

Eco-Anxiety: Ontario Teachers' Insights into Effective Environmental Education Pedagogy

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Research Article

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Abstract

In recent years, there is a growing concern of eco-anxiety, an anxiety evoked by negative accounts on Climate Change. Globally, scholars find that this anxiety, manifested in expressions such as frustration and fatigue, decreases interests and de-motivate learners (see, e.g., Ojala, 2017). In addition, literature about teachers' self-efficacy is limited, indicating a lack of support for teachers to integrate environmental education across curricula. Although the policy document outlines ways in which teachers can implement research-based practices, few teachers in reality take up the initiative. Thus, this empirical paper will explore the phenomenon of learning and teaching anxiety in environmental education through two Ontario teachers' perspectives. In the two interviews collected, lack of empirical evidence to apply research-based practice prevails to account for anxiety in environmental education. Further, given the shared challenge brought by Climate Change, this paper will bring insights to practitioners devoted into this area to address the collective crisis.

Introduction

In recent years, there is a growing concern about eco-anxiety, a learning anxiety evoked by negative environmental accounts on Climate Change among young learners. Globally, scholars find that this anxiety, manifested in expressions such as frustration, fatigue, or anger, decreases interests and reduces motivation in environmental education (see, e.g., Ojala, 2017; Sobel, 1997; Strife, 2012). However, concern about this anxiety is less prevalent in the Ontario context, leading me to investigate whether it exists and in what formats it takes in the Ontario classroom. In addition, literature about teachers' self-efficacy in environmental education is limited, implying a gap of knowledge for professional development of teachers in this area. The Ontario Ministry of Education's (2009) policy document, "Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow", proposed ways in which teachers can integrate environmental education across curricula. In reality though, few teachers implemented the strategies because of the overcrowded curriculum. Thus this empirical paper will explore the phenomenon of this learning anxiety, then it will focus on two Ontario teachers' perspectives to investigate its manifestations both inside and outside of classrooms. This study will conclude with insights for educators to expand knowledge of cross-curricular connections and collaboration among colleagues to enhance experience. As a beginning teacher with lived experience in both China and Canada, I am fascinated by this phenomenon to understand effective pedagogy in different cultural contexts. Further, given the shared challenge brought by Climate Change, my endeavor will provide insights with practitioners to apply research into reality.

Methodology

Influenced by Creswell (2007), who argues that stances related to "ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric, and methodology" provide researchers with different lenses to select information (p. 30), I designed this small-scale and qualitative study to provide me with contextual information of my questions. In addition, the interview as my instrumental tool elicited rich interpretations and produced nuanced understanding of my questions, which informed practices and guided policies. However, I

acknowledge that my findings are limited to be applied broadly by nature because qualitative studies can't generate causality (Palinkas, 2014).

I purposefully reached out to two experienced Ontario teachers, Alice and Kathy (pseudonyms), to understand learning needs in the Ontario classroom. Both teachers work in public schools and teach environmental education for many years in different formats such as leading an eco-club or excursion. Guided by semi-structured questions, both interviews also lasted 45 minutes and were transcribed verbatim afterward. Key terms were codified and categorized into different sections to strengthen preliminary findings. After analyzing and connecting different categories, hands-on learning experience for students and professional development opportunities for teachers eventually emerged as two effective measures to deal with eco-anxiety in today's classrooms.

Key Findings

In my teachers' practice in both elementary and secondary classrooms, anxiety can be easily identified through expressions such as frustration or fatigue toward relevant reports of Climate Change. Mainly, teachers described their students as "tired", "anxious", and "concerned" in the topics on activism and sustainability. In response, Alice shifted the gear to positive aspects of human behaviors in the midst of the crisis to reassure her students. "Delicacy" in instruction, as she reflected, dissipates doubts and coalesce courage and imagination. In addition, she noticed that factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic background among her student populations reinforced or reduced the anxiety because students approached this collective challenge with different understanding. For example, she recalled that students of different gender identities felt excluded in their participation for being different in their understanding. Thus students' identities play a role in their engagement in environmental education.

Similarly, Kathy pointed to "complicated" regulations that frustrated her students from taking relevant initiatives. Particularly, she found that her students' enthusiasm in environmental initiatives waned by convoluted recycling campaigns. In addition, her student leaders felt burned out by taking excessive responsibilities to inform and persuade others in sustainable initiatives at the school. As a result, fatigue becomes a common phenomenon among her students to respond to Climate Change. Despite the pervasive pessimism, she still instilled hope by providing opportunities for her students to see changes in their lives. For example, she modelled how to track possible changes of living habits by leading "action projects" that connected lived experience with sustainability and reservation. Because of this effect, she fostered critical thinking and instilled "critical hope" that changed negative attitudes of her students toward Climate Change (Ojala, 2016).

Beyond learning anxiety, teaching anxiety prevails to account for low engagement of beginning teachers in environmental education. Most notably, teachers' lack of knowledge, experience, and understanding explain their low self-efficacy in environmental initiatives and programs. In addition, this lack of expertise leads to skepticism of the value of environmental education in the healthy development of students. For example, Alice observed that many teachers felt disinclined to take students outside because of the

perceived management and assessment issues that would interfere with the normal progression. Kathy also raised that new ideas were not “well received” until shared knowledge was established and consolidated among the teacher colleagues. Thus, building a strong incentive for collaboration among teachers will promote environmental education further in the Ontario classroom. To achieve this goal, both teachers also indicated setting up mentorship programs as an effective way to facilitate the knowledge transferral among professionals and thus mobilization in environmental education.

Conclusion

With the questions of eco-anxiety in the Ontario classroom and its effect on learning experience, this study reveals ways in which the anxiety affects both teaching and learning motivation. Specifically, expressions such as fatigue, frustration, and confusion indicate the gap of support in the form of mentorship to enhance the experience. In addition, lack of understanding of students’ backgrounds solidifies the anxiety, hindering students’ access to resources in environmental education. Since Climate Change has become more pronounced, studies in learning anxiety will empower learners and instill “critical hope” in the Ontario classroom to counteract the negative effect (Ojala, 2016, p. 78). Further, mentorship programs mobilize expertise in environmental education, which directly affects the learning experience. Thus, I propose more funding be devoted to research to study the learning experience. I also propose a mechanism be established to create conditions for mentorship programs to flourish at the schools. Given that the Ministry (2016) outlines strategies to promote environmental education in the classroom, these proposals will facilitate the transition for teachers to implement effective pedagogy in their practices.

The study is qualitative and small-scale, so the findings are confined within a specific context. Nevertheless, my study will still benefit practitioners in environmental education by generating a nuanced understanding of pedagogy in environmental education and implication for classroom practice. In addition, the teachers’ insights will add insiders’ perspectives into the literature, which expands the knowledge of effective practices within a public system. Given the increased number of international collaborations in environmental education, my study will provide educators around the world with insights into effective environmental education pedagogy across contexts.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

The study is approved by the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board. The protocol number is 26489.

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