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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Environmental education, democracy, Thunberg, and XR

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Slow research: An invitation to respond to David Orr's challenge

Immediately following this Editorial/Invite for “response” papers to be included in a Special Issue (SI) of the *Journal of Environmental Education (JEE)*, David Orr's Essay engages “the missing politics of environmental education” in the democracies we once thought served us (for example, Grayling, 2017). Orr's provocation is part of a larger project “*Democracy unchained: How to rebuild government for the people* (Orr et al., 2020). This compelling project has a particular focus on the parlous state of American democracy, but we believe the deeply problematic state of democracy is, broadly, a ‘globalizing’ post-modern *condition*.

Orr's Essay can also be viewed theoretically or/and practically within the global activism of, for example, Greta Thunberg's “student strike for climate action” (SSCA) and Extinction Rebellion's (XR) demonstrations for the “climate emergency”. We wonder where environmental education (EE) and its research, and associated fields like ‘global citizenship education’, are ‘positioned’, or ‘placed’ in the progressively reconstructive ‘growth’ of democracy and vision of education (for example, Dewey, 1916/1966).

Response studies to Payne & Hart's, and Orr's essays will comprise an alternate kind of ‘slow’ SI that anticipates a dedicated SI section in forthcoming issues of the *JEE*. We invite authors from the global north and global south to:

1. Constructively and critically support, qualify, or challenge Orr's provocation for democratic ecopolitics in environmental education (EE).
2. Suggest ways that EE participatory practices may theoretically or practically critique and advance the (eco)pedagogical richness of an environmental ethics, ecopolitics, and ecological esthetics in and for education. Such deep pedagogical practices, as ideas, could be grounded in meaningful curriculum, or programmatic, or policy formulations and/or significant environmental encounters, experiences, or episodes in local environmental/global ecological problems, and their relevant social issues and cultural concerns. Researchers/practitioners are encouraged to reference such ecopedagogical encounters and educational experiences that, individually and collectively, enable sensitivities, awareness, sensibilities, understandings, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, decision-making, competency building, and ‘agency/ies’ embodied in environmental/ecological values and embedded in human/social relations. Authors are invited to consider “other-than-human” interests and, subsequently, encourage the making or taking of responsible citizenship action for nature and its derivative environments, or/and whether extant governmentality undermines genuine ecological concern and disables environmental agency and action/activism.
3. Demonstrate robust theoretical and/or methodological experimentation (and, even, non-methodological) or innovation in EE research that practically and/or praxically advance critical theory-building in EE relevant to specific encounters and experiences within particular political frameworks that guide what counts as researchable problems.

This alternative form of local/global SI is an example of ‘slow’ research. Response studies will ‘trickle out’ in subsequent issues of the *JEE* over the coming months and years. Guidelines for prospective authors are included at the end of this Invitation.

The challenge: Have EE and EE research remained relevant?

The recent publication of the 50th Anniversary Special Issue of the *JEE* provided a rare opportunity for us Editors to pause and reflect on fundamental questions about the field’s purposes, knowledge, practices, and literature of EE. What is really going on? In what circumstances and their contexts? Through what researchable problem and questions, framings, methodologies, methods, geographies/ecologies, demographics, samples, and cases? And, what of their ethics of research, and politics of inquiry? What needs to be changed, now? How are ecologically sustainable education (ESE), Global Citizenship Education (GCE), and various academic forums and other professional mediums, also contributing to the field’s progress, or regress? How are the *agencies* of EE and its research enabled or constrained, and *structurally* supported or resisted in various governmentalities? How do we conceive, and practice, the relationships between agency and structure, and past and present, in the future of the field?

At the same time as the 50th Anniversary SI was being finalized (Stevenson & Hart, 2019), various ‘global’ versions of environmental activism such as the SSCA and XR were exploding ‘locally’ around the world. These protests occurred in Nation States that make strong claims on the politics of democracy and freedom, but also question the political motives of countries renowned for being authoritarian and coercive. Who can forget the images of Greta Thunberg as she stared at Donald Trump at the UN Assembly in New York? Who can forget her dramatic plea directed at world leaders - “How *dare* you...?” Who did not witness the millions of student strikers and their supporters who *dared* attend hundreds of rallies around the globe and demanded political “action” in accordance with the sciences of climate destabilization, global heating, forest incineration, ocean acidification, and land desertification? Who did not recoil at the photos of militarized police wrestling to the ground, arresting, handcuffing, and frog marching hundreds (Australia and Hong Kong), if not thousands (UK) of XR demonstrators who *dared* occupy city streets and inconvenience ‘ordinary’ people ‘going about their business’? Who did not hear about these alleged “criminals” having bail conditions imposed by courts that aimed to, in some instances, prohibit them from coming within 2.5 kilometers of the protest site, or/and associating with other XR events or people? Why have some governments demonized the activities of Thunberg, SSCA, and XR and, even, banned XR demonstrations or attempted to have XR (and, by implication, SSCA) classified as “extremist”? Why have some governments threatened protesters with imprisonment for terms longer than murders while welcoming the ongoing pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong? What is wrong with our taken-for-granted understandings of the *structural/historical* politics of the educational “production” of *agential/actional* citizens?

Given the ‘treats’ (or threats?) to ongoing governance *for* business-as-usual for big oil and Wall Street, *dare* the critic challenge the blurring of democracy and authoritarianism that, now, is well-and-truly on open display in the global confusion and local chaos of freedom and coercion, right and wrong, of public and private in the inevitable rise of “ecopolitics”? Cynics armed with slogans like, for example, “the cult of Greta”, “bolshewokes”, “democracy extinction”, and “negative globalism” might also be asked searching questions demanding of truthful responses about, for example, their local “politics of decarbonization” in the “climate emergency” of “coal/fossil fuel capitalism”. For most of us in EE, those sorts of global-local ecopolitical knowledge interests and challenges have probably been consigned to the ‘too hard basket’. This state of affairs is indeed a “tragedy of the commons” as Garrett Hardin (1968) described many years ago.

There are easier questions we educators might *dare* ask of our political leaders; the importance to children of ‘education’ in a democracy, why students ask teachers about hotter and drier days, or catastrophic “unprecedented” fires and floods, or the loss of local habitat and animals, the ecopedagogies we do not practice in school, why EE and ESE are often consigned to an occasional camp or field trip. Educators are also very well placed to ask why local politicians deny (or support) the science of ‘climate change’, or links between hotter and drier conditions and destructive fires when, simultaneously, policies aimed at improving Science Education (often as STEM) following the latest decline in PISA rankings

are, paradoxically, demanded by those same politicians. Might teachers and students ask why fellow citizens and peer groups are ‘identifying’ with urgent climate action and against species extinction and, even, why civil liberties and rights to freedom of association and expression are being curtailed, or denied, when other freedoms and rights are being zealously pursued? Is repression masked by politeness, distraction, and obfuscation, thus side-stepping the status quo with teachers held responsible for an under-questioned curriculum?

Legitimate questions?

Invited ‘respondents’ in EE and EE research might ask of ourselves, and *for* our students, what role has EE at school, and in classes, played (or not) in Thunberg’s and her fellow strikers’ activisms (or even the non-activist critics)? Thunberg’s (2019) ‘reader’ is more-than-instructive on such ‘matters’! OR What educationally “significant” and even insignificant “life experiences” (SLE) and encounters shaped the 15-year-old Thunberg’s interest, commitment, agency and action in, initially, sitting on the steps of the Swedish Parliament. We could ask whether or not the curriculum provides nurturing experiences of relatively natural environments beyond the classroom walls and school boundaries. We might ask how schooling includes, or does not, meaningful encounters with troubled Nature, or the problems confronting it and issues creating such troubles (for example, Payne, 2015).

The focus need not be Thunberg, an easy target for conservative politics and cynical self-serving media; it could be on the political ramifications of any environmental activist. All of this is mindful of why activists’ significant life experiences were reported forty-years ago in *JEE* by Thomas Tanner (1980). Alternatively, within EE research, we might *dare* ask about the “intergenerational” and “household” role (for example, Payne, 2010a), as Orr does, and “action competence” (for example, Jensen & Schnack, 1997/2008) of Thunberg’s family (or any significant other, including teachers and school environments) in influencing a range of environmental actions and activism, or inaction and non-activism. We respondents might *dare* ask about the “cross generational” interactions and relations of student actions or inactions and family agency and constraint, even activisms, in nearby examples of schooling. We in EER might *dare* compare and contrast ‘local’ studies of schooling and EE with political machinations of governmental national, international cohorts or ‘global’ samples, as Orr suggests.

But these ‘truth-and-dare’ or, maybe, ‘dare-and-truth’ challenges too easily assume EE is practically responsive to the ecopolitical qualities and characteristics of education *in*, for example, pedagogy, curriculum, policy, and research. Do such questions assume that we have grappled with some of the most basic political and practical/educational aspects of the “thing” called EE, such as the never-neutral prepositions of *in*, *about* and *for* the environment, and *sustaining* the field given the urgency of action *for* that exposed by SSCA and XR - locally and globally? Do the assumptions we subscribe to, or are inscribed by, about Orr’s (missing) “politics of EE”, let alone any ecopolitics *for* EE, ESE, and their research have any hold, or traction?

How might we make sense of the challenges from Orr, SSCA, XR in invited Response studies? The SSCA global-local phenomena, with its active young generation, cannot be seen outside the 50 year ‘progress’, or not, of EE, ESE, and relevant research (Stevenson & Hart, 2019). Or can it? Herein lies the general researchable problem to be tackled in Responses invited for this SI about the ambiguous, enigmatic, elusive, evasive, and, even, paradoxical or contradictory ‘politics’ democratically gone “missing” in EE, before we get to the deeper ecopedagogical question of its ecopolitics, or lack of. Put differently, and more broadly, what practices and in what contexts—educational and political—generate “meaning-making” and “valuing” in EE and EE research also demonstrate (empirically) an empirical/praxical ‘turn’ from the implicit anthropocentrism of democracy/ies toward the ecocentrism of a ‘strong/critical’ or ‘deeper’ ecological politics? (Payne, 2010b).

EE has histories

In EE there is an upsurge of interest in education about or for climate change, and research about it. *Dare* we in EER ask for what purpose, and form, does this heightened academic concern and practice take,

even action? Is it, nonpolitically, the simple provision of more information, knowledge, data, facts *about* climate change and, maybe, its consequences? Does its form use an orthodox pedagogy that presumes ‘neutrality’ in approach or method, or is ‘balanced’ in content and its assessments? Does it include any insight into the environmental and political history of the accelerating carbonization of the atmosphere? Or, conversely, does it include or exclude the environmentally ethical, ecopolitical, and environmental esthetics of an interdisciplinary education *about*, or *in*, and *for* understanding and acting upon climate “destabilization” and global “heating”? Maybe, for many, it is too ‘critical’ to de and reconstruct the normalizing language such as “warming”, or “long drought”? Or “change” is allowed to masquerade as “natural”, and not “anthropogenic”, as the vast majority of scientists have concluded? Is the ‘scientific’ inspired term “Anthropocene” adequate in ‘accounting’ for the highly skewed sources, consequences, costs, and distributive injustices of CO2 emissions?

David Orr or Greta Thunberg do not have all the political, educational, and generational answers. But they put themselves out there, in different ways. At least they tried, though...they sure as hell did that much! *Dare* we ask of ourselves about ‘other’ equally important environmental and ecological problems pushed to the margins by local politics or centered on dominant concerns about climate change, such as those endemic to marine education, land education...urban education...professional development, pre-service teacher education, and so on? Might Response papers grapple with policy, at all levels of curriculum and pedagogical challenges confronting schooling with many local politically ‘othered’ environmental problems and social issues? And, what about complementary initiatives within the politics of Education such as Indigenous pedagogies, political ecology, geography, international studies, and the UNs GCE that seem promising for EE and ESE but, again...? How and in what ways, and where does ‘citizenship’, ‘civics’, and ‘democracy’, all key educational concerns of Orr, for example, fit? And how can they be addressed politically and practically?

In the decade after *JEE* was first published in 1969, three United Nations Conferences held in Europe in the 1970s formalized the ‘global field’ of EE. Of the many political dilemmas those original policy-makers faced, one is struck by the sense of the complicity of educational systems, policies, structures, teacher training, curriculum, and pedagogy in reproducing the then “ecological crisis”. So, where, now, are our mainstream postmodern Education ‘systems’ positioned by the economic-political will of the dominant government— as part of the neo-liberal problem, as part of the reconstructionist solution, or as a silenced/absented non-issue? What role did or does the politics of ‘schooling’, and its curricula and pedagogies, afford in sustaining or contesting the now “nature crisis/emergency”? In those 1970s forums, we *dared* push the need for “alternative” policy framing and praxis of Education that would challenge the various well established political orthodoxies and entrenched traditions of education, policy, curriculum, and pedagogy that, for many years, had dominated locally, nationally, and internationally. So what, now? Is SSCA the exception, not the norm, but a soon-to-be-forgotten hiccup and inconvenience to the status quo?

And, what about Responses to a “missing politics” from the so-called ‘informal’ education sector, such as NGOs, ‘citizen science’ groups, or museums and zoos, or interpretive centres? What about the neo-liberalization of pre-service teacher education in our Universities into which the nebulous, elusive “sustainability” (of what?) is supposed to ‘fit’? And the openly political professional development of teachers given the heavy burden and challenge suddenly foisted on “Education” by the 70s series of UN conferences? And what about the associated politics of ‘disciplinary-based’ professional education in engineering, medicine, and law, as recommended by Orr?

And, for the keen historical eye/mind in (2) above, where is a (research-based) update of some of the original principles of EE recommended in 1978 by the UN, in terms that might “mean” something of “value” today (for example, Payne, 2018)?

And the beat goes on: Pre Thunberg

It should come as no surprise that different traditional standards, ideological interests and political agendas were assertively played out ‘globally’ at the 1970s UN conferences about policy, practice, culture, nature, development, resources, belief systems, education, schooling, values, and so on. The final Tbilisi Report recommendations, partially updated in (2) above, did agree about the urgency of establishing an

‘alternative’ EE that, effectively, challenged, criticized, and progressively ‘reconstructed’ the mainstream systems, structures, and orthodox practices of Education.

Not surprisingly given entrenched conservative opposition to social “change” or “transformation”, many traditions in Education persist forty years later in contemporary theories and practices of EE, and methodologies in its research. EE has always struggled to be ‘alternative’; a struggle exacerbated by the saturation of neo-liberalism in corporate universities, audit and impact-driven education discourses, and practices of schooling.

‘Old’ journals like the regionally inspired *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, first published in 1984 fifteen years after *JEE*, played a significant role in promoting EE as not just conventionally *about* the environment, or even experientially *in* the environment, but also in a critical, praxical, interdisciplinary manner *for* the environment. Central to this ‘ethico-political’ alternative was “critical pedagogy”, collaborative inquiry that was embodied in environmentally problematic, ‘everyday’ ‘real/material’ circumstances and settings, action research, and democratic resolution of local environmental problems - in full view of the social issues that contributed to those problems. The ‘radical’ inclusion of the term *for* was consistent with much of the Tbilisi recommendations.

Starting also in 1984, *The Southern African Journal of Environmental Education* includes a focus on comparative aspects of EE, highlighting the importance of environmental ethics and environmental action issues. *SAJEE* uniquely represents post-Apartheid ‘voice’ in the ‘South’ of global EE (see also, another *JEE special issue* edited by Cae Rodrigues, 2020). Another regional journal, the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, first published in 1996, recently devoted a Special Issue (2017) to the intriguing question of “what counts as activism” in EE?

But...? Lots of journals, lots of conferences, lots of writing, and no real change, until now when the heat is on...as a politics of inaction, in spite of all the rhetoric, texts, disruptions, and imaginings. Actions speak louder than words. Walk the talk.

Speculation? In 10 years time, when the Editors of *JEE* are finalizing the 60th Special Issue, what will we *dare* say, not say, and conclude about the field’s progress, action, walk? And, following Thunberg (2019) where “no one is too small to make a difference” what will the ‘record’ of EE research make valuable and useful claims on?

Invitations for political actions against: Paralysis; risk aversion; challenge free; amnesia? All of the above?

The many preceding probes, clues, and possibilities outlined above indicate some of the key challenges for potential Response papers. They are not exhaustive. As Editors, we are responding to the urgent question of - is some‘thing’ ecopolitically “missing” in EE, ESE, Education for Sustainable Development, EE research, GCE and related endeavors. Has EE “missed” the boat, as challenged by Orr? If so, what is missing? Indeed, given the *JEE*’s international scope, is any resurgent ‘activism’ in EE about to “trump” the “new” political conservatism, denialism, authoritarianism, and anti-environmentalism of our democratically elected leaders and parties? How are EE, ESE, and EER capable of sustaining roots in Tbilisi, and in proactive pedagogies, curriculum, policies, and research ‘resistances’ in Education? Or for the institutions and organizations in which we work, such as a school, or university, special interest group, or NGO?

In all of this democratic mess and mangle, do we misrecognize ourselves in EE? What, indeed, are our political motivations, preconceptions and positionings in EE research? (for example, Hart et al., 2013). What is the “becoming” of our field? (for example, Hart, 2005; Hart & Hart, 2018; Payne, 2013, 2016, 2018). To be sure, is the discourse-practice of EE any longer ecologically and/or environmentally sustainable in ‘post’ local and global democracies?

How might we now reengage “agentially” in an actional politics of EE within and beyond education? Do our politics of inquiry, antecedent to our research framings and positionings, *actually de and* reconstruct the various educational “structures” that enable ecological and social justices, as action? How *should* (or can) we (belatedly) act now both within and without our political systems! *Dare* we ask a

pressing question of ourselves as active researchers and as journal Editors - are we simply 'legitimizers' of (uncritical) 'knowledge generation', and gatekeepers of its (non praxical) 'production' and 'circulation'? How does the field now rethink and 'represent' itself? Its narrative history and coherence? As Orr and Hart ask, what are our environmental education politics and democratic ecopolitics?

We invited David Orr to address our Editorial pause, cause, and misgivings about the current and future politics, prospects, possibilities, and promise of EE, ESE, and EE research. As a well-known environmental thinker, Orr has published nine books in environmental studies, politics, and education. He is a Distinguished Professor (Emeritus) at Oberlin College in Ohio in the USA. Not coincidentally, David is currently engaged in the "democracy initiative" which began with a "Conference on the State of American Democracy" in November, 2017 and culminated in the publication of *Democracy Unchained* in early 2020. A series of 14 public events will continue into early 2021. David's historical contribution to EE is broad and extensive. He *dared* ask three decades ago, "Is environmental education an oxymoron?" in his first book, *Ecological Literacy* (1992, p. 149). In other words, Orr proposed that **all** education should be environmental, in the interdisciplinary ecological approach formulated and recommended at Tbilisi.

In his lead paper for this SI, David *broadly* identifies various absences, silences, or gaps in his "Missing politics of environmental education." He challenges us to examine, investigate, and act upon five crucial issues confronting the future of EE, namely;

1. Governance: the importance of advancing environmental law and regulations sufficient enough at global and local levels.
2. Democratic vitality: given, for many of us living in affluence, our habits and norms of "well conditioned consumption".
3. Growth limits: where the costs and burdens of post-scarcity overconsumption and associated resource extraction are easily and/or conveniently "shifted" to the next generations and/or overseas to the less affluent.
4. Technological utopias: the unanticipated or unintended "bite back" consequences of technological solutions and their growth economies.
5. Professional education: the extension of environmental and sustainability educations into many traditional "applied" areas, including law, engineering, medicine, and finance.

Orr's general challenges now require more precise contextualization that Response papers may generate for those who continue to ask: So what?

Given the youth phenomenon and 'street work' of SSCA and the pressing question of intergenerational and "decolonized" cross-cultural (eco)politics, ethics, and esthetics, our *dare* to authors of Response studies might link aspects of Orr's "missing politics" to EE/ESE/GCE initiatives at any of the many levels of EE ranging from the academy to primary/elementary and secondary schooling, including early years education, pre-service and in-service teacher education, and professional education/development. And, in case you missed it, we want responses to focus on the politics of environmental education inquiry, research and praxis.

A Response paper/study will seriously consider how *local* engagement, debate, and critique in pedagogy, curriculum, and policy development can also be reframed for *global* relevance and potential "transferrability" (not generalizability), given the wide range of EE initiatives, and their research.

Thunberg recently expressed disappointment that her environmental initiatives appear not to be having much effect on Politics. Dare we in EE and EER help with research insight and evidence?

The *JEE* instructions for authors can be found at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=vjee20>

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