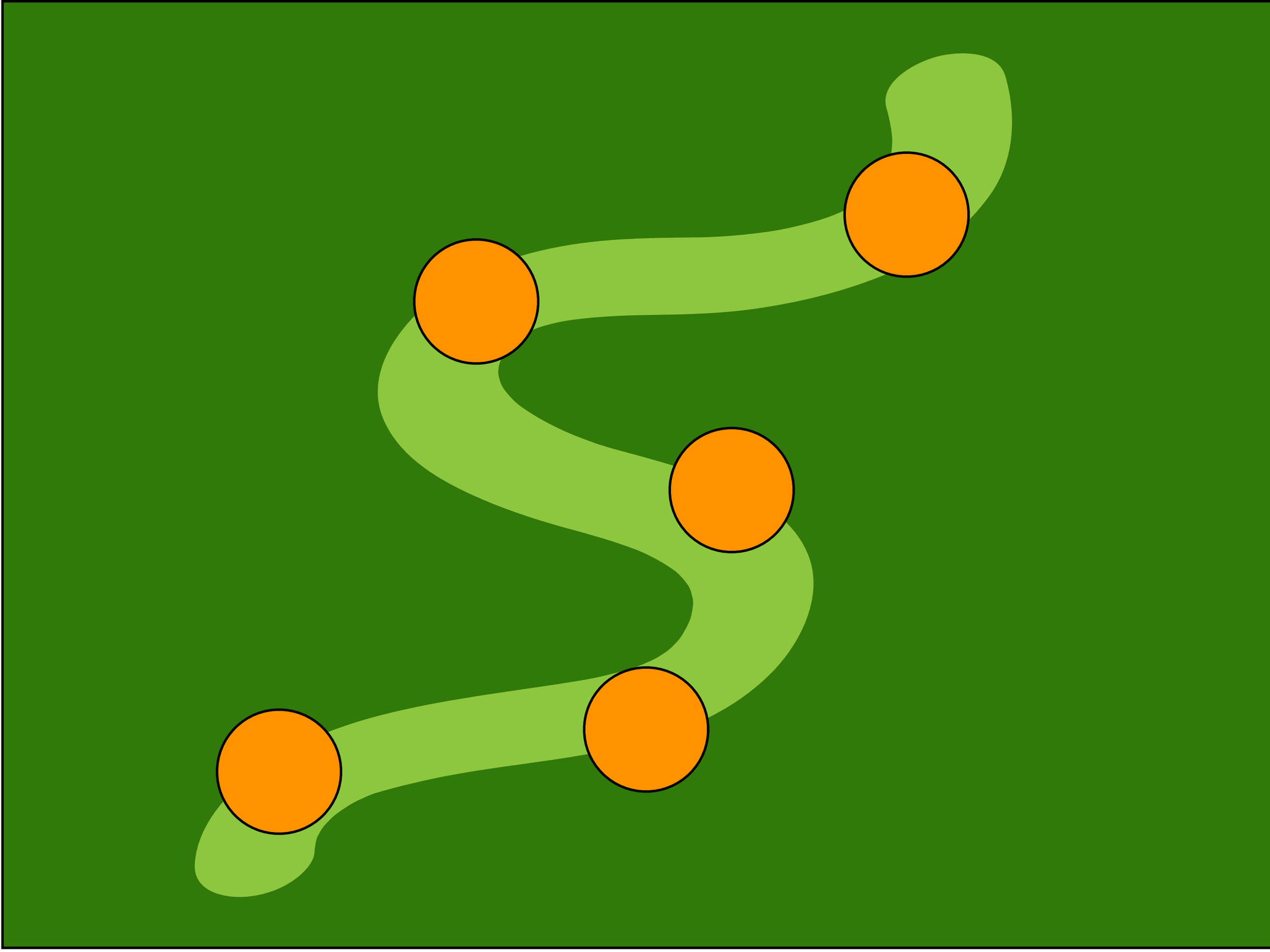
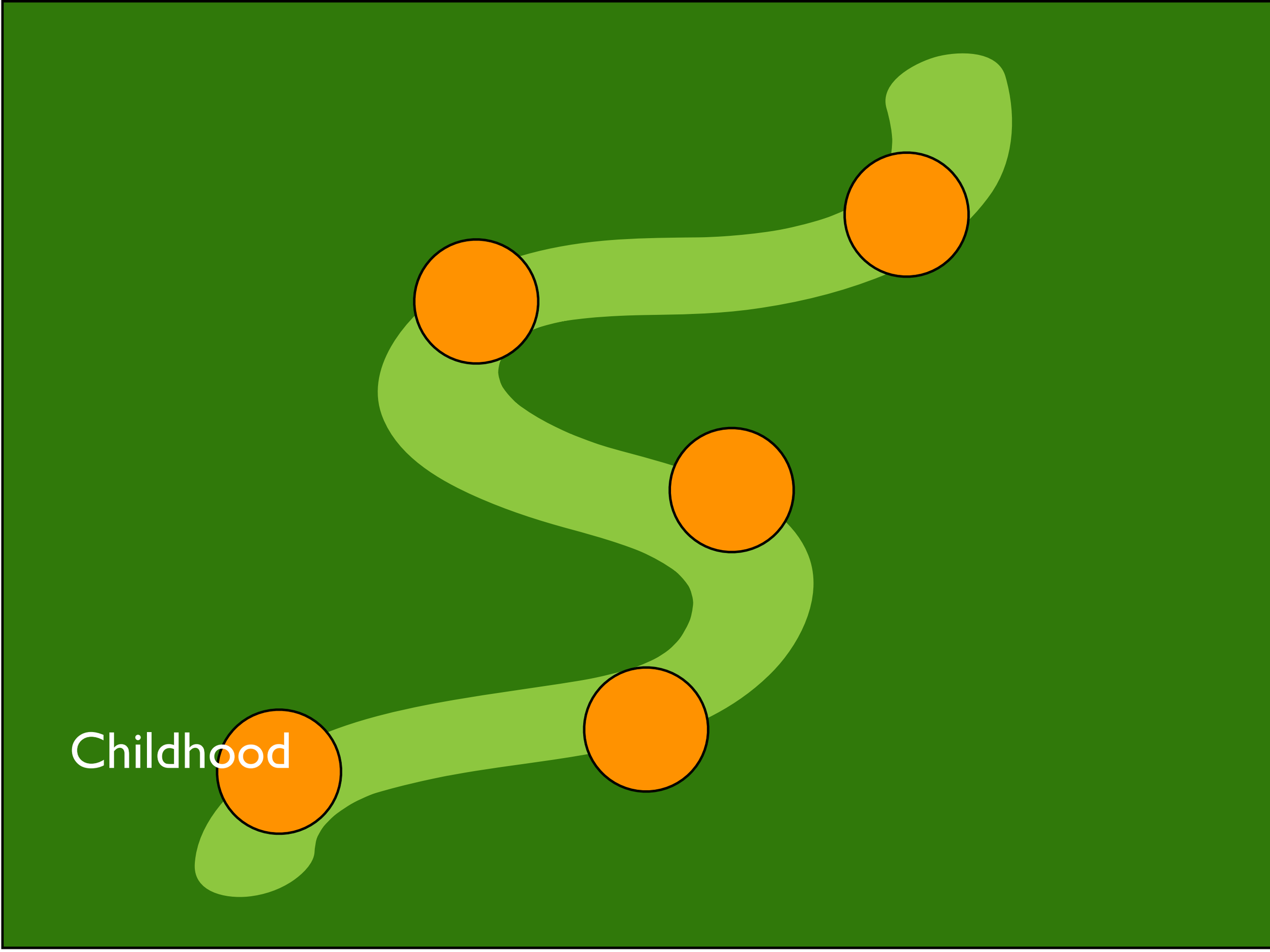
Youth in Arts 2018

Creative Pathways

Shirl Buss

Designing Our Careers




Childhood

Childhood

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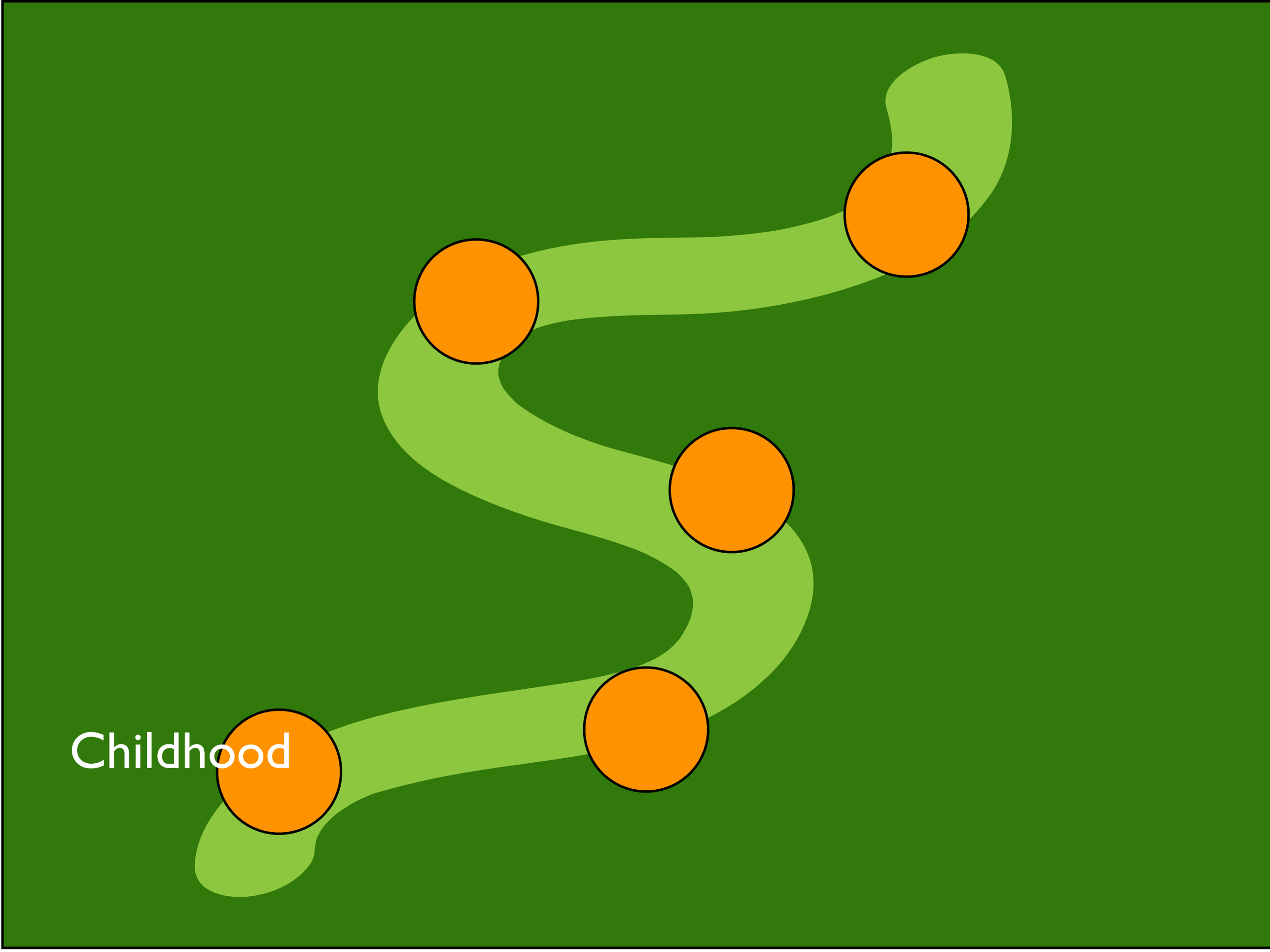
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Education

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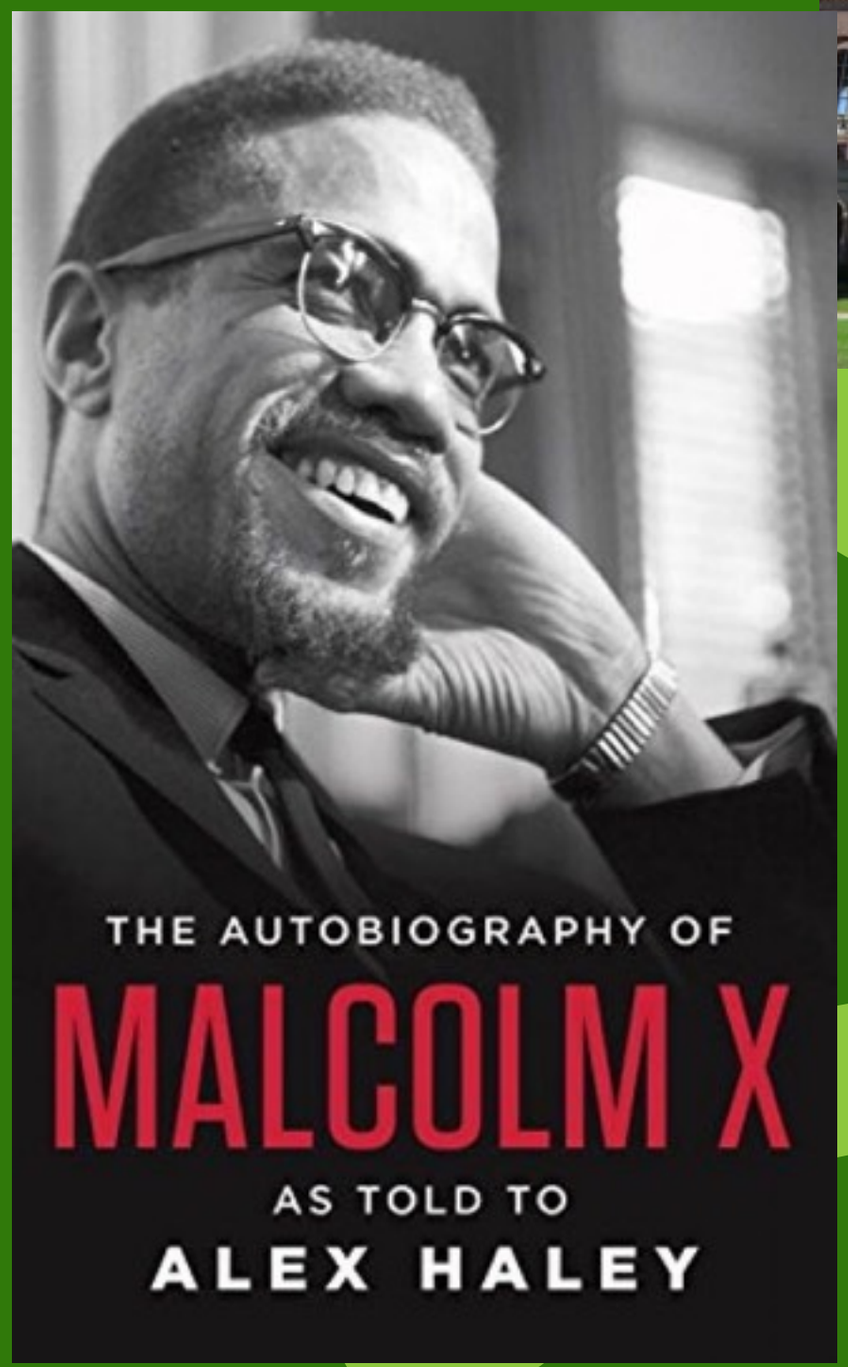

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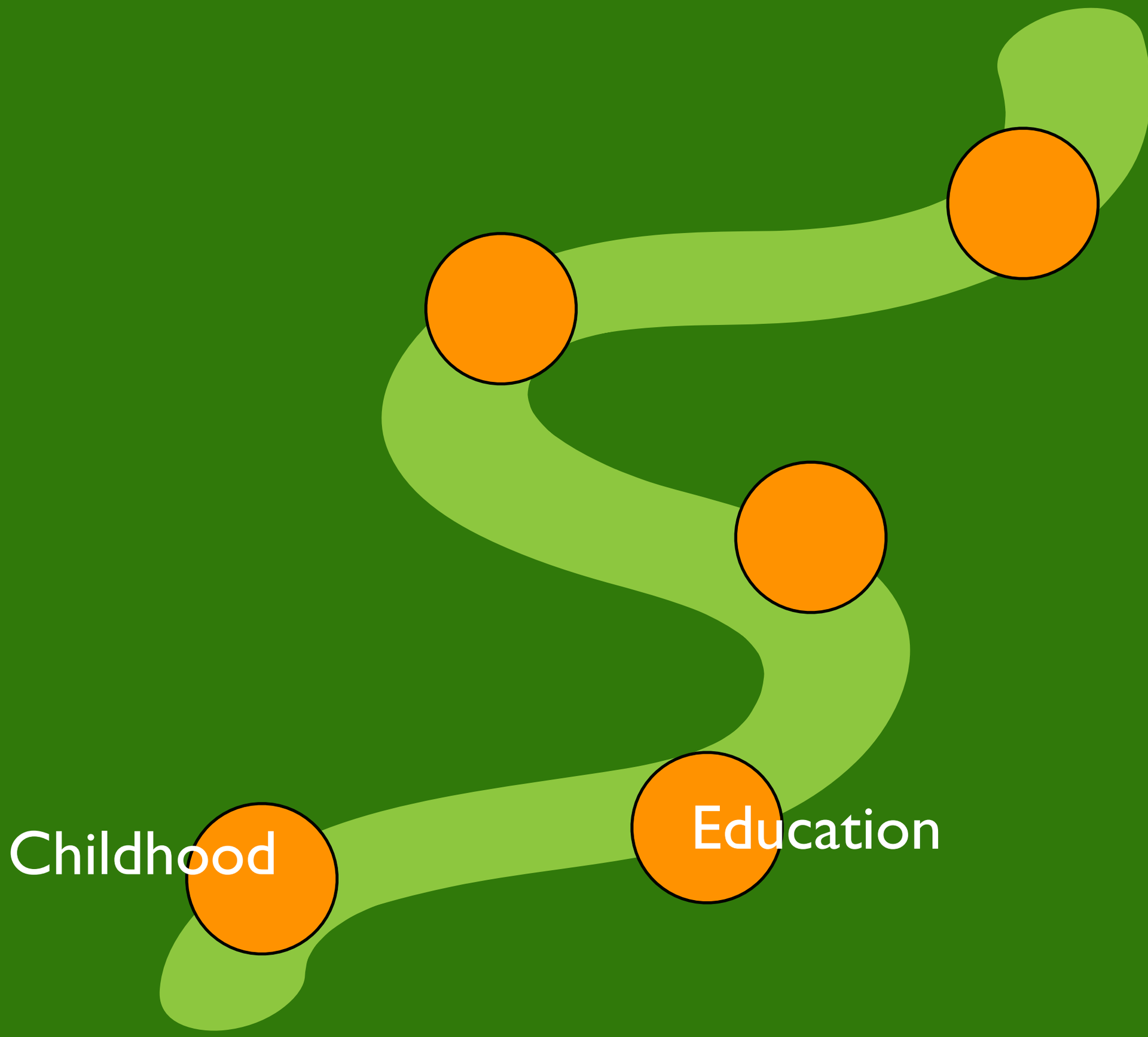
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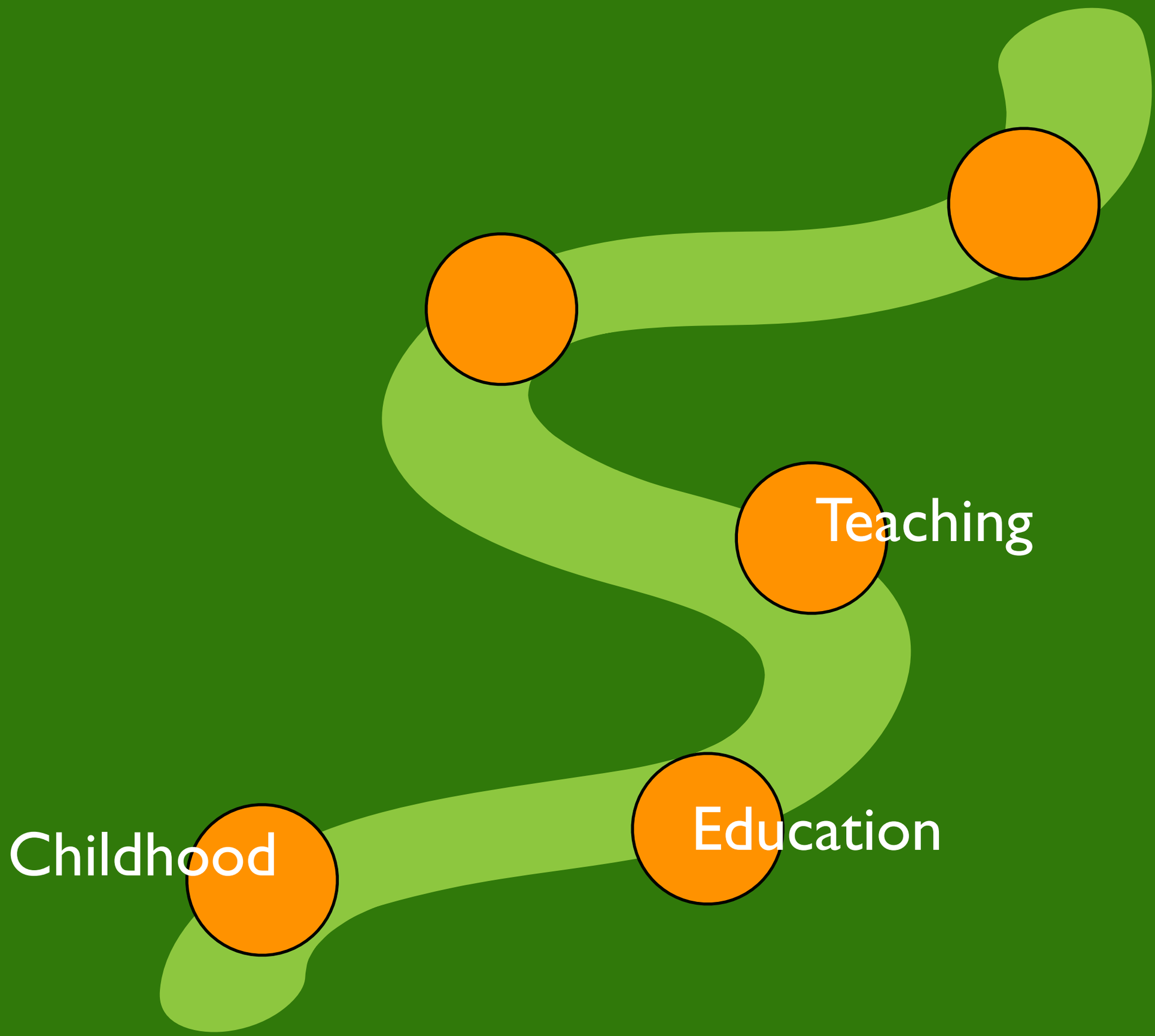
Teaching
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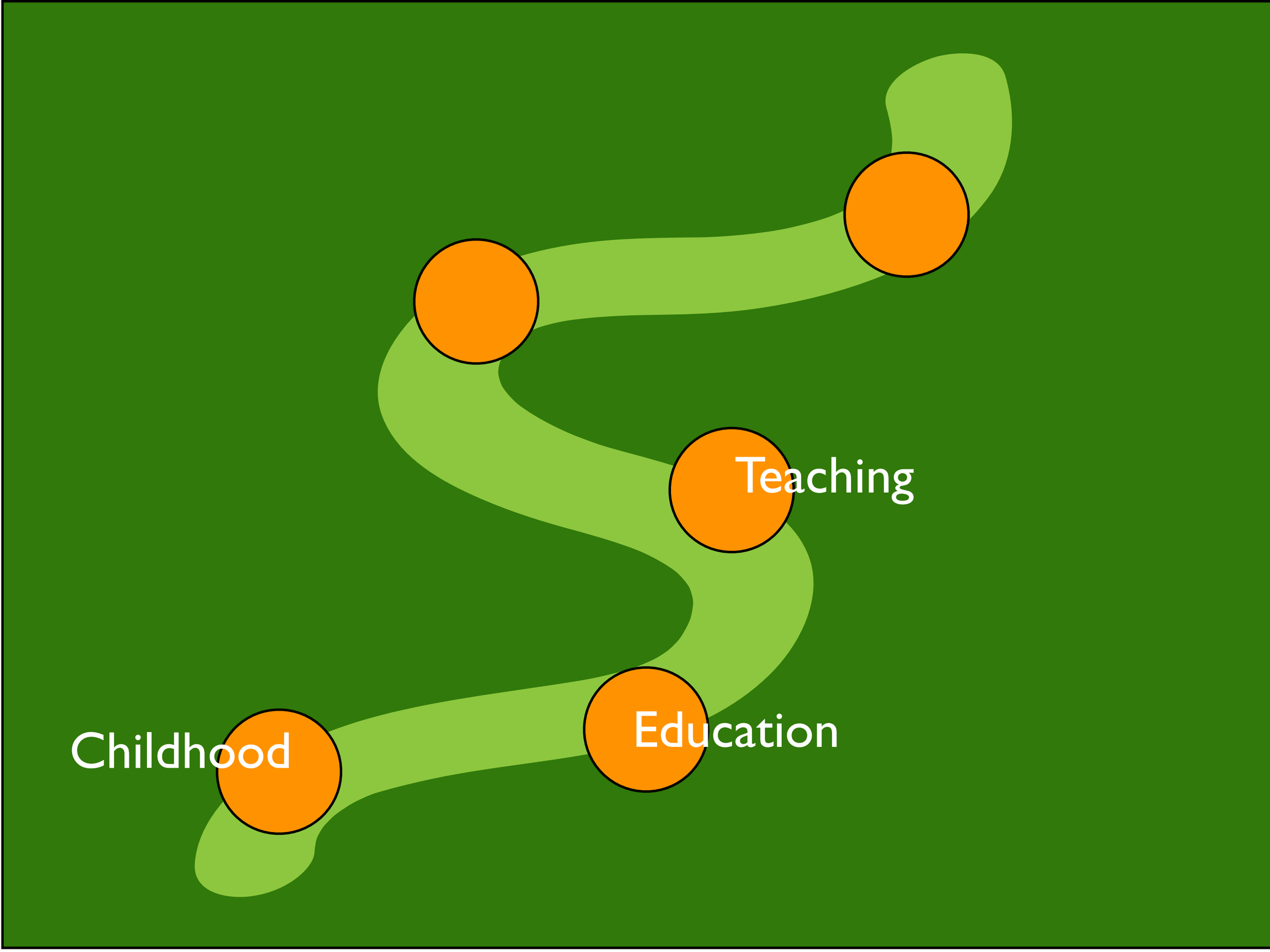
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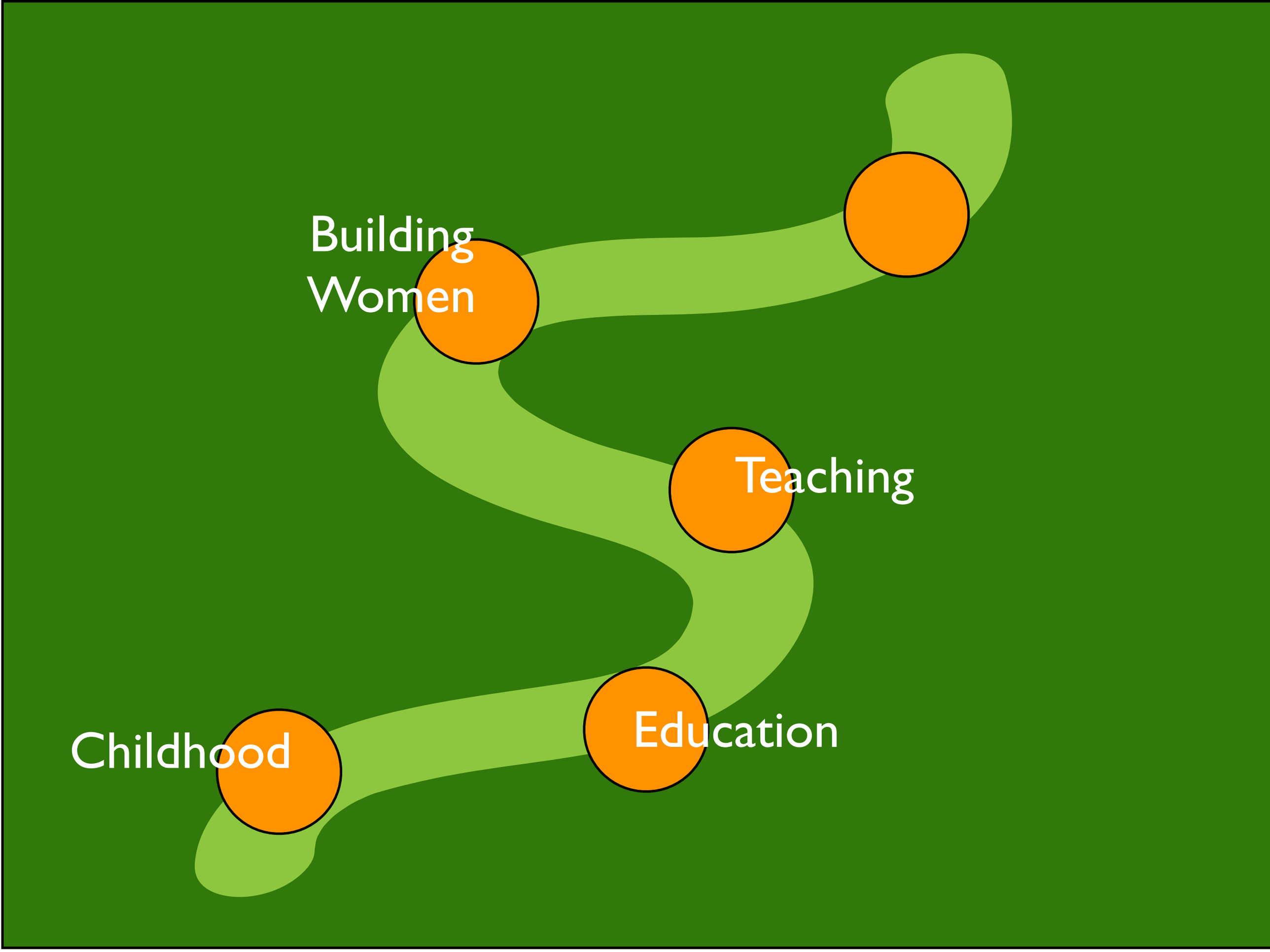
Building
Women
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Building Women

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Building Women

A-8—Tues., Nov. 17, 1981 EVENING OUTLOOK

Living

Building women reach new heights in career satisfaction

By ERIC GRIMM
Evening Outlook Staff Writer

VENICE — They are a team of carpenters, plumbers, electricians, roofers and painters. They are five women.

Their company, Building Women, grew out of a Comprehensive Education and Training Act (CETA) grant in Santa Monica. During 2½ years as Santa Monica Handywomen, they learned skills on the job by working for low-income people with tools furnished by Santa Monica under the grant.

When the CETA funding ran out, they became a non-profit corporation, and for the past two years they have been general contractors on jobs from repairing leaky faucets and installing deadbolt locks, to adding onto houses.

Four of the five original builders remain, including Shirl Buss, Renee Cowhig, Janet Stambolian and Ellen Ladley. Penny Cozad was attending architecture school and joined the group when it set up offices in Venice.

Building Women are different from other contractors, not just because they are women, but also because they contract on a sliding fee scale and try to pass along their skills to other women through workshops and classes.

The social philosophy is a way to pay back what they gained through the CETA training, they say.

Being women has worked both for and against them, Cozad says several times they've lost jobs because of their sex.

"Usually we work with the wives," she said. "We think we've got everything tied up, then the husband stalls. It happened three times recently."

But Cowhig points out many of their clients want women to do their work for them.

"While some of them might be feminists, many of them aren't," she said. "They just identify with the concept and get excited about women working."

Buss says in many cases they work for older single women who are more comfortable having other women doing the work.

And many times, Cozad says, cultural stereotypes work in their favor.

"There's a feeling women are more conscientious, more meticulous," she said. "We don't try to discourage that stereotype."

Buss says on some of the jobs they have bid for, the women were selected even though they didn't have the lowest bid.

"It's some intangible thing," she said. "Maybe it's our professionalism . . . or our ability to communicate."

Cowhig says, generally, women learn communication skills earlier than men, and that sometimes gives the company the edge in competitive bidding.

"It makes the client think he can trust these women," she said.

The women say they got into the construction field because of fantasy and finances.

Cozad says she worked traditional office jobs for women and would fantasize about being a carpenter and working outdoors.

Cowhig says the financial aspect enticed her into the field. She says she worked herself up to office manager for one firm, then realized there was no place else for her to advance.

"I like the idea of working outside and being your own boss," she said. "You use your mind and body in your work — it's a delightful fantasy."

Of the 12 women in the original two groups of CETA handywomen, eight are still in the field. They say the CETA project was one of the few successful efforts in the grant program.

Their group survived, they add, because of an unusual combination of luck, complementary personalities and the CETA funding.

They would like to expand the program, offering more training and adding more women. However, grants for training have dried up, and the women are devoting most of their time to "pounding the pavement" looking for jobs.

Buss also cautions the field is extremely difficult to break into and nine out of 10 new businesses don't survive.

The women say, however, they are willing to help other women who want to start their own groups. For more information, call Building Women at 391-0442.

General contractors Penny Cozad, Renee Cowhig and Shirl Buss on job in West Los Angeles

Evening Outlook Photo by Richard N. Levine

Building Women

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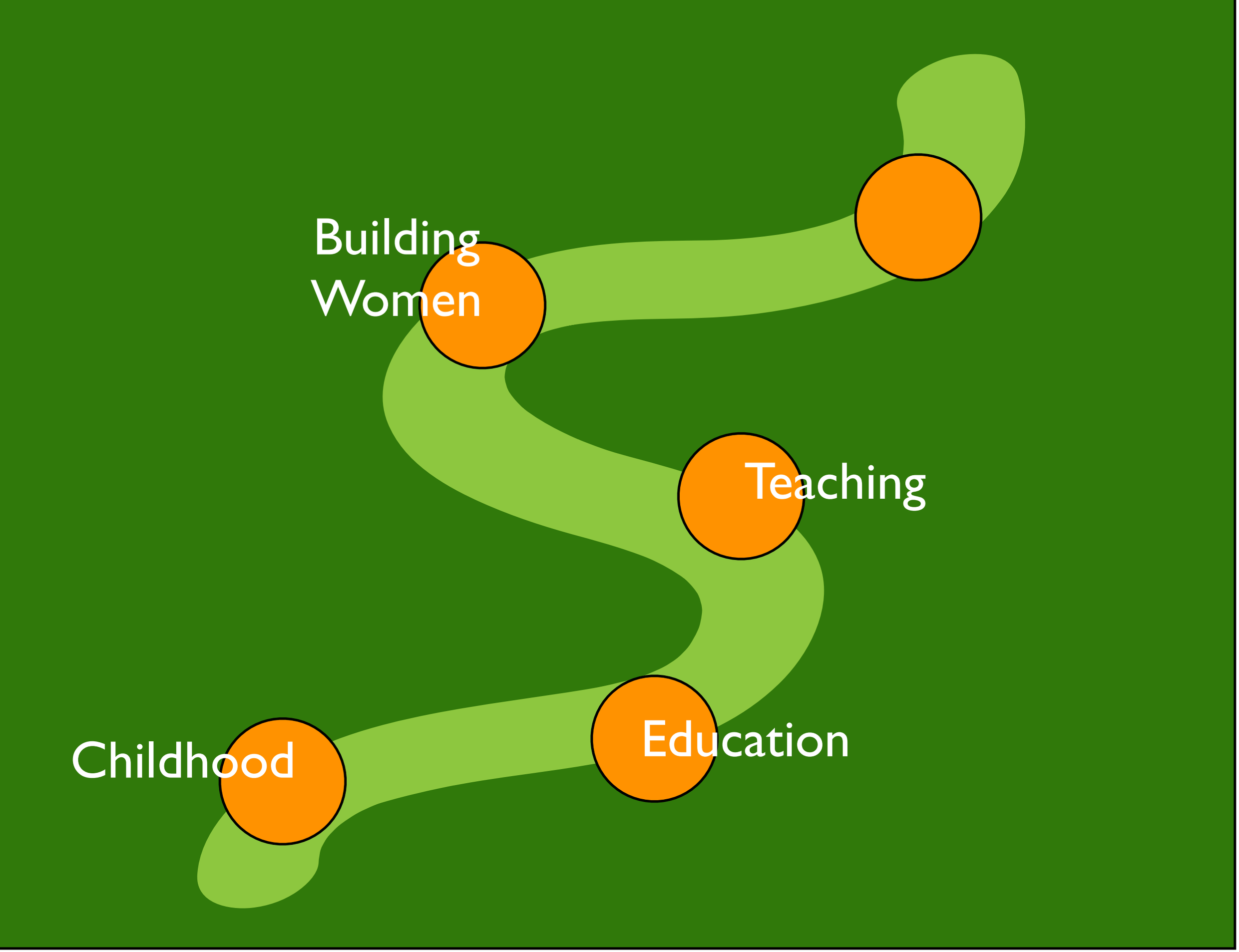
Evening Outlook Photo by Richard V. Levine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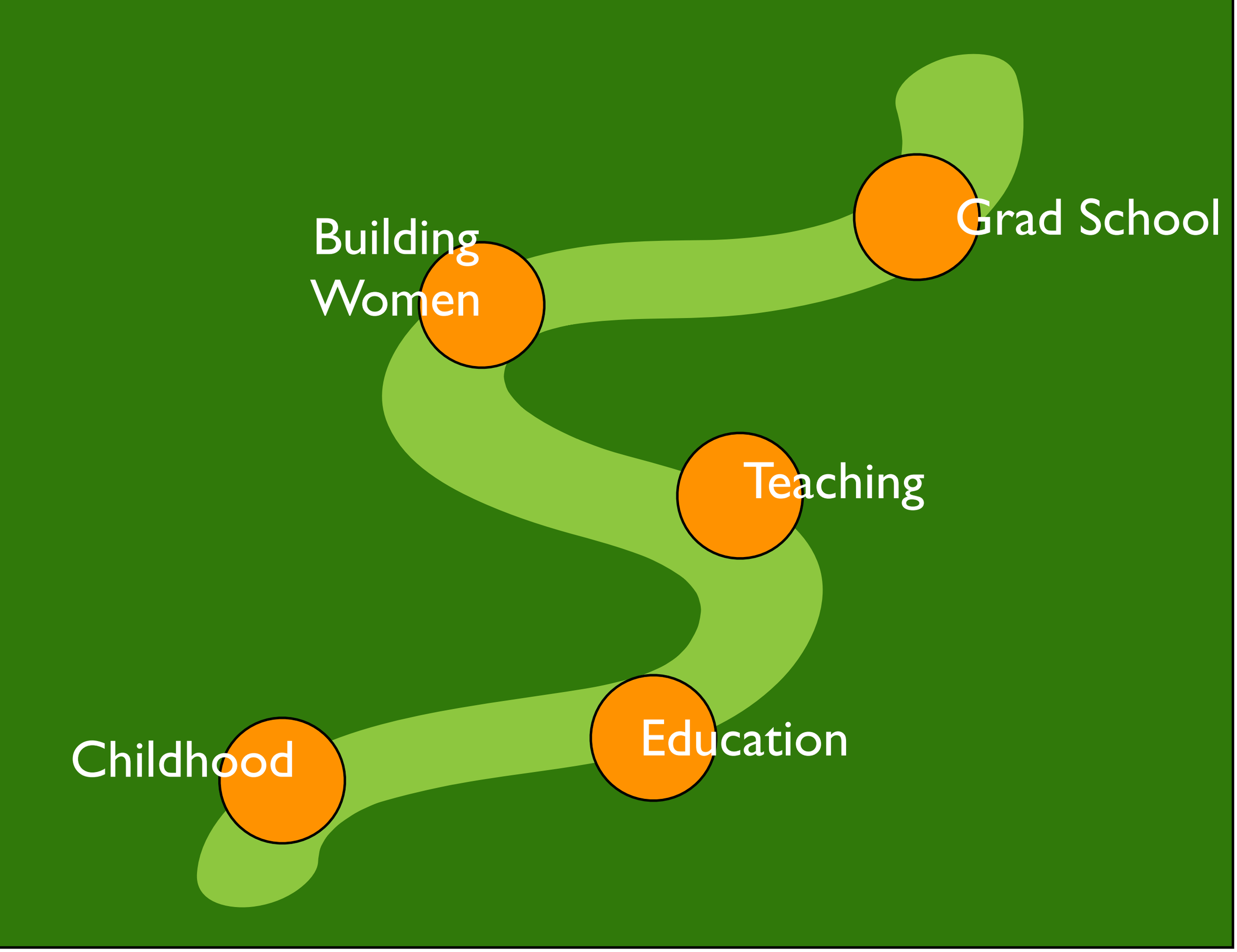
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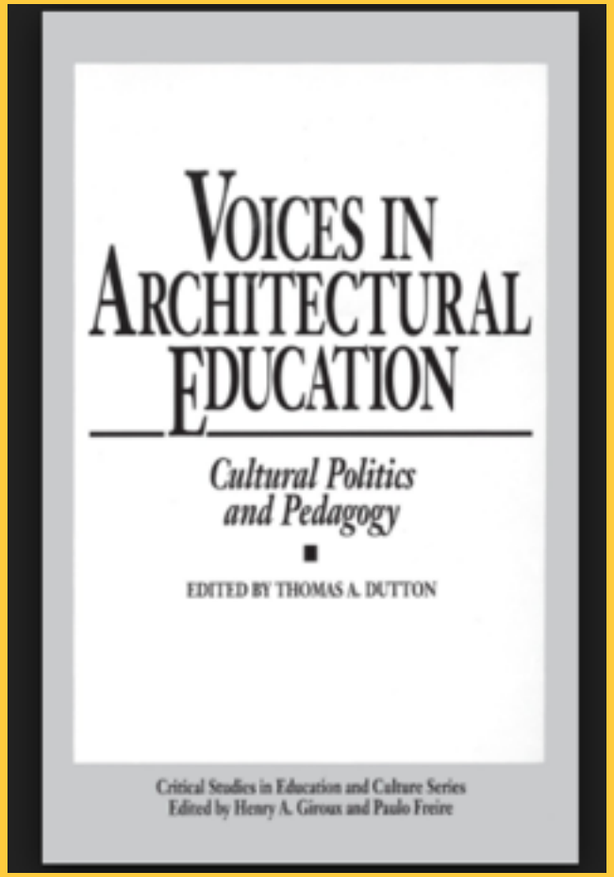
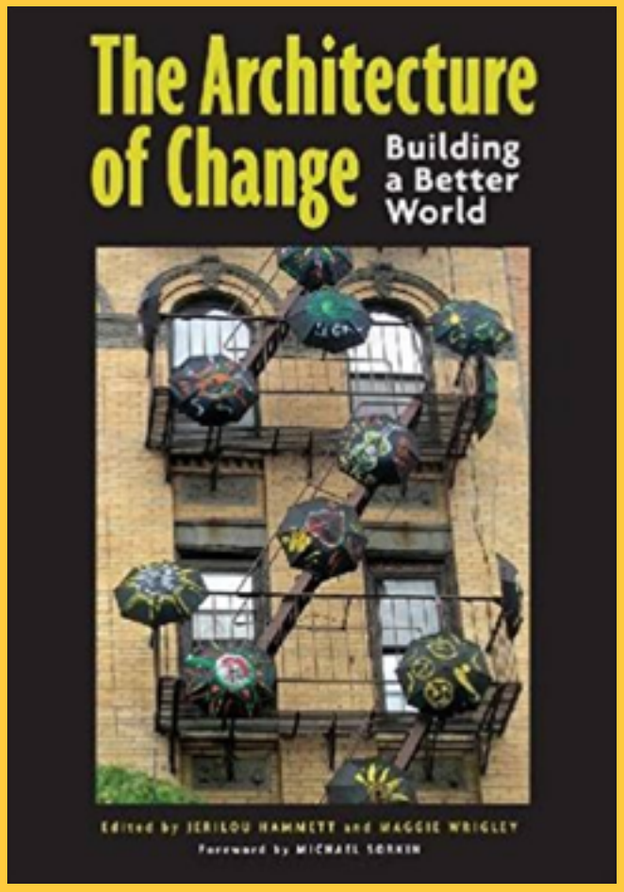
Architecture + Design



Research + Writing



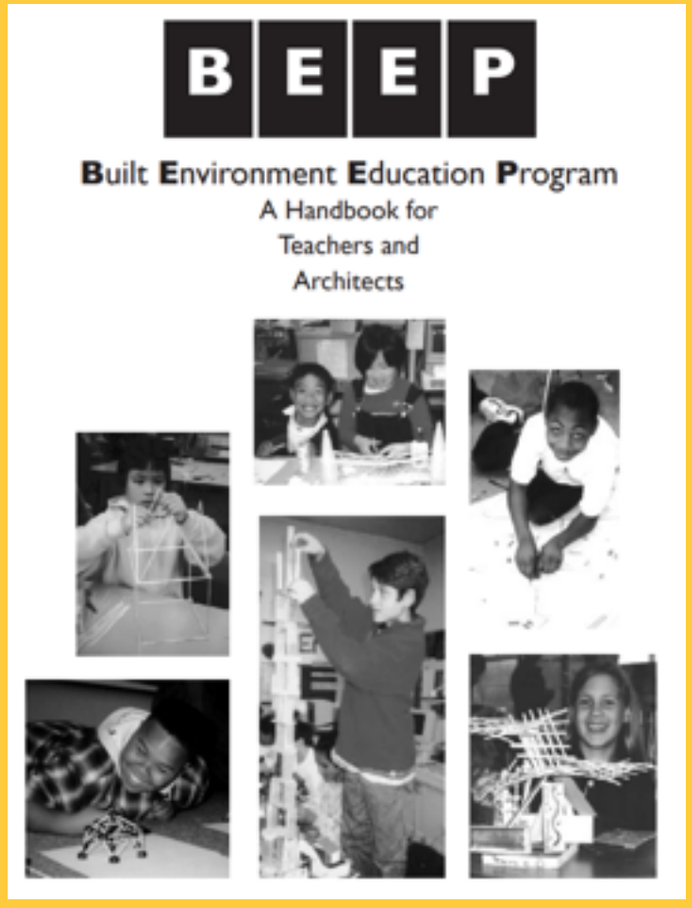
JOURNAL ARTICLE

DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH: CHILDREN ON THE EDGES OF SKID ROW

Shirl Buss

Children's Environments Quarterly

Vol. 5, No. 1, Street Children and Children in Homeless Families (Spring 1988), pp. 43-49



Building + Community

Teaching All Ages