



The State of Environmental Education in the San Francisco Bay Area Implications for Grassroots Environmental Education Nonprofits

Jessa M. Barzelay

In collaboration with LEAPS for Environmental Literacy Initiative organizations

Introduction

Environmental education (EE) opportunities for children and youth are abundant in the San Francisco Bay Area (BA). A boon for the region's young people, the saturation of EE groups presents challenges for small, grassroots organizations. Local philanthropic, consultant, and EE research experts were interviewed to generate a landscape review of EE in the region as it pertains to grassroots organizations. Experts identified successes, challenges and trends in the field, particularly around the themes of cultural relevancy, funding challenges, and messaging. Results include recommendations to address the identified challenges and maximize strengths through collaboration for greater impact and the advancement of the EE field in this region.

This project was done in collaboration with LEAPS (Leadership and Evaluation to Advance Program Success) for Environmental Literacy Initiative, a grant-funded cohort of 17 small to medium-sized environmental education/youth development organizations in the Bay Area. As LEAPS leaders plan for the loss of funding in June of this year, a critical need to gather evidence-based materials to understand, contextualize, and define the value of the LEAPS cohort's collaborative work was identified.



Leadership retreat for LEAPS organizations

Objectives

Gather evidence-based materials to understand, contextualize, and define the value of the LEAPS cohort's collaborative work through expert interviews and a literature review.

The following research questions were designed in collaboration with a LEAPS Initiative consultant.

- 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?

Methods

Experts

Seven regional experts were identified in collaboration with a LEAPS Initiative consultant. 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; key supporting roles to those delivering programs.

Interview Design and Procedure

A six-question Interview Protocol was created 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.

Results

Interview analysis revealed three common themes regarding successes, challenges and trends of environmental education in the San Francisco Bay Area:

Funding

- Competition for funding, even in the philanthropic Bay Area is particularly challenging for grassroots organizations that cannot, and should not, "scale out."
- Grassroots organizations require both program and capacity-building support, the latter of which fewer foundations are granting towards.

Diversity

- Grassroots organizations are the key to reaching under-resourced communities and youth. Their limited capacity is both their strength and their weakness – they can form more meaningful, long-lasting, impactful connections with their audiences due to the intimate, place-based programs, however, the challenge of having limited capacity for evaluation, professional development, etc... can result in a struggle to attract and sustain funding.

Messaging

- Bay Area EE organizations are fragmented, resulting in little communication between them and inconsistent messages within and outside the EE field.
- A wide array of labels are used within the EE field (outdoor education, nature learning, environmental justice, etc.) may help to differentiate organizations in a positive way but also contribute to the confusion around EE to those outside of the field.

Example section of interview analysis table:

Research Question	Themes	Key Words	Example Quotes
What is the state of the EE field in the Bay Area?	Diversity	Oversimplified (not just a program participant number) 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>
	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> <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>
	Messaging	Unifying language Labels: EE vs. EJ Traditional vs. oppositional Outdoors Trends: STEM/Tech/Citizen Science Youth development Communicate urgency Authenticity Impact	<i>We have a lot of pearls but not a string to make a beautiful necklace.</i> <i>There are a robust assortment 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.</i>

Community Grows program participants:



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 sustaining productive collaborations.

Partner 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.

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 an 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 impact can be effectively measured and communicated.

Create pathways for a diverse workforce

Grassroots organizations are developing the 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.

String the pearls

Grassroots organizations can be small and mighty independently or big and bold collectively. Collaboration leads to increased communication, identification of common values, and unified messaging, all of which are critical to the advancement of EE.



Kids in Parks school program



7 Teepees' Watershed Education Project

References

Expert Interview Participants

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