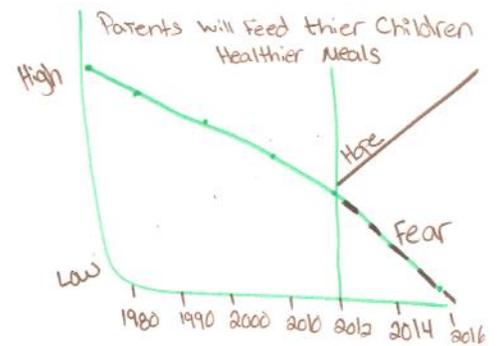
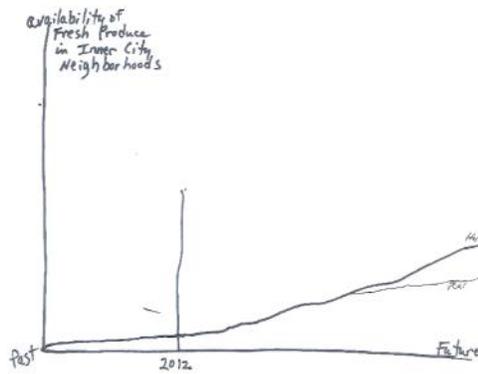
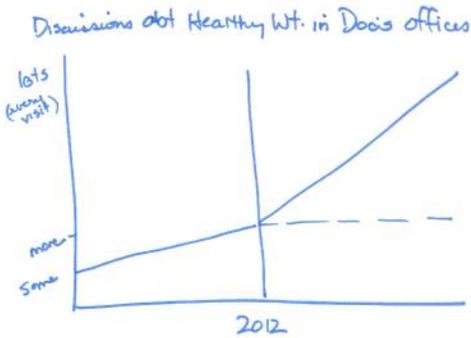
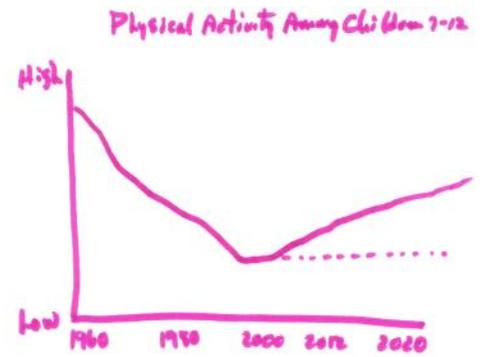
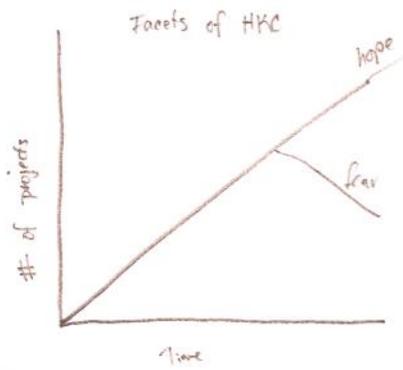
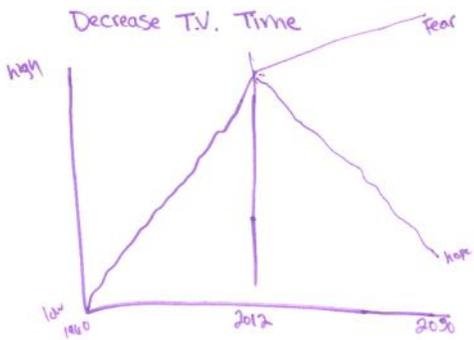
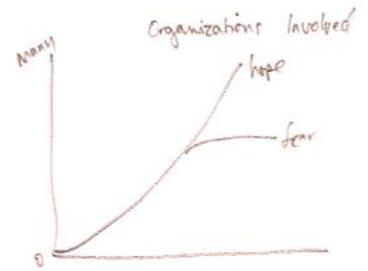
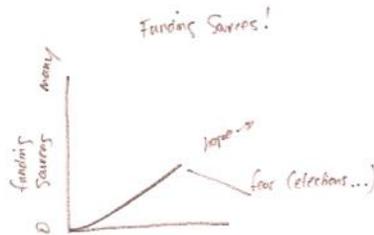
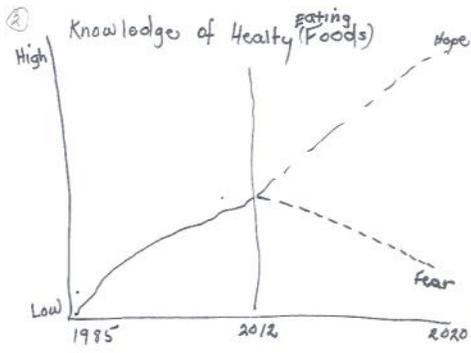
Appendix C: Original Translation of the Causal Loop Diagram into Vensim PLE

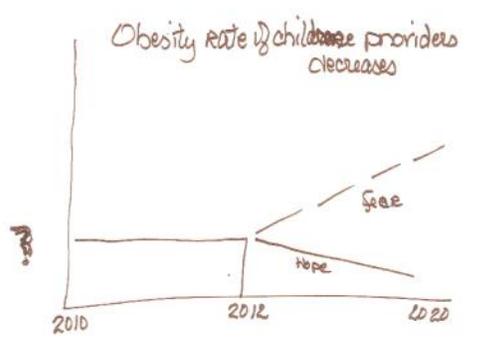
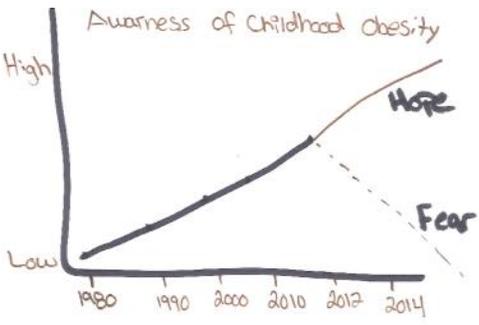
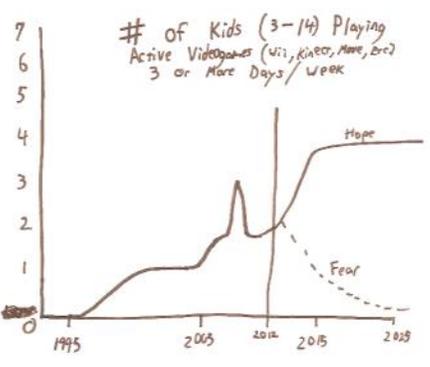
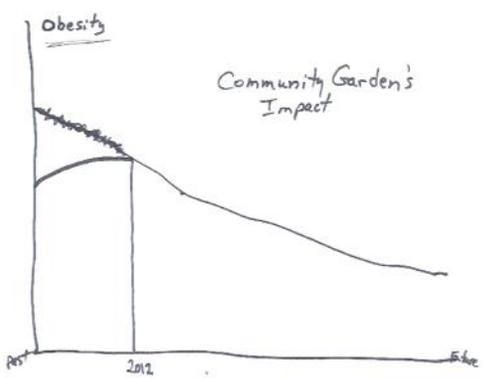
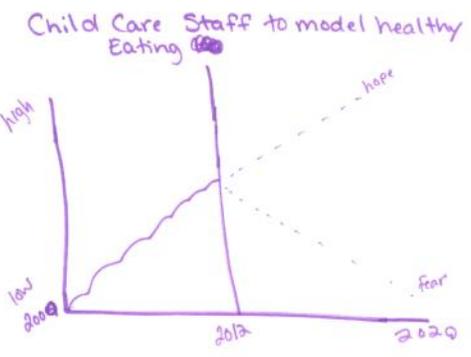
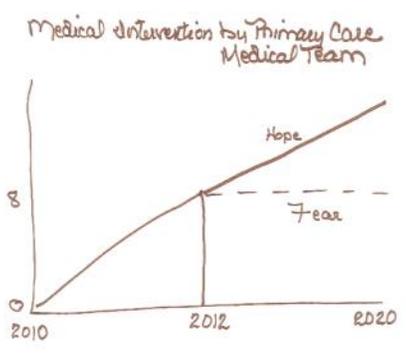
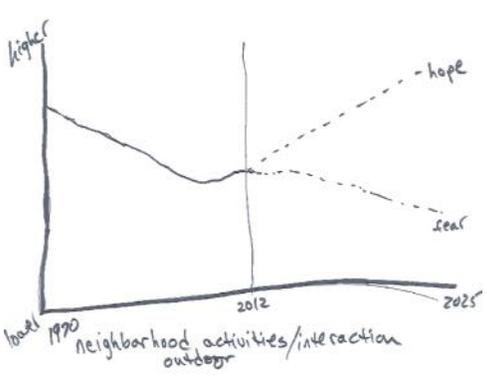
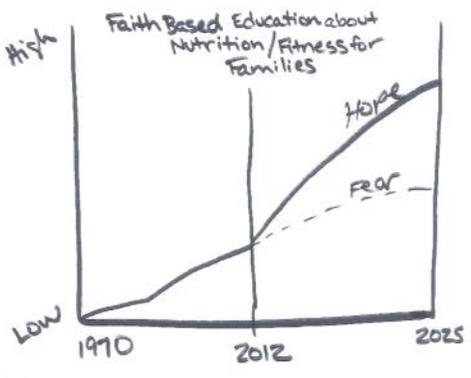
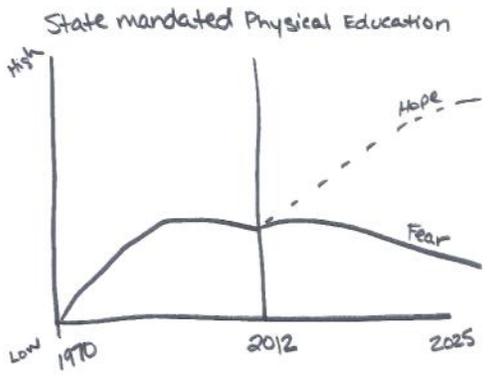
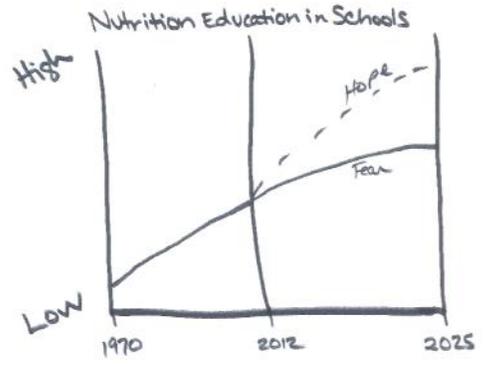
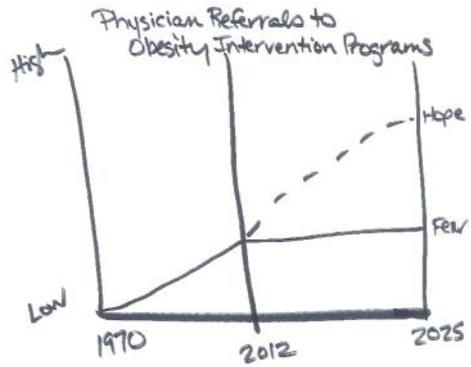
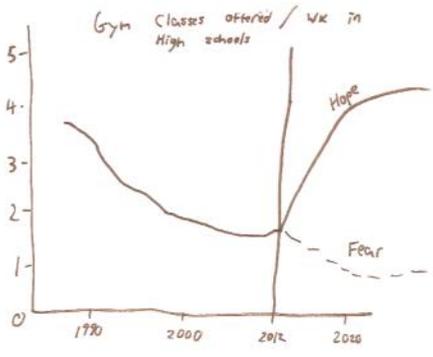


Appendix D: Transcript Translation of the Causal Loop Diagram into Vensim PLE



Appendix E: Behavior Over Time Graphs not Represented in the Storybook





NOTE: This graph was created using the following data points: For the year 1980, awareness of childhood obesity was at 10%. By the year 2014, awareness of childhood obesity was at 80%.

