

## Introduction

### Ecocritical Scholarship Toward Social Justice and Sustainability in Teacher Education

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Teaching in our current moment in history is a challenging task. While teachers may ostensibly focus on one designated subject or content area, they can find themselves struggling to help students grapple with, and respond to, the complex and interrelated problems facing society and the world. However, exciting work is being done to help teachers do just this—to courageously confront and critically and creatively examine the injustices of violence and destruction that are increasingly sanctioned all around us. Furthermore, this kind of work is being done with a fierce commitment to the possibilities that PreK-12 and higher education classrooms can be places of such transformation. This special issue of *Issues in Teacher Education* provides highlights from diverse scholars working at the intersections of social justice and sustainabil-

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ity in teacher education. In all the articles selected for this issue, the authors focus on how they are addressing 21st century challenges that emerge from the complex intersections of social justice and sustainability through critical and creative scholarship influencing, and being enacted in, teacher education. As critical educators have been arguing for decades, teacher educators as public intellectuals can, and arguably must, be scholar-activists (Collins, 2012; Giroux, 2004; Giroux et al., 1986). When the three of us decided to initiate this special issue, we were in Washington, D.C., presenting and attending sessions at the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) annual meeting. We were all presenting papers at a roundtable in Division K: Teacher Education that centered on the diverse ways that we were applying ecocritical theory in teacher education programs. Inspired by the rich diversity of work that we consider *ecocritical scholar-activism*, we wanted to share that work with other teachers and teacher educators.

Scholar-activism is critical scholarship that purposefully and deliberately confronts and unsettles the status quo both inside and outside of the academy. Ecocritical scholar-activism is research and teaching that acknowledges and rejects all forms of domination and injustice against both humans and nonhumans, recognizing that these injustices are mutually reinforcing. Such a position poses the need to examine our cultural "logics of domination" (Warren, 2000)—that is, the systems of belief that justify valuing some lives over others. As scholar-activists we must also examine how a logic of domination undergirds the unjust and destructive social and economic ideologies and policies that constitute schooling and thus teacher education. As such, we believe it is essential for teacher educators to consider how anthropocentric—human-centered—assumptions and actions work to limit education as a transformative practice in relationship to addressing social justice and sustainability. Western industrial notions of human-centered progress are pervasive throughout PreK-12 curriculum and in colleges of education, and this special issue shares a glimpse of some of the diverse critical perspectives challenging those notions, both those situated within and tangential to teacher education programs. Specifically, all of the articles in this special issue illuminate the importance of research from teacher educators who are working to challenge and shift destructive cultural logics that are pervasive in Western industrial schooling.

### Broadly Defining Ecocritical Scholarship in Teacher Education

In order to respond to the systemic violence perpetuated by our current social, economic, and environmental contexts, ecocritical educators

examine and address how it is that schools create, support, and sustain the habits of mind that rationalize, justify, and (re)produce unjust social suffering and enormous amounts of environmental degradation. When faced with such a challenge, ecocritical educators ask: How is it that exploitation is rationalized, justified, and/or (re)produced by teachers? Furthermore, ecocritical educators are also committed to turning the critical lens inward and asking: What can teacher educators, and teachers, do to teach in support of alternatives to Western industrial culture? In an attempt to address these questions, we, as scholar-activist editors of this special issue, together with the authors and reviewers, engage an ecocritical approach to exploring the possibilities of ecological perspectives in teacher education. The articles in this special issue share scholarly projects from eco-anarchist perspectives, EcoJustice STEM, place-based education, decolonial and indigenous futures, and critical posthumanist creative perspectives. Each shows how diverse approaches to supporting social justice and sustainability can be potential pathways to solutions that address the social and ecological problems faced by schools and society.

Drawing from ecofeminism (Code, 2007; Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993, 2002; Shiva, 2005; Warren, 2000), ecopedagogy (Fassbinder, Nocella, & Kahn, 2012; Kahn, 2010), critical ecoliteracy (Turner, 2011), and EcoJustice (Martusewicz et al., 2015; Turner & Donnelly, 2013; Turner, 2015), the call for submissions for this special issue was designed to solicit manuscripts from educators engaging pre-service teachers, practicing PreK-12 teachers, and students in (re)conceptualizing diversity to be inclusive of equity in both human and more-than-human relationships. Specifically, we sought to share applications and enactments of ecocritical frameworks in teacher education. An ecocritical approach addresses how education is influenced by systems of exploitation and violence, systems which rely on a refusal to acknowledge and embrace mutuality and interdependence (Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2015).

The past decades of teacher education scholarship have been marked by critiques of how neoliberal policies and reform efforts have cast an authoritarian shadow on the possibilities of addressing social justice and sustainability in schools (Peters, 2011; Giroux, 2008; Giroux & Giroux, 2004). Considering the stark conditions we face due to climate change, poverty, famine, and increased violent conflict, scholar-activists are more than ever presented with the challenge of rethinking education with attention to what can be done differently in teacher education. In this era, which many refer to as the Anthropocene, we turn our attention as scholar-activist educators and researchers toward recognizing the diverse work of those fighting from within the margins to oppose the colonizing enclosures of the economic and political restructuring of relationships.

These critical educators recognize that, within teacher preparation and higher education, there exists the opportunity for critically addressing and rethinking current dominant conceptual frameworks constituting classrooms, schools, and communities.

Related scholarship is taking place pushing the boundaries of environmental education that bleeds over into teacher education. Traditionally, the discipline of environmental education (EE) is invoked when the concept of ecology is employed within education. While EE is an extremely diverse and useful field, scholars of ecopedagogy (Fassbinder, Nocella, & Kahn, 2012; Kahn, 2010) have pointed out the limitations of traditional environmental education and environmental literacy in schools. Kahn (2010) asserts that we are facing “ecological issues that require a much deeper and more complex form of ecoliteracy than is presently possessed by the population at large...” (p. 527), and he argues that movements to incorporate environmental literacy into education must move from basic functional literacy to cultural and critical literacy. Understanding ecological systems and the mechanics of environmental destruction—the goals of traditional EE and much of mainstream teacher education—are not enough to solve the problems we are facing today. Thus, we echo Kahn here suggesting that a critical investigation and reimagination of cultural systems is essential to real change in the classroom and beyond.

Ecocritical scholars use diverse lenses for addressing and rethinking dominant cultural frameworks, but certain principles remain at the center of the work. Specifically rooted in and yet pushing the boundaries of the critical tradition (Horkheimer, 1976; Horkheimer & Adorno 2007; Marcuse, 1964, 1989), scholars positioned within the ecocritical movement recognize that social and environmental justice are inseparable and inextricably linked, and that these injustices rely on the perpetuation of value-hierarchized social thought (Bowers, 1993, 2001, 2006, 2010, 2013; Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Code, 2007; Gruenewald, 2003; Kahn, 2010; Martusewicz & Edmundson, 2005; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2015; Merchant, 1983; Plumwood, 1993, 2002). In order to dismantle such injustices, then, we must analyze the hierarchies our society has created. This approach also includes exploring alternative knowledges and ways of understanding difference that move beyond the limitations of Eurocentric thought.

A primary premise we take in this work, that is addressed in all of the contributed articles, is that situated at the root of social and ecological injustice is a fundamental—and problematic—premise that humans, as a species, are understood as superior to and somehow separate from all other living beings and non-living things. Thus, guiding this work

is the understanding that the manifestation of a human-supremacist worldview is culturally constructed and inextricable from cultural assumptions about race, class, gender, ability, age, and so forth. A foundational premise in ecocritical work in education is that cultural habits of mind in dominant Western industrial culture are based on a system of human-supremacy—referred to as anthropocentrism—and are pervasive throughout how we as humans in Western industrial culture learn to interpret and assign value to differences.

### What is Anthropocentrism?

Anthropocentrism, or human-centeredness, is a belief system that privileges humans and functions to maintain the superiority of human existence by marginalizing and subjugating anything nonhuman (Plumwood, 1993, 2002). Radical ecocritical scholars and educators take the position that anthropocentrism is so pervasive in the metaphors by which we teach and learn in Western industrial schooling that, in order to interrupt the dominant belief system, educators must first learn to name and recognize anthropocentrism as problematic in connection with what can be done to rethink the vital relationships upon which we all depend. Given how dominant and foundational anthropocentrism is in schools and society, we suggest that teachers and teacher educators can—and do—play a key role in addressing and interrupting anthropocentrism, and that they must furthermore consider what a non-anthropocentric education might look like.

Anthropocentrism in education is possible because we, as humans, specifically those of us within dominant Western industrial culture, have learned to think and behave according to a culturally constructed way of understanding which shapes how we conceptualize various relationships and thus shapes the meaning ascribed to said relationships. In most cases, educators in Western industrial cultural have been socialized to think and act in accordance with maintaining human-supremacy. Since meaning is constructed culturally, it can be constructed differently. Thus, foundational assumptions about what it means to be human can be made explicit, interrupted, and shifted if we learn to think differently about our relationships to each other and to the natural world.

Ecocritical work continues and pushes the boundaries of the work of social justice scholar-activists within critical education spaces by making clear the connections between human-supremacy, patriarchy, racism, and other forms of domination like ableism, ageism, and classism. All of these value-hierarchized dualisms inform dominant cultural assumptions in Western industrial culture, and they are all based on

normalized logics of domination, which means that they are inseparable and intersect in complex and contextualized ways. These intersections are made explicit through examples such as the water crisis in Flint, Michigan or the Water Protectors in Standing Rock protesting the oil pipeline.

Scholar-activist educators must address anthropocentrism if they are serious about overcoming social inequalities in both localized and international contexts. In what follows, we outline the important tenets of EcoJustice Education and ecofeminist frameworks in order to illustrate how they help constitute an ecocritical framework for teaching that challenges anthropocentrism (Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016; Martusewicz et al., 2015; Plumwood, 1993, 2002; Turner, 2015). In other words, confronting human supremacy as an undergirding assumption supporting Western industrial forms of domination makes explicit the importance for educators to engage in recognizing an anthropocentric worldview, and examining how that worldview contributes to constituting and maintaining interlocking systems of domination.

### An Ecocritical Framework

Ecocritical scholarship strives to identify and critically examine the role that education both plays, and ought to play, in transitioning toward supporting diverse, socially just, and sustainable communities. Drawing from an EcoJustice Education framework (Martusewicz et al. 2015) and stemming from the growing field of ecocritical work in social and cultural foundations of education, we frame ecocritical perspectives as work that critically and ethically:

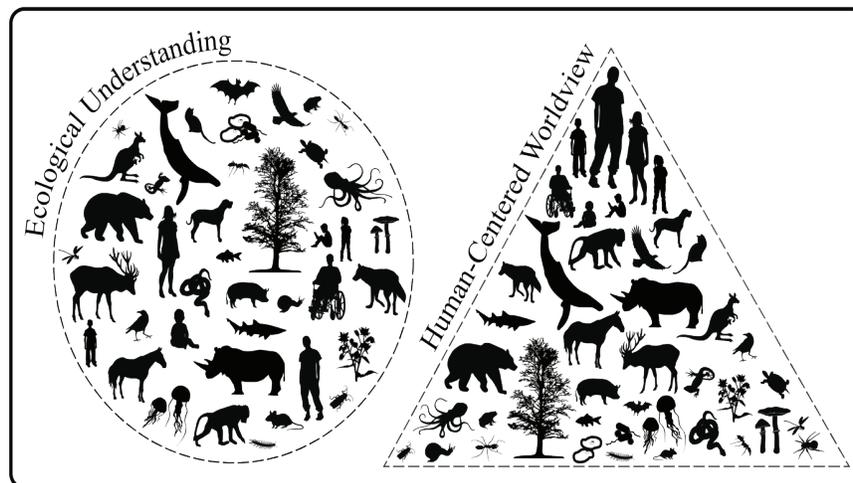
1. Examines Western industrial culture and its impacts on social and environmental systems.
2. Examines value-hierarchized dualisms that contribute to inequities such as racism, classism, sexism, ableism, anthropocentrism, etc.
3. Examines and identifies how to teach or share skills, and habits of mind, that support socially just and environmentally sustainable communities. (Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016a)

Framing the research in this special issue, we work from the position that it is important for those within the field of education to recognize and value cultural knowledge systems that do not explicitly perpetuate conceptual frameworks rooted in domination. In doing so, we have developed a conceptual framework (Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2015) to identify, examine, and revalue the critical practices of mutual aid and interdependence that exist in diverse communities all over the world

(Lupinacci, 2015; Lupinacci & Happel, 2015; Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). In order to frame the major foci woven through all the articles in this special issue, we offer Figure 1 to illustrate the overarching theme of an ecocritical analytical framework. Simply put, an ecocritical framework works to support scholar-activist educators in recognizing two different worldviews—ecological understandings and a dominant human-centered worldview. Simultaneously, this framework shapes research that also examines how those worldviews might be reconstituted—via education—in ways that are local and in support of living systems (Lupinacci, 2013, 2015). Figure 1 depicts an overview of two such views.

Ecocritical research often examines how knowledge systems—in relationship to language, culture, and power—are culturally constructed, and thus as educators and educational researchers we can play a role in reconstituting those relationships (Lupinacci, 2013; Lupinacci & Happel, 2015; Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Martusewicz, et al., 2015; Turner 2015). By highlighting how our cultural belief systems, root metaphors, and narratives are constructed and not simply ‘natural,’ educators can help develop critical perspectives about these root beliefs. This undertaking also opens the space for exploring alternative belief systems and metaphors that facilitate different kinds of relationships with other people, other beings, and the land.

**Figure 1**  
*Ecological & Human-Centered Worldviews*  
(Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2015)



An ecocritical framework also illuminates the systematic economic and political restructuring of lives that further perpetuates social suffering and environmental degradation. What has become commonplace over the past century, and extending into the current, is the intentional restructuring of relationships to control and commodify lives in order to maintain and manufacture markets (Bauman, 2013; Chomsky, 1999). For example, food and water are life-sustaining elements necessary for supporting healthy communities. However, the relationships to these “resources” have been enclosed—monetized or understood as commodities to be earned and purchased. This iteration of capitalism—supply and demand economic systems predicated on exploitation—works to enclose living systems and can be understood as the globalizing force to commodify and privatize that which is common, public, and life-sustaining.

In short, an ecocritical analysis recognizes the importance of examining intellectual, environmental, and cultural practices and traditions in regard to how they either support or undermine living systems. Whether examining discursive practices or economic structures, a key feature of ecocritical work is the recognition that human knowledge systems are culturally constructed, have consequences for all living beings, and can be re-imagined in transformative ways (Turner, 2015). An ecocritical analysis addresses the powerful role that our culture plays in the development of ourselves, our values, and our relationships. Such a framework examines, explores, and proposes diverse and collaborative educational projects that can respond to current belief systems and enclosures, and these responses are necessarily local, situational, and in support of decentralized living systems (Lupinacci, 2011; 2013).

### Overview of Articles

We start this special issue with a piece that grounds us in the history and personal experience of working in EcoJustice Education. In the article, “EcoJustice for Teacher Education Policy and Practice: The Way of Love,” EcoJustice theorist and foundations scholar Rebecca Martusewicz highlights that EcoJustice Education is both a framework for learning how to closely consider ethical responsibilities that educators and community members share, and a socio-ecological and political movement. Martusewicz traces her own personal history in the development of this field, outlines the theoretical foundations and major scholars contributing to those founding ideas, and shares examples of how those ideas have been put to work as concrete practical manifestations in organizations, curricula, programs, and institutions. This article kicks off the special issue with a necessary theoretical focus on *relationality* as a particu-

larly important concept in the epistemological, ontological, and ethical frames that constitute EcoJustice Education. Martusewicz reminds us that ecocritical work is both about relationships and built upon them, and that valuing and strengthening relationships must always remain at the heart of a movement.

The next article delves deeper into one of the concrete examples touched upon by Martusewicz. In “Place-Based Teacher Education: A Model Whose Time has Come,” Ethan Lowenstein, Iman Grewal, Rebecca Nielsen, Nigora Erkaeva, and Lisa Voelker describe their experiences with the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition and with developing place-based education in their community and their university. They highlight the importance of collaborative and civically engaged place-based education, and describe the pedagogical shifts they see as central to doing such work, including a shift toward inquiry-based and problem-centered education.

Jeannie Kerr and Vanessa Andreotti also seek institutional and pedagogical shifts in their article “Recognizing More-Than-Human Relations in Social Justice Research: Gesturing Toward Decolonial Possibilities.” In this piece they share insights that stem from a research study in teacher education that engages both the human and more-than-human as fundamental to matters of social justice. While they present practices informed by land-based non-anthropocentric teachings gifted by Indigenous communities, in their article Kerr and Andreotti use ecocritical scholarship and Latin American decolonial studies to articulate concerns related to recognizing the limitations of Western modernity. Focusing on how ecocritical scholars critique the omission of the more-than-human in educational research and practice focused on social justice in connection with Western modernity, they connect these concerns to insights from decolonial scholarship that emphasizes the relation to colonialism in structuring the imaginative limits of Western modernity. Sharing from their research, Kerr and Andreotti outline the decolonial and critical theoretical framework that informs their research in teacher education. They conclude with a reflection on the limitations and paradoxes that emerged from conducting their research. Their article offers possibilities for decolonial futures, while recognizing our shared systemic complicity within enduring colonial institutionalized practices.

Kevin J. Holohan, in “Social Ecology as Ethical Foundation for Ecological and Community-Based Education,” briefly examines and explains the theory of social ecology and the political theory of *libertarian municipalism* as developed by the late Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) as a possible comprehensive framework for a secondary curriculum centered upon an anarchistic and ecological ethics. Holohan first offers

an investigation of the philosophical foundations of social ecology and the political theory of libertarian municipalism and their implications for how we think about and practice education. Next, he shares findings from an empirical study conducted at a small charter high school in a large metropolitan area that utilizes social ecology and community-based education to move its students toward enhanced self-actualization through active participation in nurturing greater community autonomy and in addressing social and environmental injustice. The aim of sharing these findings is to provide insight into how social ecology is understood and used by teachers and students within a school to foster social and ecological responsibility and activism on the community level.

In the article, “Teaching EcoJustice in STEM Methods Courses,” Mark Wolfmeyer offers insights for incorporating ecocritical perspectives into STEM education. Wolfmeyer points out that discourses of individualism, mechanism, and rationalism are deeply embedded in Western math and science philosophy and practice, and he deftly draws distinctions between these fields as essential tools and the modern assumptions that have been layered onto them. By arguing for an ecocritical approach to preparing STEM teachers, Wolfmeyer provides a new direction for STEM education that does not reinforce problematic Western discourses. This paper provides concrete critical and ethical responses to dominant educational policies promoting the teaching of STEM fields. Recognizing how dominant discourses of modernity (Martusewicz, et al. 2015) work discursively to constitute STEM, this article examines and exposes how STEM education is prioritized via funding in teacher education. Wolfmeyer shares conceptual research theorizing the inclusion of Ecojustice Education in elementary science methods and elementary math methods courses. Building on the work of social justice education, this article presents several practical considerations for including an EcoJustice perspective. Furthermore, the article examines complexities and tensions that emerge from the fact that many students can, and often do, find this shift a disruptive practice that unsettles them at times to the point of shutting down. Ultimately, the Wolfmeyer suggests a curriculum for methods courses that provides students the opportunity to consider math and science content’s usefulness through exposure to a critique of the global marketplace and opens students to a potential in releasing the imagination for social and ecological change.

Julia Ostertag, in the article “Solitary Spider Stories of ‘Becoming Teachers Together’: Knots Spun from an Arts-Based Research Project with a Garden,” presents a personal and lyrical exploration of what it means to teach and to learn, and shares her experiences carrying out an arts-based research project in a teacher education program. This

project, which involved planting a garden, harvesting flax, and spinning it into thread, all while engaging teacher education students in related art installations, became a learning experience for Ostertag in unexpected ways. Conveying her successes and failures, Ostertag finds interrelations between her own acts of creation and teaching and those of the nonhuman world. The familiar figure of the teacher, alone in front of a classroom and enclosed by four walls, pervades what is possible in teacher education. Ostertag asks what if we could decentre anthropocentric teaching practices and 'become teachers together' with other human and nonhuman teachers? Could a garden become a teacher? A plant? A spider? This article engages with these possibilities by reflecting on some difficult knots during the third phase of a site-specific installation series that was part of an arts-based research project with student teachers at the University of British Columbia Orchard Garden, a teaching and learning garden.

In the final article in this special issue we share an interview with Chet Bowers. We are so grateful that Chet was willing to conduct an interview with us via email before his death last year. It is hard for us to imagine where all of the work included in this special issue might be had Chet not pushed teacher education and the associated curriculum studies to examine deeply rooted cultural assumptions of how language, culture, and education carried forward cultural patterns and practices from the past. We are grateful to Chet for his fierce commitment to eco-justice, ecological intelligence, critiques of the technological pitfalls of Western industrial culture, and the possibilities for teachers to play a key role in mediated learning that centers social justice and sustainability through revitalizing what he referred to as the cultural and ecological commons—the natural systems (water, air, soil, forests, oceans, etc.) and the cultural patterns and traditions (intergenerational knowledge ranging from growing and preparing food, medicinal practices, arts, crafts, ceremonies, etc.) that are shared without cost by all members of the community (Bowers, 2017 para. 1).

In conclusion, each of the researchers in this special issue are putting the kind of critical and ethical framework we've outlined here into practice in educational spaces. All of the articles explore a wide variety of curricular examples of ecocritical frameworks as they are applied to working with teachers, teacher candidates, and educational leaders to address how they can, as radical educators, maintain educational spaces that challenge dominant assumptions prevalent in Western industrial culture. We hope that such an analytical framework, in an anarchic tradition, sparks activist-educators to take the position that imagination and interruptions to authority—and the associated actions of enclosure—are

necessary in order to understand and change the social and economic conditions that create the illusions of humans as separate and superior to all other beings, and that rationalize the exploitation and torture associated with the commodification of living beings.

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