



Sowing Equity and Social Learning Through Activist Leadership Youth Experiences at the Massachusetts Avenue Project



Image Credit: Massachusetts Avenue Project

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. City of Buffalo and the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP)	4
3. Data Methods	6
4. Results and Discussion	
4.1 Cognitive Learning	8
4.2 Social Learning	9
5. MAP Strengths and Opportunities	12
6. Ideas for the Future	
6.1 Ideas for MAP	13
6.2 Ideas for the City of Buffalo	14
7. References	15
8. List of Figures	16

1 INTRODUCTION

Young people have historically played a significant role in social movements, from the civil rights movement and the desegregation of schools in the Jim Crow South to the Arab Spring and pro-democracy protest across the Maghreb. It is no surprise today that we are witnessing an increase in youth involvement in the social movement for food justice (Steel, 2010).

The term food activism was born out of the food justice movement to reflect the work of community organizing around efforts to address and advocate for healthier, affordable, and more equitable food systems. Food activists are looking beyond their plates and taking aim at a variety of injustices throughout the food system: some, like those profiled by Jill Lindsey Harrison, are members of front-line communities working to restrict and regulate the toxic chemicals and pesticides found in the neighborhoods' water stream and soil. Others like, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative is the product of alliances between activists, policymakers, and planners to ensure that the benefits of urban agriculture can be enjoyed by underserved communities of color (Alkon, 2017). Despite the youths' growing contribution to social movements and activism, there are missing pieces in the research literature that explore what young adults are learning and retaining through their food activist work. Social learning is a large component of activism (Stetsenko, 2008) and in this case, particularly food activism. Yet food scholars have a very limited understanding of social learning and how it serves the larger purpose in achieving food equity.

Schusler et al assert “social learning occurs when

people engage one another, sharing diverse perspectives and experiences to develop a common framework for understanding and basis of joint action” (Schusler et al., 2003, 311). Social learning occurs as a result of social interaction or deliberation (Pahl-Wostl et al. 2007). Social learning can be facilitated by creating interactive settings in which actors can share and reflect upon different perspectives, experiences, and types of knowledge (Muro, Jeffrey 2012). It can manifest in cognitive learning as factual knowledge gains, or in relational learning as improved interpersonal relations (Koontz 2014). Relational learning includes the development of relational qualities: interpersonal trust (Resh, Siddiki, and McConnell, 2014), improved understanding of other actors' perspectives, shared meanings that potentially support their interaction (Siddiki et al. 2017) and the presence of respected leadership (Heikkila and Gerlak 2005). These interactions among actors not only increase knowledge and insights but also increase the growing capacity to make use of knowledge and experience (Bierly et al. 2000, Leeuwis and Van den Ban 2004). Consistent with previous scholarship, cognitive learning is based on knowledge transfer (Siddiki et al. 2017), cognitive functioning that relates to mental processes of perception, memory, judgment, and reasoning (Cognition and Cognitive Science).

Cognitive and relational learning are both implicit yet salient outcomes in activism, social movements and other forms of collaborative arrangements where individuals are engaged in an interactive process with knowledgeable individuals from different backgrounds and presented with information relevant to the work of the collaborative. The likelihood of being exposed to

new ideas and information is high, as is the potential to forge new relationships. Without simultaneously and explicitly emphasizing and evaluating relational and cognitive qualities in our teaching and learning (Kirshner 2007) we risk losing the inherent inclusive and collaborative feature of activism and by extension risk the success of collaborative decision making. Although, studies and curriculums incorporate a collaborative approach in building food activists the project is necessary in the field, where there is little explicit attempt to measure active social learning. In exploring the “learned” or unlearned skills of activists we can facilitate what makes for a better and more enhanced learning experience and overall a successful community leader. For the purpose of evaluating active social learning among activists, I worked closely with the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) to provide recommendations on how to further facilitate their social learning development.

Realizing high rates of land vacancy, youth unemployment and unhealthy food choices were urgent and unmet needs in the community, MAP, a not-for-profit, urban agricultural farm located on Buffalo’s west side started their Growing Green Program in 2003. MAP’s Growing Green Program employs teens in a school year and or summer program that teaches youth how to farm, cook, market and advocate for large social change in their communities. Growing Green youth have, in turn, educated thousands of community residents, school children, and policy makers about how localizing our food system will benefit people, the planet and our local economy.

MAP’s inspiring model addresses critical national issues: the need for race reconciliation, the decline in local agriculture, a growing concern for the well-being and productivity of youth, and the need to create sustainable and healthy inner-city neighborhoods and metropolitan areas. MAP addresses these issues with an integrative model that allows young people to develop communication, teamwork, and leadership skills, find meaningful employment, and make a connection to the land and to the natural environment that will stay with them for a lifetime.



MAP youth preparing the farm field ready for garlic planting; Credit: Massachusetts Avenue Project

MOTIVATION

The primary audience for this report is the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP), a not-for-profit organization that works to build capacity among and teach advocacy skills to youth in Buffalo. Today, MAPs' growing green program has created more than 650 jobs for West Side teenagers. Growing Green is intended to nurture the growth of a diverse and equitable community food system by promoting local economic opportunities, access to affordable, nutritious food and teach social change education.

The report comes at a time nationwide where interest in youth engagement in urban agriculture is growing. MAP can, if it chooses, use this report to guide its programming. The experiences and insights shared by MAP's youth and alumni will be useful to programs beyond the Buffalo-Niagara region.

The remaining six sections of this report provide information on the cognitive and relational learning of current and former MAP youth and capture factors related to their cognitive and relational learning. **Section two** of the report describes the setting and overview of Buffalo, and MAP as target areas, while assessing the role urban farming organizations have played in advancing racial disparities and food equity among community members and young adults. **Section three** includes research methodology and primary and secondary data from MAP teens and alumni. Based on the data presented in Section three, **Section four** reports the key findings and analysis. **Section five** includes a discussion on the findings. In the concluding **Section six**, the report provides recommendations to MAP, other urban farm organizations interested in youth social learning development and the city of Buffalo.



MAP youth processing black walnuts from partner organization, West Side Tilth Farm; Credit: Massachusetts Avenue Project

2 City of Buffalo and the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP)

The post-industrial city of Buffalo, New York stands at a crossroads. For several decades, the city witnessed an economic decline that adversely impacted the quality of life of its residents, especially evident in the double-burden of food insecurity and chronic disease. Recent trends suggest that the city is experiencing a resurgence of sorts (Raja, Picard, et al. 2014), beginning with local efforts to ensure a safe and affordable food system. In just one decade, Buffalo has become a leader in urban agriculture, with some one hundred community gardens coloring its post-industrial landscape. Buffalo's food movement started outside of City Hall, with "Rust Belt radicals"¹ farming² vacant land in the late 1990s. From there, the effort blossomed into a full-on campaign to engage local officials to amend local laws. Such efforts have resulted in monumental milestones in the field of food access and urban agriculture: including a city ordinance approving urban chicken coops in 2010, the forming of the office of community gardens which aids organizations in creating gardens by identifying available properties. To that end, Buffalo's new Green Code, that governs land use and zoning, now encourages urban agriculture on vacant land (Raja et al. 108).

Multiple community organizations have harnessed the momentum and continue to push for urban agriculture as a means to achieve sustainable and equitable community transformation. With 16,000+ vacant lots (about 3,200 acres), in the Buffalo-Niagara region, a number which continues to grow, The Massachusetts Avenue Project and other

community organizations have worked tirelessly to turn abandoned lots around the city into urban farms and community gardens while actively engaging community led-involvement. The work comes after years of "incremental, ordinary practices to rebuild food systems, followed by a surge in collective action through a network- and alliance-building —ultimately to change dominant local government policy discourse in favor of food issues" (Raja et al. 2014).

The Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP)

was started by residents on the West Side of Buffalo in 1992, and was formally incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in 2000. MAP believes everyone has a right to nutritious, affordable, accessible and culturally relevant food. They advocate for people and communities to have access to power, land and resources to define their own food and agricultural systems. Formerly operating out of a vacant food pantry and then a vacant public library building, the organization now operates out of a new urban farmhouse and community center located on Massachusetts Avenue after which the organization is named. MAP operates an urban farm, empowers and trains youth, operates a mobile fresh produce van, and engages in policy advocacy. Youth-based programming is a core part of MAP's work. Since 2003 *Growing Green*, a youth program of MAP, has provided jobs and training to over 650 low-income youth, ages 14-20, increasing their knowledge of where their food comes from, how to grow, process and market healthy food, as well as the impact food has on their health and the health of their community. During the fall of the school year, youth rotate between three main tracks, before choosing their primary concentration in the spring.

¹ Community-based food systems actors in the post-industrial city of Buffalo, New York.

² The terms "farming" and "gardening" are used interchangeably.

The tracks include: farming, cooking and advocacy/organizing. During their time farming teens are taught how to plant, maintain and harvest a 1½ acre urban farm and greenhouses where they produce fruits, vegetables, herbs, eggs and for neighbors, the elderly, local restaurants and markets throughout the year. During their time cooking, teens are taught appropriate safety etiquette, such as basic kitchen knives skills necessary for chopping, dicing, peeling. In addition, they are trained to use the seasonal produce grown from the urban farm, to cook and prepare healthy and tasty meals, for community cooking classes and more. Finally, the last group works with teens to deepen their knowledge and leadership in areas of sustainable agriculture, food justice, and social justice. Additionally, youth build skills in communication, problem-solving, and more. Whether that be through learning how to write one-pagers, pamphlets, or speaking at environmental to racial justice conferences, MAP teens are taught various organizing and public skills necessary to push advocacy initiatives forward.



MAP youth selling produce to customers at their Mobile Market site; Credit: Massachusetts Avenue Project

3 DATA AND METHODS

This report is based on five months of work including both qualitative and quantitative research methods. It is based on embedded field work as well as surveys and interviews. Research for this report builds on collaborative research that the University at Buffalo Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab (UB Food Lab) has conducted with MAP since 2003 (Whittaker et al. 2017). UB Food Lab began conducting formal surveys with youth participating in its Growing Green Youth program from 2005 to shed light on the experiences of MAP currently enrolled in the program. Since 2012, the UB Food Lab has not conducted youth surveys on the current curriculum program. The report is set to both fill in the gaps since the last youth surveys conducted, and show special attention to the learned skills and experiences of youth and alumni.

For this report, the author met with MAP staff and students, spent time with the organization and other partners in the city of Buffalo. The author participated in helping youth prepare items for the Holiday Bazaar, worked closely with the market team in building an urban farm directory and shared personal stories over Thanksgiving potluck dinner. The time spent at MAP gave the author insight into the everyday lives and experiences of MAP teens and staff working at the urban farm. Over time, the author was able to build trust and foster genuine relationships with the MAP youth.

The author conducted surveys with current MAP teens and conducted interviews with MAP alumni from November 2019 to January 2020. Surveys were designed to elicit the cognitive skills youth had learned through the four tracks in MAP's curriculum: farming, market, cooking and advocacy. As mentioned

in earlier portions of the report, cognitive learning is a fundamental skill in activist and collaborative arrangements. It may lead to increased knowledge of factual gains that rely heavily on cognitive function: memory, reasoning and judgement. Self-reports of cognitive learning were assessed through youth agreement with the following statements:

Cognitive Learning Statements

	Because I participated in Growing Green I..
Farming	Gained new gardening and farming skills
Food Policy	Have learned more about food policy
Food Safety	Can teach someone how to use knives safely in food preparation
Food Enterprise	Can teach someone how to run a small business

As noted in earlier portions of the report, relational learning is key to youth engagement, activism, and leadership. It may lead to interpersonal trust between and among MAP youth, between youth and MAP staff, and youth and broader food systems stakeholders in Buffalo. It may improve understanding of other actors' perspectives (including those who may differ from youth by virtue of age, race, gender, position of authority, role in the food system, etc.). Relational learning may generate shared meanings that potentially support youth interaction among themselves as well as with others. Therefore, the survey also asked teens to rank their relationship to one another, to staff and their environment. The survey provided a set of statements, and youth were asked to score them using a score 5 (strongly agree).

Relational Experiences Statements

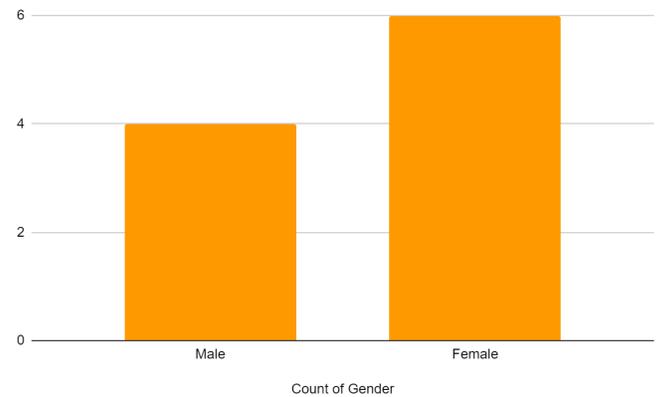
	Because I participated in Growing Green I..
Trust	I can openly express challenges about myself to the group
Understanding	Have a better understanding of other MAP teens' experiences
Leadership	Am more of a leader
Communication	Communicate better with others

The survey was distributed in paper to youth in November 2019. Youth handed the completed surveys back directly to the author. The survey was completed by ten MAP youth teens from the ages of 16-18. Of the teens that completed the survey, four teens identified as male and six teens identified as female (see figure 1). Three teens identified their race as Asian, three teens also identified their race as Black or African American; one teen identified as belonging to two or more races, one teen identified as Native Hawaiian or other pacific Islander; one teen identified as Latinx; one teen identified as American Indian.

Although the survey evaluated factors pertaining to MAP, it lacked questions about the external influences that may impact both relational and cognitive learning of youth. Future surveys should take into consideration external emotional stressors that might impair a teens' ability to learn and retain social learning skills. The author also interviewed two MAP alumni, which supplemented the survey analysis.

Interviews with alum were designed to elicit a long-term view of MAP's influence on youth. Finally, the author also reviewed prior documents, reports, and papers about MAP to contextualize the findings.

Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Respondents



4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cognitive Learning

Urban food systems programs for youth, such as those operated by MAP, offer a rich and complex learning environment. MAP youth reported a fairly high level of cognitive learning in a variety of food-systems related topics. On average, youth agreed strongly (3.9, on a scale of 1 to 5) with ten statements that queried them about the degree to which participation in MAP had impacted their cognitive skills.

As illustrated in Figure 2, MAP teens strongly agreed that they learned about farming and gardening skills. This is not surprising given that urban farming is core to MAP's programming, and having access to the farmhouse and farm gives opportunity to observe and engage in agriculture.

MAP teens also agreed strongly with statements eliciting levels of trust (4.7, on a scale of 1 to 5). It is plausible that there may be a correlation between teens' high agreement about their learning around farming and their sentiments tied to trust. Farming is an extremely communal activity and relies on mutual trust and strong relationships. It is clear MAP teens are confident in learning how to farm not only from the instructor, staff members, but from each other. This observation emphasizes the importance of horizontal development in cognitive learning, not so much the importance of trust in cognitive learning.

As illustrated in the same graph, MAP youth did not seem to agree with the statement(s) that they had learned how to run a small business. There may be a correlation between teens' lower levels of agreement

in running a small business and lower scores relating to identity and belonging. On average, MAP teens who identified as male more strongly agreed with the statements gauging their cognitive learning 4.2 compared to teens who identified as female 3.8, as showcased in Figure 3.

Figure 2. Level of Agreement Regarding Development of Cognitive Learning Skills (n=10)

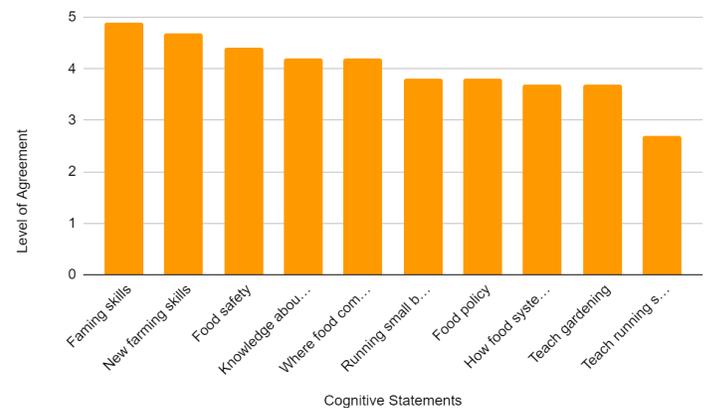
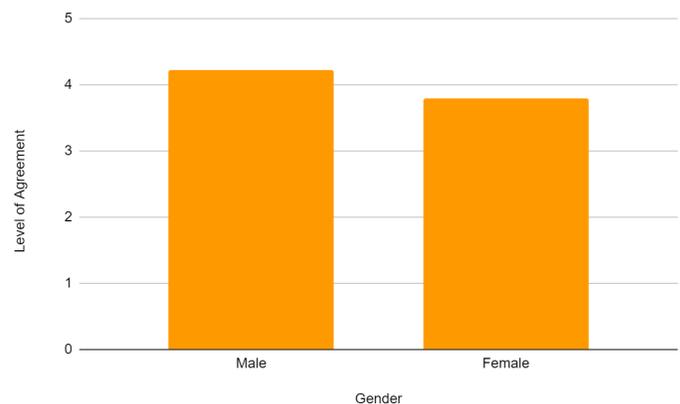


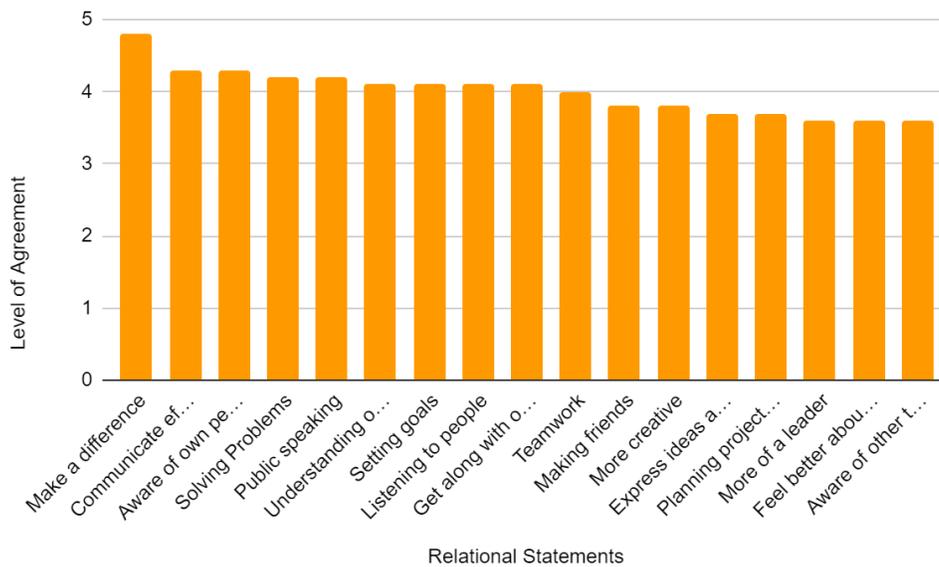
Figure 3. Level of Agreement Regarding Cognitive Learning by Gender



Relational Learning

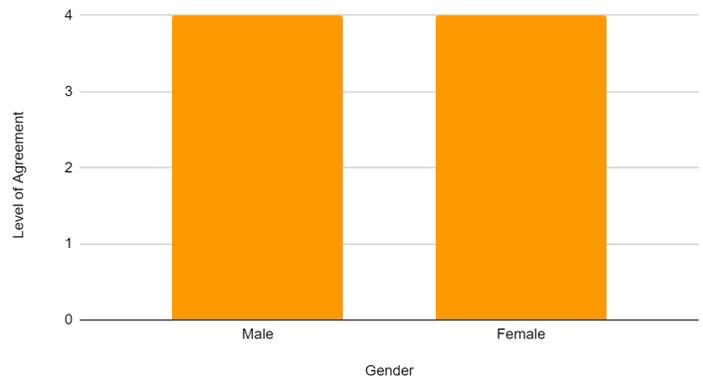
Rather than setting up a dynamic based on knowledge and power — as can be the case in classroom environments — relational learning reimagines the instructor’s role as a trusted mentor. At its core, relational learning relies on strong relationships between teachers, students and peers that provide youth with a framework to achieve overall personal growth. MAP teens reported a high level of agreement, 4, on a scale of 1-5, with statements that gauge relational learning. Relational learning is learning that strengthens interpersonal relations. As illustrated in figure 4, MAP teens reported a high level of agreement with statements that suggested that they can make more of a difference and communicating effectively. MAP teens scored on average 4.7 out of 5 (87%) on factors relating to trust, 4.8 out of 5 on factors relating to their built environment and 4.9 out of 5 relating to staff relations. High reports of relational learning may be correlated to their perception of greater trust, inclusive built environment and strong staff relations.

Figure 4. Levels of Agreement Regarding Relational Learning



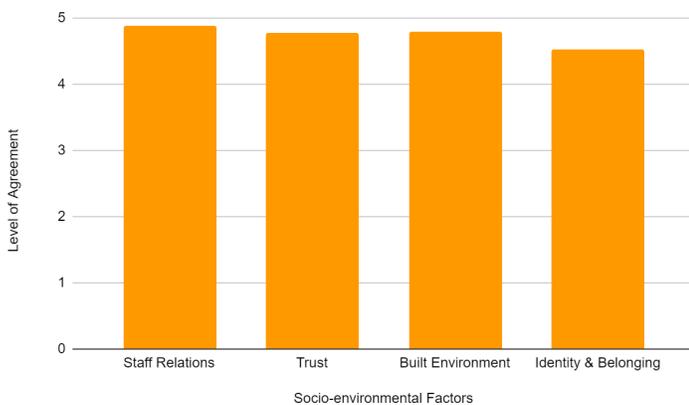
Conversely, MAP teens report lower levels of agreement on statements that asked them if they view themselves as leaders. Although teens’ are given the space and platform to grow their confidence, factors relating to identity and belonging at MAP may adversely impact skills necessary to become a leader. On average, both male and females scored the same 4 out of 5 on relational learning (see figure 5).

Figure 5. Level of Agreement Regarding Relational Learning by Gender



Many socio-environmental factors impact the learning of a MAP teen. As illustrated in Figure 6, MAP teens reported a high level of agreement when queried about their relationship compared to their agreement with statements that queried them about their identity and belonging. Youth agreement with statements that gauge their relationship with the staff signals that MAP staff have a deep commitment to building a trusting community where youth are given their own agency to drive their own learning process. Youth expressed lower levels of agreement with statements that gauged identity and belonging because of barriers that may include language, and or other cultural differences amongst MAP youth and MAP staff.

Figure 6. Levels of Agreement regarding Socio-environmental Factors



The Long View: Insights from Alumni

Experiences of MAP alumni suggest that youth engagement in urban agriculture has a lasting impact. Alumni also have a long-term view of the ways in which the organization could strengthen their offerings for youth. Alumni reported that they learned about the impact of a poor diet on behavioral outcomes, and felt more equipped to incorporate healthier foods in their diet after a summer working at MAP.

Despite greater factual knowledge in farming and gardening, the interviewee emphasized the relational aspects of MAP, a point that is consistent among current MAP teens illustrated by their high agreement with statements that signify relational learning. “I was a part of a diverse cohort of people, we had great relationships and are still friends till this day.” As for the MAP staff at the time, she commented: “I consider them to be family, they did more than they had to and really tried to build genuine relationships with us, personally that was very impactful because I did not have anyone like that in my family.” “I would come in angry, crying, and I could share any and everything with them because they worked so hard to build that trusting relationship. I went to MAP even if I was not scheduled to work and it felt like my second home.”

The level of comfort the interviewee felt while being a part of MAP resonates with corresponding survey answers by current MAP participants, teens scored 5 out of 5 on whether they believed they belonged to the larger MAP community. However; despite the level of comfort assured to most teens by the staff, alumni mentioned coming into MAP angry, upset and crying, a note that showcased the reality of personal challenges teens may be carrying once they arrive at work. The interviewee notes, “at the time I did not know I was experiencing a lot of trauma, I thought my experiences were all normal. Those were things that I was dealing with. My parents were abusive towards each other and sometimes toward us. I felt a lot of confusion and a lot of anger.” The alumni further commented, I wish MAP taught teens different coping skills.

The alumni expressed, “[MAP] wasn’t really about learning about food and enterprise, but more so learning about myself and relationships.” The alumni’s comment can help explain why MAP teens scored the lowest on learning and teaching how to run a small business. The alumni later reflects, she wished they had grown a stronger network while participating in the program.

In a question that asked the interviewee how would you recommend that urban agriculture and food systems programs like MAP engage with the youth? The interviewee responded, “Definitely look at how students would benefit both in skills and financially. “I was grateful for the check I received especially over the summer, but during the school year the money was just enough to pay for my phone bill.” The interviewee found it challenging that although she was working for an organization that promoted healthy and nutritious food, she found it very difficult and nearly impossible to be able to afford the same healthy options from the store.



MAP youth using excess farm produce to make garlic and parmesan baked eggplant for their cohort; Credit: Massachusetts Avenue Project

5 MAP STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

MAP continues to be the leading urban farm in Buffalo that prioritizes youth voice and leadership. Based on the survey's and alumni interviews conducted, MAP highly develops relational skills of teens in the community. Teens identified they have developed effective communication skills such as becoming a better listener and public speaker after their time at MAP. Interviewee two expressed MAP uses food as a tool for broader civic engagement and saw first-hand how teens advocating for food, allowed them to step up in their life. This observation is further supported by the general sentiment that teens feel they can make more of a difference in their lives after participating in the Growing Green program. Such skills are garnered by MAP's model of learning, learning that is not strictly hierarchical and confined to the teacher instructing the learner, but rather a more inclusive and active learning process whereby, teens drive the discussions and research and MAP staff facilitate and keep a supporting role. As a direct result of their learning model, interviewee two defines MAP as a launching pad for individuals to establish a strong sense of skill and drive.



MAP's fresh herbs packaged and ready to be sold at Mobile Market sites; Credit: Massachusetts Avenue Project

6 IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

Conversations with MAP youth juxtaposed against the opportunities available in the city of Buffalo suggest that MAP is poised to continue empowering youth and advocating for large social equity in parts that are disproportionately underserved in WNY. MAP's successful work can be amplified by actions that MAP can take as well as broader actions in the city of Buffalo. This section outlines some of these ideas for the future.

Ideas for MAP

To improve both cognitive and relational learning of MAP teens, MAP and other urban agriculture organizations similar to MAP may consider the following ideas in strengthening their program.

MAP can consider working with the youth to identify leadership opportunities.

In the area of relational learning, teens reported the lowest agreement on the statement "I feel more of a leader." In the interview stage, as teens are interviewing for the position, it would be important for MAP to consider teens fill out a quasi-individual professional development (IDP) document that outlines three to four leadership opportunities they want to meet by the time they graduate MAP.

MAP can consider partnering to form shadow experience with community entrepreneurs. Although it is clear the relational components of MAP are necessary, there appears to be a lack of cognitive skills in food enterprise. Perhaps, during the fall rotational, teens are matched with professionals and members of the community for a two-week internship, where they are exposed

to running a small business from community organizations, such as Urban Fruits and Veggies, African Heritage Co-Op, F-bites, Corner Store Initiative, to not only gain cognitive skills around such businesses, but beginning developing a network of their own.

MAP can consider offering CSAs to MAP Youth and their families. In order to help teens have the option to eat healthier at home, MAP can explore partnering with local WNY farmers to create a "Beet Box." The Beet Box is an equitable CSA (community supported agriculture) box that originates out of North Oakland, California. It not only supports under-supported pesticide-free farmers growing a diverse array of vegetables on land, but also supports MAP teens who will be able to voluntarily opt in for a discounted CSA share at the beginning of their program. The box offers a wide range of seasonal produce with an average of 11-14 items per Full Share box and 7-9 items per Half Share, and 4-6 items going into the Fruit Share. MAP can explore a similar payment model to the Boston Food Project that accepts SNAP benefits as a payment option for their CSA. For every dollar in SNAP benefits you spend on your CSA share, you'll get an extra \$1 in your SNAP account (up to \$80 per month depending on household size).

MAP can consider partnering with Yogis in Service to offer yoga and mindfulness training to teens. Mental health is a key prerequisite to young adults' learning (as reported in interviews). It may be helpful for MAP to collaborate with Yogis in Service (YIS), a community centered, non-profit organization located in Buffalo that offer

year round weekly free yoga sessions at five different locations in the city. Their mission provides access to yoga and mindfulness as a set of self-care tools through community-based classes in schools, universities, community centers, and treatment centers. Their core practice not only focuses on the sequences of the body, but spends equal attention cultivating healthy breathing, relaxation techniques and guiding focus work. Per the interviewee's suggestion, such practices may offer new coping strategies to teens.

MAP cannot continue to be successful without structural support from partner organizations and networks. To further the learning of MAP teens, and the impact of urban agriculture in Buffalo, the city of Buffalo may consider the following ideas in strengthening their support.

Ideas for the City of Buffalo

Partner with MAP to offer paid internships at local city government agencies.

For those MAP teens who identify one of their leadership opportunities as working for the government, the city should consider supporting the placement of teens at different government agencies/ departments during the summer, in hopes of providing an empowering, enriching and educational experience.

Financially Support MAP in providing reduced CSA costs to MAP teens and families. CSAs are a luxury that very few American and American families can afford, however they do support both farmers and families in need of healthy food. The city of Buffalo should be open to considering subsidizing the cost of CSAs to MAP

teens. Through MAP's Growing Green Program teens are already learning new and advanced cooking skills, by providing teens with healthy produce, it may encourage teens to practice and teach what they have learned at MAP to their families and friends at home.

Youth engagement in urban food system is growing in popularity across the United States. This project aimed to identify the socio-environmental factors that may facilitate youth learning in urban agriculture projects. Youth develop a great deal of skills through engagement in urban food systems, as evidenced through the experience of youth participants in the Massachusetts Avenue Project in Buffalo, NY. In the cognitive learning process, teens are learning new farming techniques, and skills and in the relational learning process, teens are learning how to communicate effectively with others, and solve new and challenging problems. Learning is not even across all areas of the food system. Specifically, youth report lower levels of cognitive understanding of food enterprise, and lower levels of belief in their leadership capacity. These are areas that may deserve greater attention in the future. In the future, it would be important to continue to monitor and learn about the experiences of alum of urban agriculture projects to build upon existing successful curricula. Continued commitment to youth leadership can sow equity in the food system.

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List of Figures

1. Figure 1 Gender Distribution of Respondents
2. Figure 2 Level of Agreement Regarding Development of Cognitive Learning Skills
3. Figure 3 Level of Agreement Regarding Cognitive Learning by Gender
4. Figure 4 Levels of Agreement Regarding Relational Learning
5. Figure 5 Levels of Agreement Regarding Relational Learning by Gender
6. Figure 6 Levels of Agreement regarding Socio-environmental Factors