

Part I: Preliminary Information

Title: Toward an Abolitionist Environmental and Place-Based Education: Applying Research to Practice

Abstract: I am applying for the Leadership Prize to extend and enhance an in-progress qualitative research study that examines the educational philosophies and practices of justice-oriented environmental and place-based educators to see if and how environmental and place-based education could be used as a tool for abolitionist teaching (i.e., to dismantle harmful norms and practices in schools). According to Love (2019), abolitionist teaching “seeks to resist, agitate, and tear down the educational survival complex through teachers who work in solidarity with their school’s community” (p. 89). With the support of the Leadership Prize, I could 1) continue conducting interviews with justice-oriented environmental and place-based educators, 2) share my findings with the Elon community and greater educational research community, 3) design and facilitate workshops to support teachers in Alamance County and across the state, and 4) inform and deepen the work of the NC School Garden Network.

Part II: Problem Description and Personal Statement

Problem Description:

“Education... is the great equalizer of the conditions of men” (Mathis, 2019, para. 1).

The quote above, which is often attributed to Horace Mann, is not entirely false in 2021. Education has the power to provide people with so many new and fantastic opportunities. Unfortunately, schooling experiences are not always created equal. Research shows that the United States education system is quite harmful for students of color, and for a number of reasons -- implicit bias, deficit thinking, microaggressions, and curriculum violence. The Alamance-Burlington School System (ABSS) is not immune to these issues. Students are overwhelmed by high-stakes standardized testing, increasing time spent on computers or tablets, the inflexibility of scripted lessons and pacing guides, and minimal time to play and explore outside. Put another way, students are suffocating in what Bettina Love (2019) calls “the educational survival complex.” According to Love, schools function to prepare students for lives of exhaustion rather than providing them with rich educational opportunities and plenty of academic, social, and emotional support. As a future teacher, this concerns me. During my field placements in local schools, I have noticed the devastating impacts of the educational survival complex on my students’ spirits. When working with them individually, I see students who are bright and curious, but their brilliance is often neglected. They seem bored and bothered by the irrelevance of curriculum and emphasis on testing. Everyday they sit inside a classroom for several hours and are constantly being told what to do and how to do it. For these students, learning is neither engaging nor enjoyable.

There have been many attempts at educational reform in the United States to lessen some of the harm perpetuated in schools, but very few have brought about long-lasting or widespread change (Payne, 2008). Reforms like school-wide behavior programs, online learning platforms, and charter schools do little to address root causes, which Love (2019) and others name as white supremacy. For ABSS and other school systems, intersectional justice is desperately needed.

If so many reforms have been attempted and failed, what is there left to say? Why am I writing this proposal? I am inspired by the potential of Love's (2019) abolitionist teaching, particularly the ways in which nature- and community-based approaches to education might bring about healing and restoration for all students, particularly students of color. Abolitionist teaching is all about dismantling systems of oppression, not reforming them. It works to restore the dignity and humanity of students of color by centering Black joy and genius, anti-racism, love, and healing in every action. Abolitionist teaching rejects zero tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the "weaponization of whiteness" -- when students of color are penalized for resisting white standards (Dillard, 2020; Stoltzfus, 2019).

Because abolitionist teaching is novel, there are few examples of what it looks like in practice; Love does not yet offer specific steps that all educators can follow to become abolitionist teachers. In my research, however, I have noticed that physically getting outside of classrooms (e.g., school gardens, local parks, community spaces) is often associated with freedom, exploration, joy, and relevance. It got me thinking: what role could getting outside play in disrupting harmful policies, practices, and norms in schools? What if this was one of the ways that I could be an abolitionist teacher? This was reflected in my own educational experience. I went to a private school in Atlanta where it was normal for us to go outside during the school day. We also used the local community as a resource for learning. I felt so much more relaxed, connected to the material, and eager to learn on the days we had class outside. It was a much better alternative to constant sitting, listening, and testing.

Environmental and place-based education (EPBE) are non-traditional approaches designed to connect students with nature and their communities. Environmental education aims to teach students about the natural world; place-based centers learning in students' everyday lives (Anderson, 2017). However, EPBE does not inherently grapple with policies, practices, and norms in schools that are rooted in white supremacy. In fact, the field of EPBE is often dominated by white people and their concerns (Stapleton, 2020). Nonetheless, the goals of EPBE overlap with abolitionist teaching. Both strive to get outside of and break down the harmful parts of the education system, but for different reasons. My hunch, what kickstarted my research project, was that EPBE could contribute to racial restoration and healing if done through an abolitionist teaching lens. Numerous studies have documented the benefits of teaching and learning outside -- academic achievement, environmental attitudes, and happiness, to name a few (Ardoin et al., 2020; Bratman et al., 2019; Chawla, 2020; Chawla, 2015; Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009). Nature is also known to be physically, mentally, and emotionally healing. Heart rates go down and cortisol levels return to normal (Kuo, Barnes, & Jordan, 2019). Imagine how getting

outside could benefit the students in ABSS! Instead of staring at a computer screen or listening to a lecture, students could be doing “hands-on, real-world learning” while reaping the benefits of being in nature (Sobel, 2004, p. 7). EPBE doesn’t have to be something that only wealthy districts can do. It’s for everyone.

Like the classroom, nature is not culturally neutral. To get the most benefit from getting outside without causing further harm, EPBE must be rooted in abolitionist teaching and promote healing and love. Abolitionist teaching is not something that only benefits students of color, either. All students in ABSS would benefit from an abolitionist EPBE because it eliminates policies, practices, and norms that harm everyone. An abolitionist EPBE can help create “a vision for what schools will be when the educational survival complex is destroyed” (Love, 2019, p. 89).

Personal Background and Motivation:

Nature was one of my first and most influential teachers. Growing up, I spent hours and hours outside playing. I have fond memories of searching for water skimmers in the creek behind my friend’s house and challenging my sister to a fig tree climbing contest. I learned so much from my outdoor escapades like the names of bugs, how to build forts, and how to grow different fruits and vegetables. My experiences in nature were not confined to family activities. Starting in 3rd grade, my elementary school took us on various outdoor and community-based field trips and multi-day camping trips to explore the different areas of Georgia from the city to the mountains. One of my favorite memories from these trips was traveling to Saint Simons Island in 4th grade, where we learned about barrier islands. We followed armadillos, dissected squids, and trekked through the marsh. Exploring the marsh was my favorite part. Our teachers gave us about 30 minutes to simply play. It was an unforgettable experience. Back on campus, nature and the Atlanta community were integrated into almost all of the subjects since everyone had access to the school garden, the public park across the street, and various museums in the area. These early experiences created a strong foundation of nature and community appreciation that would continue through many more years of school.

I am incredibly privileged to have the educational opportunities that I did. These experiences would later support me as I worked with diverse groups of students in my various school placements as an elementary education major. This semester, I enrolled in Dr. Morrison’s environmental education course. In this course, we partner with Elon Elementary to help facilitate a garden club for 3rd through 5th graders. Watching them work together in the garden brings me so much joy! I even heard one student exclaim, “You haven’t lived until you’ve put your hands in the Earth!” as we were adding soil to our garden bed. Every single one of my students were curious, eager, and outspoken -- even the ones who were initially very shy. Being in the garden brought this out of them, much like being in nature back home brought this out in me.

My research so far with Dr. Morrison, which we started last year, and being in his environmental education course has prepared me to use nature and other outdoor spaces as a context for learning. I also have a placement this semester at Grove Park Elementary through a different course. Spending time with 3rd graders during the school day has a completely different vibe than being there for an after-school club. Unfortunately, I tend to see less excitement around learning when I'm there. They are intelligent and curious kids, but they spend so much of their time working through modules on a computer. Not being able to move their bodies and explore their interests produces "inappropriate" classroom behavior like wiggling and chatting. I try to bring in my understanding of abolitionist EPBE where I can (e.g., in my lesson plans and smaller activities), and the students I've worked with so far all are much more engaged when I incorporate nature or their community into the lesson. In these moments, learning is much more like playing. Playing, which involves inquiry, critical thinking, and more, is a valuable yet overlooked form of learning. Students are enthusiastically and intentionally interacting with their environment to learn about relationships between people, plants, and life in general.

Every student with whom I have worked, regardless of race, gender, ability, or status, loves spending time outside. They are so much happier and full of energy. I want to find more ways to tap into this in my work inside and outside of the classroom. I've had numerous experiences working with students thus far in my life, but none as meaningful as when I can work with students in nature. In high school, I worked as a camp counselor for summer and weekend youth theater camps. Now in college, I've tutored in The Village Project every semester and have been in multiple field placements at local schools. I am well prepared to support students and other educators in their journey toward abolitionist teaching. In fact, Dr. Morrison and I have already been invited to speak at one conference and facilitate a workshop for teachers at an elementary school in Raleigh. I can leverage these experiences to share my research findings with more teachers. Hopefully, this is just the beginning.

Part III: Plan for Intellectual Inquiry

Despite the lengthy evidence of the healing and restorative effects of spending time in nature (Chawla, 2015; Williams, 2017), it is not typically cited as a tool for healing racial trauma or disrupting oppressive systems. As a future educator, I am challenged to find ways to move toward a more critical EPBE and consider whose voices have shaped our "narratives, research, and curriculum," and whose voices are continuously ignored (Stapleton, 2020). This research project is my opportunity to pass the mic.

Dr. Morrison and I started this research project in October of last year to understand more about ways that EPBE could push back against racism and move toward equity and inclusion. The response has been overwhelmingly positive so far. We've interviewed 20 self-identified justice-oriented environmental and place-based educators -- mostly from the United States and Canada but also Kenya and Uganda -- to understand their perspectives on the ways that EPBE overlaps with antiracism and abolitionist teaching. From these interviews, we created the following

themes: intentionality, reclaiming space, cultivating a strong classroom community, centering community expertise and knowledge, mattering, curricular exploration and inquiry, centering Black joy and genius, restorative agency, making space for difficult and authentic discussions, and everyday environmental education. We currently have over 60 people waiting to be interviewed, and the list keeps growing. The Leadership Prize will help me continue these interviews; through other grants, we have offered \$50 to all participants. It's important to compensate people for their time and expertise when doing antiracist work. After collecting data, Dr. Morrison and I are planning to write a manuscript on our findings and submit it to an academic journal, perhaps *Environmental Education Research*, *The Journal of Environmental Education*, or *Harvard Educational Review*.

So many people in the environmental education field find this research valuable. Dr. Morrison and I have presented at four national and international research conferences so far -- National Children and Youth Garden Symposium (NCYGS), Environmental Educators of North Carolina (EENC) Conference, North American Association of Environmental Educators (NAAEE) Research Symposium, and the American Educational Studies Association (AESA) Conference -- and are pending acceptance from the Virginia Association for Environmental Educators (VAEE) Conference, American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference, and the Children and Nature Network (C&NN) Conference. In fact, we were invited to submit a proposal to the VAEE Conference after presenting at the EENC Conference in September 2021. We've also been asked to create a series of webinars for [Kids Gardening](#), a national nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting school gardens across the United States, on our research after presenting at the NCYGS in July 2021. Aside from these conferences, we have also submitted a blog post on our research project for [Rethink Outside](#), a collaborative that focuses on supporting equitable access to nature. We were recently invited to lead a workshop on abolitionist teaching at the [Durham Public Schools Hub Farm](#). The Leadership Prize would support travel to different conferences to share our research findings with more diverse audiences and allow me to continue developing personally and professionally.

Research is meaningless without application. This research project will expand upon the work of a previous Leadership Prize recipient to create and facilitate workshops for educators that are centered in antiracism and abolitionist teaching through the North Carolina School Garden Network (NCSGN). These workshops will be hosted locally at Elon Elementary or Eastlawn Elementary, two schools that Dr. Morrison already has partnerships with and has worked with extensively. The workshops would focus on understanding the interdisciplinary possibilities of EPBE and learning how EPBE can be used as a tool for abolitionist teaching. The workshops would support educators who are thinking of starting to incorporate EPBE or who want to enhance their current EPBE practice, particularly with school gardens but also other spaces outside of the classroom. One study found that educators who wanted to incorporate EPBE struggled with integrating multicultural perspectives into instruction because of perceived culture clash, which prevented them from making deeper connections with their students (Blanchet-Cohen & Reilly, 2013). Yet, Williams and Anderson (2015) found that English language learners

(ELLs) benefited greatly from garden-based learning because they felt more connected to the material and less worried about making mistakes. The 21.5% of ABSS students who are speakers of other languages may benefit from this type of instruction (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). After the workshops, participants will have continued support through social media platforms and online resources from NCSGN.

To develop my own leadership skills, I hope to attend workshops at [Life Lab](#) to learn more about garden-based education. Life Lab is a national organization based in Santa Cruz, CA. They host experiential professional development sessions that help educators utilize gardens and natural spaces to their full potential. Attending these workshops would support my leadership skills and enhance my current environmental education skills. I would be able to combine what I learn at the workshop with the data from this research project to design an entirely new caliber of workshop -- one that encompasses nature, antiracism, and abolitionist teaching.

Part IV: Feasibility, Budget and Timeline

Feasibility statement:

The research portion of this project is well underway. As previously mentioned, we have interviewed 20 people and have plans to interview many more. From these interviews, we have gathered a lot of rich data, and we have even started pulling out themes that would be emphasized in our workshops. Importantly, all of our participants have explained that the concept of abolitionist EPBE makes sense and want to see more of it. After presenting at conferences, many attendees shared that it was an important contribution to the field of environmental education and were excited to see where our project led.

This project also builds off of existing community partnerships, making its application feasible. The local application for this project will be a series of workshops for North Carolina educators. Dr. Morrison has worked closely with teachers at Elon Elementary and Eastlawn Elementary to help grow their gardens for several years. This is where the workshops will be hosted, and hopefully many of our attendees will come from ABSS. I also have connections to Grove Park Elementary, another school in the area, through my current field placement. Through this connection, I hope to recruit more teachers to participate in the workshops. The conferences Dr. Morrison and I attended in the fall (e.g., EENC) have helped us connect with other environmental educators in North Carolina who would benefit from these workshops as well. Of course, these workshops are not just for environmental and place-based educators; they would benefit all teachers who want to help their students' academic skills and physical and mental well-being.

Budget:

\$1,500 for travel and registration to Life Lab in July 2022 for garden-based education training

\$2,300 for conference expenses

- Expected conferences: VAEE 2022, AERA 2022, C&NN 2022, NCYGS 2023, AERA 2023, NAAEE 2023

\$2,000 for research expenses

- Funding for participants (\$50 per interview)
- Transcripts (about \$12 per interview)

\$1,700 for educator workshops

- Materials (\$900)
- Merchandise (\$400)
- Refreshments (\$400)

Total: \$7,500

Timeline:

Semester	Steps
Winter 2022 (December-January)	Planning meeting with NCSGN (December) POL 3760: Washington Center Seminar (January) -- This class allows Teaching Fellows to learn about educational policy first-hand from speakers and on-site visits in Washington, D.C., and other locations through the Washington Center.
Spring 2022 (February-May)	VAEE Conference (February) in Richmond, VA Kids Gardening Network webinar (February) Abbotts Creek Elementary PD workshop (March) Durham Public Schools Hub Farm workshop in Durham, NC (March) Kickoff for NCSGN + spring workshop #1 (March) Kids Gardening Network webinar (March) AERA Annual Meeting (April)
Summer 2022 (June-July)	SURE (June and July) Summer NCSGN workshop #2 (July) Life Lab workshops in Santa Cruz, CA NCYGS 2022 Conference (July)
Fall 2022 (August-December)	Fall NCSGN workshop #3 (Sept) NAAEE 2023 Conference (October)
Winter 2023 (January-February)	Study abroad in Ghana

Spring 2023 (March-May)	Spring NCSGN workshop #4 (March) AERA Annual Meeting (April)
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Part V: List of sources

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