Developing Culturally Relevant Environmental Education Programs

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Why are you here?
Chalk Talk

• Environment
• Environmental Education
• Environmental Justice
Diversifying Environmental Education

Running Grass, Three Circles Center for Multicultural Education:

• Acknowledge that children have different needs based upon and shaped by where and how they live

• Involve family and community institutions directly in the development and implementation of EE programs and curriculum

• Recognize that the health of ecosystems, communities and individuals are inextricably linked
Research Brief - Summary

Building Capacity for Integrating Environmental Education With Community Empowerment: Interviews With Leaders in the Portland-Metro Area
16 Interviews

- **Environmental education providers** – individuals working for organizations with a primary mission focused on environmental education and/or environmental advocacy

- **Community organizations** – individuals working for organizations with a primary mission focused on youth or community development, especially issues such as social and economic justice, education and equal opportunity, and inclusion of communities of color and other represented groups in local and regional leadership, institutions, and activities

- **Organizations providing environmental education and other community services** – individuals working for organizations that have both environmental education and youth/community development as core elements of their missions
General Priorities

The most frequently cited issues that respondents from both youth/community development and environmental education organizations believed were general priorities in their communities were:

- Economic Security
- Education
- Access to Healthy Food
- Elimination of Racial Inequities
- Access to Safe Natural Outdoor Spaces and Activities
- Affordable, Accessible Transportation

Other priorities noted by participants included health, housing, public safety, clean water, reducing social isolation, and youth leadership development.
Priorities for the Environment

When asked which environmental, conservation, or sustainability issues are the most important to the people they serve, the most frequently raised topics were:

- Access to and Preservation of Natural Areas
- Climate Change and Energy Issues
- Healthy Food Systems
- Water Quality
- Transportation
- Resource Over-Consumption
- Wildlife, Fish, and Habitat Issues

Also mentioned: health issues, livability/walkability of neighborhoods, invasive species, and air quality.
Common Projects

Several areas of focus for common projects were raised as topics that would yield important benefits for youth and community development as well as for environmental, conservation, and sustainability priorities:

• **Food systems:** Healthy, sustainable, equitable
• **Natural outdoor areas:** Conservation, sustainable management, and healthy, safe access
• **Health and wellness:** An overarching connector of other common concerns
• **Education:** In school and out of school
• **Local communities:** Resilience and identity
• **Reduced consumption:** Energy, materials, buildings, transportation
• **Transportation:** Affordable, equitably distributed, environmentally sustainable, low impact
• **Water management:** For healthy human use and for fisheries, biodiversity, and ecosystem health
Barriers & Challenges

• **Growing Relationships** – the challenge of building long-term supportive relationships between groups and individuals who work for youth and community development and environment, conservation, and sustainability outcomes

• **Funding Collaboration** – the difficulty of dedicating scarce staff time and organizational resources toward meeting with other groups and building mutual awareness and relationships; overcoming the structural pressure to compete with each other for limited funding

• **Developing Common Projects** – the challenge of looking for areas of intersection among missions rather than emphasizing identity-defining differences in missions; finding great topics for collective action that will generate mutual benefit, enthusiasm and success

• **Bridging Divisions Related to Race** – the challenge of overcoming structural, historical, personal and behavioral issues related to relations between communities of color and white-dominated institutions and organizations

• **Working With Language, Culture, and Logistics** – the challenge of improving cultural awareness and cultural responsiveness and overcoming language and logistical barriers when working across community and organizational boundaries.
Supporting Community-Based EE

The primary recommendation that emerged from these interviews is that in order to be effective, environmental education must be integrated within communities and within community-based organizations (i.e. geographically defined communities, communities of color, low-income communities, etc.) This can be achieved by building capacity within youth and community development organizations to create and deliver their own environmental education programs and by building strong partnerships between environmental education providers and community organizations. Both approaches place environmental education providers primarily in a supportive role, emphasizing ongoing relationships with self-determining communities, with many of the lead roles in program design and delivery fulfilled by community members.
Recommendation #1

Environmental educators who wish to work in diverse communities should whenever possible develop long-term partnerships and help build capacity within those communities to design, modify, and lead their own culturally responsive environmental education programs. Collaborative design and leadership involving people with specific community experience, history, relationships, and expertise along with people who have environmental, conservation, or sustainability expertise is likely to lead to better outcomes on many dimensions than one-size-fits-all, prepackaged, delivered-from-outside education programs. This means that a substantial portion of funding for environmental education efforts must be dedicated to supporting local organizations and members of these communities as they develop capacity to engage with environmental issues.
Recommendation #2

Building robust, long-term partnerships among youth/community development groups and organizations focused on environmental, conservation, and sustainability goals requires time—time that is generally not available. Most NGOs are chronically under-resourced and focus their limited budgets on core missions and operations, and perhaps on collaboration with similar groups that have closely aligned missions. Funders who wish to support environmental justice or work at the intersection of all these issues should focus substantial resources on convening, matchmaking, and cultivating these partnerships by providing funding that is dedicated to relationship building, collaboration, and common projects. Anti-collaborative pressures related to competition for recognition and funding should be reduced wherever possible.
Recommendation #3

Both environmental educators and those who focus on youth and community development and empowerment may hold counterproductive stereotypes about each other that hinder their interest in developing partnerships and common projects. Like many stereotypes these may include some grains of truth mixed with inaccurate beliefs, overgeneralizations, and misleading expectations. Exploring and working through these assumptions and differing perspectives may help refine understandings and build focus and momentum for shared efforts.
All groups will benefit from recognizing the need to work together. It is unlikely that most environmental education efforts will achieve success by themselves without meaningful partnerships in specific locales with specific cultural communities. Most community and youth development groups will benefit from increased capacity (through partnerships and funding) to address critical environmental education issues that affect them.
Recommendation #5

Much more work remains to be done to overcome divisions related to race, class, language, and recency of immigration. One key way to work on these issues is to ensure that organizations have a visible, substantive, multifaceted approach to ensuring that people of different backgrounds are represented on boards, among leadership and staff, and in the design and delivery of plans, activities, publications, projects and programs. Another key avenue for bridging such divides is to provide opportunities for organizations that grew out of under-represented communities to build capacity and contribute as full partners and leads in environmental education efforts.
Recommendation #6

There are many suitable topics for shared, collaborative efforts that address youth and community development and empowerment goals as well as environmental, conservation, and sustainability goals. Building relationships among groups and working together on common projects can have reciprocal benefits. In other words, good relationships make developing common projects more possible, and common projects if done with care make developing good relationships more possible.
Quotes

“The biggest gap is that environmental education organizations don’t understand that the environment is important to communities of color, who are actually more willing to pay for good environmental practices.”

“People in our community often talk about the environment in relation to their children and neighborhoods.”

“Get people together to co-create priorities. Commit time up front.”

“We need to be more culturally sensitive in approaching some communities. We go in with an agenda; what’s missing is relationship building, trust building, asking questions. You can’t just drop in, you must spend time building relationships, having a conversation and dialog, inviting people in, learning about their culture and needs and struggles before pressing an agenda.”
Discussion
Thank You!

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