



AEOE Statewide Conference Spring 2019

Opening remarks from AEOE Executive Director Estrella Risinger at the annual statewide conference, held this year at Westminster Woods in Occidental, California, March 29-31. AEOE's mission is to advance the impact of environmental and outdoor education in California.



Good morning! I am so delighted to be here, both HERE, together with all of you over this beautiful weekend, and here, as your new executive director.

I want to acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria. The Graton Rancheria community is a federation of Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo groups.

I offer this acknowledgement in recognition of the complicated history of the land that we will be living on together over the next few days. As Californians, with a deep history of conquest, enslavement, and displacement within our state, it is imperative that we know the history of the land; as environmental educators I believe we are uniquely positioned to connect young people to places in a way that is healing and hopeful.

So again. Welcome. I'd like to take a quiet moment of reflection and gratitude for the opportunity we have to come together for this amazing conference in this truly spectacular place. Think for a moment of all the places and people that have shaped you, supported you, and encouraged you to care for the land, to care for young people, to care for our future.

And now I'm going to ask you to do something for me. *[Estrella holds up a sign with a bus; Wheels on the Bus group sing-along]*

Thank you for the walk-up song. For all you baseball fans, this week is opening day. If you're a fan then you know all about walk-up songs, those unique bars of Johnny Cash, AC/DC, Drake, or Kriss Kross that play as you step up to the plate.

My own personal walk-up song isn't one I thought I could generate en masse so I thought I'd go with second best. The Wheels on the Bus is actually my youngest son's song, but I'm sure he won't mind me borrowing it. He's a little guy, just beginning to walk, with only a few teeth, and an obsession for bananas, and you should see the way his face lights up when he hears this song. It's playful and comforting at the same time. When he's crying, it soothes him. And it's such a strong reminder that those familiar moments, when something is new or scary, or exhausting, mean EVERYTHING.

And to tell you the truth, taking the stage today, I was a jumble of anxiety. And you all are the nicest group of people! But it's hard doing something new, even when you've got friends to back you up. So when you can carry even just a little piece of yourself with you, and hear it echoed back to you, it goes a long way.

As educators, we know how important this is, to connect with your students, find ways to relate to them. Help them feel seen. Heard. Reflected back to them in their eyes and hearts. And, yes, their skin. Their culture. Their language. Because familiarity brings comfort. Safety. Especially in spaces where access has been denied, is marked by exclusion or danger.

I had an experience recently when I was traveling to another state – presenting on the role of social and emotional learning in environmental education, actually, similar to what we're talking about today – when I decided to ride public transportation into town from the airport. This will be fine, I thought. A new experience. I'm down with that. But then, as I stood in line, my stomach dropped. I realized: I don't know the rules.

How much does it cost? Do I need a transfer? How do I tell the bus driver I need to get off? How

do I even know when I'm there? I don't know the rules. Lucky for me, I have ridden the bus before. I have some experience to draw from, prior knowledge that helped to inform me. So when I stepped up, I asked the driver if she could tell me when I was near the convention center. She smiled, said "Sure honey" and off we went. And, looking around me, I saw from the logos on other people's jackets that I was not alone. Many of us were going to the same conference, riding the bus together. I ended up getting there just fine.

And how many of you have had a similar experience, perhaps traveling to another country? Attending an event or being in a house of worship that is different from what you're familiar with? If you are not from the majority culture, in that moment, wherever you are, you know what that feels like.

So let's apply this to outdoor education. Perhaps you're a young person who hasn't had a lot of experiences in the outdoors, at least not ones that look like this. At first, perhaps you're experiencing excitement: I get to go to camp! The school garden! A field trip, yay! Even just getting away from the classroom can bring a sensation of novelty. And then comes apprehension, perhaps even dread. I don't know the rules.

What should I wear, do I have the right clothes? Will they laugh at me because my shoes didn't come from a fancy store? What will I do there? What if I do it wrong? Will I get in trouble? Will the instructor like me? I don't know the rules.

If we are the guides, how do we help students to learn the rules? We tap into their prior knowledge, support their ability to lean on their peers, and work to establish a learning environment where it's not only okay to ask questions, it's encouraged, and they know we are there to support them. Where we help them feel like they BELONG.

Belonging – it's one of our most powerful needs that we have as a species. Sure, that likely varies somewhat between individuals, but collectively, I'd argue that BELONGING is one of the drivers of most people's development, especially acute for the young people that many of us work with day in and day out.

As the wise Maya Angelou said: "People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel."

[turn and talk] In a few minutes, I'm going to ask you to When I say the magic word (*Estrella holds up a sign with a banana*) I want you to turn and talk to a neighbor, reflecting on these two questions:

- What do YOU need to feel like you belong?
- And: How do you see belonging showing up in your practice, either individually, or at your institution, your organization or place of work?

Magic word: Banana (5 min discussion)

Thank you for sharing. If we look around this campfire circle, we can't help but notice that as a

group, we do not fully represent the rich diversity of the students we serve. At least not ethnically or racially. Does that mean you don't belong here? That I don't belong here? Absolutely not.

But for folks who are light like me, it does mean that our work comes with an additional responsibility. We have to be the ones to reach out, to try harder. To help our students and our colleagues of color feel seen. Heard. Truly welcomed and included.

As a white educator, I've got to work especially hard to help foster a positive environment where my students will feel brave enough to take risks, where they will feel included when bringing their whole selves into the experience, where their identities will be embraced and they will feel like they belong.

This is especially true for us as environmental educators, many of whom live and work in places that might ignite trauma in the very students we seek to inspire. Because we exist in a place of tension: beautiful open hearts who mean well and want to live in a world where all living creatures can live in harmony and yet we have to be aware of the history of environmental education, which hasn't always modeled harmony or inclusivity – at least not within our own species – and in many cases, takes place in the very spaces that were used to inflict trauma on entire communities.

Take this very site. A former lumber camp that was established to build up the great victorians of an emerging metropolis to the south, and surrounded by the ancestral lands of the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo, the indigenous people of the area that were forcibly removed and placed into servitude and slavery, and where their cultures were intentionally destroyed. Despite the incredible hardships placed upon them, Tribal members continued to protect the cultural identity of their people by preserving tribal and other archeologically important sites throughout their aboriginal territory. Today, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria are a federally recognized tribe and many Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo Indians live within their ancestral territory. And this site, Westminster Woods, strives to create a place where students can learn that is welcoming and inclusive.

We have to acknowledge that many "natural" places are rooted in systemic exclusionary practices. And we need to own up to the fact that the field of environmental education was founded on perspectives that have ultimately led to EE being majority white-led. And, there are outstanding individuals and programs that have had a deep positive impact on the lives of young people. Both of these realities are true. We can't change our history. But we do need to acknowledge it and learn from it. It is up to us to strive to improve our skills and deepen our understanding of the complexity of humans' relationship with the natural world and our role in shaping those relationships. To honor and celebrate what we've accomplished, while also being self-critical, and self-correcting.

We have a collective responsibility to understand and acknowledge these complexities. To learn from them, and strive to improve. Again, as the wise Ms. Angelou said: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

One powerful way we can do better is to help our students to develop their social and emotional skills alongside their appreciation and wonder for the natural world. Creating a positive environment, modeling inclusivity, encouraging critical thinking - this is it. This is the key to ensuring that the experiences will linger, will have the long term impact we're striving for, helping our students to feel connected, and empowered to make a difference.

This is especially important in our current society, where we've become so polarized: yes vs no, red vs blue. We will not survive as a species if we cannot develop these skills and shift to more of a both/and approach. Even in the domain of science.

Take the wheels on the bus. Yes, the laws of physics say they go round and round. But don't they also go up and down? Depending on the suspension, sure. And occasionally the wheels stop. People get on, off, the driver takes a lunch break, things happen. So yes the wheels on the bus go round and round, AND up and down, AND sometimes not all all. We can hold these truths simultaneously. It all depends on your perspective, your vantage point, which moment in time you happen to be observing. One can argue from evidence, look towards the laws of nature, and accept that there are different ways of knowing, different ways of experiencing. This doesn't mean that if we have a vast scientific misperception that we're off the hook, NO, but it does mean that as educators, we have to embrace the complexity of human experience, of perception, that informs our understanding of the world.

So what does this have to do with teaching outside the box, our theme for this weekend together? What does this mean for us? How do we apply those very skills we are striving to develop in young people towards ourselves? In order to ensure that outdoor and environmental education is truly FOR ALL OF US, we have to be willing to investigate our own practice. It's important that we not get stuck in our routines, in habits of mind. And isn't that why we're here? To learn? The best teachers are ones who can be innovative, and adaptive. Responsive to students' needs, and willing to reflect on their practice. That means taking a critical look at who has largely benefited and who has historically been excluded. It means going beyond the stereotype of who engages with the outdoors, and how, and collectively raising our voices when those images, those stories, are not truly inclusive. Because that benefits ALL OF US.

And as we explore natural phenomena, and investigate human impacts on the environment, and dig into ecological systems, perhaps we can do so in a way that's a little bit kinder, more inclusive, where we can all see ourselves reflected back at us, and feel like we belong.

So I want to invite you to think about belonging over the course of this weekend. Do you see someone sitting alone? Who was brave enough to come to a conference like this without their inner circle? Maybe they're taking a quiet moment, and maybe they'd welcome your friendship. Let's also consider, who isn't here that should be? How can we as a field reach out to others to include their voices, their perspectives? In what ways can you bring your whole self to your experiences this weekend? Notice when you feel held back or kept apart. How can we, as a community, support you?

Let's commit to be better. To **educate** ourselves, to strive to **connect** with each other, and to **advance** our field so that it is truly representational of the rich diversity of our state - where outdoor and environmental education is known for being inclusive, thoughtful, innovative, and where ALL OF US BELONG, working together to make the world a better place.

This weekend, we're here to learn, expand our networks, and build our community – let's start that right now.

[Note: during the opening remarks, conference attendees participated in an activity called Mingle where they got moved around, found a partner, and responded to a prompt – in this case, they shared why they are an outdoor or environmental educator.]

Thank you for playing. As we go through this weekend, let's continue reflecting on how we show up, how we can expand our understanding, and practice inclusivity. How we can BE BETTER. As you walk to your first workshop today, see if you can find someone else to connect with. You just never know when you might find your new best friend; your new mentor; heck, the love of your life; and maybe you'll help somebody else to feel like they belong; first we have to be willing to reach out. Thank you for sharing your time with me today. I am so delighted to be a part of this community. And I can't wait to get to know all of you. So let's get started!

Suggested resources for more information:

[What Are Personal Pronouns and Why Do They Matter?](#)

[Honor Native Land: A Guide and Call to Acknowledgement](#)

[Environmentalism's Racist History](#)

[Fighting for the Environment Through Inclusion](#)

[The Green Movement is Talking About Racism? It's About Time](#)

[What is Social & Emotional Learning?](#)

[It Matters Who You See in Outdoor Media](#)

[Are There Two Different Versions of Environmentalism, One "White," One "Black"?](#)

California Association for Environmental & Outdoor Education

[**www.aeoe.org**](http://www.aeoe.org)