



Transnational tomorrows today:

Graduate student futures
and imaginaries for art education

Guest Editors:
Anita Sinner, Kazuyo Nakamura
and Elly Yazdanpanah

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ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

CANADA

A SELF-REFLECTION ON ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN MONTREAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

My positionality as a public school teacher is the basis for this autoethnographic inquiry into the implications of environmental education in public schools in Montreal, Canada. My reflections are combined with examples of environmentally themed school projects, as well as my assessment of the provincial Quebec Education Program, to reveal a common through-line. This commonality depicts a curriculum that is lacking a sense of cohesiveness, urgency and criticalness. In an effort to provide attainable recommendations to rectify the areas which are in need of improvement, the UN's SDGs and *Schools in Action* serve as points of reference. They offer a wealth of knowledge, resources and examples to guide citizens and teachers toward a more sustainable life and education. Detailing areas in need of improvement, I pair the previously mentioned resources with my own recommendations to further develop environment education to a more critical level in Montreal area public schools.

KEYWORDS

public schools; environmental education; curriculum; teachers and learners

NOTES FROM THE FIELD: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

As a teacher, I believe there is no doubt that the art classroom has and can act as a channel to inspire students, educate on social issues and foster transformative changes on both small and large scales. The purpose and goals of the visual arts classroom continues to shift as the needs and interests of our world transforms constantly. More and more, the topic of climate action and our current environmental crisis appears in the themes and productions of class projects in public schools. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals offer educational knowledge and tools which teachers of all subjects can incorporate within their curriculum. The UN's SDGs present accessible resources on Global Citizenship and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) with various pedagogies and detailed target goals (UNESCO 2018). Through my observations of working in schools, when it comes to themes of the environment, many teachers focus on the production of projects in the art classroom and beyond. Emerging from traditional instruction styles, there is a fixation on product creation prevalent throughout schools. Perhaps it is the notion that product creation is demonstrative of a student's success in tangible form, further validating a teacher's pedagogy to themselves, parents and faculty. This rigid framework leaves little room for transformative processes or critical perspectives. As a result, students focus on narrow frames of references with little to no room for wider contexts and global perspectives.

In this self-reflective article, I utilize my positionality as a public school teacher to offer insight on how environmental education is commonly addressed in schools. This autoethnographic study explores my first-hand observations through my personal teaching experiences, and offers specific examples of environmental education projects, with an examination of provincial (in this case, Quebec) environment education plan (Gouvernement du Québec. 2002). Upon this analysis, and with the use of the UN's SDG targets and teaching resources, I discern what factors are essential to develop adequate educational opportunities for students on environmental issues appropriate for the context of Montreal area public schools. Additionally, I offer understanding on why and how visual arts classrooms can serve as an appropriate platform for teaching environmental education.

ASSESSING QUEBEC'S ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PLAN

Prior to offering my experiences on environmental education in public schools, the roles and expectations of who and how environmental education is taught must be addressed. In Quebec, each teacher is responsible for their own curriculum content and evaluation methods, given that they must adhere to the government implemented evaluation competences. Ultimately, it is at the discretion of the teacher to determine how, what and why they teach certain subject matter as proposed by article 8-1.02 of the Provincial Collective Agreement, 2022-2023, (QPAT 2022: 126). By reviewing Quebec's Education [Program](#), issues on the environment appear on the secondary education curriculum plan for science and the environment, not art. This means that it is the science and technology teacher's role to implement environmental education in lessons. Oftentimes, art teachers address environmental issues in their lessons, however, it is not a part of their required curriculum. For example, under the section of teaching environmental education, it states:

The environment itself can be studied from different angles, and teachers must determine the appropriate approach. It can be likened to nature, which is all around us, and which we must learn to appreciate, respect and preserve, or it can be seen as a living environment to be understood or manipulated, an environment that includes the biosphere and has an impact on long-term social relationships. It can also be seen as a space filled with problems to be prevented or solved, or as a system to be understood in order to be able to make enlightened decisions. Finally, the environment can be perceived as a resource to be managed and shared, and as an opportunity to become involved in a community project.

(Gouvernement du Québec. 2002: 7)

The proposed environmental issues and concepts offered in the program for Cycle Two are categorized under two main sections including 'Energy and Residual Materials', and are Quebec-centered, not internationalized. While tending to the lasting impacts of our local production and consumption is vital, its implications on wider global contexts are equally as significant.

Additionally, the targeted competencies which science and technology teachers must teach and evaluate accordingly include:

- Competency 1, Seeks answers or solutions to scientific problems;
- Competency 2, Makes the most of his/her scientific knowledge and;
- Competency 3, Communicates using scientific language.

(Gouvernement du Québec 2002: 13, 16, 19)

Ultimately, if science educators are evaluating student work by these three competencies, they have fulfilled their necessary teaching requirements. While awarding teachers with autonomy and freedom, it is clear that there is a lack of obligation and enforcement for teaching our current climate crisis and environmental issues in Quebec's public education system. This is where art education can interject to address the gaps, using visual expression to create an impact that can reach extended audiences. For instance, Canadian photographer and artist Edward Burtynsky who is widely known for his industrial landscapes offers a wealth of teaching potential through the environmental and social concerns his work presents. Burtynsky's work, notably *Manufactured Landscapes* (2003), confronts the relationship between human and nature, shedding light on pressing ecological issues globally brought forth by industrial development. As a means to address relatable situated contexts for students, Burtynsky's *Nickel Tailings* (1996) features a series of thirty-seven photographs revealing the disturbing reality and aftermaths of the mining industry on Canadian soil (Burtynsky n.d.). The visually compelling photographs render a devastating illustration that grips attention and can serve as an entry point into dialogue on local environmental impacts that industrialization causes. Engaging photo realizations as such can activate classroom discourse on destructive human behaviours and motivate students to look for solutions to better our future. Altogether, climate and environment education is limited, and as a topic, it is not taught consistently and often provides an overview of issues without looking towards finding attainable solutions.

The ongoing environmental crisis which we are currently living in and continue to enable is often spoken about in daily conversations as an issue separate from daily living. It is like a box which we can choose to open up or close whenever it is convenient. Rather than approach the environmental crisis with the urgency that it requires, especially in education, schools are often being left out of the equation and out of the action plan at local levels. This sends a concerning message to teachers, students and citizens that our voices and actions are not necessary in the conversation on the environment. As Cucuzella (2021) discusses in her work on the Anthropocene, ecological concerns through art and architecture are addressed in a way that offers critical and action-oriented considerations. Her work suggests that those from western cultures have been privileged to ignore and avoid discourse on environmental issues, however, '...aiming to reduce devastation without changing dominant market practices' (p. 2). Despite the ongoing conversations, natural signs of climate change, scientific and social recommendations that appear around us, I believe it is fair to say the majority of us act in avoidance, simply because it is easy to do so. We cannot expect individuals to create large impacts without changing the norms and regulations of corporations, leading organizations, and of course, schools. As an educator who has taught at a number of schools and various curricular subjects, apart from facilitating classroom discussions, I admit to feeling a sense of disconnect and discouragement towards the responsibilities of teaching environmental issues. Modifying classroom and school-wide practices on environmental concerns can feel like a monumental challenge, especially for non-permanent teachers, who may be subjected to changing schools and teaching subjects yearly.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE FIELD

I have observed several lessons, as a pre-service teacher, teacher and colleague on educating students on environmental responsibility and the climate crisis. Most projects appear around April, in time for Earth Day and follow a similar trajectory, beginning with a lecture component on global warming, the importance of recycling and then move on to the creation of an artwork depicting images of the earth and other images synonymous with our planet.

This is a formula I have observed throughout years of teaching, my time being a supply teacher, as well as my time teaching after-school art classes in different schools. During the Earth Day celebration at a school I taught previously, each class was given a set of images to colour which when combined, formed one large scale poster image of the planet earth. While the message of the project implies that taking care of our planet is a collective effort, it lacked a level of deeper engagement. In my view, grazing the surface of what it means to work together to take care of our planet and excluding larger global contexts and perspectives is a dilemma for teachers. Another project which gained much recognition by several teachers was when a school developed a cross-curricular project combining science and visual arts in collaboration with a local non-profit center that offers services on environmental practices. The project invited students to create a useful object from recycled materials. Once completed, students had a competition to determine which project would win based on the amount of 'likes' their image accumulated on Facebook. Examples of the project included reusable grocery bags, a pencil case and a backpack made from various plastics. While the project seemingly promotes responsible production and conscious consumption from the outset, most students remodeled household products into new products, using large amounts of tape and other binding materials. Most products were covered in thick layers of clear shiny tape, having me question whether the issue of wasteful consumption and environmentally harmful materials was addressed with a critical lens. The potentiality of the learning outcomes from process to production for the students was boundless, however, perhaps due to time constraints or lack of resources, the project rendered a rather superficial result. This project, like many other public school projects aiming at teaching students about global issues including climate crisis, toxic waste, and consumer culture often falls short of its potential for transformative learning experiences. A suggestion would be to shift the expectations over from teachers only, to a broader community-minded approach with multi-stakeholders. The school board, with the help of its consultants could develop cross-curricular projects, invite experts to host seminars and workshops, collaborate with organizations and hire consultants to develop realistic action-oriented programs.

With the description of the teacher's role in educating about the environment, an analysis of Quebec's Education program on environmental education and examples of environment focused art projects, we can gain a better understanding of the current structure and position of environmental education in Montreal public schools. Understanding society's destructive contributions to the environmental crisis, we must adopt changes necessary for preventing and improving the current catastrophic state. Adapting effective local practices including assessing local effects on waste, tracking consumption versus production rates, improving local recycling systems, banning single use items and toxic materials in local establishments and advocating for reuse and recycling can all contribute to global changes by altering social and cultural standards on environmentally conscious practices. Although issues pertaining to environmental crises including climate change, fast fashion, over-consumerism, increased carbon footprint, air and water pollution, and deforestation, are not necessarily being enforced or critically analyzed across public school curricula, the blame must not be placed on students or educators. I do believe that in order to address serious environmental issues on a critical level in classrooms, we must be willing to penetrate beyond the surface and dive further into the many complex layers that form our global environmental crisis. However, it should be understood that it is not solely the role of the teacher to implement change beyond the walls of their class, but rather, a collective responsibility by the institution, school board, government, and citizens too.

At the onset of my teaching career, I was optimistic and eager to begin my mission as an art educator in facilitating transformative lessons that could create positive impacts in the lives of my students and their communities. Realistically however, I have discovered how difficult it is to secure a teaching position for more than one year and to spend time individualizing the curriculum in the ways needed to bring the SDGs to a meaningful and impactful conclusion. Teachers are overloaded with various tasks and responsibilities, face overcrowded classrooms and a lack of resources. This creates a difficult formula for teachers like myself who want to individualize curriculum to include lessons on social impact and environment education. I believe that in order to improve environmental education, there must be a

willingness to adopt system changes and have cohesive cooperation at all levels of faculty in a school institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

Through my experience, I have observed that school aged children, from elementary and high school, are often focused on self-centered views of the world. Haraway discusses Vinciane Despret, philosopher and scientist who is known for her *worlding* practice, her drive for thinking-with other beings and her practice of curiosity (Haraway 2016: 126). These are inspiring elements essential to teaching about diverse perspectives and situated contexts, locally and globally. In order to teach environmental issues in a global context, teachers can begin teaching students to *decentralize* their own belief systems and think with a more tolerant and inclusive lens. All members of schools have the ability to act as agents of change and foster critical global thinkers. The challenge for art education is to make this a reality. This is possible through system changes, moving away from standard and outdated traditional curricula and teaching methods. Additionally, applying the onus on board-level faculty is vital at ensuring teachers and students have the necessary resources for critical environmental education.

As presented within the SDG 12 framework, target 12.8.1 calls national education policies, curricula and teacher education into action (United Nations 2022). Determinately, I have observed three areas necessary for improvement in developing environmental education in public schools: 1) increase board level action and responsibility; 2) develop teacher resources and; 3) apply new pedagogical approaches that include global perspectives. The UN's work on SDGs proposes a useful template for teachers on various Global Citizenship subjects. Their section on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) addresses the critical urgency to educate children and adults on the need and commitment to build a sustainable future for themselves, their futures and the planet (UNESCO 2018). Some examples of transformative pedagogy and tools include P.E.A.C.E pedagogy, flipped classrooms, event-based learning, storytelling, arts-based inquiry as pedagogy, and design thinking (UNESCO 2018). Each of these pedagogies offer specific tools teachers can bring into

their classrooms. A commonality shared in the majority of the non-traditional pedagogies – arguably *future* pedagogies – mention an emphasis on process, on discussion and on internationalizing contexts. In most public schools, I have observed that the pedagogical philosophy of many teachers, particularly art teachers, emphasize far too much on production-centered approaches rather than practice-based approaches. If we shift our focus from production to practices that explore alternative teaching philosophies, for instance, walking pedagogy and play-based learning, among others, we may see students ‘connect the sustainability dots’ and respond to activities differently, with more awareness of all the resources, including tape. Embodying non-traditional pedagogy like Despret’s curiosity practices and the examples provided by UNESCO’s ESD can help elevate the quality of environmental education in public schools and diminish class waste.

In addition to the UN’s SDGs and ESD resources which provide a wealth of knowledge for pedagogical shifts that tend to internationalize the curriculum, there are also habits and system changes that schools can apply. In accordance to the global indicator framework for SDG 12, the targets of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2022) which are most realistically applicable and relevant to public school education, include key indicators:

- 12.5 By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse;
- 12.2.1 Material footprint, material footprint per capita;
- 12.4.2 (a) Hazardous waste generated per capita, and;
- 12.8.1 Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development are mainstreamed in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education; and (d) student assessment.

(United Nations 2022)

A starting point for positive changes in schools that adhere to the mentioned indicators on sustainable development can include: forming a school committee of all stakeholders on the environment, tracking classroom material waste, adopting global perspectives in lessons, eliminating single-use products in the classroom and cafeterias, and

finally, providing staff and family with teaching resources. Changes must be made from the materials and tools used daily for the production of artworks and for the lessons and themes taught. Perhaps it is the process of collecting, manipulating and discarding materials that could be the learning focus of the lesson rather than the creation of a final product. Inverting our traditional art education practices with these new frames of thought are imperative for fostering the critical thinking skills and new perspectives essential in environment education. Teachers must be critical in their thinking on why or how, rather than concentrate on what to create.

This idea of constant product creation to demonstrate students' understanding and validate teacher's lessons is commonly seen across all curricular subjects and this is especially prevalent in the art classroom. While certain academic subjects like mathematics, geography, and English language arts often generate projects in the form of written work, posters, and digital platforms, minimal use of harmful materials and waste occurs. On the contrary, science and visual arts classrooms often engage projects in the form of dioramas, sculptural prototypes, paintings, clay work, and other artistic mediums. Much of the materials used in these creation processes include excess waste and the use of toxic chemicals including acrylic paints, gouache, inks, glues, plastics and glitter. With attention to SDG 12 indicators 12.5, 12.2.1, 12.4.2 (a) and 12.8.1 (United Nations 2022), I propose reasonable changes for schools to adopt. For example, in an effort to minimize the use of environmentally toxic materials, science and visual arts teachers can collaborate on teaching lessons about the local and global harms of such materials and work towards uncovering possible solutions. As a collective solution to such environmentally harmful materials, students can research sustainable alternatives, and create and distribute resources to others. Ideas of such can include a list of environmentally conscious material substitutes and the recipes/instructions to create their own sustainable materials. Rather than using toxic and wasteful products, students can produce naturally dyed inks, flour and starch made glues, and engage in paper making. Additionally, in an effort to manage waste during the cleaning process, students can use rags instead of paper towels, make homemade cleaning products with natural ingredients, reduce their water consumption and instill responsible material

disposal and recycling practices. Questioning our making processes and tracking consumption trails, understanding where our materials come from, and where they are heading when we are done, are topics missing from the art education curricular equation today. These are the questions worthy of examination in public schools by teachers, principals, consultants and students.

As art educators, we must rewind and unlearn our original teaching philosophies as well as how we form and implement our curricula. As part of this examination, we must also begin to unpack the curriculum competencies that the entire framework of the art program is designed upon. These are heavy tasks that fall entirely upon the shoulders of public school teachers who are already overworked and overwhelmed. In order for structural changes to be implemented, a team of school and board-wide faculty alongside the public – parents, students, concerned citizens – would have to collaborate to move forward.

ART AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION FUTURES

With an assessment of the Quebec Environmental Education program, my personal observations and the environment project examples, it is evident that the current environmental education in many Montreal area public schools is lacking. It is missing the sense of urgency it requires, the inclusion of international perspectives, and the collaboration of the entire school team. I do believe that with special attention to SDG 12 – *Responsible production and consumption patterns by utilizing their resources* – schools can activate positive changes towards our environmental crisis (United Nations n.d. Goal 12). The previously mentioned pedagogical shifts that invite non-traditional teaching styles paired with processing the SDG targets serve as a combination for student success on environmental education. As a multi-curricular teacher, I believe that modeling behavior and habits that act in support of responsible production and consumerism is the first step towards encouraging students to follow. By re-evaluating my own teaching and art practices with attention to how I create, the materials I choose to use and how I dispose of them, I create new sustainable standards for myself and my classroom.

With this in mind, I strive every day to implement SDG targets 12.5, 12.2.1 and 12.4.2 to prevent waste by reducing water, paper and material consumption as well as work towards eliminating hazardous material usage. With these changes in my art and teaching disciplines, I seek to implement new pedagogies shifting away from material production and instead employing creative reuse, performance, walking and public art practices. These system changes work alongside and complement target 12.8.1 on global citizenship education and education for sustainable development (United Nations 2022). By activating efforts to include various global perspectives to internationalize curricular content helps to foster global citizenship and critical thinking for students to apply inside and outside of school, ultimately increasing their sense of personal and social responsibility towards their local communities and beyond. It is indeed possible for schools to address environmental education in an impactful way, with the help of UNESCO's ESD resources, the application of diverse pedagogies and with system changes in schools. Finally, by productively acting as an agent of change in my own classroom, I pave the way for students and colleagues to follow for a more sustainable and responsible future.

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