

# Creating Contexts for Sustainability Teaching

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## *Abstract*

The education sector is being called upon to prepare citizens around the world to meet the complex environmental, social, and economic challenges we are currently facing. But do educators feel sufficiently confident, knowledgeable and empowered to this? How does identity impact an educator's ability to implement sustainability learning? This study sought to gain a better understanding of the role of teacher identity, and self efficacy, in teaching for sustainability, without seeking to determine causal relationships or direct correlations between variables. The ultimate goals of this exploration was to develop a better understanding of how the course affects teachers self-efficacy in teaching for sustainability, how teachers identify themselves as sustainability educators, to identify gaps and opportunities for strengthening related teacher training, and to propose suggestions for moving forward.

In 2011, a new Post Baccalaureate Diploma in Education (PBDE) in Education for Sustainability was launched. The objectives for the course included exploring and examining a variety of approaches to education for sustainability, in addition to evaluating programs in existence in Winnipeg and Manitoba. Six teachers enrolled in the Introduction to Teaching for Sustainability course were involved in this research project. Ethnographic research methods for data generation were used including observational notes, conversational interviews, program documentation, and review of participant artifacts.

Data analysis involved multiple stages and levels of coding informed by qualitative data analysis methods. Although each participant had unique identities which were important determinants of how they experienced the teaching for sustainability course, the course provided meaningful contexts for each of the students to develop and enact an identity as a sustainability educator. The learning experiences within the teaching for sustainability course were able to accommodate the uniqueness of each participant. In some cases the program helped students establish a sense of confidence in teaching for sustainability where in other cases the students used an existing confidence in to help them excel in the course and in their teaching practice. Important factors shaping the development of the participants' identities as sustainability educators included personal motivators, desire to impact student learning, spirituality and cultural values.

This study provides important insight into the role of professional development programs in the development of teacher's identities as sustainability educators. Results from this study suggest that a well designed professional development program for educators focused on sustainability education provides key opportunities for educators to: a) participate in dialogue as part of a learning community; b) establish relationships with peers and instructors; c) develop and expand their understandings of what it means to teach for sustainability; and d) apply their new knowledge and skills to their teaching practice.