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Plantasia's Daughter: An Intersectional Approach to Environmental Education Organizations Through Diverse Hiring Practices

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Plantasia's Daughter: An Intersectional Approach to Environmental Education Organizations

Through Diverse Hiring Practices

by

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Under the Direction of Kim D. Reimann, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the climate crisis, critical questions regarding the livelihoods and socio-economic prospects of Black and Indigenous People of Color linger as technical solutions in the alternative energy field forge ahead. Some early environmental and climate justice activists have argued that alternative energy solutions and other environmental initiatives suffer from inefficient mobilization, including drastic gaps in diversity and inclusion. The research will specifically look at diverse hiring practices to examine the fundamentals of Black and Indigenous leadership – herein referred to as BIPOC leadership- within environmental education non-governmental organizations in Georgia. The effects of these leadership models will be further studied to determine career linkage possibilities for minorities in the environmental education sector and the environmental sector writ large.

INDEX WORDS: Nongovernmental organizations, Diverse hiring, Social movements, Environmental education, Environmental justice, Climate change

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DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the late Wangari wa Maathai, Dr. Robert D. Bullard, and the climate justice warriors in the geographic areas that are most impacted by the climate crisis. I would also like to dedicate this to my parents, Mrs. Mary Kiriaku and Dr. Johnson Kinyua Kiriaku.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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PREFACE

In the wake of the 21st century climate crisis, several problems vex the American working and schooling populations. Issues surrounding climate change and its inevitable consequences have morphed into polarized camps that are housed within contingent ideological structures. However, despite polarization and political division, climate change continues to alter the landscape of cities, towns, and rural communities. A generation of young Black, Southeast Asian, East Asian, Indigenous, and non-White Hispanic workers are coming of age in the era of this drastic climate alteration. How do they make sense of their futures, their working years, and their livelihoods? One method of analysis approaches the problem through the public policy and nongovernmental institutions sector, primarily the advances of environmental education organizations. This approach emphasizes the need for alternative energy practices to ease the energy burdens placed upon general populations while recognizing an increased need for resource mobilization, environmental policy education, and green sector job development.

1   RESEARCH QUESTION

The climate crisis has birthed numerous industries working to combat the effects of climate change and environmental degradation. This includes the construction of educational organizations and training institutes that encourage conservation efforts and climate knowledge. This has produced two "arms," so to speak, in the climate industry that link technical solutions (alternative energy, energy-efficient utilities, nature conservation, etc.) with social and interdisciplinary knowledge work (environmental education, environmental policy, and legislation). While there seems to be a fine coalitional approach that bridges the technical with the political and educational, there is a glaring lacuna thrumming from beneath these initiatives. That lacuna is the issue of race as linked to climate change and the subsequent consequences of the climate crisis within communities of color.

This may seem like a non-sequitur, but the issues of race and climate change are inextricably linked. Communities that consist primarily of people of color disproportionately bear the burden of air, water, and waste problems (Bullard, 1993). Additionally, race influences the likelihood of exposure to environmental health risks, increases the likelihood of living near sewage treatment plants and municipal waste landfills, and increases the chance of living near freeways as well as other noxious facilities (Knox, 1993). Given these interrelated phenomena, this thesis posits the following question: What could explain the lack of BIPOC representation and leadership within the environmental sector, despite the great burden placed upon communities of color by climate change?

1.1   Hypothesis

Could it be a lack of skill and or/opportunity in the talent pool? The literature regarding

diverse hiring practices is critical to the foundational underpinnings of this study. A lack of

results, skill, or opportunity within an intentionally diverse talent pool may offer a competing

explanation for the lack of BIPOC representation in the environmental sector. However, the

literature provides examples of a diverse hiring pool as critical to increased productivity and

retention. Numerous studies have found that diversified sectors and industries consistently

produce better solutions and more effective workplaces (Roberge, 2010).

Could it be a lack of effort on the part of environmental entrepreneurs? While this may be

a tempting argument, the environmental sector tends to move quite swiftly in the realm of gender

diversity and other forms of diverse hiring practices. However, recent studies have shown that

gender diversity regularly outpaces racial diversity in the green sector, despite the strong interest

in further diversifying the field (Taylor, 2015). Dr. Dorceta E. Taylor of the University of

Michigan recently published a study showing that Caucasian women made considerable strides

in leadership within sustainability nongovernmental organizations. According to this study,

Caucasian women accounted for approximately 60% of the intern and new hire positions in these

organizations (Taylor, 2014). The study makes the claim that every type of environmental

institution made significant progress in gender diversity, but little had been done for racial

diversity. This may point to a reality wherein diversity is viewed by environmental entrepreneurs

as a comportment of gender relations only. This signals a narrowness of effort, and perhaps an

anemic vision of diversity, but it may not signify a total lack of effort.

Could it be a lack of environmental educational exposure? The environmental education

literature notes an increase in environmental education initiatives "... develops and enhances

environmental attitudes, values, and knowledge." Environmental education initiatives also build skills that prepare individuals and communities to collaboratively undertake positive environmental action (Ardoin, 2019). A systematic review of 105 environmental education organizations conducted by the Stanford Social Ecology Lab found that cognitive and affective improvements were found in organization members. These positive effects lead to positive impacts on the individual member's interactions with the climate crisis, increasing conservation efforts on an individual level, while also providing dedicated human resources to the environmental education sector on a collective level.

However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the makeup of these organizations. While there are these positive cognitive and affective improvements in organizational participants, *who* are the participants? Are communities of color considered in the marketing, recruitment, and expansion of these environmental education groups? After exploring the potential competing explanations for the racial representation gap in the green sector, the research in this paper proposes a new approach: how can we utilize environmental education organizations to bridge the representation gap between Black and Indigenous People of Color and White people in the green sector? In an even greater attempt at specificity and granularity, how can researchers look to the leadership of said organizations as a potential avenue for positive change? Environmental racism is often underrepresented in issues regarding climate change and alternative energy. This paper argues that the remaining gap in the prevailing environmental literature may be- at least, potentially- explored by analyzing the leadership structure of environmental education organizations. In this way, the intersecting issues of race and climate change as viable and important considerations in environmental policy creation may lay upon each other to inform climate solutions at hand alongside alternative energy trends.

1.2   Literature Review

Diverse Hiring in Environmental Education Nongovernmental Organizations

The preliminary literature paints a stark picture of the diversity dearth in environmental

education, with one review finding membership lists in such organizations to be racially and

socioeconomically "homogenous." Leadership and staff of these organizations are regularly

skewed towards middle to upper-class White people, with little effort to include People of Color

(James, 1993). Though this is understood as the typical pattern in the environmental education

sector, it may not be a supported method of sustainable organizational practice. In other

industries, increasing the level of diversity has not only increased productivity, but has prevented

stagnation, increased democratization in decision-making, increased the skill base and range of

talent amongst organizational members, and curtailed the accumulation of implicit bias

(Marquis, 2008). This leads to a few important questions facing the environmental sector, and

the environmental education sector in particular: Where can environmental activists and

educators have an honest conversation about the lack of diversity in their field, their own implicit

bias in hiring practices, and the regular insight the diverse hiring practices improve industries? It

may be pertinent to ground these questions and the supportive literature in an example. An

experiential analysis of one such environmental education nonprofit organization, Sustainable

Georgia Futures, may elucidate the necessity for this specific study.

Sustainable Georgia Futures is a grassroots environmental education organization

stationed in Atlanta, Georgia. SGF serves people in DeKalb County, Clayton County, and Fulton

County. As a part of the Justice40 coalition, SGF received direct funding to target green

economic growth in communities of color. SGF approaches this work through the lens of

relational organizing and federal climate financing. Sustainable Georgia Futures connects low-

income to middle-class workers of color to job and internship opportunities in the green sector.

Additionally, SGF hires professional organizers and consultants to facilitate group meetings, or

"House Meetings," and to run the Green Fellowship Program. In both the House Meetings and

the Fellowship program, recruited partners and hired fellows to engage deeply in workshops

about the green sector, environmental climate justice, environmental racism, and climate

gentrification in the city of Atlanta.

SGF relies on a fiscal sponsorship model. Fiscal sponsorship allows SGF to use another

organization's tax exemption for a small fee. However, if SGF can choose to pivot towards the

private sector or choose to publicly trade on the market. Its fiscal sponsorship allows SGF to

work as both a nonprofit organization and a nongovernmental organization. Seeing as the

organization is relatively new and given that the Justice40 accelerator program gives SGF access

to additional federal funding, SGF primarily relies on the grant funding model through a fiscal

sponsor to support its operating budget and programming. This model allows for them to a)

maintain 501(c)3 tax status and b) fund seven fellows through their Green Fellowship program.

Importantly, this is a Black woman-led and Black woman-staffed environmental education

initiative. Sustainable Georgia Futures is a nongovernmental organization that follows a social

change model that implements diverse hiring and community leadership identification as a

mobilization technique. The organization applies diverse hiring theory and the curtailing of

implicit bias to the broader lens of environmental education (Lewis, 2015). The leadership and

organizational mission of Sustainable Georgia Futures are based upon the idea that climate and

environmental justice come from the policy sector. Subsequently, to change policy is to change

social outlooks, norms, and valuations through the mobilization of available resources- resources

that range from labor to technology, to monetary capital. From this lens, social change is not

only reliant upon technological and energy alternatives but is also reliant on the social values and norms present in each country, state, or city.

This is a different "method of attack," so to speak, in the climate and environmental sector. It lies outside of prescribed understandings of technological and consumer models as the heartland of the needed systematic social change as a conduit for environmental and ecological shifts (Florini, 2009). In truth, both understandings are robust and well-supported by the literature. They work in tandem with one another and not against one another. The current climate and environmental sectors understandably emphasize efficient energy models, alternative fuel resources, and technological automation. The emphasis on resource mobilization in the event of increased grievances within the public as a balm for further disintegration is evident in Sustainable Georgia Future's organizational model.

In the face of often conflicting and competing interests, while counteracting climate change, this emphasis on mobilizing resources through social movements and diverse hiring is crucial. Additionally, the social movement industry happens to be a growing industry in the United States of America, and within the American climate justice movement (Callahan, 2021). This can be seen through the growth of social innovation programs across liberal arts colleges in America as well as the institutionalization of federal and philanthropic funding models for the relevant nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (Archino, 2020; Toscher, 2019). The usefulness of diversity literature within the specific school of climate justice is most evident when there is social fragmentation around climate solutions and the economic implications of the climate crisis. This particular intersection between diverse hiring literature and social movements can be found in the social movement theoretical school. Social movement theory notices the link

between "frustrations or grievances of a collectivity of actors and the growth and decline of movement activity (McCarthy, 1977)."

In the face of competing interests (fossil fuel lobbying, infrastructure stagnancy, transportation, and urban planning), climate realities, and growing class divisions, the stratum of climate opinions and action within most democratic countries is deeply fragmented. The additions of technological changes and fuel alternatives are crucial to understanding possible climate solutions, but social movement theory and the diverse hiring literature both ask an important clarifying question: is it enough? Is the implementation of scientific and technological tools enough to change the social values and norms of a given society insofar as it can change the entirety of its internal structure to accommodate such changes and to view those changes as necessary for a sustainable, tenable environment? This clarifying question is central to the cause of many nascent environmental and climate justice organizations, particularly those concerned with the intersection of race and climate change. Their missions are concerned with resource mobilization and the liberal application of technological and scientific change to the larger public through the shifting of social values as well as the mitigation of environmental racism. The necessity of a diverse hiring practice must be emphasized to accomplish these goals (Paynter, 2017).

2   METHODS AND DESIGN: CASE SELECTION AND EMPIRICAL RESULTS

By utilizing a comparative case study and statistical analysis method, this specific

research design focused on fifteen randomly selected environmental education organizations that

operate in the state of Georgia (Lijphart, 1975). As the hypothesis states, increased BIPOC

leadership within these organizations may lead to an increase in the hiring of BIPOC staff

members. As a teleological goal, increased BIPOC environmental education staff members may

lead to an increase in representation for young BIPOC workers interested in the green sector.

This may lead to a greater number of BIPOC students engaging in the green sector as a viable

path toward economic mobility for early careerists as well as increased awareness of the racial-

socioeconomic dynamic interlinked with the environmental sector.

2.1   Case Selection

All organizations were sourced from the *Environmental Education in Georgia* directory

(Haddock, 2022). After an initial discovery phase and edits, all organizations analyzed were

selected using three criteria. These organizations were chosen because they focused on the

"learning processes that increase the knowledge and awareness" of environmental issues and

sustainable development. Due to their interdisciplinary nature, this niche of the green sector

concerned itself with education and instruction, rather than technological solutions or clean

energy alternatives.

2.1.1   Criteria

Organizations were selected on the basis of three key criteria to maintain the integrity of

the observations:

A. The organization fell under a 501(c)3 or 501(c)4 tax umbrella.

B. The organization consisted of at least three people. Individuals within the directory were

   not selected.

C. The organization focused on environmental education as a core objective of its

   organizational mission or goals.

    Leadership was defined as executive directors, or those designated by the Board of

Directors to lead the strategic initiative of the non-governmental institution, as well as the

directors of individual departments. This was, in part, to simplify the categories of inclusion and

definition. However, there was an additional reason for this delineation. Most of the selected

organizations digitally published the biographies and images of their executive directors and staff

but did not do so for the Board of Directors. Since this was a regular pattern during the research

phase, I decided to focus on executive directors and department leads as the sole marker for

leadership within an organization BIPOC leaders and staff were evaluated through the presence

of Black, Southeast Asian, East Asian, Indigenous community members, and/or non-White

Hispanic people on organizational websites. To discern these criteria, I looked at leadership and

staff photographs as well as available biographies with specific references to background, race,

or ethnicity. With this information, I made an educated guess regarding the selected person's

racial and ethnic background.

2.2   Empirical Results

    Following the initial analysis of this research pool, I measured the relationship between

BIPOC leadership and BIPOC staff by performing a crosstabulation in the statistical package,

StataBE. I then performed a Chi-squared test to measure statistical significance. This is shown

through the correlation coefficient (* and **, respectively) in tables 2.2-2.3. I performed the

same measures between White leadership and White staff. Finally, I measured the relationship

between White leadership and BIPOC staff as well as the relationship between BIPOC

leadership and White staff, respectively. A total of 200 leadership and staff members across the

fifteen organizations were recorded and analyzed. For ease of presentation and readability, Table

2.1 has been converted to percentages, though the statistical analysis used the original numerical

counts for accuracy.

I found several engaging patterns between the variables. Once operationalized, there was

an effect between the independent variable- BIPOC leadership- and the dependent variable-

BIPOC staff in the selected organizations (see Table 2.2). This relationship may signify some

support for the original hypothesis, though it is important to note that the relationship and its

effects were not as strong as anticipated. However, I was particularly surprised to see that there

was indeed a relationship, in a general sense. The data did not find a statistically significant

relationship between White leadership and BIPOC staff members. Similarly, there was little

interaction between BIPOC leadership and White staff members. However, there was an

illuminating discovery in the data between two other variables: White leadership and White staff

members. It was observed that there was a very strong relationship between these two

variables: *a positive correlation with nearly a 95% chance of statistical significance.* (see Table

2.3).

Table 2-1: Organizational Leadership and Staff Makeup

Organization Name	Percentage of Leadership: BIPOC	Percentage of Staff: BIPOC	Percentage of Leadership: White	Percentage of Staff: White
Greening Youth Foundation	100%	100%	0%	0%
EcoAddendum	25%	50%	75%	50%
Alliance for Climate Education	37.04%	44.44%	62.96%	55.56%
The Southface Institute	20%	14.29%	80%	85.71%
The Captain Planet Foundation	28.57%	33.33%	71.43%	66.67%
The Sierra Club	100%	75%	0%	25%
The Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia	0%	50%	100%	50%
West Atlanta Watershed Alliance	100%	100%	0%	0%
The EARTH University Foundation	100%	100%	0%	0%
Georgia Project WET	0%	0%	100%	100%
Green Girl Atlanta	0%	0%	100%	100%
Environmental Leadership Program-Southeast Regional Network**	0%	0%	100%	0%
Chattahoochee River Environmental Education Center	17.39%	10%	82.61%	90%
EarthShare of Georgia	50%	0%	50%	100%
Trees Atlanta	0%	33.33%	100%	66.67%

Table 2-2: Organizational Analysis 1 – BIPOC Leadership and BIPOC Staff

BIPOC-led organizations who have…	0 BIPOC staff	1-2 BIPOC staff	3-5 BIPOC staff	>5 BIPOC staff
	4	8*	2*	1*

P(r)= .0119*

After performing a test of statistical significance, the relationship between minority leadership and minority staffing is positively correlated. This is represented by the correlation coefficient of P(r)=0.119. A coefficient of P(r)≥.1 is generally understood as a positive correlation with a 90% chance of statistical significance. However, these variables did not have the strongest relationship.

Table 2-3: Organizational Analysis 2 – White Leadership and White Staff

White-led organizations who have…	0 White staff	1-2 White staff	3-5 White staff	>5 White staff
	4	5**	3**	3**

P(r) = .079**

After performing a test of statistical significance, the relationship between minority leadership and minority staffing is strongly positively correlated. This is represented by the correlation coefficient of P(r)=0.079. A coefficient of P(r)=.05 is generally understood as a positive correlation with a 95% chance of statistical significance. These variables did not have as strong of a relationship as general convention would have, given that P(r)=0.079 and not P(r)=0.05. However, this relationship is important to notate as it may provide the data needed for further investigation

2.2.1 Analysis

It seems that the following pattern arises: When an environmental education organization has White leadership on its team, it is neither likely nor unlikely to represent a higher count of BIPOC staff members. The same is true when an environmental education organization has BIPOC leadership on its team and White staff members. However, when an environmental education organization has White leadership on its team, there is a statistically significant chance that there will be a higher count of White staff members. This is where the strongest relationship was found in the data. The effect is the same in the case of BIPOC leadership and BIPOC staff. It is not *as strong* as the effect between White leadership and White staff, but it is still present. The initial hypothesis was substantiated by smaller margins than anticipated. These data points may

have important implications for the subsequent hiring practices and representation of diverse

staff in the environmental education sector.

3   CONCLUSION

This research thesis found positive relationships between BIPOC leadership and BIPOC

staff as well as positive relationships between White leadership and White staff within

environmental education nongovernmental organizations. The hypothesis was supported due to

the weak albeit present relationship between BIPOC leaders and their staff, though the

relationship was stronger and better supported in the case of White leadership and their White

staff. This creates an avenue for further research within the environmental education sector and

the green sector, writ large. Furthermore, the data obtained in this study seeks to reify previous

research that suggests a positive correlation between the leadership of color in various industries

and a greater number of BIPOC employees in said industries. This could point to clear paths of

career linkage for young workers of color who are interested in the larger environmental and

sustainability sector.

3.1   Limitations

Though the tests of statistical significance offered much in the way of demographic

relationship analysis, this research design suffered from a few critical limitations. A few of these

limitations arose from the buttressing of a qualitative research pool selection with a relatively

simple quantitative analysis (King & Keohane, 1994; Stake, 2003). However, some of these

limitations may have been avoided and may be avoided in further replications of this study.

Firstly, all demographic information was strictly delegated by the researcher. These

determinations were based upon ethnic markers such as staff pictures, names, and biographies

provided through the organizational websites. Given the imprecise nature of such labeling, the

demographic selection process may have potentially skewed observations. If this research design

were to be replicated, all participants would be asked to self-report their racial and ethnic

identity. Self-reporting is not inherently a perfect option, but it may be a superior option when

compared to researcher-dependent determination. Additionally, the researcher would invariably

contact the organizations that fall under the nonprofit umbrella to provide their demographic

reports. It is standard practice for most nonprofit organizations to provide such lists, either

publicly or via private request (Burdick, 2022).

Secondly, I believe that the research would have benefited from better controls, namely

the geography and location of selected organizations. Given that the study was geographically

limited to environmental education organizations in the state of Georgia, there may be a

disproportionate skewing of demographic data that is not representative of the entire

environmental education sector. This compromises the generalizability of the data. Thirdly, the

randomization of samples may have been compromised because of the primary source. The

Environmental Education in Georgia directory is an incredibly useful tool. It is particularly

useful when analyzing the intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizational aspects of this

research. A large majority of organizations represented in the directory are directly linked to

larger governmental initiatives, namely Georgia Project WET and the Sierra Club, though they

themselves may be non-governmental. However, because of this lean, the sample pool skews

towards specific types of intergovernmental environmental education initiatives with a smaller

representation of nongovernmental organizations. This directly affects the nature of the

organizations observed. It may also have a direct effect on the demographic choices in hiring.

Had the directory included more community-based, grassroots initiatives, there may have been a

wider pool of diverse staff members.

3.2   Final Statement

While quoting her mother, the late Wangari Maathai, Wanjira Mathai states that she did

not find the environmental justice movement. Rather, it was the environmental justice movement

that found her. This research thesis argues that there are substantive strides to be made in the

world of environmental education organizations while considering the broader networks of

intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions. In the past fifty years, these kinds of

organizations have grown significantly in number, leading to increased awareness of

environmental issues as well as the alternative energy options available to combat climate

change. They have also created viable pathways to green sector jobs in the alternative energy

field as well as the environmental sciences.

However, which of these approaches takes the proverbial first step in creating change? Is it

the clean energy needs that create the environmental education and social sector policy?

Alternatively, is it the environmental education and social sector policy that guide the

mobilization of alternative energy resources toward the synthesized goals of reduced carbon

energy production and clean energy usage? The scope of this paper may be unable to answer

these questions, but it can point towards the necessity to bolster environmental education policy

as a necessary route of analysis. This is largely due to the converging socio-political complex

that plagues most, if not all, change initiatives in the West, particularly within the United States

of America: that of the racial politik.

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