

Emotional Dynamics in Nature Conservation Education: Lessons from Future Teachers

Sally Wai-Yan WAN

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, Hong Kong

Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

The integration of emotions into environmental and sustainability education (ESE) is crucial for fostering meaningful engagement and transformative action among learners. This paper presents findings from a post-dialogue reflection session following Global Dialogue Session 1, where student teachers reflected on their learning experiences with “Planning, Experimenting, and Reflecting (PER) for ESD in Nature Conservation.” Participants engaged in open discussions that revealed a wide range of emotional responses, such as hope, anxiety, and a sense of responsibility. These emotions significantly shaped their understanding of sustainability and their pedagogical practices. One key finding was the role of emotions as drivers for engagement, transforming concern about environmental issues into proactive teaching strategies. The dialogue highlighted the need for educational frameworks that explicitly address emotions in line with the growing recognition of their role in learning processes. The study advocates for a nuanced understanding of how emotions can catalyze transformation in educational practices.

Full paper

Introduction

The integration of emotions into environmental and sustainability education (ESE) is essential for fostering meaningful engagement and transformative action among learners (Ojala, 2013). Emotions play a pivotal role in shaping attitudes, behaviors, and pedagogical practices, making them a crucial component of effective ESE. This paper presents findings from the first round of post-dialogue reflection after a group of student teachers’ engagement in Global Dialogue Session 1, where they

reflected on their learning experiences with “Planning, Experimenting, and Reflecting (PER) for ESD in Nature Conservation” in December 2024. The session focused on the personal dimensions of their attitudes and behaviors related to sustainability.

Conceptual Framework

There is a significant intersection of emotions in sustainability education and teacher education. Emotions are recognized as pivotal in shaping attitudes and behaviors towards sustainability, fostering deeper engagement and transformative learning (Grund et al., 2024; Ojala, 2013, 2021). Integrating emotional dimensions into teacher education enhances teachers’ ability to address complex sustainability issues, promoting reflective and proactive pedagogical practices (Fischer et al., 2022). This framework underscores the importance of emotional engagement in cultivating a holistic understanding of sustainability among future teachers.

Methods

Participants and settings

A total of nine participants, major or minor in education, engaged in focus group discussions that revealed a wide range of emotional responses to their experiences in nature conservation education during the post-dialogue session. Taking a transformative approach, innovative and creative methods—such as community mapping, collaborative drawing, collective mind mapping, and post-it memo activities—were employed to enhance the depth of emotional engagement and critical reflection during the discussion (Kara, 2020). These methods provided valuable insights into the complexities of sustainability education.

Data analysis

The data collected from the focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved coding the data to identify key themes and patterns related to emotional responses as well as their impact on pedagogical practices. Thematic analysis allowed for a detailed examination of how emotions influenced participants’ understanding of sustainability and their teaching strategies.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university’s ethical committee prior to the study. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Findings

Key themes emerged from the discussions, highlighting emotions such as hope, anxiety, and a sense of responsibility. These emotional responses were pivotal in shaping participants' understanding of sustainability and their pedagogical practices. One significant finding was the role of emotions as drivers for engagement. Student teachers reported transforming feelings of concern about environmental issues into proactive teaching strategies that promote student agency in conservation efforts. This “inside-out” perspective underscores the importance of acknowledging and validating emotions in educational settings, allowing future educators to channel emotional energy into meaningful actions.

Discussion

The dialogue highlighted the need for educational frameworks that explicitly address emotions in ESE. Participants expressed a desire for strategies to help them navigate their own emotions and those of their future students. This need aligns with the growing recognition that emotions play a crucial role in learning processes, particularly in dealing with complex and often controversial topics related to sustainability. To enhance understanding, it is beneficial to draw on conceptualizations of emotion from other fields, such as environmental psychology, which emphasizes how emotional responses to nature influence behavior and attitudes, and sociocultural perspectives that highlight the role of emotions in shaping identity and community engagement.

The discussions revealed implicit assumptions that often underlie emotional engagement in ESE. One assumption is that emotions are inherently positive and should be cultivated to foster resilience and action. However, this perspective can overlook the value of negative emotions, such as grief or anger, which can also motivate critical reflection and deep engagement with sustainability issues. Another implicit assumption is that emotional responses are individual experiences rather than collective phenomena that can foster community solidarity and shared action.

Conclusion and implications

To conclude, the insights gleaned from Global Dialogue Session 1 contribute to the broader discourse on emotions in ESE. By focusing on the interplay of emotions, sustainability, and education, this session advocates for a more nuanced understanding of how emotions can catalyze transformation in educational practices. For future research directions, it is imperative to explore conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches that incorporate diverse disciplinary

perspectives on emotions to enrich the field of environmental and sustainability education.