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The State of Environmental Education in the SF Bay Area
Implications for grassroots environmental education organizations
and their funders

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NPA 616

Spring 2015

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Abstract

Environmental education (EE) opportunities for children and youth are abundant in the San Francisco Bay Area (Bay Area). This saturation of EE groups, however, presents challenges for small, grassroots organizations. This report explores a high-functioning, productive collaborative effort and presents a perspective on the EE field in the Bay Area, as described by local philanthropic, consultant, and EE research experts. Experts identified successes, challenges and trends in the field, particularly around the themes of racial diversity, funding challenges, and messaging. Results include recommendations for grassroots EE organizations to address the identified challenges and maximize strengths through collaboration for greater impact and the advancement of the EE field in the Bay Area as well as recommendations for funders of EE organizations.

Keywords: Environmental education, youth development, grassroots organizations, collaboration, funding, messaging, diversity.

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Frequently Used Terms

Environmental education (EE) – In this report, the author intends the definition of environmental education to be any program or activity in which there is a facilitated experience which involves learning about or engaging with the natural environment.

Grassroots – The author uses the term grassroots to describe small organizations (less than \$1 million annual budget) that were developed within a community (typically one that is underserved) to address a specific community need.

Underserved youth – The author uses the term underserved youth to describe middle and high school-aged young people of color from underserved communities.

Introduction

LEAPS Environmental Literacy Initiative

Recognizing the richness in environmental education in the Bay Area and wanting to provide greater support to organizations in their environmental literacy portfolio working in a youth development capacity, the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation launched the LEAPS (Leadership and Evaluation to Advance Program Success) for Environmental Literacy Initiative in 2012.

The LEAPS cohort is comprised of 17 environmental education/youth development organizations in the Bay Area. LEAPS leadership consists of consultant, Haile Johnston from Common Market Philadelphia, Learning for Action (LFA), a social sector evaluation and strategy consulting firm, and organization representatives.

The organizations and leaders who would be invited to join the LEAPS group, were part of a very specific funding cohort. The Foundation's strategy / criteria for that cohort included organizations serving traditionally underrepresented youth populations throughout the Bay Area, offer youth the opportunity to grow and develop as leaders and stewards within and beyond their programs, and have leadership who were ensuring that youth development was occurring and was interested in learning and developing themselves and their organization's capacity. Great care was also taken in identifying and enlisting the help of qualified and caring consultants.

Since the Initiative launched in June 2012 the LEAPS cohort has convened 15 times, including formal trainings on topics like creating logic models and evaluation plans, measuring outcomes, program vision development, and messaging/storytelling,

as well as informal networking gatherings, and a leadership retreat. Leadership development was provided in the form of 360-degree leadership assessments and leadership coaching. Finally, LFA provided 93 hours of technical assistance to each participating organization to use for developing evaluation plans, strategic planning, or other capacity-building tools. The LEAPS Initiative capacity-building work included the following grantee and cohort-level outcomes:

Grantees:

- Received new and enhanced tools, instruments, and systems for evaluation and learning
- Strengthened organizational culture for evaluation and learning
- Increased effectiveness of programmatic strategies and program models through data driven decisions and improvements
- Increased communications capacity to share evidence and models, advocate for policy change, and sustain programs that work

Cohort/Field:

- Increased awareness of other organizations and potential pathways for youth to receive multiple exposures to environmental literacy across ages and grades in the Bay Area
- Increased sense of community and partnership between organizations serving underrepresented youth throughout the Bay Area

LEAPS organizations also worked collectively on three “cluster studies” whose topics and research strategies were determined and implemented by LEAPS organizations under the guidance of LFA staff. Cluster study topics included:

- Advancing Relevant Interventions: Engaging Older Youth in Workforce Development,
- Creating Safer Spaces for Traditionally Underrepresented Populations, and
- Expanding Our Understanding of Meaningful Engagements with the Environment.

While the LEAPS cohort’s achievements of outcomes are notable, they do not guarantee it sustained financial support. As LEAPS leaders plan for the loss of funding in June 2015, a critical need was identified to gather evidence-based materials to understand, contextualize, and define the value of the LEAPS cohort's collaborative work.

In this paper, an overview of EE in the San Francisco Bay Area will be presented from the perspective of professionals supporting the field through research, philanthropy, and consultancy to address the following research questions:

- 1) What is the state of the EE field in the Bay Area?
- 2) How are the LEAPS organizations uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of underserved youth within the EE field in the Bay Area?
- 3) How are the LEAPS cohort organizations supporting the EE field in the Bay Area through serving an underserved population?

I will argue that in light of current trends in EE and the critical role grassroots EE organizations play in the advancement of the field, collaboration amongst grassroots

organizations helps solve capacity issues and that foundations could make a greater impact on the field by funding collaborative work.

Methods

Experts

Seven experts were identified in collaboration with a LEAPS Initiative consultant. All experts were working in the San Francisco Bay Area. For the purpose of understanding the field of environmental education in a broader context, the experts selected represented the perspective of funders, researchers, and consultants. Quotes and ideas attributed to interviewees were coded to provide anonymity and will be cited as Source A, B, C, etc.

Interview Design and Procedure

A six-question Interview Protocol (Appendix 1) was designed in collaboration with a LEAPS Initiative consultant. The protocol included an introduction as well as additional “probe” questions to generate a rich discussion. The Interview Protocol was delivered to each interviewee prior to the interview via email, and interviews were conducted by phone. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Interview Analysis

Conversation highlights were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed for themes and key words using thematic analysis. A literature review revealed supporting research for emerging themes and recommendations.

Literature Review and Expert Interview Excerpts

Messaging Environmental Education

The term “environmental education” has been shaped over a long history by influences from various disciplines (Carter & Simmons, 2010). Confusion as to the definition of the term dates back to 1905 when “Liberty Hyde Bailey, noted botanist, writer, college administrator, educator, and proponent of nature study rejects the use of the term “environmental education” in his writing because he thought it was imprecise, theoretical, pompous, and would always need to be explained” (McCrea, p. 2).

Today, confusion around the definition and role of EE remains, both within and outside the field (Ardoin & Bowers, 2012, Keene, et. al., 2010, Source C, personal communication, April 8, 2015, Source D, personal communication, April 9, 2015). One contributing factor to what is largely a fragmented field (Taylor, 2014, Source B, personal communication, April 15, 2015, Source F, personal communication, April 9, 2015) are the various labels organizations use to describe their EE programs, including outdoor education, environmental literacy, nature play, environmental justice, garden education, etc.

These labels may be beneficial for differentiating ones organization from others to funders, but they also can be polarizing (Source C). For example, “environmental

education” may be viewed by some as too traditional while “environmental justice” might be perceived as too oppositional (Source C). These labels also become a challenge for researchers who think of “EE in terms of ‘nature’ or ‘the natural world,’ rather than as urban settings” (Ardoin, et. al, 2013, p. 512).

Furthermore, in attempting to determine the number and variety of EE nonprofits receiving funding in the Bay Area the way EE organizations self-label creates challenges to researchers (Ardoin & Bowers, 2012).

Grassroots Organizations and Diversity

Grassroots organizations often provide place-based programs which occur within the community in which the organization is located. “Since environmental education begins close to home, it encourages learners to understand and forge connections with the environment in their own neighborhoods and communities. It is through these connections that students gain the knowledge and skills that help them make sound decisions” (Carter & Simmons, 2010, p. 13).

Grassroots and place-based organizations are often better positioned to ‘scale deep’ rather than ‘scale out’ ensuring that the youth they served have developed a very strong connection to place...understanding of environmental and cultural systems, over a significant amount of program engagement.” (Source D)

Studies have shown that EE is delivered most effectively to underserved youth and communities by “being creative with, and responsive to, the social and environmental diversity in their particular locale” (Blanchet-Cohen & Reilly, 2013, p. 20) and by “adopting a constructivist approach that references familiar, lived experiences” (Stern, et. al, 2011, p. 120). By delivering programs close to home, the program messages are more likely to stick (Source E, personal communication, April 8, 2015).

Grassroots EE organizations, like those participating in the LEAPS Initiative, typically work at the intersection of EE and youth development. As a result, they “are developing a [racially] diverse workforce of young people who are smart and motivated to positively impact the environment“ (Source C). This critical role in developing racially diverse young people with strong environmental values could be an answer to the continuing issue of low gender, racial, and class diversity as discussed Taylor’s report for the Green 2.0 Initiative, *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations* (2014).

Funding Challenges for Grassroots Organizations

Funding for environmental education is scarce, even in the philanthropy-rich San Francisco Bay Area (Ardoin & Bowers, 2012, Source F, Source G) and with more than 200 providers (though this is a very modest count based on the number of organizations signed up to receive information from ChangeScale, a recently formed collaborative of EE organizations in the Bay Area), competition for the limited foundation support is high (Source B). Grassroots EE organizations rely heavily on support from family foundations (Source C & D). These foundations tend to fund within a particular region and typically

have a connection to the program (Source D) but also have shifting focus areas and limited life spans, both of which can affect the stability of funding for grant recipients. The available grants offered by foundations tend to support programs rather than capacity-building initiatives (Sources A, B & C).

Funders are also confused by the definition and efficacy of EE which falls squarely between foundations “education” and “environment” funding categories (Ardoin & Bowers, 2012). Just as the EE field is fragmented, so is the EE-granting philanthropic field (Source C).

There is also confusion on how to measure the efficacy of EE programs. “It is expected that nonprofit leaders grow their organizations in order to achieve significant social impact. Funders often seek short-term metrics to demonstrate the effectiveness of their grants” (Wei-Skillern & Silver, 2013, p. 123). Larger EE organizations with greater resources have the capacity to reach more participants than smaller grassroots organizations. However, grassroots organizations typically often form more meaningful, long-term connections with the youth that they serve. If held to the same participants served metric to evaluate program success, larger EE organizations will appear to be more effective. This inequity in impact metrics makes it challenging for grassroots organizations to attract and sustain funding.

Collaboration as Strategy for EE Organizations

Collaborations between EE organizations are increasing in the San Francisco Bay Area (Source G, personal communication, May 4, 2015) but the field is still viewed by experts as being fragmented (Sources B, C, D, & F). “[It is] critically important that all

[EE] organizations come together. Larger organizations have a lot to learn from the organizations in LEAPS...but have better resources in terms of evaluation” (Sources F & G).

Collaborations allow for sharing best practices, creating common goals for behavior change organizations hope to see in their participants, and improved messaging (Chin, 2004). Collaboration also offers opportunities for pooled resources for professional development and diversity trainings (Source G). “...networked nonprofits set at the center of their work their missions, instead of organizational gains or their short-term organizational objectives. They forsake organizational-level benefits, sharing or relinquishing control over program implementation, access to funding, and recognition in order to focus on achieving leveraged impact rather than organizational scale” (Wei-Skillern & Silver, p. 123).

Results

Interview analysis revealed three primary themes; funding, messaging, and diversity. The themes of funding and messaging arose in discussions about challenges with which the EE field in the Bay Area are grappling. The theme of diversity arose in both discussion about successes and challenges in the local EE field. See Table 1 (Appendix 2) for the results of the thematic analysis of the seven interviews.

What is the state of the EE field in the Bay Area?

The Bay Area is rich with EE opportunities, ranging from large organizations to grassroots groups. Competition for a limited amount of EE grants often leaves

grassroots organizations very under-resourced and with limited capacity to meet their missions. Some increase in communication and collaboration amongst Bay Area EE providers has been observed, but more communication could lead to increased effectiveness for both large and small organizations. Communication and collaboration are key to strengthening the messaging of EE, both within the field and to outside groups like funders and policy makers.

How are the LEAPS organizations uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of underserved youth within the EE field in the Bay Area?

Place-based, grassroots organizations can serve underserved communities and youth best. Through the higher level of engagement with youth within their community, grassroots organizations understand and can act on their audience's needs.

How are the LEAPS cohort organizations supporting the EE field in the Bay Area through serving an underserved population?

Networks and collaborations like LEAPS support the EE field in the Bay Area by creating unified messaging, sharing best practice, and working toward shared measurement tools for improved impact evaluation. They also develop their racially diverse youth audience into environmental stewards who could, in the future, improve the diversity void within the environmental field.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from the expert interviews and literature review. Many of the challenges facing grassroots EE organizations and the greater EE field in Bay Area can be addressed by participating in sustainable, productive collaborations.

Build constellations rather than lone stars. Leaders who catalyze successful networks acknowledge their weaknesses as readily as their strengths. The goal is to build the larger system that is necessary for delivering on the mission, not to become the “market leader.”

Wei-Skillern & Silver, p. 122

Team up

Grassroots organizations can increase their capacity by working in collaboration with larger organizations with complimentary capacities. In turn, larger organizations can provide additional career pathways for youth participating in grassroots programs and other resources like professional development and evaluation assistance. Funders want to see organizations that are aware of their peers and not operating in isolation.

Demonstrate depth

Grassroots organizations are uniquely positioned to have long-lasting, meaningful results due to their connection to their audiences' schools, communities, and homes. When “scaling out” isn't a sustainable option, smaller organizations should demonstrate their success and impact resulting from “scaling deep.” A culture of

evaluation should exist within all EE organizations, large and small, so this deeper level of impact can be effectively measured and communicated (Donaldson, 2008).

Create pathways for a diverse workforce

Grassroots organizations are developing the racially and culturally diverse workforce the environmental movement needs. Smaller organizations that cannot provide paid internships or other entry-level positions should guide their motivated and talented young people along pathways toward environmental careers outside of their organization.

We have a lot of pearls but not a string to make a beautiful necklace.

Source D

String the pearls

Bay Area grassroots EE organizations are doing amazing work with very limited resources and little communication amongst them. Collaboration leads to increased communication, identification of common values, and unified messaging, all of which are critical to the advancement of the EE field.

Recommendations to EE funders – Fund for EE field advancement

Grassroots EE organizations play a critical role in the advancement of the field. In supporting them, funders can make greater impact on the EE field through:

- funding capacity building for grassroots organizations so they can focus on “scaling deep” in the way only they can do best,

- funding collaborative groups who, together, can share best practices, develop stronger leadership, and contribute to the field's knowledge about community impact, and
- recognizing that impact metrics solely based on participants served cannot be applied equally across EE organizations. Just as EE providers need to demonstrate the depth of their impact, funders need to value different outcomes for different types of organizations.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample size of the interview pool was limited for this project. It is recommended that a larger pool of regional experts be interviewed for a more comprehensive perspective of environmental education in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Local researchers are currently drafting new studies specific to the Bay Area environmental education field including a more in depth review of the number and types of environmental education organizations operating within networks and collaborations.

There is also a great opportunity to investigate trends and challenges within the field among the organizations that larger collaboratives, like ChangeScale, have brought together. Just as the LEAPS cohort conducted their own research and evaluation, other cohorts of EE organizations could do the same, thereby contributing data to the field at large.

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Appendix 1

Conversation Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I am a graduate student in University of San Francisco's Masters in Nonprofit Administration Program and a member of the advisory group supporting the LEAPS for Environmental Literacy cohort, a group of environmental education (EE) grantees, funded by the S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation, in the Bay Area that serve underserved youth. For over two years this cohort has been engaged in capacity building around leadership, evaluation, and creating shared measurement tools to investigate specific topics of interest. As the group work to better understand the context and value of their unique work within the broader field, and be able to more accurately contextualize impact and make a case for their contributions, there is a need to better understand the current state of EE in the Bay Area and how the cohort's areas of focus dovetail in with broader field needs.

We are having these conversations with field experts to learn more about the current landscape of EE in the Bay Area and how the cohort might better contextualize its impact.

I expect this conversation to last about **30-45 minutes**. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Background

1. While we have some familiarity with your work, it's helpful to hear from you how you would describe your background and specific expertise as well as some of your current efforts.

Insights on Bay Area EE Field

Given your depth of experience in this field, we are very interested in getting your impressions and feedback on the current state of EE in the Bay Area, particularly for underserved youth.

1. Starting broadly, and then we can go more specific, how would you describe the state of the field of EE in the Bay Area? What are the greatest successes here? What have been some of the greatest challenges? What emerging trends have affected or will affect how the field does its work – whether they are research-based, political, philanthropic, etc?
 - a. *Probe:* When you think about the intersection between EE and youth development, particularly when it comes to reaching traditionally underserved populations (low income youth, youth and adolescents of color, youth who live in urban neighborhoods that may be disproportionately affected environmental burdens, etc), how would you describe the greatest successes, challenges, opportunities, and trends?
2. While some organizations in the cohort are connected to larger institutions, many work at a more grassroots level in local communities throughout the Bay. In your

experience with the field of EE in the Bay Area, what are some of the greatest opportunities for grassroots organizations to help advance the overall work?

- a. *Probe:* One thing we've noticed is that some cohort organizations sit at the intersection of EE and EJ, yet there is sometimes a divide or disconnect in the goals and messaging of those fields. How do you view the relationship between those two fields and the strengths and drawbacks of each? How does each sit in relationship with research, social, political, and philanthropic landscapes?
3. Given the recent release of Green 2.0 report and its findings regarding the lack of diversity within the environmental field, what role, if any, do you see environmental education organizations playing in addressing this issue?
 - a. *Probe:* Do you believe that the Green 2.0 findings are true of Bay Area EE organizations or do you perceive Bay Area orgs to be more diverse (staff, volunteers, board, etc)?
 - b. *Probe:* What components of those EE programs serving underserved youth do you believe have the most impact on increasing diversity in the EE field?
 - c. *Probe:* What role, if any, do you see grassroots organizations playing in this work?
 4. As the cohort prepares to share its work with the community and potential funders, what field needs or trends would you recommend they be mindful of and in dialogue with?

Probe: What is the unique value these groups bring to the EE field in the Bay Area?

Probe: Is there any relevant regional (Bay Area) research or literature you would point us to?

5. Our organizations are constantly being invited into opportunities for collaborations, and this cohort in itself has been a collaboration. In your experience, has there been an increase in collaboration in the EE field in the Bay Area? How important is collaboration in the EE field?
 - a. *Probe:* What is it, particularly, about collaborative work that is helping advance the broader EE field?
 - b. *Probe:* In the collaborations you've observed, are some more effective than others? What makes for the most effective collaborations?
 - c. *Probe:* What should organizations be mindful of when considering collaborative opportunities?

6. Are there any other people you would recommend we speak with as part of this process?

Thank you for your time!

Appendix 2

Table 1

Results Table of Thematic Analysis of Interviews

Research Question	Themes Identified	Key Words	Example Quotes
What is the state of the EE field in the Bay Area?	Diversity	Oversimplified Cultural relevancy Transference Continuity Traditional pedagogy Grassroots	<i>Diversity issues in the environmental field have been oversimplified. Environmental education pedagogy needs to change to address the root issue of lack of cultural relevancy in EE programs.</i> Source E
	Funding	Fragmented Fickle Family foundations Competition Capacity-building vs. program support Collaboration Scale deep vs. out	<i>Funders (family foundations) are fickle and it is difficult to maintain capacity building work (in a grassroots organization) without stable support.</i> Source C <i>Grassroots and place-based organizations are often better positioned to 'scale deep' rather than 'scale-out' ensuring that the youth they served have developed a very strong connection to place...understanding of environmental and cultural systems, over a significant amount of program engagement.</i> Source D
	Messaging	Unifying language Labels Traditional vs. oppositional Outdoors	<i>We have a lot of pearls but not a string to make a beautiful necklace.</i> Source D <i>There are a robust assortment</i>

		<p>Trends: STEM/Tech/Citizen Science Youth development Communicate urgency Authenticity Impact</p>	<p><i>of organizations [in the Bay Area] with lots of assets and community support but the number of groups make it a challenge to come together around a shared vision for EE in the Bay Area and common measurement to demonstrate impact. Source F</i></p>
	<p>Secondary Theme: Capacity</p>	<p>Funders fragmented Disconnected Inconsistent quality Poor communication</p>	
	<p>Secondary Theme: Research</p>	<p>More on Env. Justice (trend) Research integration Need more on EE</p>	
<p>How are the LEAPS organizations uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of underserved youth within the EE field in the Bay Area?</p>	<p>Place-based</p>	<p>In-community Lasting change Meaningful application of new knowledge Creators vs. consumers of programs Grassroots better equipped to work in-community than larger orgs Culturally competent</p>	<p><i>Grassroots organizations fulfill a role of amplifying the environmental voice ‘on the ground’ in under-resourced communities. Source A</i></p> <p><i>Grassroots programs operate closer to home [for underserved youth] where the kids can bring local knowledge. They become creators of the learning, not just consumers of the learning and can then put to work what they’ve learned to make a difference in their community. Source D</i></p>
	<p>Dosage</p>	<p>Fewer participants, richer experience Develop beyond program</p>	<p><i>Programs that move beyond a prescribed “dose” of experience but rather allow youth to develop throughout and beyond the program and encourage growth into programs outside of the organization are best developing young, environmentally conscious</i></p>

<p>How are the LEAPS cohort organizations supporting the EE field in the Bay Area through serving an underserved population?</p>	<p>Greatest impact on positive youth development</p>	<p>Place-based Culturally relevant Staff more often reflects community</p>	<p><i>people. Source C</i></p> <p><i>Grassroots organizations are developing a culturally diverse workforce of young people who are smart and motivated to positively impact the environment. Source A</i></p> <p><i>The environmental justice focus [of grassroots environmental education organizations] is critically important. When children are born into an environment they did not create, one that has been damaged by the actions of those outside of their community, they may not feel as committed to fixing it. Environmental justice organizations empower youth to own and care for their environment. Source B</i></p>
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