

Examining Equitable and Inclusive Work Environments in Environmental Education:

*Perspectives from the
Field and Implications
for Organizations*



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CONTEXT

The environmental education (EE) field is going through a period of reflection and reexamination in an attempt to overcome decades of practices that have resulted in a nearly homogeneous white workforce (Taylor, 2014). Mainstream, nearly-all-white practitioners, leaders, researchers, and funders seem preoccupied by the inability of environmental fields to find resonance with the concerns and issues of highest priority in communities of color, despite the fact that climate change, toxins, and other environmental problems disproportionately affect the health and economies of these communities (Anthony, 2017; Cultural Competency Assessment Project, 2006).

This study, led by the Research Group at the Lawrence Hall of Science, was commissioned as part of a planning grant, funded by the Pisces Foundation, to support the design of a professional learning workshop series for outdoor science organizations. This study investigated how EE organizations think about and operationalize equity and inclusion in the work environment by gathering perspectives of EE leaders and educators of color. The study sought to identify strategies and tools that would contribute to systemic organizational changes to

support and retain people of color. While we acknowledge the many dimensions of diversity and intersectional identities, this study specifically focused on the experiences of environmental educators of color.

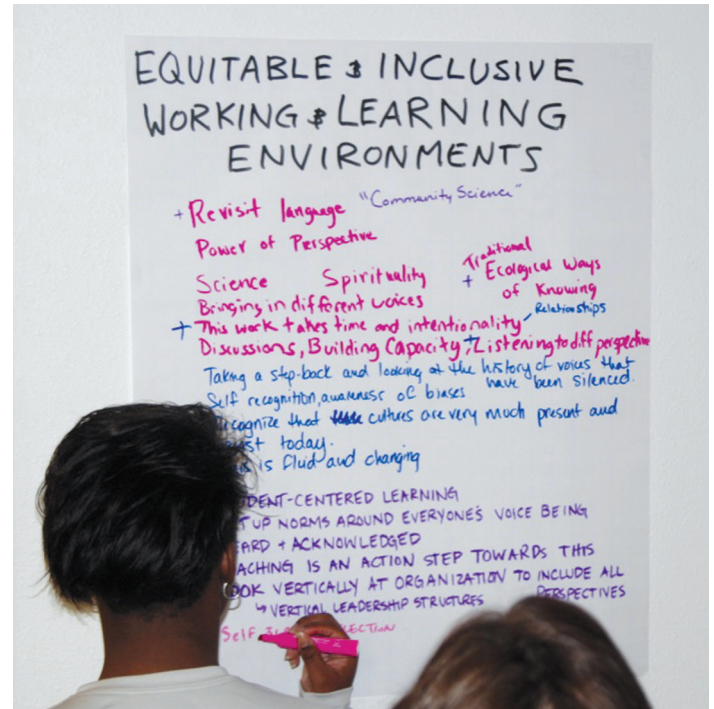


Photo: Craig Strang

DEFINING EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND DIVERSITY

We used the following definitions in this study:

Equity: The guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented full participation of certain groups. The principle of equity acknowledges that historically underserved and underrepresented populations exist and that fairness regarding these unbalanced conditions is needed to ensure equality in the provision of effective opportunities to all groups. (adapted from UC Berkeley Initiative for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity; Youth Outside).

Inclusion: The act of creating environments in which any individual or group feels welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate. An inclusive and welcoming climate embraces differences and offers respect in both words and actions for all people. (adapted from UC Berkeley Initiative for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity; Youth Outside)

Diversity: Psychological, physical, and social differences that occur among any and all individuals, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, or mental or physical ability. A diverse group, community, or organization is one in which a variety of social and cultural characteristics exist. (adapted from The National Multicultural Institute; Youth Outside).

Note: We often hear people incorrectly use “diverse” or “diversity” to only refer to communities or individuals that have characteristics outside of the “norm,” or outside of a dominant culture—e.g., people of color or individuals from the LGBTQ+ community.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

The study included two primary data sources:

1. A survey of 51 organization leaders. These leaders (e.g., executive directors, directors of education) represented organizations from across the United States and Canada, with a heavier concentration in the western region (see Figure 1). Participants were



Figure 1. Map of Survey Participants

recruited through the Lawrence Hall of Science’s BEETLES Project (beetlesproject.org) network of outdoor science programs, so the majority of them represented residential programs that focus on connections with nature, experiential learning, and science. We did not collect race or ethnicity data for organizational leaders; however, a 2014 national study of residential outdoor science organizations found that 92% of program leaders identified themselves as white/Caucasian (Snow & Romero, 2014).

2. Focus group interviews with 26 individuals, each of whom self-identified as a person of color. Participants were environmental educators (instructors, coordinators, and managers) in organizations from around the San Francisco Bay Area, including nonprofit organizations and federal and local government agencies. Nine participants were early-career professionals with 1-2 years of professional experience; 11 participants had 3-6 years of experience; and six participants had 7-15 years of experience.

KEY FINDINGS

The following summarizes key themes that emerged from both the survey of organizational leaders (hereafter referred to as “organization leaders”) and focus groups with educators of colors (hereafter referred to as “educators”).

What do equity, inclusion, and diversity mean?

Organization leaders often described equity, inclusion, and diversity in terms of providing *access* to opportunities and resources for *all* learners and *all* staff (see Figure 2). Educators’ understanding of equity, inclusion, and

diversity was more nuanced and complex and included examining the systemic oppression, power, and privilege that underlie these issues. Thus, educators emphasized that individuals and organizations alike need to understand the historical context of EE, listen to and amplify marginalized voices, and examine the intersectionality of one’s identity (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status, culture) as it relates to equity and inclusion. Educators noted that equity, inclusion, and diversity are *not* independent or mutually exclusive of each other and that addressing these issues at the systems level requires an understanding of how they inform one another.

DEI? EID?

Most participants in this study used the term “DEI” to refer to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This phrase inherently puts the emphasis on diversity. However, our study findings and reports from equity and inclusion advocates suggest that the notion of putting “diversity” first by starting with hiring a “diverse staff” is often counterproductive. Instead, what if we consider leading with equity and inclusion by focusing our efforts on creating spaces that are welcoming and that honor and value the identities and experiences of individuals from marginalized communities before focusing on hiring goals?

Read more on “diversity”—“the dangerous 9-letter umbrella”—at www.youthoutside.org/news/blog/diversity-the-dangerous-9-letter-umbrella



Figure 2. Organization leader and educator definitions of equity, inclusion, and diversity.

Like the educators, researchers have challenged the tendency of organization leaders to focus on *access for all*, which neglects the critical need to understand how systemic oppression, power, and privilege have disproportionately impacted marginalized communities, particularly people of color (Feinstein & Meshoulam, 2013; Herrenkohl & Bevan, 2017; Philip & Azevedo, 2017). This “access-for-all” narrative negates the need to prioritize these communities that have been, and continue to be, largely excluded in EE. Therefore, pushing beyond access to consider the systemic barriers that inform inequities becomes a necessity.

*“[I want organizations to] straight-up acknowledge that **environmentalism was created by [people of color] first**. I had a huge disconnect that my ancestors were a part of the environmental movement and honored the earth, and then the colonizers came in and took that away from them and converted them, and now I’m in 2018 trying to say, **“I’ve been connected to this my whole life. This isn’t something that you’re teaching me and awakening me to.”**”*
 –Focus group participant

Are equity, inclusion, and diversity organization priorities?

Organization leaders along with educators indicate that equity, inclusion, and diversity are frequent topics of conversation in the field. Organization leaders indicated that equity, inclusion, and diversity were a medium-high priority (mean: 3.29; 3.44; and 3.15 respectively, on a four-point scale). Some 67 percent of organization leaders reported having an explicit statement about equity, inclusion, or diversity in *at least one* of their guiding statements, such as a mission statement or strategic plan. And 43 percent of leaders reported having at least one person on staff who was responsible for advancing equity, inclusion, and diversity within the organization. However, when we examine these practices further, the findings suggest that equity, inclusion, or diversity are *not* consistently a part of the organizational structure in a meaningful way. For example, statements about equity, inclusion, and diversity were more likely to be included in operational, internal-facing documents, such as a strategic plan or staff manual, and far less likely to be included in documents representing the organization’s core purpose and beliefs, such as its mission, vision, or core values.

Educators also noted that many equity, inclusion, and diversity initiatives are primarily focused on external-facing programs; that is, organizations are more likely to be thinking about equity, inclusion, and diversity in regard to learning experiences for learners, as opposed to the organizational work environment. Educators noted that initiatives are often focused on getting more black and brown staff or learners to programs (i.e., diversifying programs through access),

“[Diversity, equity, and inclusion is] this white-savior complex that is... really creating a separatist movement where there is still a form of “other”... [People of color] are still an “other” and [white leaders] still have dominance... [Diversity, equity, and inclusion] always come from the top down... They are never from the grassroots... or from the community.”

–Focus group participant

but those initiatives do not explicitly state goals to foster an equitable and inclusive environment. Educators also pointed to experiences where the burden of change was placed on a few individuals of color without providing institutionalized support. Such initiatives, often advanced by white leadership, support the existing status quo and continue to marginalize people of color by not engaging their own voices, by tokenizing individuals, or by not recognizing the history of people of color in environmental movements.

Are environmental education organizations representative of audiences served?

The EE field-at-large continues to be overwhelmingly composed of homogeneous white individuals (Enderle, 2007; Pearson & Schuldt, 2014; Taylor, 2014). This remains true of organizations that participated in the survey, many of which acknowledged that their own staff—educators, leadership, and board members—often do not fully represent the backgrounds and lived experiences of the learners with whom the organizations work. In some cases, staff may speak the same language, or come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds or geographic regions, but rarely reflect the ethnic or racial backgrounds of learners. Educators note that this continues to be problematic for staff and learners who represent nondominant communities and lived experiences, and point out that the continued underrepresentation of educators of color results in experiences where educators feel isolated, marginalized, and excluded. Research has also demonstrated that this

can negatively affect the sense of place and learning experience for learners of nondominant communities (Outley & Witt, 2006).

How equitable and inclusive are hiring practices?

While 70 percent of organization leaders report having a goal to hire more black and brown educators, they noted a number of challenges they perceive, including: not enough people of color apply (41 percent); applicants of color (when they do apply) rarely meet the hiring criteria (21.5 percent); and the nature of the job does not meet the needs of people of color (17.6 percent). Yet, extensive research has shown that these perceived challenges do not reflect reality (Taylor, 2018; see Misconception: People of Color are Not Interested in EE, page 4). As noted by the educators, these perceived challenges present a deficit-oriented framing that fails to acknowledge how the current practices of organizations may be reinforcing systemic barriers to entry. Educators shared that many factors have serious implications for how effective an organization may be in recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff from historically excluded communities: *who* composes hiring committees (e.g., hiring

MISCONCEPTION: PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE NOT INTERESTED IN EE

Dorceta Taylor’s 2018 article, *Racial and Ethnic Differences in the Students’ Readiness, Identity, Perceptions of Institutional Diversity, and Desire to Join the Environmental Workforce*, featured in the *Journal of Environmental Studies and Science*, provides evidence that directly contradicts the common misconception that people of color are not interested in environmental-focused careers.

She also found that there were no significant differences in salary expectation between college students of color and white students interested in environmental careers, contradicting another common misconception that environmental education pays too little for “qualified” people of color.

Taylor’s findings provide a further rationale for organizations to critically examine their own assumptions, hiring processes, guiding documents, workplace environment, and the role these factors might play in perpetuating a lack of diversity across the EE field.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FIELD

How can we advance equity and inclusion in the EE field?

These findings reveal that initiatives to increase equity, inclusion, and diversity are often driven solely by leadership and rarely engage staff of color in meaningful ways. As part of the focus groups, we asked educators to share recommendations about how organization leaders can collectively advance equity, inclusion, and diversity in the field. We include these recommendations below, along with some considerations from the authors of this study:

- ▶ **Embrace and engage in authentic and difficult dialogue: Leaders should practice engaging in, providing space and opportunity for, and facilitating difficult conversations related to equity, inclusion, and cultural relevance.** Seeking support from organizations or professionals who have expertise in facilitating conversations around equity and inclusion may be a first step. These conversations are difficult and may surface issues that organization leaders may not feel ready to deal with. If not facilitated in a thoughtful way, they can cause further harm to individuals from marginalized communities. Still, this should not deter organizations from engaging in this work.
- ▶ **Articulate clear equity, inclusion, and diversity goals and outcomes: Leaders' goals should go beyond numbers to articulate what equity and inclusion look like in all areas of the organization, including the work environment and programming for learners.** Instead of articulating goals related to diversity or reaching a certain percentage of “diversity” (which can feel inauthentic and tokenizing), organization leaders should critically think about their goals related to equity and inclusion and consider how such goals are actually set. Through this process, it is vital to consider who and how to engage in identifying both goals and outcomes.
- ▶ **Establish hiring processes that focus on equity and inclusion: All aspects of the hiring process, including job descriptions, qualifications, and interview committees, should express the organization's commitment to equity and inclusion.** In particular, by engaging more people of color in the hiring process, opportunities will arise to include

their own perspectives about who and what qualifies for positions working with youth from a diversity of backgrounds.

- ▶ **Implement participatory, or vertical, decision-making processes: Creating systems and structures for people at all levels of an organization to be recognized for leadership and to participate in decision-making processes provides opportunities to meaningfully incorporate a diversity of perspectives—in particular, those of staff of color.** Opportunities to participate may necessitate thinking about whether there are particular time points at which leadership can engage *all* staff for input. In addition, transparency and clear communication with staff about decision-making and staff participation are critical in fostering a sense of agency among staff.
- ▶ **Provide opportunities for professional growth and mentorship: Organizations should provide professional learning opportunities to support advancement of educators of color in the field.** Professional learning can include: sending staff of color to

“I feel like, for me, I’ve only been doing environmental education for two years and I’m over it, I don’t want to do it anymore... I feel like my job would have been ideal if I didn’t feel so marginalized in the space. I feel like I have two jobs: I feel like I have to go do my job and also exist in a really really white space... I’m the only black male on staff... I’ve been a professional for a long time, [and then] I started working in environmental education and it is the most racist space I’ve ever been in my life. Oh my gosh, it’s just like so much work to be done. Racist burnout is real.”

—Focus group participant

conferences, providing funded time to participate in webinars or in-house workshops, providing resources and tools that focus on improving teaching, and establishing mentoring systems that support reflective practice and peer learning. When considering mentorship models, there should be equal value placed on two-way mentorship (i.e., mentors and mentees learning from each other), acknowledging that each individual brings valuable knowledge and experiences to the relationship. These opportunities are important for the growth and retention of all staff, and are particularly essential for staff of color who are most likely to feel isolated and in need of professional peers with similar identities.

- ▶ **Establish systems to foster an inclusive space for staff: Organizations should consider how they can support educators of color in establishing spaces in which they feel empowered, included, and valued.** Help staff identify mentors of color in the field, and also provide staff time for affinity spaces where staff can gather based on similar identities, either within the organization or in the region. There are growing networks that invite participation by environmental educators of color. These spaces are critical, as they enable educators of color to step out of the “teacher” or expert role and into a refuge with peers who share similar experiences. This strategy, however, should not supplant organizational efforts

to establish policies or use strategies that can support a more-inclusive work environment.

- ▶ **(Re)Consider compensation: A lack of a living wage disproportionately affects people from low-income backgrounds. Within the broad category of compensation, organizations should consider housing, benefits, position type (part-time, seasonal, or volunteer vs. full-time), and equipment/gear necessary to perform the job.** It is important to recognize that while lack of a living wage can negatively affect all individuals from low-income communities, the impact of such policies and practices must be examined critically, through an intersectional lens. For example: How might low wages affect a person differently if they are low-income and also identify as a refugee, or a woman, or a parent, or as Black, or as all four? In what ways do EE organizations consider these factors when setting compensation packages? While it may be difficult for organizations to change existing policies or to work around existing infrastructures related to hourly rates or benefits, opportunities may arise to consider how to offset other expenses related to cost-of-living or execution of job responsibilities. Such considerations can greatly reduce unnecessary burdens that historically marginalized communities experience, and they can also contribute to a greater sense of value among educators.

CONCLUSION

Study findings reveal a clear disconnect in the way that environmental education organization leaders and educators of color define, experience, and intend to prioritize equity, inclusion, and diversity. Leaders, generally, want to make equity, inclusion, and diversity priorities, but the strategies they use can unintentionally reinforce the status quo of the systemic racism and marginalization that educators of color experience. It is important to recognize that one of the limitations of this study was the sampling approach. Because the study was intended to inform the design of a professional learning series, the sampling approach focused on leaders of outdoor science programs and educators of color in partner networks. Therefore, the sample is limited in its representation of the EE field-at-large. With that said, the findings presented resonate with much of the research and literature in the field, and continue to highlight

how imperative it is that EE organizations examine their practices regarding equity and inclusion to ensure that they are being intentional and responsive to the experiences of their staff of color. By presenting these findings, we hope to increase the degree to which organization leaders and white-identifying staff can begin to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of educators of color and can reconcile the ways in which they have been thinking about and operationalizing equity and inclusion in their organizations. We believe that it is critical for all staff, including organization leaders and educators of color, to engage in ongoing dialogue as a means to understand and empathize with each other’s perspectives and lived experiences. Finally, we hope that increased understanding and empathy will encourage a culture of productive reflection and action among outdoor science programs and their leadership.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS FROM THE AUTHORS

For “White Folks”—Where to Start:

- ▶ Do your research and engage in self-reflection: Read existing literature about the history of environmental movements, racial literacy, representation in the outdoors (check out these articles as a start: list.ly/1/2gkM); explore TED talks, vlogs (video blogs), blogs, social media, books, and other media. The Internet is awash with people who have agreed to share their lived experiences and perspectives—so take advantage of its resources, and don't assume that every person of color is interested and willing to do this emotional labor. As you learn about the history and lived experiences of marginalized communities in EE, challenge yourself to think about how these experiences compare with yours. What new perspectives now emerge for you? Where do you feel discomfort? Why are you feeling discomfort? How can you learn from it?
- ▶ Start transforming hiring practices by using the Avarna Group's Hiring Toolkit (theavarnagroup.com/resources/hiring-practice-better-practices).
- ▶ Use the Building Capacity tool (see Chapter 3 in the BEETLES Guide for Program Leaders in Outdoor Science; beetlesproject.org/resources/guide) to reflect on how equity, inclusion, and cultural relevance actually show up (if they do) within your organization.
- ▶ Explore resources, professional learning opportunities, and affinity spaces from organizations such as Youth Outside (www.youthoutside.org), Center for Diversity and the Environment (www.cdeinspires.org), Avarna Group (theavarnagroup.com), Latino Outdoors (latinooutdoors.org), Outdoor Afro (outdoorafro.com), and People of the Global Majority in Outdoors, Nature, and the Environment (www.pgmone.org).

For “People of Color”—What Now:

- ▶ While we checked and triple-checked that these findings resonate with and reflect the experiences of participants in our focus groups and respondents to our survey, we recognize that many more opinions, perspectives, and experiences exist. Our intent with this study is to make it easier to communicate some of the more generalizable feelings and patterns that currently exist.
- ▶ If this report reflects your own experiences in the EE field, please feel free to share it with your colleagues! We hope it helps to remove the burden often placed on people of color, first, to always have to live in the role of educating other colleagues and coworkers about the experiences of people of color, and, second, having to share their personal stories of identity, bias, and discrimination. Instances of discomfort, isolation, unconscious bias, and systemic racism suffered by educators of color are widespread throughout the EE field. The responsibility for ameliorating the situation lies squarely with organizations and organization leaders.
- ▶ If this study does *not* resonate with you, if your experiences and impressions are different from what is represented here, we would like to hear from you. Please contact Jedda Foreman (jforeman@berkeley.edu) or Valeria Romero (valeriafr@berkeley.edu).

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