



What Works? Research into Practice

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Facilitating Activist Education

Social and Environmental Justice in Classroom Practice to Promote Achievement, Equity, and Well-Being

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Tips for Activist Educators

- Design projects that connect with curriculum expectations in ways that bring together schools and communities.
- Partner with education-minded community activists like food banks, shelters, environmental groups, rainbow networks, cultural and community animators.
- Provide exemplars of excellence to which students can aspire.

Activism is about bringing to life ideas regarding power, fairness, democracy, and hope. What relationships exist between activism and education? How can educators leverage these relationships to support student achievement, equity, and well-being?

Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario states that creating “actively engaged citizens” (p.1)¹ is a mission for Ontario’s schools. In addition, this guiding policy framework for schools in Ontario lists equity, well-being, and academic excellence as priorities. Activist-education learning activities such as participation in, and reflection on, community-based socio-political activism can be a significant strategy for achieving these goals and helping students develop into active citizens capable of initiating social and political change.

Activist education can be defined as an intentional educational practice in which participants engage in guided learning activities that help them understand themselves as capable of effecting change for social and ecological justice.² Learning derived from activist education occurs through activities that are hands-on, minds-on, developmentally appropriate, and – at least partially – student-directed. Activities are presented in ways that open a practice field where students and educators can enact lived-democracy³ in the form of facilitated participation in, and sometimes resistance to, the structures that constitute human society on both local and global levels.

Why Schools Need Activism

In the past decade, activist movements have garnered significant global media attention. Citizen collectives such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy, Idle No More, and 350.org have come together to take action on racism, income inequality, Aboriginal rights, and climate change, respectively. These groups pose globally important social questions and demonstrate that citizen action is an important part of the contemporary human story. If Ontario's schools are committed to helping students develop skills and dispositions for active citizenship, then it is incumbent on them to employ developmentally appropriate strategies to help students engage meaningfully with activist questions being voiced in contemporary societies.

One important task of activist education is a disruption of the sense of social apathy that many education researchers suggest pervades contemporary schools.^{2,3,4,5} One way educators can undertake this task is by intentionally developing classroom environments that facilitate activist inquiry.⁶ For example, an ongoing action research collaboration between the Toronto District School Board and the social innovation NGO TakingITGlobal integrates professional learning regarding "global citizenship, environmental stewardship, and student voice"⁷ with a five-day "ideas camp" for students. During the camp, students and educators explore a variety of social, environmental, and political issues; they express and share their thinking about these issues using new media and design strategies developed through instruction from industry experts participating in the ideas camp program.⁸

Activist Educators: Designing Environment, Ideas, and Actions

Activist education can be conceptualized as having three components: environments, ideas, and actions. Activist educators design each of these elements as they make decisions about how to create a supportive community of learners in their classrooms. While environment, ideas,

and actions are highly interconnected, environment holds some primacy because it functions as a playing field on which ideas and actions can unfold and interact. Ideas and actions, while independent to a degree, are best addressed in tandem in order to highlight the importance of a pedagogical design in which students are invited to act on ideas and reflect on actions.

Environments

All learning is situated within an environment, and the character of the learning environment has significant impact on the nature of the learning that can take place.^{9,10} John Dewey's seminal thinking about educational environments focused on the notion of experience, and Dewey viewed educators primarily as designers of environments in which children could learn. This way of thinking about teaching and learning is central to activist education. Successful activist educators design learning environments that facilitate feelings of safety and inclusion. Invitational education theory posits that one way of developing such learning environments is by designing schools as inviting spaces where students and educators work hard to consider how everything they say and do impacts others in the classroom environment.¹¹ Design choices that foster activist education include both logistical elements like classroom arrangement (e.g., circles or groups versus rows) and relationship conventions (e.g., co-developing classroom norms with students, envisioning the educator as co-learner and students as co-teachers¹²). Cultivating a classroom environment where students feel safe, cared for, and empowered to ask critical questions is crucial in order to incubate ideas and actions that can be tested, practised, and refined in the real world.

Ideas and Actions

Putting ideas into actions is critical to activist education.^{2,13} Teachers who identify as activist educators design opportunities that invite students to take action on social and environmental issues. They also ask that students think deeply on these experiences and question ideas surrounding any given set of activist actions. Such reflective practices distinguish activist education from the broader

field of activism. While activist education can occur in any context, the learning purpose inherent to schools offers focused opportunities to join activist actions with ideas connected to curriculum expectations.

What Teachers Can Do: Promoting Achievement, Equity, and Well-Being Through Activist Education

With its focus on social and ecological justice, activist education helps to connect student action with ideas regarding power, fairness, democracy, and hope. Skillful educators facilitate student learning about these critical concepts at developmentally appropriate levels. What follows are examples of pedagogical design for activist education that promotes achievement, equity, and well-being.

Promoting Achievement

Across the curricula, activist-education action projects can be designed to connect with curriculum expectations in ways that bring together schools and communities. Partnering with education-minded community activists (food banks, shelters, environmental groups, rainbow networks, cultural and community animators) can provide exemplars of excellence to which students can aspire. Hands-on, minds-on enactments of activism about issues connected to students' lives and communities may provide a significant source of intellectual engagement.¹⁴

Primary/Junior Exemplar

Biweekly over two months, a Grade 3/4 class works in collaboration with a local chapter of the Raging Grannies (<http://raginggrannies.org/>) to collect litter in parks near the school.

Each small group works with a volunteer granny to sort and weigh recyclables, organics, and garbage, and to depict data in graphs and pictographs. Students discuss the value of parks as public spaces and the importance of taking care of natural areas to reduce impacts. Together, they write up their discussions,

digitize and post their graphs on the Raging Grannies' blog, and present recommendations to the parks department on placement of waste receptacles.

(This exercise connects with the following curricula: Social Studies, Grade 3., B2.1–2.2; Math, Grade 3, Data Management and Probability, data relationships; Language, Grade 3, Media literacy, 3.1–3.4.)

Promoting Equity

Participating in and reflecting on developmentally appropriate activism for social and ecological justice provide exposure to instances of equity and inequity within local and global communities. Learning through activist education promotes equity as students consider diverse practices and perspectives, and attempt to reconcile differences between themselves and others.

Junior/Intermediate Exemplar

A Grade 5 class visits the school in a neighbouring First Nation community to participate in the annual Our Dreams Matter Too walk (www.fncaringsociety.com/our-dreams-matter-too). Leading up to the event, pen pals from each community exchange letters; as an elective, summative task, some work together to write letters to their Member of Parliament to advocate for more funding for schools in First Nation communities. (This exercise connects with the following curricula: Language, Grade 5, Writing, 1.1–1.3; Social Studies, Grade 5, B1.1–1.3.)

Promoting Well-Being

Taking part in activist experiences offers the potential for focused self-reflection on well-being. Students can consider how particular actions promote or detract from well-being for themselves and others. Teachers can draw attention to the ways that activist campaigns often emerge when groups identify a particular threat to their well-being and organize to resist that threat. Additionally, students should be encouraged to reflect on the need for self-care when taking part in activist campaigns. Activist education should always be safe for students: Make opportunities to examine the ways and reasons

that activists sometimes forgo their own safety as they strive for socio-ecological change.

Intermediate/Senior Exemplar

Grade 12 students in a world issues class participate in a fasting campaign to develop understanding and awareness about local and global inequity in access to food. In debriefing, they discuss how it felt to be hungry, how it impacted their ability to function, the kinds of self-care they initiated at the end of the fasting campaign to safeguard well-being, and the reality that the simulation is unlike the experience of chronic persistent hunger because of the ability to resume a privileged eating routine. (This exercise connects with the following curricula: Grade 12, CGW4C/4U, B1.1–1.4.)

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In Sum

Activist education engages students intellectually in learning tasks that are relevant to their lives and communities. Simultaneously, students may become engaged citizen-activists – people who see themselves as capable of affecting positive change for social and ecological justice. Many practices of activist education are supported by the principles of *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*, insofar as activist education serves to develop active citizenship. The exemplars herein offer invitations to collaborate with students to test pedagogical strategies that leverage theories and practice of experiential education toward increased achievement, equity, and well-being for all students.

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