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Environmental Education at an Under-resourced and
Multicultural Bellingham Public School:
Reflections on AmeriCorps, Culturally Responsive Education and
Abbott Elementary

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Person Positionality and School Background

Over this past school year, I had the opportunity to serve an AmeriCorps term with Common Threads Farm as a food and garden educator. Common Threads is a local non-profit that leads in-school gardening and cooking programs in Bellingham and Mt. Baker school districts. I primarily worked at Cordata Elementary School in North Bellingham, where I taught outdoor science education lessons in their school garden for students ranging from Pre-K to 5th grade and led an afterschool cooking program. I also traveled with co-workers in the winter to teach cooking lessons to students at every elementary school in the Bellingham and Mt. Baker school district. This position has truly been my dream job. As a student in the Environmental Education and Environmental Justice programs at WWU, I gained so much applicable knowledge to the field of outdoor education and had a fabulous time doing it. I built relationships with kids,



Teaching a 2nd grade cooking class at Cordata this winter

teachers, and farmers across Whatcom County, but I found a special love for Cordata Elementary's community. To be a caretaker of their garden and their students has been the most rewarding experience I could have asked for during my time at WWU.

Cordata is one of the least-resourced elementary schools in Bellingham School District (BSD), due to a multitude of socio-economic factors that put the school community in a unique position within the predominantly wealthy and white Bellingham population. BSD is a relatively well-resourced district due to its ability to pull a significant budget from property taxes from Bellingham's well-off neighborhoods. However, Cordata is positioned on the outskirts of Bellingham, one of the most northward and the lowest-income attendance area in the district (OSPI). Due to the lingering historic racism of Bellingham (real estate exclusion preventing people of color from purchasing homes in higher property-valued neighborhoods like Fairhaven and hate crimes against South Asian Sikh migrants that pushed Sikh communities northward) the northern neighborhoods are lower-income and more racially diverse (Bellingham Racial History Timeline, n.d.) than central Bellingham areas.



Sikh men in Bellingham around the time of violent hate crimes that caused them to flee north. Credit: Bellingham Racial History Timeline

This is represented in the demographics of Cordata's school population—37.5% of students are Hispanic or Latino and 14.7% are Asian, compared to a district-wide percentage of 18.9% Hispanic or Latino students and 4.7% Asian students (OSPI). The school is the most racially diverse in BSD and has the highest percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs; children whom English is not their first language). In addition, 70% of attending families are considered low-income (qualifying for free and reduced lunch) and

almost 7% of students are homeless (OSPI). About a third of the student body is transient, meaning students will move out of the school attendance area and stop attending Cordata at some point throughout the academic year due to homelessness, seasonal work, or other family factors (Morrow, 2022). This yields a school population that's carrying a lot of baggage—trauma from adverse childhood experiences, poverty, and racism manifest into many students' struggles with emotional regulation and success in a traditional school environment.

These trauma responses and associated behaviors result in a higher need for supplemental emotional and academic resources compared to a school population experiencing less adverse experiences like the wealthier, more central Bellingham area schools (Cavanaugh, 2016). However, due to how our public school system is structured and funded, students at Cordata do not get all of these necessary supports for student success. This results in test scores that are at the bottom of the district's academic measures. Less than 10% are meeting math and literacy standards, which matters on a state-wide level in determining a school's "efficiency". This is despite standardized testing being proven to be biased towards affluent, English-speaking, white children and the argument that standardized testing is only furthering the divide between white students and students of color (Guisbond & Neil, 2004; Knoester & Au, 2017).

The labelling of the school as one of "low-efficiency" makes the job of educators harder. It entails carrying the emotional load of incorporating culturally responsive teaching pedagogies into their limited instruction hours without district support in the name of student success. There is more paperwork to measure student growth and can even mean less pay compared to the rest of the district (Owens & Candipan, 2019). Administration and teacher turnover is rapid.

The school has had 3 different principals in the last 4 years. There is no Parent Teacher Association (PTA) funding and rallying for student enrichment, the only elementary school in BSD to not have one.

I write all of this not to create a tone of despair



1st graders learning about seed transport in the garden

when speaking of Cordata. I walk the hallways to the sounds of happy children with art covering the walls. So many of the teachers, the school counselor, and the administration care deeply about the student population. The school motto is “You are Loved and You Belong”, which is repeated over the morning announcements every day. There is love, growth, and a necessary sense of stability in Cordata’s building when their students walk in. To be welcomed into their community has been such a joy.

However, some of my days at Cordata are more challenging than others. Creating intentional curriculum when using an outdoor classroom is difficult, and the added barriers of students who are struggling with age-appropriate learning standards and emotional regulation with not enough support made some days in the garden what could only be described as a frenzy. To add some levity on the long days, I would come home to catch up on an episode of Abbott Elementary. I followed this cast of teachers on the network sitcom through the course of



Cooking lentil stew during cooking season

the school year, constantly laughing and crying at how accurate of a depiction the show is of an under resourced elementary school. Abbott Elementary won six Emmys this past September after only two seasons due to the writer's ability to create a storyline that

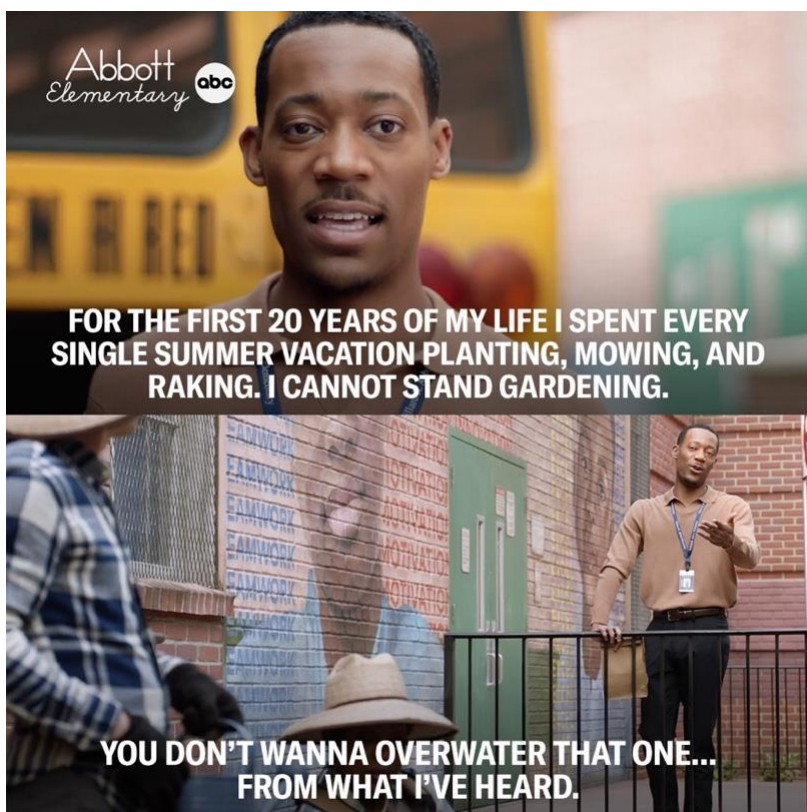
portrays what it is like to endure the bureaucracy of the public education system as an underdog struck a relevant chord with educators around the nation, including myself. What truly makes the show work is its ability to tackle these issues without leaving audiences completely disheartened. The show's use of satirical comedy brings in not only a needed levity, but the opportunity for audiences to think critically about systems of oppression in schools.

I could detail my year at Cordata in the terms of the corridors of public education power—how low-income schools receive services like environmental education, the ins and outs of Title 1 funding, the actions of racism I watched students handle in the classroom—but I would not be able to capture it in the way that Abbott does. In a way that leaves a person inspired to advocate for education (especially through grassroots, collective work like seen on the show) but not defeated and paralyzed to change of our current system. So, I decided to tell similar stories about Cordata. There were so many parallels between scenarios at my job and plotlines on Abbott that I saw when I tuned in, to the point where my year in the Cordata garden may best be

described through a comparison to Abbott Elementary. Below are vignettes of Abbott and my own experiences.



Image credits: ABC



School Gardening

A plotline throughout *Abbott Elementary* is a semi-successful school garden that two of the teachers think they are managing, but a third teacher with a green thumb is running behind the scenes. [Watch a clip of the episode here.](#)

As a school gardener myself, this episode struck a chord, specifically when referring to how difficult it can be to get the food grown in a school garden into a cafeteria. At Common Threads, we sell the crop we grow to the Bellingham Central Kitchen, which

makes from-scratch meals that get distributed across the school district, through a USDA grant.

We were able to give about 360 pounds of food this fall season. Scratch meals like tomato basil soup with ingredients sourced from our garden were served in school cafeterias for months after our harvesting season ended, providing local nourishment to kids who rely on school to get food. Public school free food programs save kids from going hungry, but the food provided is usually stocked with preservatives, sugar additives, and rarely meet nutritional guidelines (Poppendieck, 2011). Author Julie Guthman argues in her book



Produce sold to Bellingham Central Kitchen in September 2022!



Produce sold to Bellingham Central Kitchen in September 2022!

Weighing In that obesity is an ecological condition—one that is determined not only by genetics, but political and social environments in which our state has created through generations of systematic oppression. This is illustrated by low-income and families of color being pushed into less resourced northward Bellingham neighborhoods, only to be supported by welfare (like free food programs) that is ultimately harming their physical being by providing food that keeps kids and families fed, but not well-fed.



Produce sold to Bellingham Central Kitchen in September 2022!

This contradicts the classical view of many nutrition educators, who view obesity as the result of poor personal choices and eating habits. I vehemently agree with Guthman and saw this play out at Cordata with kids who had poor nutrition, but to no fault of their own. The free food bags save kids from not eating when they are not at

school, but everything in them must be shelf stable. Therefore, they do not include fresh produce and rarely any substantial protein source or fiber-rich foods to provide the necessary nourishment that kids need not only to grow, but to be present during their school day and learn. Students were able to gain this through the garden on a small scale—each week their class would try kale, tomatoes, herbs, and a multitude of other fresh produce they helped grow. They carried home with them the gardening knowledge needed to affordably grow their own food if they wish. They made (and enjoyed!) lentil stew in their cooking classes, learning about cost-effective bulk protein sources that their families could explore.



Veggie Sushi made by a student at cooking club

In after-school club, we would cook familiar foods with a nutritional twist to create new food exposure—zucchini cupcakes, pizza with homemade sauce and veggie toppings, smoothies with the added secret ingredient of spinach. The response from students was astounding—they were always more pleased with what they created than I expected. Some of the most comforting student feedback I got throughout the year was when kids would tell me that they tried a recipe or ate a food that they learned about from me at home.

The teachers of Abbott were similarly excited about the food their school garden produced but their ability to get it into the cafeteria was a bit more of a struggle. They arrive at the cafeteria with one zucchini in hand, ready to hand it over to the food service staff with the pride of accomplishing growing food to feed the school. However, the cafeteria staff comedically remind them that there is not much one can do with one squash and hundreds of mouths to feed, nor is there the room for the time and effort of the staff to prepare it.



Image Credit: ABC

I would occasionally run into similar scenarios—if I had extra basil at the end of the day, I would try to pass it off to the food service staff, who would gently remind me that they really could not do much with a handful of basil leaves. On several occasions, I harvested kale from the garden which would soon to be transformed by the food service staff into kale chips served at lunch that day. It is not realistic for this to always happen, as Abbott reminds us. However, I like to hold true to the idea that even the smallest tastings students receive in the garden will nourish them—their bodies, but also their brains. The next time they see kale at the salad bar, they might be more likely to take some. Eventually, the teachers at Abbott come to the same conclusion, and continue to use the garden for the educational and spiritual value gardens provide.

Connecting with Kids and Culturally Competent Curriculum

A character in Abbott that I sometimes see myself in is Jacob Hill. Fresh from serving with Teachers Without Borders, he is in the classroom (and Abbott’s under-resourced school specifically) to change the world and be a bit out of cultural touch, [as seen in this clip](#) . He struggles to find common ground with students and does not set up the best boundaries, due to his attempts to fit into the school community. He does not build the best relationships with kids, letting mockery get by slightly too often, as



Image credit: ABC

seen in a clip [here](#). Further into the series, Jacob can recognize these traits and have a bit of a self-evolution in his teaching pedagogy. I went through a similar journey at Cordata.

I came to Cordata not because it is a “low efficiency” school—I knew nothing about it but had simply been assigned the school by my supervisors. However, once I began working there, I did turn into a bit of a Jacob Hill figure. This identity was especially prevalent in our weekly after-school cooking and gardening club. It is part of a school enrichment club, where community partners like Common Threads provide programming to kids identified as needing additional support afterschool—like a Boys & Girls Club, but with a bit more structured curriculum.



Club student chopping broccoli for pasta salad!

Starting out, I did not bring the “structured” piece to our cooking club. Wanting to be a positive role model to these kids that I felt like needed it, we did not set up many boundaries or put much organization behind our cooking lesson. Taking full ownership as the educator in charge of creating these community guidelines, the lack of intentionality in our curriculum quickly began to show as my co-workers and I ran into responsive behaviors where not only were we being walked

over (like Jacob), students were not getting along with each other. It was draining—both for myself and the kids. Club days always left me feeling defeated, like no enrichment was actually gained from this partnership.

I realized that to truly be a positive role model, just like Jacob was told in the above clip, you must earn a child's respect. We soon set up behavior plans and created club goals to reach together. I stopped letting kids talk over me when giving directions and free playground turned into organized outdoor games as a direct consequence of bullying during unstructured times.

It is hard to be punitive as an educator, especially one who cares deeply about the population they are working with. Too often, teachers are unsupported by school districts in creating these behavior management plans, especially in a restorative way that acknowledges the power dynamics of a multicultural population. I learned how to be firm and fun—a practice that is said to be foundational to education but is very rarely shown. I had always relied much too heavily on the fun. The kids responded to our community norms. Soon, they arrived at club excited to cook together and try new foods. They began to work together and respect all members of our club, teachers included. We made cookbooks with each recipe we made, sending them home at the end of the year. I was no longer leaving club burnt-out by the end of the day. Positive student-teacher reciprocal relationships were slowly built.

Once collective community agreements were established, a foundation to build positive student-teacher reciprocal relationships was established. Now, I know all the club kids for who they are, not for the behaviors I was associating with them. We hug and high-5 in the hallways when we pass by each other, they eagerly ask me what they get to cook that day when they see me, they are proud of what they make. We ask students frequently what kind of foods they like and eat at home—an empowering opportunity they use to teach us what foods represent

community. Tajin is a popular one—I soon learned the delicious magic of pairing Tajin with apple slices and cucumber rounds.



Homemade Tortilla making day!

They still sometimes poke fun, notably laughing when I used tongs to pick up hot tortillas because “our Mexican mom can just use her magic mom hands”. I would no longer use the word “role model” to describe myself for club kids, despite that being what I was originally trying to emulate. I know that they have so much joy, happiness, and support in their lives from school and families that my presence is not going to single-handedly change their life. However, I do get to hang out with them for a couple of hours each week, and in those hours, they feel responsible, respected, and confident. They are nourished and exposed to new foods. They take that knowledge and skills home with them, which is all that matters to me.

Anyone who has ever taught already knows the importance of student respect, so it feels silly writing it out like a revelation. But it is something that especially gets lost when we speak about educating a multicultural population as white teacher, as we see in the example of Jacob Hill. We try build connection to the point where it becomes condescending, when all kids really want is to be heard, seen, and mutually respected—which sometimes comes with a firmness



that can often be associated by white educators (like Jacob letting kids call him names and occasionally myself) as provoking a power imbalance (Sabry & Bruna, 2007)

A major part of being a white educator in a multicultural setting is also establishing culturally competent curriculum in which kids can see themselves. The garden and cooking club are rich places to do this because food is such a cornerstone of community. However, the relationship between whiteness and land (the taking of land, the dispossession of said land in

indigenous and other marginalized communities, and the following ecological disruption and destruction of said land) is the foundational aspect of settler colonialism that continues to underly how humans interact with natural spaces, as La Paperson writes in *“A ghetto land pedagogy: an antidote for settler environmentalism”*. This is important when we think of the

land and environmental education, especially in a garden space—a particular sensitive area when we think of food and who, both historically and today, have labored to grow it.



Classroom space in Cordata's garden

Many of my students' families work on farms and migrate throughout the year to be able to continue to provide income for their children. The irony of myself, a white person, teaching Latino children of farmworkers how to garden is not lost on me. La Paperson uses the term "storied land" to tell the histories of place and space when interacting with land for educational purposes. To ignore the histories of displacement and violence both in the land taking of indigenous people and in the agricultural industry in our school garden would be an active complacency in the decolonization of these systems. I attempt to reject this by connecting our garden lessons not to the idea that we can "use" and "work" our garden for food production (identifying land as something that is disposable), rather than an outdoor classroom in which we

can engage in meaningful life science curriculum that align with the goals of their public education and talk about the storied history of gardening and land.



Left image: Fava bean seed saving lesson focusing on the indigenous practice of saving seeds for next season.

Right image: 1st grader who especially loves Cordata's garden observes the space through a magnifying glass

Though it is very common, I do not love the use of the term “stewardship” in garden

lessons. It is a term that has too often been co-opted by white environmental educators who are trying to establish a place attachment of kids with the land they are caring for, but do not tell the story of indigenous communities who have been the actual stewards of said land through generational care. I also do not want to force the role of proprietor of the garden onto students. It is not their job to labor this land, it is their job to learn within it. We exist in the space with the opportunity to learn about ecological processes—like pollination, life cycles and erosion, but also to learn about the land in a way that does not dismiss the land’s ties to settler colonialism.

With 4th-5th graders especially, we talk about indigenous intentional harvesting, how settler gardening practices have been built from indigenous knowledge with little credit, and how free food programs like the one the Common Threads is centered around is the result of community mutual aid and originally was created by the Black Liberation Movement (Kadri, 2019). In a fitting comparison, the character evolution of *Abbott's* Jacob Hill into a more culturally competent educator is represented towards the end of the second season, with a scene of him teaching about Martin Luth King, Jr., and Malcom X—specifically on the important correction that their viewpoints were not as opposed as we traditionally are taught in public schools and that their ideologies blended together toward the ends of their lives.

Funding for classroom materials

The pilot of *Abbott Elementary* follows Janine, the show's enthusiastic main character, as she fights for funding to get a new classroom rug. She humoursly reports on the importance of a rug as a calming space for kids when their dysregulation can take over a classroom, remarking that the "classroom rug is like Xanax for kids". Sitting on the classroom rug to calm down with a book is almost a universal memory of our elementary school experiences, but Janine must fight her principal and superintendent to acknowledge the importance of this purchase, which turns into a long battle. Watch a clip of her principal undermining her and other staff [here](#).

Ultimately, she forgoes the bureaucratic system of school funding. A fellow teacher sketchily acquires used, branded Philadelphia Eagles stadium carpets to be repurposed as

classroom rugs. The vignette showcases the important lesson Janine learns that system is so difficult to work through so teachers must “figure it out themselves”.



Image credits: ABC

Working for a non-profit that is funded mainly through grants and their partnership with the public school district, I have fought a similar fight for funds as Janine. Specifically, when working with a low-income population, there are less avenues to gather resources—my co-workers teaching in wealthy attendance areas would frequently have supplemental materials donated to them by involved parents. Parent Teacher Associations are usually active in funding enrichment programs like Common Threads, but with no PTA or many advocating families at Cordata, that has not been an option. Instead, my boss and I would cold call hardware stores hoping for donations for small but needed things like water jugs and chicken wire.



Images of Cordata Garden in Fall 2022

Like Janine’s pride after finding a way to get classroom rugs, one of my most favorite impacts over my time at Cordata was being able to get new raised garden beds. When I began at Cordata in the fall, the garden looked gorgeous— we had 25 in-ground beds,

with perennial herbs, annual produce, and an entire garden section allocated specifically for native plants. However, after I began teaching classes, I quickly realized that the lack of raised beds posed major problems for garden lessons.

Cordata has a living skills program in which a lot of students have restricted mobility, and some are wheelchair-bound. It was difficult to involve them in the garden when everything was set on the ground at such a low-level. Also, despite my greatest efforts, the beds would constantly be stepped on by students not paying full attention to their feet stomping directly on top of a tomato plant. Though this seems



like a small issue, the soil disruptions were significantly impacting our growing plants. It was hard to gather classes around the long, narrow, in-ground beds. Overall, the structure was just not the most conducive for intentional lessons.

I began to ask about the possibility of acquiring raised beds (which almost all our other gardens already had) with the team at Common Threads shortly after our fall season started, but immediately ran into red tape. Additional funding for big projects like this is basically non-existent in our NGO budget. I was told by multiple co-workers and supervisors that I should reach out to my parent volunteers, of which I had none. Other school gardens received parent help and gifts like new woodchips and hundreds of tulip bulbs. I once asked the Cordata principal if there was any extra money that could be allocated to the garden, to which he unsurprisingly said no. A garden classroom is a special yet important thing to have at a school, but making sure students were equipped with books and expensive math curriculum took an obvious priority for a community and school stretching to make ends meet. My garden lead at Common Threads, Sarah, was just as passionate as I to try to find a way to acquire beds and began to reach out to local entities that could possibly donate timber. The project was put on the backburner for the winter season, but a miracle occurred right before spring!

A tree in front of Fairhaven middle school fell during a winter windstorm, and the high school shop classes were trying to find a way to repurpose the lumber with a community project. Building four brand-new, beautiful garden beds for Cordata (free of charge!) was the answer. A local church donated soil to fill the beds, and a delivery service dropped off all the materials in the garden during Bellingham's spring break. I started tearing up when I first saw them. Like Janine getting her rugs, I picked a big battle to be able to get what my students needed but it was ultimately a mentor (who I am so grateful for) that was able to make it happen with community connections.



Left and top image: Filling new beds with soil! Right image: 3rd graders planting lettuce starts in new beds

The kids were ecstatic when they came back to school and saw the garden's new addition. As I write this, each third-grade class is brainstorming what they are going to paint on their very own class garden bed, a project they have been tasked with to create a sense of belongingness in the space. So far, they have decided on murals of sunflowers and garden bugs. We planted starts of lettuce, Bok choy, carrots, basil, tomatoes and bell peppers that are growing at an accelerated rate to their in-ground counterparts due to warmer soil and less disruption. I taught the life skills class how they can use their own watering cans to water in the raised beds, the first time they have truly successfully been included in the garden in it's history. It is with such a sense of pride that I now teach with these new materials, and even after a few short weeks, I see the difference it is making in the educational experience of my students. The pilot of *Abbott Elementary* ends with Janine's class sitting calmly on their new rug with Janine holding a similar sense of accomplishment as I with my raised beds.

In an ideal world, Common Threads would be funded to the point that adding in these garden beds would not be a months-long debacle. In an especially ideal world, Janine would be able to acquire something as simple as a rug without a whole episode worth of hassle. That is unfortunately not how our current public system works, and as frustrating as this fact may be, I gained the valuable experience of learning how to do things outside of a low-funded system to get what your community needs. It's something teachers spend their entire career doing and something that Abbott mirrors well with their representation of collective, ground-up change through their characters.



Common Threads crew volunteering at Flynn Farms!

If there is anything I have learned throughout my year at Cordata, it is that teachers know how to show up for everybody. Everybody knows and loves a teacher, but it is not until you are one that you uncover the creativity, intentionality, perseverance, and about a billion other traits it takes to be a good teacher. I don't know if I have fully developed all it takes to be a fantastic teacher, but I have learned so much throughout this year that I know I have grown exponentially into a better educator.

I know my students were welcomed into a space that they loved and learned in. I know that after this experience I will always stand by teachers' sides and support the power of enrichment programs like school gardening for kids. I know that the power of fighting for kids who do not have the resources to fight for themselves will always be a worthy mission, and that it takes a whole village of supporters to do so. I know that I have cared for this garden and school in a way that it will be better served for whoever has the privilege of teaching in the space next

school year. This is all in thanks of the wonderful educators at Cordata, who mirrored the vigor and humor portrayed in *Abbott Elementary* in the best way, the Common Threads crew who support their staff more than any other organization I've worked with, and my students, who were so eager to learn every time they stepped into the garden.

Future Recommendations

After all the thanks and deserved acknowledgements for the community I worked with this year, I do have recommendations on ways that we can do this collective work in future years at Common Threads and Cordata after I am gone. I should have been briefed about Cordata's positionality before I began teaching there. Understand the dynamics of educator-student relationships when working with students who are dealing with adverse childhood experiences with insufficient educational support is key to immediately engaging with the school's population in a meaningful and fitting way. This is represented in the challenges that I faced in afterschool programming.

Even though I held previous teaching experience, I should have received further training on how to create the positive community agreements that were eventually set months into when our programming began. This is not only a lack of oversight on the part of Common Threads, but on the education system as a whole. Teachers rarely receive similar restorative and reciprocal behavior management tools during their training, putting the additional weight of learning these techniques on an individual basis as new educators. District support and training on these pedagogies could easily resolve these issues, bettering the dynamics of classrooms across their jurisdiction.

In addition, Common Threads should allocate more funding in their budget for Cordata Elementary and other under-served schools than schools that are better resourced. This would close the gap between the segregation of resources in the wealthier areas of Bellingham that have financial and volunteer support for school supplement programs compared to those that do not, like Cordata. This is already in the works, especially after full-time staff engaged in meaningful conversations with me about the equity issues Cordata faces and how our program is complacent in it. In addition to focusing on under-served communities in our programming, Common Threads is expanding their free food services with a new USDA-grant funded food truck that will travel to low-income houses complexes (many of them within Cordata's attendance area and housing my students) to provide nourishing meals over the summer.

Moreover, a pooling system of PTA funding where the resources generated by PTAs are shared across the district, not just at one individual school, would yield a redistribution of wealth that could have long-lasting impacts on Bellingham students. This is already being modelled within PTAs in neighboring Seattle School District with great success (McGrane, 2023). School district wide solutions like this allow for small-scale, collective, and individualized work for our community, but still accomplish the resource-sharing necessary to break the stark divide between high- and low-income neighborhoods.

Abbott Elementary is a satirically accurate model for what it is like to currently be a teacher in an under-served community, but it is not a model that has to be our forever reality. Through small community changes, our public school system could be a much more equitable and resourced entity. Students who live within oppressed systems created by the state long before they were around deserve just as quality of an education as a child who holds a lot of

privilege. We have the individual power to fight and change for these kids, and I sincerely hope that the garden educators at Cordata continue to do so, as it is a place that I have fallen so in love with. As I begin a new chapter with my AmeriCorps term ending, I hope to take these learnings into the next phase of life and continue the work that is still just beginning in our education system.

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