

Creating Space for Teacher Activism in Environmental Education: Pre-service Teachers' Experiences

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Abstract

Ontario, Canada mandates integrating environmental education (EE) into all subject areas from K-12, but pre-service teachers receive little to no instruction on how to do so. This study focusses on the experiences of 13 pre-service students who demonstrated their passion for EE through their own activism and volunteerism. Findings include the participants' definition of activism, lack of acknowledgement of activist experiences within the program, and participants' worries about being positioned as radical. Further, participants expressed a need for support, space, and time within the pre-service program to discuss these experiences and share ideas and resources within the teacher community. Suggestions to augment teacher education programs and for further research are provided.

Résumé

L'Ontario intègre l'éducation à l'environnement à toutes les matières de la maternelle à la 12e année, mais les enseignants en formation ne reçoivent que peu ou pas d'instruction à cet égard. Cette étude relate les expériences de 13 étudiants en enseignement qui ont montré de l'intérêt pour la cause environnementale en s'impliquant dans leur communauté. Ils nous font notamment part de leur définition de l'activisme, du peu de reconnaissance que cette expérience reçoit au sein du programme, et de leur crainte d'être étiquetés comme radicaux. En outre, ces étudiants aimeraient être épaulés et profiter de plus de temps et d'espace pour partager leurs expériences, idées et ressources avec leurs pairs. Les auteures offrent des suggestions pour améliorer les programmes de formation des enseignants et orienter les recherches futures.

Key words: environmental education, activism, curriculum, teacher identity

Introduction

This paper presents findings from a phenomenological study of how pre-service teachers (n = 13) reconcile an activist identity with their teacher identities. Activists are defined in the literature as individuals who play a role in social movements and form a community, or a collective “we” against a problem; this community may focus on the creation of new ideas (Starr, 2010). Generally, activists seek to alter a problem or issue, and the resulting action depends on the identification of who or what is to blame (Benford & Snow, 2000). While

there are many types of activism, such as those that focus on gender, sexuality, different abilities, and equity, this paper aims attention at activism related to the environment. The definition of EE has historically included some tie to action by an individual or group wanting to change an aspect of the environment (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978). This paper also presents the argument that schooling must be more democratic if educators are to realize the vision whereby teachers can safely express their environmental ideals and activist endeavours.

Through a series of open-ended interviews with 13 teacher candidates enrolled in a large initial teacher education program, we sought to explore the experiences of activism in the candidates' terms, allowing them to define what they meant by activism and how they viewed it in the light of their emerging teacher identities. In what follows, we briefly discuss both environmental education in Ontario and democratic schooling before sharing the findings from our study. The literature is interwoven throughout. We end with implications for teacher education and suggestions for further study.

Environmental Education in Ontario

In 1998, the environmental science course was removed from the Ontario curriculum, an act accompanied by a dramatic decrease in attention to environmental issues in secondary schools (Puk & Behm, 2003). Puk and Makin (2006) show that, in the same year, 88% of elementary school teachers taught EE two hours or less per week. Despite this apparent lack of attention to EE, Canadians have become increasingly aware of environmental issues and have thus grown more interested in including environmental learning in all sectors of society, including the classroom (Russell & Burton, 2000). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) has responded to this interest through the publication of "Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow," which mandates the inclusion of socially relevant, culturally appropriate environmental issues into every subject from kindergarten to grade 12. This document also calls for integrative curriculum, which aims to link real world experiences with curriculum across subjects. Pre-service education programs, however, rarely offer courses to help pre-service teachers develop interest in, knowledge about, or teaching skills for EE (Puk & Stibbards, 2010). This lack of training in EE integration is a major cause of curriculum failure in the classroom and one of the most important issues facing EE (Goldman, Yavetz, & Pe'er, 2006). Pre-service teachers are thus left to rely on their prior experiences with respect to environmental causes, such as their activist endeavours.

One could interpret the action-oriented approach to local environmental issues championed in "Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) as encouraging teacher activism. However, dominant discourses in education tend to exclude the possibility of an activist identity, leaving teachers who do identify as activists fearful of being identified as mavericks

(Barrett, in press). Indeed, dominant discourses about what constitutes a good teacher favour individualistic and apolitical educators (Barrett, Ford, & James, 2010) over teachers who are oriented toward the “group action” characteristic of activism. Further, despite efforts and policies created to reform teacher training by breaking down hierarchical views of academics, practitioners, and community members, most institutions still value following dominant societal views of teachers and their roles (Zeichner, 2010). The current ethos of public schooling, with its claims to benevolent neutrality, is not conducive to teachers’ recognizing themselves as political actors. Indeed, official gestures through policy and curriculum changes towards educating students for active citizenship tend not to see teachers as political agents.

Democratic Schooling and Environmental Education

Democratic approaches, where the discourse encourages the open flow of ideas, faith in the collective to resolve problems, and a critical reflection on policies and procedures, could provide the conditions necessary for both teacher and activist identities to emerge (Beane & Apple, 1995). Teachers are involved in curriculum and policy creation and reflection, and this can help empower teachers to reconcile their identity as teacher with their identity as activist; this approach could also be applied early on to pre-service teachers (Beane & Apple, 1995). Democratic conditions can also lead to communities of practice where activist identity is safely expressed and used to define pedagogy that facilitates respect and collaboration among teachers (Sachs, 2001). This collaboration could counteract the barriers educators face when teaching EE, such as lack of resources or support, or fear of controversy (Barrett, in press). Teachers could use personal experience to teach EE, regardless of barriers and available resources, and without relying on school curriculum or formal support (Astbury, Huddart, & Theoret, 2009).

Both authors have integrated EE into our work in different ways. One taught science for a decade, using a passive approach to EE. She deliberately included environmental education throughout her teaching, without engaging in individual or group activism in the community. As a professor, her research has focussed on new teachers’ struggles to include, or grapple with, social justice issues in their teaching. The other author went to graduate school following a pre-service program, spending time working as a naturalist and conducting research in food literacy and education. Our backgrounds’ serve as evidence of our interest in the topic and provide context for our analyses. Although the bracketing required by phenomenological studies cannot eliminate the influence of our interests on our analyses, declaring them allows readers to recognize how our experiences influence our depiction of the participants’ experiences.

Methodology

We chose a phenomenological approach, based on Creswell's (2000) guiding framework, to gain insight into how pre-service teachers make sense of their teacher education experiences. Following Creswell's (2013) model, the authors honoured the participants' views as complex and authentic, informed by places and experiences they encountered during their education and activism, either currently or historically.

We recruited participants through email, class visits, and social media. Two participants, as disclosed on the ethics report, were former students of one researcher. Inclusion criteria was: being a teacher candidate and having a background, passion, or interest in environmental issues (See Table 1).

Table 1: *Participants*

Participant*	Age	Sex	Certification Grade Level	Activist Identification	Subject Specialty
Alex	19	F	7-12	Y	History
Thea	19	F	K-6	N	n/a
Casey	28	F	K-6	Y	n/a
Diana	20	F	4-10	Y	English
Ella	20	F	7-12	Y	Environment/French
Finn	28	F	7-12	N	Geography/Environmental
Grace	27	F	K-6	Y	French and German
Holly	43	F	K-6	N	n/a
Isabelle	23	F	K-6	N	n/a
Sam	X	F	K-6	Y	n/a
Smith	24	M	7-12	Y	Drama/history
Kim	21	F	7-12	Y	Geography/English
Beth	30	F	7-12	N	n/a

*Pseudonyms

Each participant completed a demographic questionnaire and took part in two semi-structured interviews (30-60 min). Each interview was audiotaped and fully transcribed. For data analysis, we used NVivo (data analysis software) to aid in coding the emergent themes. A list of non-repetitive and non-overlapping significant statements was coded from the transcripts (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Themes within significant statements were then coded in NVivo. For example, under activism, significant statements, including phrases such as extreme,

passion, and passive, were coded. Themes that were common among participants were grouped, allowing patterns to emerge. Each theme was considered individually. We then developed a written description of participants, including verbatim examples from the transcripts. As data analysis was ongoing, we continued to recruit participants until data saturation was reached.

Validity was established by: (1) providing transcripts and researcher notes to participants, allowing them to verify the text and clarify the meanings of their experiences; and (2) having multiple sources for the same concept.

Findings and Discussion

We identified three themes, each of which we will discuss in detail below: (1) identifying as an activist; (2) being an activist teacher; (3) activism and teacher education

Identifying as an Activist

Participants were involved in a variety of activities/activism such as conservation work, local cycling initiatives, food policy in schools, outdoor education, food justice organizations, women's shelter, guerilla gardening, sustainable cooperative, public health research, YMCA, and an Ecoclub. The questions "do you identify as an activist?" and "how would you define activism?" were asked of each participant. In total, 8 of the 13 pre-service teachers identified as activists—either as environmental activists or as food activists, or as both (Alex, Casey, Diana, Ella, Smith, Sam, Grace, and Kim). Overall there was no explicit pattern between teachable subject area and willingness to identify as an activist. Participants defined activism variously as someone who: (1) cared about the environment; (2) took measurable and grand action; and (3) sought to spread awareness.

Participants saw an activist as someone who cares about the environment, noting that activists "want to make a difference" (Alex) and "make the world a better place to be in" (Sam). Alex expressed frustration about the lack of caring amongst people in her courses. She explained, "I find a lot of people are like, 'Who cares? [Environmental damage] is in the past.' But it does matter and... it still spills into modern day. Especially with the environment, it has such a big effect."

Smith stressed the importance of caring about the environment, stating, "For myself I would define [activism] as an interest in the environment and trying to pursue the care of and conservation of it." One way to express this care of the environment, and its' betterment, is to be an activist who is involved in making a change. Sam believed an activist looks outward to find "ways you can improve" the world for others, and to "be the change that you want to see" in the world.

Pre-service teachers believed that activists are action oriented, usually in formal ways. Grace believed that “as an activist you are supporting the advancement of that organization...through writing their MP/MPP or attending rallies.” She believed that activists take “it a step further” than merely displaying passion. This is a typical interpretation in the literature, in which social movements and their members are often defined as a group that has a formal organizing principle, and who defines a problem and aims to fix it through action (Benford & Snow, 2000; Starr, 2010). The relationship between environmental issues and action is often a key component of environmental education (UNESCO, 1997).

There were some discrepancies amongst the participants’ explanations of what counted as action. Casey assumed that only her “larger scale” and “formal” involvement counted as activism. She explained, “I definitely would consider myself an activist but perhaps on a 2 or 3 level scale out of 4. Like 2.5.” This was indicative of the tendency amongst participants to define an activist as someone who makes grand or extreme gestures. It was an interesting revelation to Casey that the smaller scale, personal choices that she makes “on a daily basis” would count as activism. Diana expressed similar sentiments. At the beginning of the interview, Diana expressed that an activist “lived for the cause.” As our conversation progressed, she reflected on her lifestyle choices. She decided that “choosing to eat healthy and not litter, and being conscious of your decisions” was not something she would have considered activism, but she now recognized it could be defined as such.

This lack of certainty about what is accepted as activism and what is not is also prevalent in the literature. Traditionally, activism or social movements are defined by organization and collective—by a group of people undertaking large projects to make an impact (Marx & McAdam, 1994). Lifestyle movements, which focus on the changes individuals make to their everyday lifestyle (as opposed to focussing on mobilizing the public to make changes), is becoming more accepted as activism (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012). Another participant, Finn, also exhibited activism through lifestyle choices such as not “eating certain foods or buying certain products, based on where they come from or the company that owns that product.” These actions may be small and informal, but they are still tied to environmental work.

One could criticize the notion that purchasing products is an expression of an individual’s activist and environmental ideals on the grounds that the citizen–consumer hybrid is unbalanced. The action addresses the consumerist aspect more than it suggests that an environmental citizen is making an actual difference (Johnston, 2008). EE has long been linked to a neoliberal framework that transforms an environmental issue into an economic one, thus making the solution consumerist based (Hursh, Henderson, & Greenwood, 2015). The problem is that this neoliberal framework of environment seeps into the curriculum, reducing the focus to things like purchasing hybrid cars or the “right” light bulbs (Hursh, Henderson, & Greenwood, 2015).

Our participants defined activism as action and personal experience, an attitude that supports the role of the teacher described in “Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). In this publication, that role is to guide “field-based pedagogical skills” and “develop knowledge and perspectives about environmental issues” (p. 11). The document also acknowledges that “student engagement and leadership are central to environmental education” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 25). Moreover, it recognizes the valuable educational opportunity that community partnerships can provide students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 25). However, it fails to acknowledge the role the teacher could play in enriching this process by exposing students to new experiences, sharing their own passion and activist endeavours in the classroom, and bringing new partnerships to the school.

From the participants’ perspectives, passively integrating environmental activism into the Ontario school curriculum was appropriate and stayed true to her style of teaching and her identity as a teacher. Grace approached EE by “just [embedding] it into everything we do,” but she also considered that form of EE to be “passive,” claiming that activism, by contrast, “implies that you are actively doing something.” Casey also hinted at this relationship of passive/active activism when she described “different levels” of activism. Holly used the same terminology, explaining that even though she makes a point of linking her environmental ideals and work in the classroom, it is not activism: “What I am doing is embedded in [the Ontario school] curriculum across the board. It is subtler than that I think. I have never thought of myself in that way. Not as an activist.” Diana seemed very dismissive when talking about her method of incorporating her environmental work into the classroom, wondering “if it even counts.” Making an active choice, to link their activism and environmental values to the curriculum, was downplayed by participants as a passive, less impactful action. This may relate to how teachers, who are often passionate about the environment, not only feel they are acting in isolation but also fear they are appearing in an unflattering professional light (Pedretti, Nazir, Tan, Bellomo, & Ayyavoo, 2012).

Participants discussed the definition and role of an activist, which included information sharing and raising awareness. Isabelle explained that an activist’s role “would be defending or trying to make people aware of a certain topic...you are trying to spread awareness or make a change in certain areas.” An activist, as defined by Ella, makes it a goal to be “involved in issues and informing yourself on issues” that are important. Finn explained that she tried “to share with people who will listen, what I think, and what I have learned,” though she was unsure of the impact. Writing is also a form of educating on environmental issues; Isabella recounted writing about her experience attending a march against Monsanto and harmful agricultural practices. She said, “I also posted about that on my blog which is also a part of activism as well.” She understood an activist to be knowledgeable on an issue they are passionate about and to act on this

knowledge. This notion helped some pre-service teachers feel able to identify as “activist teachers.”

Even though participants exhibited actions that aligned with their definitions of activism, most did not use this term to describe themselves. This was due, in part, to their belief that society paints activists as extreme or radical. For example, Smith believed others defined activists as being “the people ...who are chaining themselves to trees, and making sure they are not eating any animals, or not wearing any fur, or almost environmental extremism.” He found that his interest in the environment “scares people.”

Despite making several lifestyle changes, including adopting a vegan diet to protest factory farming, spearheading several EE initiatives, and advocating for environmental policy changes on campus, Ella shied away from identifying as an activist. She joked that an “activist is not as bad as eco-activist or eco-terrorists.” She believed people often use the term *activist* in an effort to be politically correct, when they really believe that the described action is extreme. Holly agreed that there is negativity surrounding the term:

I think activism has gotten this negative connotation to it. It is interesting because there is research that says if you get really militant about things people will actually do less. They pull back more. It gets too scary, too big, I can't do it. I think that is maybe a little bit of it.

Participants tended to downplay their involvement in environmental issues on account of the negative connotations—including extremism—associated with such activism. Finn explained that while she does many things to help the environment, she avoids activities that may be perceived to be radical:

I don't go out into the picket line and hold a sign and chain myself to trees. When I hear “activist” that is kind of what goes through my head, that is what I picture...but I guess you could almost be a silent activist and I think that is more of what I am.

Likewise, Beth tended to downplay her involvement in the environmental movement saying:

I know a lot of people that are involved in things, and they talk to me about it all the time. I am aware of things, but other than just remaining aware and helping them if they ask, I haven't done much.

The discourse of what it means to be a teacher that pre-service teachers encounter, both in the Bachelor of Education program and in the Ontario classroom, may be the root of their discomfort and the reason for the way they are dismissive of their own related actions. As previously mentioned, a democratic approach to education could enable educators to more comfortably identify as both a teacher and an activist since it fosters this dual identity and supports creation of a community based on experiences (Beane & Apple, 1995). They

form a basis of meaning and identity for pre-service teachers and impact the way they teach (Melville, Bartley & Weinburgh, 2012). If pre-service teachers encountered a school structure that supported their activist work and interest in EE, they might feel more confident and less uncomfortable integrating EE into their teaching.

Being an Activist Teacher

In interviews, some participants saw themselves as educator-activists, as individuals who raised awareness and educated the public, but others were afraid to blend education and activism, citing their fear of being political or inappropriate in the classroom as cause for caution. Smith broached this issue by stating, "I know we are not supposed to be political as teachers, but environmental issues are political." Kim noted, "There is a risk of identifying as an activist. For people who want to be formal educators in classrooms, those identities can be problematic to bring into the space where your principal and superintendents can view it." This is especially true if they want to be viewed as doing their job properly (Jickling, 2003).

Some participants believed that society needs to be aware of EE and aim to create change as part of the activist role. Many, however, dismissed their own role as activist/educators; they did this even while they articulated their belief that information sharing and educating the community - activities they already engage in - was part of the role of an activist. For example, despite integrating EE into her teaching, Diana did not feel that teaching in and of itself sufficiently comprised "activist" activity. She explained, "I take an interest in this stuff but I don't feel I have done anything proactive that would make me an activist." Holly noted that "activist" is not a title she used, explaining:

I have never used that label about myself. And it is certainly not the way I think about myself. So, when you think of an activist, you think of them physically doing something or mentally doing something to change or support or to educate in a more formalized way.

School is a formal way to educate and certainly takes mental effort to accomplish, yet these efforts are diminished by the participants. Despite referencing attributes that both a teacher and an activist need to have, Holly still does not consider herself an activist.

Sam seemed to be alone among the participants to embrace the idea of being a teacher and an activist. She explained that when she thinks of her own teaching philosophy she believes she is "an activist":

I would consider myself to be an activist. If I am a teacher and I am talking to my students on an everyday basis...I see that I am relating this [environmental issue]... on a scale of one to ten I would put myself an eight.

Here, Sam emphasizes how her dialogue and daily actions as a teacher are impacted by her activist ideals.

Activism and Teacher Education

Study participants believed that if there were space to share their activist experiences in their initial teacher education program they would feel that their activist work was valued and supported in the educational context. Grace suggested that allowing pre-service teachers to make links between their volunteer work and classroom assignments was one way for the teacher education program to help pre-service teachers to be ready to teach EE. Kim thought that pedagogy should make explicit links between social justice and environmental issues. Providing space for pre-service teachers to guide their own learning could be an effective way for EE and activism to become part of the B.Ed. program.

One large-scale Canadian study found that to teach EE, teachers needed to place less emphasis on new classroom curriculum, instead developing community partnerships and maintaining their own support networks (Astbury, Huddart, & Theoret, 2009). This notion was framed as “innovation on the margins” (Astbury, Huddart, & Theoret, 2009, p. 167). The experience of teachers in this study seems to support this idea.

EE does not necessarily fit into a curriculum box which makes it difficult for pre-service teachers to do EE, when they feel pressure to follow set curriculum guidelines (Johnston, 2009). This made it hard for participants to find space to explore environmental issues and, more importantly, to believe they had agency to create their own space. Even established teachers often feel that there is already too much material to cover, making teaching EE across disciplines—an effective method for educating about the environment—difficult (Barrett, 2007; Barrett, 2013). Teachers often feel they do not have the authority or ability to exercise independent judgment when it comes to the mandated provincial curriculum, especially as a pre-service teacher (Klaus & Jaritz, 1996). Sam believed that her main priority would be to “go with the [Ontario classroom] curriculum” despite being interested in sharing her activist experience. The pressure to follow the curriculum often makes it difficult to approach the interdisciplinary topic of “environment” practically within the classroom (Feng, 2012). Grace suggested that the new French and Geography Ontario curriculum could help create space to link environmental experiences and “a lot of those barriers [to EE] will dissipate.”

Participants acknowledged the importance of past experiences, such as activist work, past employment, and familial upbringing, as essential to helping teachers to feel prepared to teach EE. Past experiences, too, would be “innovation at the margins,” where pre-service teachers can use personal experiences to make direct connections to EE, rather than relying on written documents or formal support (Astbury, Huddart, & Theoret, 2009). Volunteer work and numerous environmental experiences prepared Grace “to be a vessel for” the

environment in her teaching; she felt this experiential learning helped her develop as a teacher. Alex believed her volunteer work had “given [her] more experience, with students and their parents.” Holly also felt prepared because of her “own interests and research but not through the program. There has been nothing, absolutely nothing throughout the program.” Finn felt prepared “to a point,” but this feeling of preparation came, once again, from her past courses in environmental studies. She wondered if “[her preparation] would be as thorough or [if I] would be as passionate about it as someone who does not have an undergrad in it, or the environmental science teachable.” Sam felt she was prepared due to her work in the [International] system of education: “My knowledge has come from there, not from something at [the university],” she stated. Smith felt prepared to teach EE due to his upbringing:

I feel prepared because I have the parents I did. I didn’t take EE ever as a course, I have done some self-research on it but growing up I have had two parents who are interested in it and cared about it and who made sure I was outside.

Feeling prepared has many dimensions. While Casey felt the B.Ed. provided her with resources to teach EE, she ultimately believed that, compared to her passion and activism, it did little to prepare her to be an environmental educator. She stated, “I would say most of it comes from my own passion and fund of knowledge. But has school made me prepared? I don’t know. Probably two out of ten.”

An increase in experiential learning, such as community partnerships and field trips may increase knowledge. This is typically how EE is addressed in Canadian schools, though doing it effectively requires time and space (Breuing, 2013). Past encounters with experiential learning impacted how pre-service teachers felt about being environmental educators. These experiences were often tied to the reason they began doing activist work and hoped to continue doing EE in their classroom. While Alex lacked a formal background in EE and “wasn’t really aware of that stuff” growing up, she recounted field trips she took in school. This experience inspired her to volunteer at the site of that trip, and she felt that this experience has “given me insight...and more experience, with students and their parents.”

Similarly, Thea recounted an experiential learning experience where she was taught

how to eat environmentally friendly. Like using re-useable bins and stuff. That was really fun, I still remember feeding black capped chickadees from my hand. I think that is important to remember these experiences and remember why the earth is important to you and what you want to do to save it.

Isabelle also reflected on the relationship between experiential adventures and her ability to teach EE. She recounted, those experiences:

I went to [a local] conservation area and we stayed on an overnight trip and went cross country skiing and made a fire and learned about animals and those experiences, those trips...made [more of] an impact on me than what my teacher said in the classroom.

The emphasis on experiential learning, and the impact it has on knowledge and interest in EE is one avenue to explore for pre-service education.

Participants' Recommendations

Participants made several recommendations for integrating EE into their pre-service curriculum and for the support they needed. The B.Ed. program should provide opportunities to engage in experiential learning since field trips and hands-on experiences were found to be impactful and meaningful. It should also include discussions about how to integrate the materials and resources related to activism into the classroom. This could be done in a variety of ways, including art, written assignments, self-reflection, or group discussions. Furthermore, participants felt they had interesting and unique experiences that were not being recognized. Not only would recognition increase confidence to incorporate EE, it would also place value on these experiences.

Ultimately, pre-service teachers observed a lack of discussion about environment and their activism in their program. This shortcoming marked a missed opportunity for pre-service teachers to learn about environmental issues and for activist teachers to share experiences and resources and to make useful connections with others. Creating collaborations between community organizations and passionate teachers is a way to support teachers who want to use a variety of methods to teach EE (Astbury, Huddart, & Theoret, 2009). These collaborations enrich the classroom, infusing it with new ideas and new materials, and may help fill gaps caused by any individual teacher's lack of confidence. It also reinforces the ideals in EE, where EE is defined as action and making a difference.

Another recommendation is to make the connection and reconnection between past experiences and current pedagogy by engaging in reflective processes. This "enables educators to refine their practice, in response to the contextual circumstances of their work, and supports continuous development of effective pedagogy, processes and policies in schools in response to changing knowledge in the field" (Daniel, Auhl, & Hastings, 2013, p. 159). But the responsibility of raising awareness and sharing experiences need not fall solely on the professors in the education program. Students have a variety of experiences and resources to share, yet many feel there is little opportunity to do so. Casey specifically mentioned a way to share ideas with her peers that she believed would be helpful:

if there was a group that I could become a member of, where all we did was talk about how we could take our learning and transform it into practice, like I would go every week. I definitely would take any opportunity to take help and resources to make my ideals a reality. So, are there opportunities? I feel bad saying it but maybe limited opportunities.

Students may need to generate these opportunities themselves by creating a community of practice. Here pre-service teachers could share feedback regularly, reflect on their experiences together, and examine how concepts are understood in the current system (Han, 1995; Hatton & Smith, 1995). A structural approach could be implementation of cohorts. Students interested in specific themed areas could be provided with opportunities and courses in these areas. Students could use social media forums to facilitate online or face-to-face meetings as a club or informal group. One study found that a creation of communities of practice in a B.Ed. program provided helpful and uplifting feedback, and that individuals sharing their experiences in these communities made them more aware of its impact and relevance to teaching (Daniel, Auhl, & Hastings, 2013).

Conclusion

In this study, participants defined activism as a formal and measurable action that resulted in a change or made a difference. This action could take a variety of forms, through leadership, information sharing, and lifestyle changes. Many participants felt activism could be construed as negative or extreme, thus not fitting into the image of a “well-mannered” teacher. Moreover, they made explicit links between “action” and goals to inspire change and spread awareness via their teaching and lesson plan creation, but they did not view these efforts as activism. Even so, based on the experiences and opinions of pre-service teachers, it is possible to link one’s activist experiences to EE. They value their experiences and are already reflecting on how they can be incorporated into the classroom, yet they are lacking confidence that doing so is an acceptable practice. Jickling (2003) urges teachers to integrate their activist experiences into the classroom, warning that limiting these ideas may imply that environmental issues are unimportant, further feeding into the idea that environmentalism is radical and should be avoided. If new teachers are going to have an impact on political issues, teacher education should be an “empowering transformative process,” not one that accepts the reality of the system as it stands (Yogev & Michaeli, 2011, p. 313). If pre-service teachers were asked to explore, connect, and share their previous experiences, it would demonstrate to them that these experiences are valuable. Further, a B.Ed. program that makes direct linkages between activist passions and resources would help strengthen the belief that these experiences are worthwhile. More exposure to EE-focussed placements

and critical discussion of current school EE policies (such as EcoSchools and EcoClub) may also help pre-service teachers formulate their own strategies and beliefs about teaching EE.

Here, we make a case for a democratic approach at the pre-service level. To prepare teachers to make connections to their activism and include this experience in their teaching, we believe that pre-service teachers must believe in their own power to effect change (Kugelmass, 2000). In this study, some pre-service teachers dismissed their actions as small or unimportant, undervaluing their power to make change through their teaching. To resist the “dominant ideologies” of the school system, pre-service teachers need to make connections to their past experiences in what Kugelmass (2000) describes as spiritual preparation. If pre-service teachers are indoctrinated into the skills and methodologies of the dominant school culture, they lose this connection (Kugelmass, 2000).

One of the main goals of this study was to find out how pre-service teachers defined terms, based on their experiences, and what supports they needed to teach EE based on how they viewed the teacher education program. The knowledge gained from this study could serve as a basis for addressing the isolation felt by activist teachers.

Further research needs to be done on the ways in which pre-service teachers integrate their activist identities into their teacher identities. Teachers are in positions of influence, and the ways in which they bring controversial issues and calls to action into their teaching need to be discussed more explicitly within teacher education programs. It would be beneficial to conduct research that focusses on specific interventions within teacher education programs with respect to the handling of controversial issues and, specifically, with the goal of helping pre-service teachers prepare to integrate environmental issues into their teaching in a way that honours both teacher and student autonomy.

Notes on Contributors

Rachelle Campigotto is a PhD student in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University. The focus of her research is environmental education, in particular food literacy, and how it can be integrated into the curriculum. Currently, she has explored the ways teachers define and understand the environment, and how they understand their activist identity within the classroom. **Contact:** rachellecampigotto@gmail.com

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