

# Being and Seeing: *Teaching Financial Literacy through Community Wealth*

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and Laura Eby**

Fourteen-year-old Mya had just completed a financial literacy scavenger hunt involving over a dozen different businesses: she was hot, tired, and thirsty from the Georgia midday sun, but she was grinning from ear to ear. “This was definitely the best day so far!” she declared, walking down Main Street.

“There’s a difference between *being in* the community and *seeing* the community,” Mya said, “And seeing the community is the best way to learn.”

Mya and 10 other middle and high school students were co-creators of a free community-based financial literacy program held over two weeks of summer. Financial literacy education (FLE) has

grown in popularity as a proactive approach to combating personal debt. Research shows that financial literacy education is linked to a higher quality of life and positive long-term health.<sup>1</sup> However, the evidence of benefits associated with high school coursework is mixed,<sup>2</sup> particularly when financial literacy is taught in a manner that is disconnected from economic concepts and local communities.<sup>3</sup> Decontextualized or individualized conceptions of wealth can instead sustain “structural blindness,” where financial literacy is viewed as a personal responsibility rather than connected to societal histories of racism, sexism, and capitalism.<sup>4</sup>



Photo by Leah Panther

Two youth from “The Dream Team” test their financial literacy scavenger hunt.

Our community-based financial literacy summer program grew out of two developments: first, residents in our racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse city in Georgia identified “growing personal and generational wealth” as the topic they wanted their children to learn. Second, by the 2024-2025 school year, financial literacy and economics will become a required course across our state’s public high schools. This makes Georgia one of 34 states on track to require up to a semester of FLE before high school graduation. Responding to both community wants and the requests of local teachers preparing to teach a new course, our summer program created an exploratory space to learn about financial literacy education embedded in a local community’s history, economics, and critical conceptions of wealth.<sup>5</sup>

The authors of this article represent an interdisciplinary team that includes a literacy teacher educator (Leah), a high school economics teacher (Laura), a community-based math educator (Lasha), and a math teacher educator (Natasha). Responding to the needs and building from the strengths of the local community, we co-designed with youth a community-based FLE workshop that centered community cultural wealth.<sup>6</sup> This framing helped us highlight for the youth, their families, and other community members that wealth includes non-material forms of capital, particularly for communities that have been historically underserved or under-resourced within financial and economic systems.<sup>7</sup> These five guiding questions led our conversations with young people:

1. What (and Who) is important to you?  
How do your economic and financial decisions reflect these beliefs?
2. What kind of life do you want to lead?
3. What kind of legacy do you want to leave?
4. How are personal financial decisions connected to larger economic systems?
5. How are economic systems connected to local histories and communities?

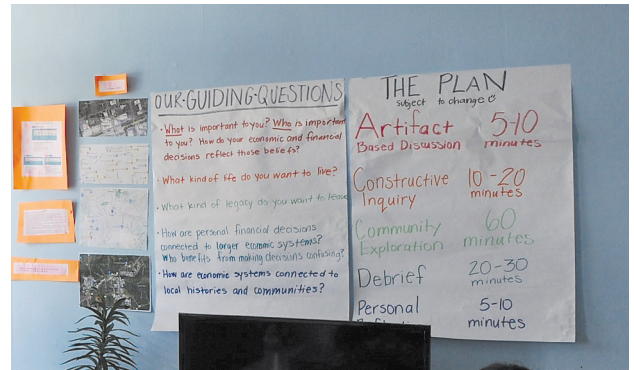


Figure 1. Guiding Questions.

### From Seeing to Being: Curricularizing Community Wealth

Our financial literacy education summer program was committed to identifying and centering sources of community wealth and transforming them into financial literacy concepts and practices. Here we explore three ways of “seeing community” cultural wealth and how these resources were curricularized into pedagogical practices where youth were “being community” (i.e., actively engaging in the community’s cultural wealth).

### From Historical Research to History Walks

To center community resources, we first drew from the past then moved to the city in present day. We initially relied on maps, photographs, or data from the U.S. Census, city government, and school district. However, these resources separated financial literacy from local history and the economy. They tended to reduce the city in question to quantifiable data or information aimed at attracting tourists or new businesses. We instead began to meet with members of the local historical society and business association to bring these two-dimensional resources into a geographic space imbued with lived experiences through oral histories.<sup>8</sup>



The main street through the city that students explored.

Our historical research and the oral histories evolved into history walks with young people. While traveling to different community-based locations, Leah engaged in historical storytelling by first sharing the history of the place participants were walking towards, pointing out landmarks along the way, and even pulling up our city's GIS mapping tool, inviting students to add pictures to the modern-day timeline. These activities all helped young people answer the essential question, "How are economic systems connected to local histories and communities?" As one young participant, Sheldon, explained during a history walk, "I could see the history in the buildings here in [the city] and ... I could see the history of everything."

### **Community Resource Walks to Community Visits**

To identify the existing community resources, we completed several resource walks with community members. We walked through the geographic area where the program was going to be held and stopped in front of every location or physical

space. At each place, we invited those present to tell stories about the location, its history, its people, its connections to the local economy, and personal memories. Audio recordings captured the storytelling along with photographs, menus, brochures, and business cards from local businesses creating tangible curricular resources we later used in artifact-based discussions (Table 3).

We then used the information gathered on the community resource walks to shape the program's curriculum. Looking at the list of community histories, artifacts, businesses, and geographic spaces, we sorted all of the available resources into categories based on economic and FLE themes like "access to food" or "employment" (see Table 1 for selected examples).

We curricularized these community resources by first identifying places to hold mini-lessons and activities and then inviting community members to host youth participants. We visited a realtor at her office to learn about the trends in renting and purchasing property. After determining their annual expected salary from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, youth participants visited a banker to



Photo by Leah Panther

Different brick facades and hardscapes provided clues about how the city's economy and businesses have changed over time.

learn about budgeting. One day, youth in the program chose between meeting with the owner of a local credit union to learn how to open a youth checking account or with a loan officer to learn about entrepreneurial financing.

We also drew from the community resources to design “our first jobs” stations. We began the session with youth participants’ experiences including Valeria’s job at a coffee shop and Brandon Mark’s

work at his family’s retail business. Then, youth began at the station most related to their current stage (see Table 2 on p. 300).

### Youth as Co-Creators and the Financial Literacy Scavenger Hunt

Community resource walks created a deep reservoir of curricular resources and instructional ideas, but nothing was concretely decided until

**Table 1.** *Examples of Curriculum Gathered during Community Resource Walks*

<b>Financial Literacy and Economics Topics</b>	<b>Examples of Print Materials Gathered</b>	<b>Examples of Oral Histories Gathered</b>
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photograph of “help wanted” sign</li> <li>• Job applications</li> <li>• List of businesses that hire contract employees or salaried employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stories of our first jobs, current jobs, and job interviews</li> <li>• Local business owners explaining the difficulty of finding employees compared to past years</li> </ul>
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photographs of “for rent,” “for lease,” and “for sale” signs</li> <li>• Photographs of a realtor’s storefront with property listings</li> <li>• Business cards for realtors</li> <li>• Photograph of an abandoned encampment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memories of first rentals, homes, and difficult roommates</li> <li>• Local political leader discussing grassroots “rehoming” and rezoning efforts</li> </ul>
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photograph of a bus stop</li> <li>• A bus schedule</li> <li>• Photograph of several used car lots</li> <li>• Business cards of car salesman</li> <li>• A list of car repair shops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stories from commuters at the bus stop describing challenges (e.g., lack of sidewalks, inconsistent bus schedules)</li> </ul>
Banking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business cards for several banks and credit unions</li> <li>• Brochures on checking and savings accounts from multiple banking institutions</li> <li>• Photographs of pawn shops</li> <li>• Contract from Payday Loans and Title Loans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A political leader describing the history of banking, banking access, and loans</li> <li>• Comments on a bank’s Facebook page</li> </ul>

the most valuable community resource was present: the youth. After identifying the goals for each day, the session would follow a predictable routine to identify the central problem or question, co-design a way to explore that question using community resources, report the findings back to the full group, and determine the implications for themselves, their families, communities, and for future financial literacy education courses (see Table 3 on p. 302).

This routine resulted in various youth constructed activities such as the financial literacy scavenger hunt. During a debrief the second day of the program, youth participants Brandon Mark and Jawanza were adamant they needed an opportunity to apply budgeting to real world

scenarios. The next day, the youth created a financial literacy scavenger hunt with several tasks under the categories of fixed costs (e.g., "To maintain your health, your doctor requires you to work out 30 minutes every day. Where do you work out within walking distance from [high school]? How much does that cost annually?"); variable costs (e.g., "Your family vehicle has a flat. How much will it cost to fix it at an auto repair shop?"); and wants (e.g., "You want to take your parent out for Mother's/Father's Day. How much does it cost for two meals at a local restaurant with tax and tip?"). The scenarios came from real world situations, such as Brandon Mark being late the day before due to a flat tire.

**Table 2.** *Curricularizing Community Resources with Place-based Pedagogies*

Station	Activities	Georgia Standards of Excellence
Station 1: Applying for a Job	Interview at least three community members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What job(s) did you have as a teenager?</li> <li>• What advice do you have for a teenager looking for a part time or summer job?</li> </ul> Find three job applications and analyze them for similarities and differences.	SSEPF1 Analyze major life decisions using economics-based decision-making skills. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Apply a rational decision-making model to evaluate the costs and benefits of post-high school life choices.</li> <li>d. Apply a rational decision-making model to evaluate other major life choices.</li> </ul>
Station 2: The Job Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth complete a job application for an ideal first or next job.</li> <li>• In small groups youth take turns completing mock job interviews based on preferred place of employment.</li> <li>• They collaboratively discuss the interview process providing advice and insight.</li> </ul>	
Station 3: The Job Offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use provided materials to identify the difference between salaried and hourly workers, negotiate wages, and calculate expected income.</li> <li>• Analyze paycheck stubs.</li> <li>• Practice reading and filling out forms.</li> </ul>	SSEPF2 Analyze income as a scarce resource that can be allocated effectively through budgeting. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Compare different types of income, including hourly wages, salary, tips, independent contractor services), dividends, and capital gains.</li> <li>b. Review and complete a sample federal individual income tax form.</li> <li>c. Describe the basic components of a paystub, including gross pay, net pay, and common deductions</li> </ul>

Working in smaller groups led by different adult facilitators, the groups explored the local community, recording their findings. Mya, Jane, and Jawanza, the self-titled “Dream Team” made up one group: Mya was outraged to find the difference in cost between a haircut for a man or for a woman, all three decided to be part of a family cell phone plan to lower the overall cost, and Jane convinced her team to have the Father’s Day dinner at a local Indian restaurant since it was the only halal option (food that is allowed under Islamic law). During the debrief, the Dream Team was disappointed that Brandon had identified the lowest cost coffee at a local gas station and marveled that Valeria found a free outdoor gym at a public park.

The creation and routine revision of our activities improved the financial literacy scavenger hunt further. After combining the community resources each team had identified, they further refined the activity to force themselves and future FLE students to make difficult decisions about budgeting. They rewrote the directions:

You have \$500 remaining for the month. You need to make some choices about meeting your needs (both fixed and variable) and wants, represented by the options on the front of this page. What do you choose? What are the consequences for what you do not choose? How do you make these decisions?

As Jane explained, the activity was no longer about making financial literacy decisions, but about displaying what and who is important to you, and defending how decisions reflect those beliefs. For her, that meant prioritizing medical care for her cat even if it meant going another month with a flat tire.

Throughout the program, youth were not just in their community, but were positioned as co-creators who could see their community and its myriad of resources.

### **Translating Community Wealth into the Classroom**

At the beginning of our collaborative, all four authors were unanimous: we were not going

to look at the Economics and Personal Finance standards until after the program was completed. We were each individually familiar with the standards, but intentionally wanted to start our curricularizing with the community at the center: its existing sources of wealth, the community members’ definitions and conceptions and wealth, and the goals of our youth participants as co-creators. After the program, as we began to reflect on the resources we created, nearly every required standard had been naturally met or referenced (see Table 2 for an example). Also, the personal finance and economics standards were met alongside other interdisciplinary knowledges including geography, civics and government, and local history.<sup>10</sup>

With the interdisciplinary alignment as a starting point, Leah and Laura began translating our FLE program into a traditional high school setting during the pilot year of Financial Literacy and Economics. The greatest challenge was planning the place-based walking field trips at least 30 days in advance with required student permission forms and adequate adult supervision. This limited the immediacy of the curricularizing, with the first trip delayed until at least one month into a four-month semester. While there was value in completing online research, calling businesses directly, and inviting guest speakers face-to-face and via Zoom, youth participant Brandon Mark explained the importance of *being inside a business* rather than bringing the business owner to a classroom, citing “you can only do so much on the Internet” but “going out into the community is a big thing.” This aligns with scholars that note learning skills decontextualized from authentic interaction can actually have the inverse effect of de-skilling youth from building economic and personal finance literacies.<sup>11</sup> Being *in* the community, Brandon noted, led to seeing the community in a new way since it “puts you in the mindset” of being an employee or future business owner. Thus, we recommend overcoming logistical barriers and share how we translate the daily routine from the summer program into a once-a-week routine for place-based economics and financial literacy in a schooling environment (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** *Translating Place-based Pedagogies into Community and School Contexts*

	<b>Daily Schedule for Summer Program</b>	<b>Weekly Schedule for Classroom</b>
<p><b>Artifact Based Discussion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Display an artifact (e.g., checkbook, a heat map of racial demographics overlaid with grocery stores, a Payday Loan contract)</li> <li>• Ask probing questions (e.g., What do you notice? What do you wonder? Who uses this? Why do they use this?)</li> <li>• Connect to the day’s/week’s learning goal(s) that are selected from patterns in learners’ personal financial goals</li> </ul>	5–10 mins	Monday (45 mins of instruction)
<p><b>Traditional Instruction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit instruction on necessary vocabulary, concepts, or historical knowledge needed to understand the week’s learning target</li> </ul>	Did not occur	
<p><b>Constructive Inquiry</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather shared questions or information that needs to be explored to meet the day’s goals. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ For example, “Most of us have a goal related to higher education. What do you need to know or have access to meet this goal? Where could we find this information?”</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Guide and provide additional information as needed (e.g., “There are additional places or ways you can create savings beyond a savings account. Do you know of any?” “There are five auto repair shops within walking distance, the mechanics there may be able to answer these questions.”)</li> </ul>	10–20 mins	Tuesday (45 mins of instruction) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In addition, codesign the community exploration activity for Thursdays.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community Exploration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners decide what, who, or how they would like to gather missing information.</li> <li>• With at least one educator, the student(s) complete the exploration which may include interviewing community members, planned interviews, place-based experiences, or virtual experiences.</li> </ul>	60 mins	Thursday (90-min block period; no class on Wednesdays)
<p><b>Debrief</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each group shares the information learned from their community exploration and answers questions from peers</li> <li>• Leaders record the answers to previously posed questions</li> <li>• Learners summarize what they would want their friends, families, and community to know based on their exploration and research</li> </ul>	30 mins	Friday (45 mins)
<p><b>Personal Reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners go back to their financial literacy and consider if they need revision, clarification, or action steps to work towards enacting them</li> </ul>	5–10 mins	

Youth co-creators worked alongside the interdisciplinary team to explore the potential for financial literacy education to reflect the resources embedded in one local community's history, economics, and wealth. Community history and

resource walks prepared us to be in the community while youth as co-creators ensured the evolving curriculum and instruction focused on seeing the community and its myriad resources for building personal and generational wealth.<sup>12</sup> 📌

## Notes

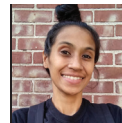
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