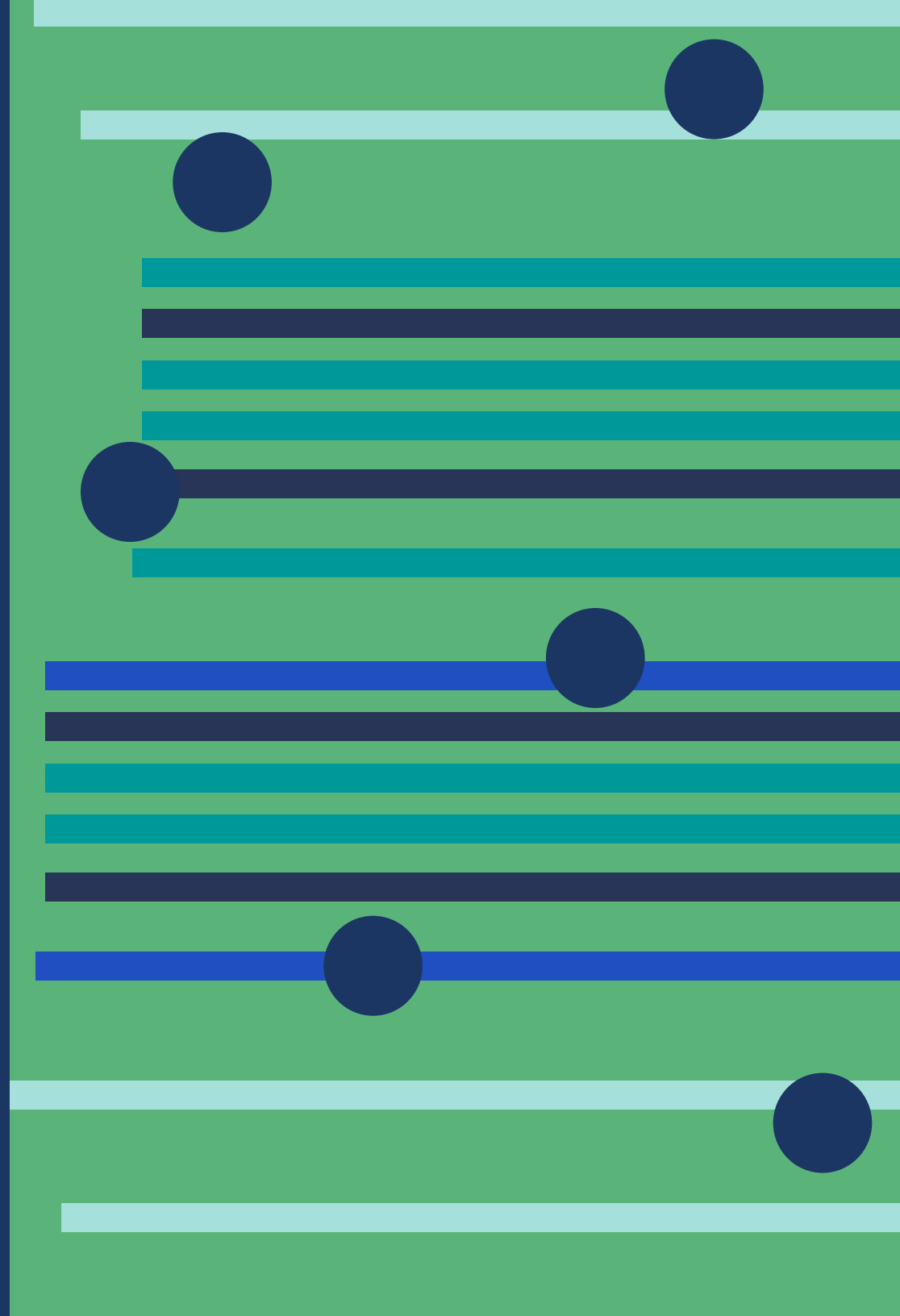


# Designing for Climate Justice Education: Learning with Black Ecologies



## Executive summary

Black children's experiences with the natural world are often left unnoticed. By seeking stories of Black families' relationships with nature in the city and their lived knowledge of climate change, we can build and implement strategies for engaging in early learning that counter Black peoples' absences in environmental and climate change education.

This City Research Insight reports on a study that seeks to understand how Canadian urban climate justice education with and for young children can respond to Black families' knowledges and experiences. This study is driven by a need for climate change education that centres questions of racial justice and includes the ecological knowledges of Black communities. Learning from focus group dialogues that documented Black families' stories of their relationships with Toronto lands and waters, the study presents insights on how Black peoples' ecological relationships (Black ecologies) can inform the design of culturally-sustaining climate justice education.

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# Black ecologies & early childhood education

Black ecologies are concerned with the practices, desires and dreams of Black communities in relation to the natural world such as water ways, soil, plants, animals, skies, snow and more - including in cities. Black ecologies are a way to understand how environmental racism impacts the experiences and narratives of Black peoples' relations to nature. The concept disrupts dominant narratives that define Black relations with the environment mostly through loss and absence.

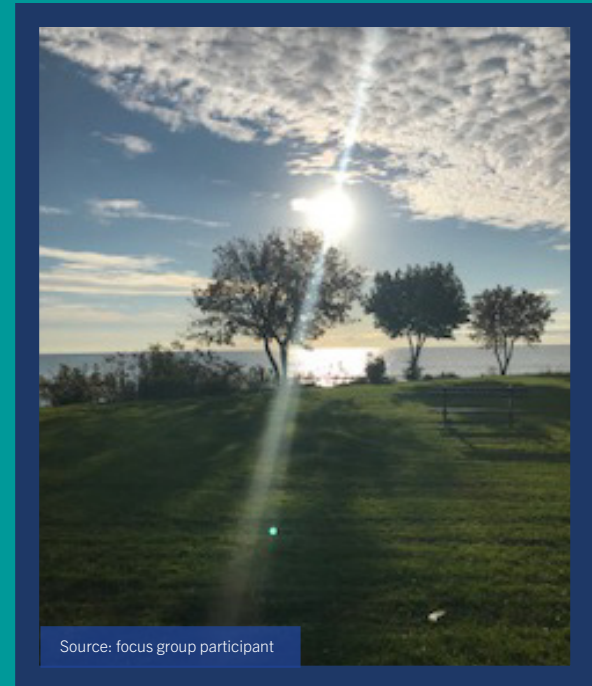
In educational contexts, Black ecologies bring attention to curricular and pedagogical possibilities for responding to the unevenly distributed impacts of environmental precarity. Importantly, Black ecologies in education bring attention to marginalized stories and practices of Black people in relation to the natural world. Black ecologies can be seen as an invitation for educators to provide opportunities for, pay attention to, and affirmatively respond to Black children's encounters with the natural world. One example of engaging with Black ecologies in a local educational context would be to engage Black farmers and Black food justice collectives in the city as generative spaces for encountering urban Black land relations.

At the intersection of Black ecologies and early childhood education we can rewrite dominant narratives of Black and other racially marginalized childhoods. Such narratives often characterize these experiences as deficient in exposure to nature. Consequently, the use of "nature experiences" is described as a measure for corrective development and behavioural solutions. Black ecologies demonstrate that there are multiple ways to read relationality with the environment and invite educators to create and reinforce affirming spaces that recognize Black children's relations to nature. In this way their interests and curiosities about the natural world are nurtured and taken seriously.

## Project team:

- Dr. Fikile Nxumalo, OISE, PI
- Correnda Downey, OISE alumna, Research Assistant
- Nicole Franklin, OISE PhD student, Research Assistant

This City Research Insight features the work of Dr. Fikile Nxumalo, Correnda Downey, and Nicole Franklin on the project "Designing for Climate Justice Education in a Canadian City: Learning with Black Ecologies" from the School of Cities Urban Challenge Grant 2.0.



# Environmental racism

The term was coined by civil rights leader Benjamin Chavis in 1982. “Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And, it is racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies.”<sup>1</sup>

## Understanding dominant narratives

The dominant narratives that govern Black people’s experiences in nature sees them as absent in and removed from the environment. These narratives, in relation to environmental racism, are reinforced by anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism,<sup>3</sup> and imagine nature as a romantic reparative and restorative place for urban Black children who are seen to lack relationships with the natural world. Colonial discourse of Black people in nature further sees them as victims, lacking autonomy in their own experiences with nature.

Understanding that there are dominant narratives around Black peoples’ relation with nature thus invites us to consider that not only is there no homogenous experience, but there is agency. Further, we can understand that dominant colonial narratives hold a conception of “pure nature” that is separate from humans, as opposed to the human experience as innately an ecological relationship.

## Further reading

- Nxumalo, F., (2020), “Place-based disruptions of humanism, coloniality and anti-Blackness in early childhood education”, in *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, 8 (SI), 34-49.
- Vergès, F. (2017), “Racial capitalocene” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, 72–82.

1. Chavis, B., (1993), “Foreword”, in *Confronting environmental racism: voices from the grassroots*, South End Press, 31.

2. Waldron, I.R.G., (2018), *There’s Something in the Water: Environmental Racism in Indigenous & Black Communities*, Fernwood.

3. Nxumalo, F., (2022). “Thinking with Black ecologies in educational research”, *The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK)*, Issue 13 - Wading, Blackwood gallery University of Toronto Mississauga.

## Case

Africville, north of Halifax in Nova Scotia, is a notable example of environmental racism in Canada. The small Black community was established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Residents paid taxes but were denied basic services such as paved roads, running water, and plumbing despite requests and petitions. The City of Halifax placed undesirable facilities there, including a fertilizer plant, a prison, slaughterhouses, human waste disposals sites, and an infectious diseases hospital. Land was also expropriated to run a railway extension through the village. Deemed a slum, Africville was then slated for “urban renewal” to be given industrial zoning, and residents were forcibly relocated despite requests to instead improve the existing community.<sup>2</sup>



Africville, Nova Scotia. Source: Bob Brooks, Nova Scotia Archives.



# Methodology

The project team invited Black families in Toronto with young children (from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 3) to participate in three 1-hour focus groups. The first focus group asked families to share their perspectives on climate change and environmental precarity, including past, current, and future impacts on their communities. In the second focus group, participants storied – created and shared stories about – their ecological relationships, describing their relations with plants, animals, land, and waterways through photos. They showed photos of outdoor places in the GTA where they spent time with their children. The third focus group built on earlier discussions and focused on the educational desires of the families with respect to environmental and climate justice education.

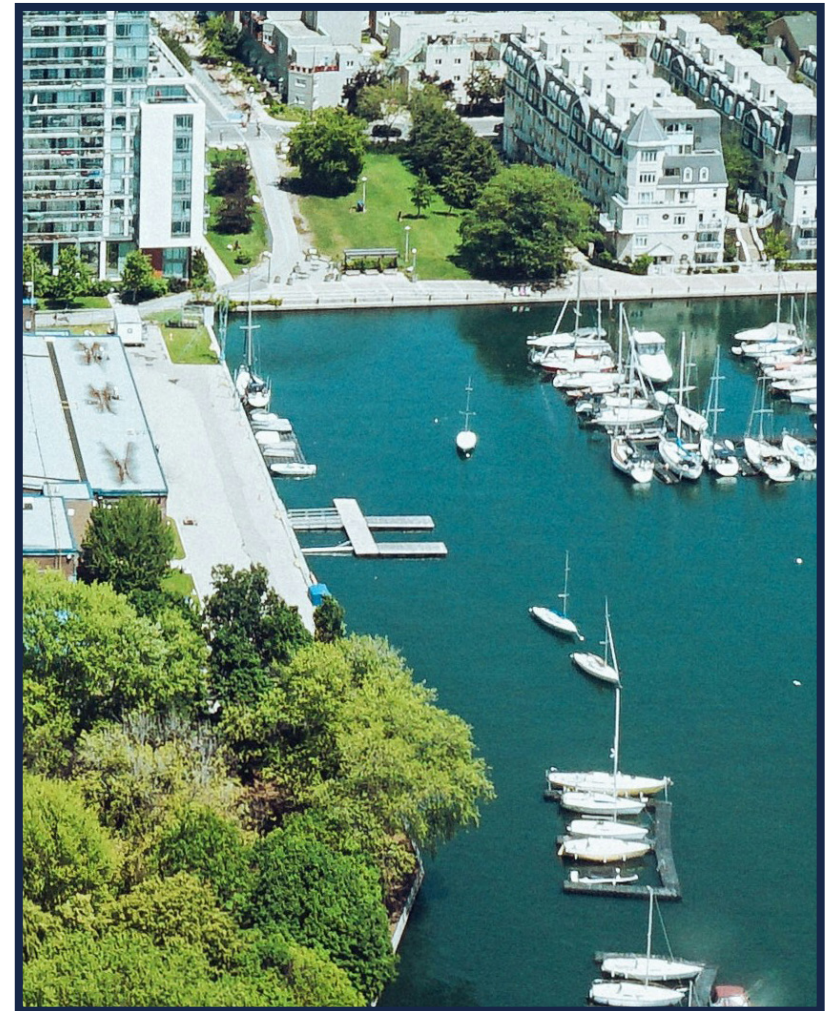
Focus group design included the guiding research questions:

- What do Black families living in Toronto want their young children to learn about climate change and how it impacts them?
- What kinds of ecological relationships do Black families have to places in the city and what are some of the ways they would like to see these relationships included in curriculum and pedagogies?
- What can be learned from Black families about how elementary educational policies can respond to climate injustice?

## Storying Black ecologies

Focus group participants shared stories of Black peoples' experiences not often seen in Canadian urban spaces. They showed photographs and told relational stories of how they experience the outdoors in the city. Some of these are situated in places that are familiar to us, like what is presently known as Lake Ontario, and stories of small patio spaces in high rises. Additionally, some of their Toronto land and water stories also merged with stories of affective relationships and connections with other places some participants had emigrated to Canada from.

The Black families told stories about their experiences learning with and teaching their children about the environment. One participant told a story of teaching their children about Toronto as Indigenous lands.



City of Toronto, Ontario. Source: Maarten van den Heuvel, Unsplash



## Storying

A focus group participant tells a story about being in nature with their child as important time to connect with each other. They share their day with each other and talk about aspects of the natural world that they notice and describe how they relate to them.

**“She really likes it. So that’s my favourite part... And there’s even a part you could even walk along the rocks a little bit.”**

- As told by a focus group participant



Source: focus group participant



1

**We can begin conversations about the environment from the relationships that Black communities have with urban places.**

- a. Foreground climate justice conversations from the Black communities' desires, relations, and environmental actions rather than through a framework that centres damage, loss, and lack.
- b. Create intentional invitations for stories. There are already Black ecological relationships in cities and stories that build capacity for disrupting erasures and deficit framings of Black nature relationships.
- c. Expand what counts as climate justice education. Black ecological stories centre and affirm Black relations with lands and waters.
- d. Pay attention to the kinds of stories told at the intersections of race, immigrant status, and income.

2

**Black parents have desires for their children's environmental and climate education.**

- a. Ensure that educational approaches have interdisciplinary, multi-faceted, equity, and justice-focused lenses.
- b. Critique the dominant focus of Western science in learning about climate change and the separation of topics from each other, such as environmental science from racial justice and Indigenous knowledges.
- c. Address Ontario's curricular erasure of environmental histories and land relations of Black communities in Canada: the experiences of Black communities and their resistance to environmental racism should be part of the general curriculum, e.g. Eddie Carvery's ongoing protest of the neglect and destruction of Black communities like Africville.
- d. Include learning topics about the effects of extractive capitalism on nature, advocacy and activism in environmental education, and food justice.
- e. Make such education available in places outside of the formal school curriculum, such as in community centre programming.

3

**We should recognize and support the kinds of place-based learning that Black families engage in with their children.**

- a. Emphasise the importance of time spent outdoors participating in joint learning activities that engage the whole family.
- b. Have an expansive definition of time spent outdoors in the city, for example patio spaces and balconies in high rises.
- c. Pay attention to challenges with access to green space – while Toronto has many places to engage with lands and waters, many of these places are difficult to access for certain communities.

# Implications and recommendations

Environmental early childhood education holds the potential to help create more livable futures.

**1. Policymakers in environment and education should allocate resources to include Black ecologies as part of the overarching knowledge base. This presents one way to actively decolonize environment and climate education.**

**2. Educators in climate and environmental education should design pedagogies and curriculum that centrally and affirmatively include the socio-ecological concerns, knowledges, practices, and realities of Black families.**

**3. Educators should seek out Black ecologies in their local urban contexts and invite these ecological ways of knowing and being into curriculum-making for all children. Educators can also notice and encourage young Black children's curiosities about the natural world, including their imaginaries, ideas and desires for thriving lifeworlds.**

- a. Disrupt colonial erasures: what might an anti-colonial orientation to place look like in the lands and waters we encounter with children?
- b. Practice noticing: what practices of noticing might be needed in working with children to deromanticize nature and normalize their place within it, while resisting deficit constructions of Black children's relations with the natural world?
- c. Centre relationality: what comes up when thinking about viewing young Black, Indigenous and Black-Indigenous children's land-based curriculum-making in relational ways, rather than from a human-centered developmental lens?
- d. Think with urban natures: Black ecologies attend to nature as always present, including in urban places and spaces like Toronto, so what possibilities are there to attune to urban natures in dialogue with Black ecologies?



Source: focus group participant



# The future

The research team sees the UCG 2.0 project as a pilot study; the findings from this study suggest larger scale research is needed that works with Black families in cities like Toronto on their knowledges, concerns, and desires regarding climate and environmental education for their children. In continuing to ask what early childhood educators can do in working with Black ecologies in curriculum-making, Dr. Fikile Nxumalo plans to engage in a longer-term participatory action research study that finds out more about the specific kinds of supports that early childhood educators working in cities like Toronto might need to do this work.

Dr. Fikile Nxumalo is currently facilitating workshops for early childhood educators on thinking with Black ecologies in the classroom.



Scarborough Bluffs Park  
Source: Canva Pro, sergey02



## Interview with Dr. Fikile Nxumalo (University of Toronto)

### How did you begin your engagement in research for Black ecologies and early childhood education?

I've always been interested in Black people's relationships with their environment, particularly during my time as an early childhood educator in outdoor spaces. I started thinking about ways to disrupt both Black and Indigenous erasure in outdoor education. One question I have had is what might we learn from listening to Black families and parents about their desires related to environmental education for their young children? This led me to Black ecological relations, which are already present but often erased, especially in urban areas like Toronto.

### Do you have any specific strategies for how educators can engage with Black ecologies in early childhood education?

One helpful strategy is for educators to start with their own context and become curious about local stories. For example, in a workshop with educators on the West Coast, we discussed Hogan's Alley in Vancouver, a Black community with rich history and land relations that was displaced through redevelopment. Educators can bring stories like this to young children, not just focusing on the history but also inviting children to imagine what life might have been like there.

### What are some specific examples of policy decisions that have perpetuated environmental racism in urban areas?

While this isn't my primary research area, I learn from stories like Hogan's Alley and the work of researchers like Dr. Ingrid Waldron, who has studied Africville and other African Nova Scotian communities. Policies such as placing landfills or polluting industries near racialized communities are common examples. These stories, while highlighting loss and damage, also provide spaces to think affirmatively about how Black families and communities have thrived and lived despite these harms.

### How do Black ecologies challenge the dominant narratives that often portray Black communities as disconnected from nature?

Black ecologies emphasize the disproportionate impacts and resistance to climate change and environmental racism in Black communities, highlighting their ongoing development of "insurgent knowledge and practices". Black ecological relationships assert that these land relations have always existed. We need to listen for complex stories beyond harm and loss. This approach integrates environmental learning into everyday life and emphasizes relationality rather than individual agency. Listening gives us a chance to highlight the multifaceted ways Black communities interact with and relate to their environment.



**Dr. Fikile Nxumalo** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching & Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

## **How can recognizing the agency of Black communities in their interactions with nature contribute to more inclusive and effective environmental education?**

Black children and families face challenges related to erasure and deficit framings in climate change and environment education. Despite growing knowledge of the disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities, the specific concerns and responses of Black communities are still missing from the curriculum in Canadian educational contexts. Black communities hold intergenerational stories about their reparative relationships and co-resistance with the environment.

## **What are some practical steps that educators can take to incorporate the diverse ecological relationships of Black children into their teaching practices?**

By shifting from a deficit lens to an affirmative lens when engaging with Black children. This means becoming curious about what children do about their environment, focusing on their interests and interactions rather than behaviours. Educators can engage pedagogically with Black children in ways that affirm their experiences and relationships with the natural world, whether in outdoor settings or through materials and stories that reflect their ecological relationships.

## **What challenges do you foresee in implementing the findings of this research in real educational settings, and how do you plan to address them?**

Children, whether in early childhood or school settings, aren't spending enough time outside to engage in land-based education. In early childhood education, there is more potential due to its openness to inquiry-based learning, but there's a tendency to reduce it to mere caregiving. In school settings, the prescribed curriculum doesn't allow space for such engagement. I am interested in beginning to address this through participatory action research that involves educators in developing curricula that integrate Black ecological perspectives and work to bring these curricular and pedagogical orientations into broader educational policies such as early learning frameworks.



# About the School of Cities

Based at the University of Toronto, the School of Cities is a multidisciplinary hub for urban research, education, and engagement creating new and just ways for cities and their residents to thrive. The School supports scholars, practitioners, and community members to co-create new understandings, policies, and practices and fosters opportunity, insight, and knowledge exchange with a global reach.

The School of Cities is playing a critical role in addressing climate change and justice, migration and belonging, inequality and democracy, and the world's collective ability to address urgent urban challenges.

## About City Research Insights

*Designing for Climate Justice Education: Learning with Black Ecologies is the fourth issue in the third volume of the City Research Insights series, designed to link the urban research being conducted at the University of Toronto with the public, other institutions, and decision-makers.*

*With this series, the School of Cities seeks to leverage our extraordinary community of urbanists and urban-oriented researchers to create a rich, multidisciplinary community of urban faculty, researchers, and students across disciplines and perspectives. In addition to facilitating interdisciplinary research projects, partnerships and funding opportunities, we provide a hub for urban-focused interdisciplinary and collaborative learning.*

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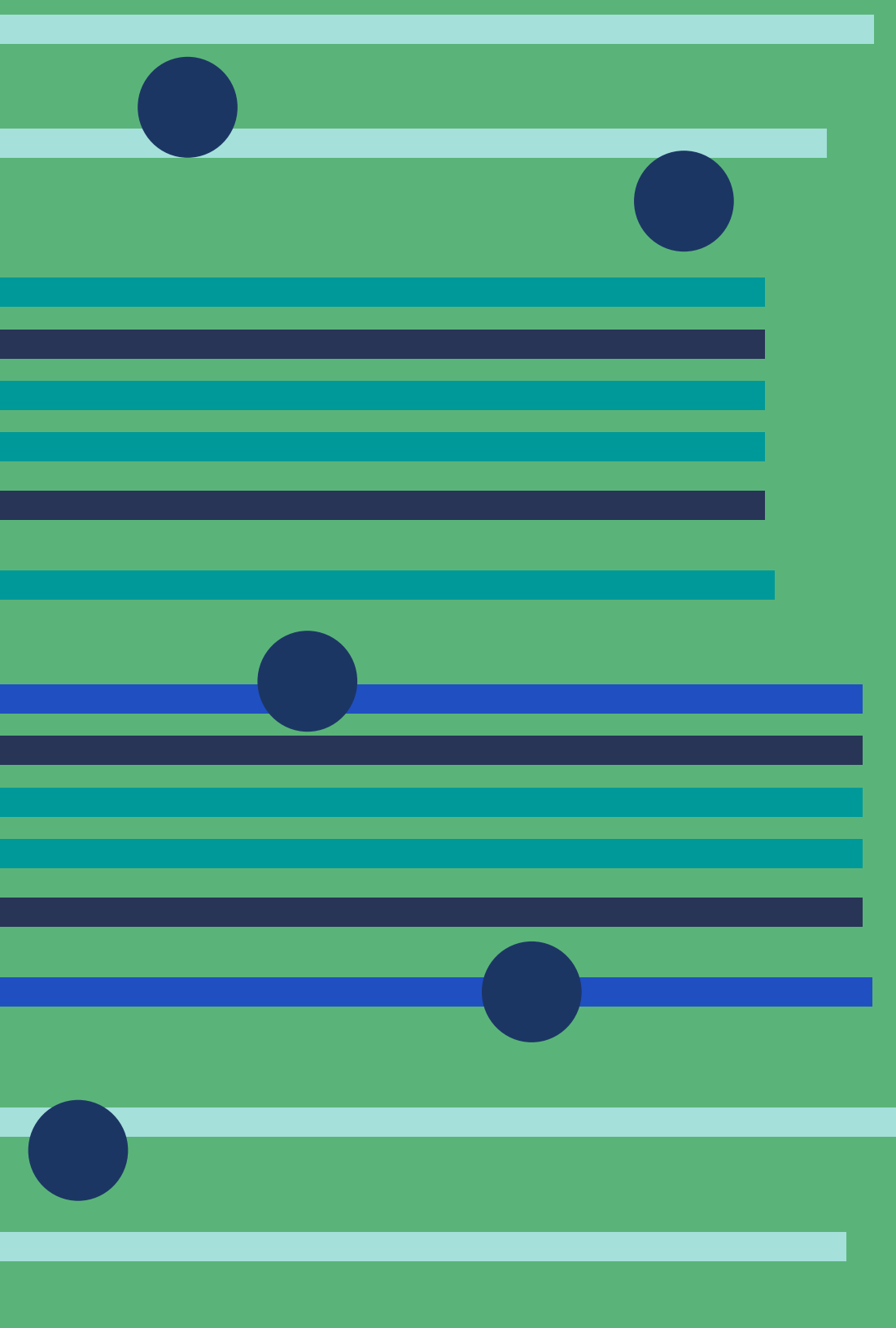
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