
Urban Innovation Fund Final Report: Young Urban Growers and Activists in Camden, NJ

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Round: 1

Team Members:

- bay Nguyen, Youth Programs Director, VietLead
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- Dr. Kate Cairns, Dissertation Co-Chair, Rutgers University – Camden
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Project Details:

- **Name of Project:** Young Urban Growers and Activists in Camden, NJ
- **Coordinating Principal Investigator/PI:** Elaysel German
- **Amount Awarded:** \$50,000
- **Amount Spent:** \$50,000
- **Final Report Due Date:** July 31, 2024

1. Introduction:

1.1 Background:

The purpose of this study is to document the teaching and learning practices developed and carried out in an out-of-school internship program. The goal is to generate an ethnographic report that will contribute to a better understanding of culturally relevant pedagogies that focus on environmental and political literacies for the development of youth socio-political consciousness and action.

The research will proceed in two phases over the course of one year. During Phase 1, I will conduct participatory observation during both farm and youth-focused programming led by the organization. Phase 2, I will interview educators and staff members of VietLead's For Us

By Us [formally Resilient Roots] farm internship program in East Camden, NJ. These interviews and participatory observations will allow me to map the teaching and learning practices of political education programming that targets young people in the city, and to investigate the specific pedagogies utilized within a politically progressive youth program.

1.2 Research Project Priority Population:

This study will prioritize participants from the "For Us, By Us" (formerly "Farming and Food Justice") internship program at VietLead, as well as adult members of the community farm. While there are no restrictions on age, race, gender, or ethnicity, preference will be given to residents of Camden, NJ.

1.3 Research Project Location/Organization:

- VietLead NJ Office: 2770 Federal St., Camden, NJ
- Resilient Roots Community Farm: 2819-2899 Cramer St., Camden, NJ

1.4 Project Objectives:

- Explore and document the teaching and learning practices of a politically progressive youth program, VietLead's For Us By Us [formally Resilient Roots Food Justice] internship program in East Camden, NJ.
- Document the range of political and environmental literacy practices currently available to youth in Camden
- Explore the experiences, understandings, and perspectives of young people and adults participating in public political and environmental literacy practices

2. Methodology:

2.1 Research Questions:

List the specific research questions for your project.

- What are the pedagogical approaches for young urban growers in Camden, NJ?
- How do young urban growers and activists conceptualize the general relationship between land access and power?
- How do young urban growers and activists conceptualize the general relationship between education and power?
- How does location shape the teaching and learning practices of young urban growers and activists?

2.2 Research Design:

This is a qualitative study designed to produce a descriptive account of the pedagogical and socio-political processes of teaching and learning with young urban growers and activists in the For Us, By Us [formerly, Resilient Roots Farm Food Justice] internship program in East Camden. I will accomplish the objectives stated above by conducting participant observation at the Resilient Roots Farm and youth political education program as well as conducting interviews with youth and adults who teach and learn in the community farm and political education program.

2.3 Narrative Description of Methods:

Phase 1 of the study I will conduct participant observation at both the Resilient Roots farm and the youth political education program during internship hours. This will involve participating in and observing farm and education meetings and events to generate field notes describing what happens at each meeting and event. Field notes will be actively taken during meetings/events when possible. When active note-taking is not possible or practical, field notes will be recorded as soon as possible after the meeting/event. All participant observation will be carried out by the PI.

Phase 2 of the study will involve semi-structured interviews with youth and adults attending and participating in the farm and/or political education events and meetings. Interviews will explore both youth and adult perspectives on Camden's political and environmental literacies and how they view the general relationship between geography, education, and power. This ethnographic component of the research will allow me to explore both young people and adult's experiences and understandings of political and environmental literacy practices in Camden. All interviews will be carried out by the PI

2.4 Instruments:

Interviews will cover the following topics (see attached interview guides):

- Oral histories of VietLead's For Us By Us [formally Resilient Roots] in East Camden, NJ
- How interviewees make sense of the relationship between land access, food, and power
- Interviewees' opinions about the teaching and learning practices of the For Us By Us [formally Resilient Roots community farm Food Justice] internship
- Interviewees' understanding of the farm's location in relation to social justice and pedagogy

- Interviewees' interpretations of the relationship between culturally relevant pedagogy, socio-political consciousness and political action in Camden, NJ

2.5 Collaboration:

The organization's stakeholders, including the youth program manager and farm manager, actively participated in developing interview guides to ensure the relevance and appropriateness of questions for participant interviews. Based on a youth interest survey, I created and taught a curriculum tailored to the participants' interests. Throughout the project, the youth program manager, farm manager, and I held regular planning and debrief meetings to align our efforts and address any challenges. Additionally, I conducted interviews with the parents of youth participants and adult farm participants, gathering valuable feedback that was shared with the organization's leaders. I also provided evaluation reports to help the organization assess the project's impact and plan for future initiatives.

2.6 Data Collection:

P.I. collected all participant observation data through note-taking and journaling. P.I. conducted all recorded interviews.

2.7 Data Sharing:

N/A

2.8 Data Analysis:

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions, along with any fieldwork and/or self-reflexive journal entries will be analyzed using qualitative data analysis software to manage and organize the data. Two qualitative data analysis software will be used: OtterAI and NVivo. OtterAI is a multifunctional software that transcribes, summarizes, and identifies themes from recorded audio. Because OtterAI's transcriptions are not always accurate it requires additional verbatim transcription. For this reason, I will use OtterAI for a first round of inductive coding to identify a set of themes emerging from the data. These initial themes will then be used to create a codebook for the second round of focused coding. NVivo will be utilized for the second round of focused coding to further analyze the data using an established codebook. Both data collection and data analysis will occur simultaneously, allowing for continuous assessment and adjustment of my research methods throughout the process.

2.9 Limitations:

Findings from this ethnographic study are specific to this particular group and setting.

3. Budget:

3.1 Percentage of Funds Expended:

100%

3.2 Final Expended Budget:

Attach your final expended budget to this report.

3.3 Additional Funding:

Awarded the 2024-2025 Marsh-Gillette Fellowship towards the dissertation project in the amount of \$2100.

4. Results:

4.1 Research Question Results:

The study and study analysis are on-going.

5. Discussion:

5.1 Key Issues:

Camden's youth are situated at the nexus of various scales of carework in their city: they act as careworkers themselves (through their farming and food sharing practices), are the recipients of care (through youth programs, schools, and families), and serve as the *raison d'être* for the city's carework itself. From this vantagepoint, their critique of environmental and political literacy practices in the city is instructive. The insights gleaned from listening to Camden youth and adopting their critical posture towards the city and its environmental and political literacy practices properly contextualizes and affirms black/Latino children's oppositional knowledge claims. Their ambivalent suspicion towards "care" in the city underscores the need to interrogate both the discourses and structures of environmental and political literacies and their entanglement with environmental racism and racial capitalism.

5.2 Challenges Encountered:

The organization overseeing the farm and youth program recently made the unexpected decision to sunset these initiatives, choosing instead to focus exclusively on providing

social services to the Vietnamese community throughout the broader South Jersey area. This shift in direction came several months into the community-engaged research grant timeline, catching many by surprise. As part of the transition planning, the organization has sought my input on how best to exit Camden without causing additional harm or disruption to the community. This was not originally part of the research plan, but it has become a critical aspect of the project's evolution. We are working closely with community members to ensure a thoughtful and considerate transition, aiming to minimize any negative impact on those who have been involved in or benefited from the farm and youth programs.

5.3 Changes in Approach:

N/A

5.4 Learning from the Unexpected:

The unexpected decision to sunset the farm and youth program revealed deeper insights into the dynamics, structures, and relationships between the organization and the local community. It became evident that, aside from four Camden youth and three resident gardeners, there were few local stakeholders involved in the farm and youth program. This lack of local engagement highlighted a growing disconnect between the organization and the community, particularly as the Vietnamese community had gradually moved out of the city due to social mobility. This realization prompted more in-depth discussions about the organization's history, its role in the Camden community, and the implications of its presence and involvement. These conversations provided a valuable opportunity to critically assess the benefits and drawbacks of the organization's activities in Camden, offering a clearer understanding of its evolving relationship with the community.

5.5 Accomplishments:

This study has informed my dissertation proposal and future research study as I will build from this rich ethnographic data to think broadly about Camden, its young people, and their futures.

6. Impact:

6.1 Dissemination:

A. How do you anticipate your findings will be relevant to the communities under study?

This research will support bridge in-school and out-of-school learning and care practices in urban geographies.

B. Have the results been disseminated to communities of interest? (Yes/No)

No.

a. If yes, please describe (e.g., locations, dates).

b. If not, is there a plan for community dissemination? Please describe.

C. Have the results been disseminated in academic forums?

a. Presented at AERA 2024 and Visions of Racial Justice and Childhood: Inequalities, Identities, Politics, Relationalities and Representations 2024

6.2 Sustainability:

Yes it is sustainable for a full-time researcher, as a part-time researcher I cannot continue the project without additional funds.

6.3 Future Funding:

A. Have you applied for future funding for this research project? (Yes/No)

a. Yes, the AERA dissertation award, ASA Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grants and the Mellon Dissertation Completion award.
