# Chapter 13
# Participatory Pedagogy in Environmental Education: Reproduction or Disruption?

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## 13.1 Introduction

Despite good intentions, participatory research and pedagogy can masquerade as an open process but still impose agendas that support particular versions of what constitutes appropriate thought, behaviour, and action. This chapter draws together two studies with some explication of feminist post-structural notions of the self in order to suggest ways in which feminist post-structural analyses might produce different readings of student responses to participatory pedagogies that have environmental change as their aim. Conceiving of the subject as discursively constituted opens up the self to both an interrogation into its construction and its possible reconstitution. It also opens up new ways of understanding student agency and helps bring to light how the discursive production of the self can limit students' ability to challenge dominant discourses and take up counter-hegemonic ones. Furthermore, a feminist post-structural analysis of power resists the tendency to 'blame the victim' when teachers or students do not 'get it right'.

## 13.2 Background

Although often extremely useful in initiating positive environmental change and providing space for marginalised voices to be heard, participatory approaches to research and pedagogy can be quite problematic. Despite good intentions, they can create the illusion of open processes but still impose agendas that support

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particular versions of what is appropriate thought, behaviour, and action (see Ellsworth 1989, 1997; Britzman 1995; Boler 1999, 2004; Kumashiro 2002a, 2004). In participatory research, full and equitable participation is elusive Boler (1999:193) and in education, (Fine *et al*. 2000; Robottom and Sauvé 2003), argues that an uncritical adoption of participatory processes can act as 'poisonous pedagogy', an example of 'the systemic ways we teach young people *not to notice* the cruelties and injustices inflicted upon them'. While in participatory development, Kothari (2001:141) suggests[1]:

> Participatory approaches can unearth who gets what, when and where, but not necessarily the processes by which this happens or the ways in which the knowledge produced through participatory techniques is a normalized one that reflects and articulates wider power relations in society.

In the context of these concerns, it is important to ask what is being disrupted and what is being reinscribed when engaging with the various discourses of participation.

Discourses produce and circulate values, beliefs, and notions of what is possible, doable, and acceptable. While people are often viewed as both the objects and subjects of participation, assuming that subjects are discursively constituted and any practice or perspective is oppressive in some ways and anti-oppressive in others (Kumashiro 2002b), we create a space for those 'post'-informed perspectives (postmodern, post-structural, postcolonial …) that can help interrogate the assumptions and effects of participatory pedagogies and research designs. For example, Boler (1999) and Pillow (2003) argue that although thoughtful critical reflection can often diminish their normalising and oppressive aspects, self-reflection is always partial and can still enable educators and researchers to remain comfortable in their blindness to their own complicity in reproducing oppressions. Feminist post-structural analyses can assist those involved in participatory education and research processes to identify their own complicity, but without the guilt, shame, and paralysis that often comes when discursively produced subjectivities are not foregrounded (Ellsworth 1989; Boler 1999; Davies 2000).

Because feminist post-structural analyses are able to interrogate ways in which power, politics, and subjectivities shape research and pedagogy, they can also help make some of the norms, foundations, and assumptions (i.e. normative discourses) that limit reflective vision visible and thus potentially revisable (Davies 2000). These analyses can enable researchers, educators, *and* students to identify effects of particular practices and perspectives (Kumashiro 2002b:17–18). In addition, they can be particularly useful in interrogating structures that espouse liberation and empowerment but may actually limit participants' 'free' engagement (see Kothari 2001).

For instance, within the assumptions of feminist post-structuralism, agency cannot exist outside the discursive (Butler 1993; Davies 2000; St. Pierre 2000). Even ideas such as independent agency and the self as an autonomous decision-maker are understood to be discursive productions. Basically, the 'choices' one

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[1] While Kothari is referring to participatory development, similar claims can be made about many participatory processes in research and education.

makes are based on those available in discourse, and some carry more power, or cultural capital, than others. Thus, agency cannot exist outside discourse, but instead exists in appropriating or disrupting dominant discourses and taking up or rejecting unfamiliar ones (Davies 2000). In order to give open access to non-dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses, one of the main aims of feminist post-structural theorising is to make visible discursive structures and their effects, as well as their processes of production and regulation.

This work is particularly feminist (rather than simply post-structural) because of its activist agenda and emphasis on exposing power relations, particularly as they relate to gender, race, class, able-bodiedness, and sexual orientation. Post-structural theorists often aim to deconstruct discursive processes without necessarily having any social agenda beyond the academic task of deconstruction, earning them the reputation of being nihilistic. In contrast, feminist post-structural researchers most often engage in deconstruction with the goal of exposing inequities, oppressions, and exclusions in order to initiate change (Davies 2000; St. Pierre and Pillow 2000). There has also been some feminist post-structural theorising that examines ways in which humans remain the unmarked normal and thus exclude the voices of non-human Others (e.g. Armbruster 1998; Bell and Russell 2000; Russell 2005).

To date, however, theorising on how post-structural perspectives fit with 'the activist[2] objectives of much socio-ecological education' has been limited (McKenzie 2004b:187), although increasing. Most approaches to participatory educational processes and associated research assume a modernist notion of the self – a unified subject with independent consciousness and agency. Since post-structuralist notions of the subject assume that one is constituted through discourses, always in flux and often contradictory, they have significant implications for notions of agency, and thus, for participatory processes.

It is my hope that by drawing together two studies with some explication of feminist post-structural notions of the subject and self, readers might conceive of ways these analyses might open up useful new insights for both pedagogies that encourage student participation in environmental action and environmental education research. In the first study, Marcia McKenzie (2004a, 2006) highlights ways in which subject positions accessible to the students from within the school and community may restrict students from taking up the very positions that the socioecological educational programmes aim towards. In the second, Deirdre Barron (1995) illustrates ways in which gender and class discourses can make it difficult for students to take up conservationist or activist discourses.

It is also my hope that in reading this work, readers might engage the following questions. What does conceiving of the subject as discursively constituted make possible or impossible? (Kumashiro 2004) What does this assumption about the

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[2] In the context of this chapter, I am interpreting activist, or action-oriented education to be education that works on developing students' desire and ability to engage in actions. To take action (as opposed to simply perform a behaviour) assumes making a decision to do something, rather than following prescribed behavioural objectives (Jensen 2004; Jensen and Schnack 1997). This action-oriented educational process is highly participatory in nature.

subject suggest about how students and teachers might negotiate changes that often require taking up different, unpopular, and/or counter-hegemonic discourses? (Whitehouse 2001; Boler 2004) What might feminist post-structural perspectives offer participatory pedagogy and research? In highlighting these studies, I am not claiming that feminist post-structuralism provides the 'right' or 'best' analysis, but do suggest that feminist post-structural approaches to research and pedagogy provoke different questions and provide insights that may not be acquired using other theoretical perspectives.

## 13.3   The Discursively Constituted Self

In her recent study of three different secondary school classes in British Columbia, Canada, Marcia McKenzie (2004a, 2006)[3] examined the contradictory discourses and resulting subject positions available to high school students in socioecologically focused courses. Schools included Hillview, a public high school in a rural working class community of 5,000; Kirkwood, a Montessori programme within an urban public high school; and Lawson College, a non-profit two-year International Baccalaureate school in a remote residential setting.[4] All three sites placed high priority on actively engaging students in social and environmental issues and included volunteer service and socioecologically based action projects as mandatory parts of the students' educational experience. Using discourse analysis to interrogate her observations of and interviews with teachers and students, McKenzie makes visible and provides a representation of how students attempted to correctly constitute themselves within discourses of neutrality, critique, achievement, diversity, consistency, knowing, activism, constitution of self, authenticity, and agency.

As the comments of students and teachers at all three sites seemed to indicate, students' notions of knowledge and themselves as knowers had significant implications for the ways in which they could engage in socioecological education. For instance, at Hillview, where discourses of educational neutrality and objective knowing tended to dominate, students seemed to understand information presented to them as true. In addition, while they emphasised how they were learning more *about* what is going on in the world, Hillview students expressed a sense of limited control over their environment and had strong doubts that one could even begin to change the world.

Discourses of educational neutrality and objective knowing were also apparent in the Kirkwood Montesorri programmes even though students there were involved in

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[3] The description of McKenzie's study comes from these two references, and is necessarily a partial representation. Only in the case of page numbers for quotations will specific articles be referenced.

[4] While the schools vary in terms of dominant social class and depth of focus on social and ecological issues, all three sites were chosen for their exemplary pedagogy. School names are pseudonyms.

many change-oriented projects. At Kirkwood, teachers saw themselves as exposing students to different cultures and ways of understanding the world, yet claimed they were neither imposing any particular values on the students nor 'bumping up against' North American values. Teachers simultaneously saw themselves as neutral, and the programme as one that challenged the consumerism dominating much of Western society. In taking this approach, the teachers seemed to be positioning students as objective knowers – a position which appeared to constrain the students' abilities to actively care about, or engage in, social or environmental action. McKenzie suggests that this 'discursive tension' between educational neutrality and social critique 'is perhaps also not surprising' given that the Montesorri advocacy programme occurs within a public school 'where education in general is purported to be neutral' (2004a:65).

Students at the International Baccalaureate school, Lawson College, seemed to have access to different discourses around knowledge and being a knower. They saw their education as biased rather than neutral, and were explicitly taught to question sources of knowledge, how knowledge is gained, and the extent to which personal or ideological bias influences knowledge claims.[5] This more critical approach to knowledge seemed to both position Lawson students, and enable them to position themselves, as contingent knowers. As they suggested in their comments, the Lawson students found themselves becoming open to more diverse types of knowledge and engaging more deeply in environmental action than they had previously.

Students' understandings of ways in which they are constituted also appeared to have some influence on their engagement with participatory or action-oriented pedagogies. Several Lawson students seemed to see themselves as socially constructed as well as having some individual agency. McKenzie refers to these intersecting discourses of constitution and agency as 'contingent agency' (McKenzie 2004a:160) – a kind of agency that hinges upon both knowledge and identity being indeterminate and shifting. For instance, several Lawson students talked about exposure to new ideas, people, places, or experiences as significantly influencing their sense of themselves, while others spoke about how families and previous experiences produced who they were. Some also spoke of ways they both engage with, and push away, from those influences and how they are susceptible to falling back into old patterns when they go home.

At Lawson, students acknowledged some of the ways they were constituted by other discourses, yet still expressed some sense of self-determination. McKenzie (2006:201) suggests these intersecting discourses of constitution and contingent agency 'contrast to traditional understandings of agency as the capacity for choice and self-determination'. Students recognised themselves as multifaceted and shifting in relationship to the power held by the discourses that were constituting them.

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[5] All students at Lawson College take a mandatory International Baccalaureate diploma programme course, *Theory of Knowledge*, which raises many of these questions. For a description, see: http://www.ibo.org/diploma/curriculum/core/knowledge/

In acknowledging their contingent agency, Lawson students appeared to be open to 'possibilities of a deeper reflexivity and more selective resistance to normative discourses' (p. 217), instead of feeling helpless in the face of larger social structures or blaming themselves for inability to make change.

Whereas the comments from Lawson students seemed to suggest some recognition of ways in which their actions and decisions were not completely their own doing, Kirkwood and Hillview students tended to attribute both their successes and failures to their independent abilities. McKenzie suggests that Hillview student conceptions of themselves as having independent agency appeared to limit them from moving beyond inactive caring to actively challenging many of the injustices about which they were learning. She suggests that at Hillview, intersecting discourses of awareness, limited agency, and inactive caring kept the student resistance within mainstream cultural narratives, and limited opportunities for student reflexivity and activism. She also suggests Hillview students' limited sense of agency appeared to be linked to their socio-economic class.

Like students at Hillview, McKenzie suggests many Kirkwood students had limited conceptions of their choices and abilities to make change, even though they were often active change agents in their school and community. At Kirkwood, many students exhibited a strong sense of 'individual power' coupled with some notion of themselves as discursively produced. Yet given that dominant discourses of individual power, educational neutrality, and economic achievement were not critiqued, the senses of student selves as change agents seemed limited at Kirkwood and often manifested in the form of lifestyle activism rather than any challenge to larger social structures. While claiming to support active participation and engaged citizenship, the discourses available to the students in both Hillview and Kirkwood programmes, both selected for their exemplary pedagogy, often appeared to contravene the programme and the teacher's own goals. McKenzie (2004a:iii) concludes that 'each group of students is to some extent "parroting" discourses common to their context', discourses which, in some cases, make it difficult for them to fully participate in their educational programmes.

## 13.4   The Power of Discourses Deirdre Barron

Deirdre Barron's (1995) study also engages a post-structural notion of discourse and the subject, and goes on to imply that given the power associated with dominant and normative discourses, change is much more complex than we might previously have thought. No matter how innovative their pedagogy, teachers cannot simply teach students to act or think differently. As students attempt to take up one discourse, they are simultaneously being produced by other (often more powerful) ones, making it difficult for them to take up counter-hegemonic storylines as their own.

Barron explores ways in which common dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity can make it difficult for elementary school students to take up counter-hegemonic discourses of environmentalism. She examines elementary school

students' responses to the Dr. Seuss story, *The Lorax* (Seuss 1972), that involves the Once-ler, who aims to chop down all the trees to create 'thneeds' which 'everyone needs'; the Lorax, an androgynous creature who sets out to speak for and protect the trees; and a young child. Through a feminist post-structural analysis of students' discussion, Barron suggests that the students responded to the Once-ler's actions depend differently upon the discourses in which they were positioned, or positioned themselves.

Barron posits that when speaking from within a technological discourse, the children appeared to support the act of cutting down the trees, whereas when positioned within conservation discourses, they were hesitant to support tree-cutting. When it came to who could stop the Once-ler from cutting trees, gender discourses seemed to exert a powerful influence on students' responses. Most of the boys assumed an ability to act, while the girls seemed to question the possibility of their own agency. To the boys, the idea that they had a right to cut down trees appeared automatic; for the girls, the dilemma seemed not to centre around 'whether humans have the right to cut down trees', but rather, 'which humans had the right to stop the trees being cut' (Barron 1995:111). According to Barron, dominant discourses of femininity made the girls those who care for the trees and defer agency to appropriate authorities, while dominant discourses of masculinity made the boys the ones with the ability to take action.

Barron's study suggests how students' responses to a moral dilemma, such as the right to cut trees, can shift depending on their positioning within different discourses. She makes visible the ways in which positioning within discourses of femininity and masculinity, technocentrism or conservation, makes different responses available and more or less acceptable. Her study also highlights how the binaries that associate masculinity with culture and femininity with nature, are taken up and reproduced by students exploring the possibility of acting in response to an environmental dilemma. As long as these discourses constituting subject positions available to people and 'nature' remain invisible, Barron argues, they will continue to constitute students and nature in ways that reinforce rather than challenge hegemonic norms (see Plumwood 1993; Davies and Whitehouse 1997; Whitehouse 2002).

Just as significantly as making the gender, environmental and other discourses through which the student subjectivities are constituted visible, Barron's study highlights how 'the social requirement to construct oneself as a unitary being' (Barron 1995:115) can trigger internal struggle. For instance, if the girls were not pressed to take up humanist notions of the self (St. Pierre 2000) and construct themselves as a unitary 'girl', they may have been able to take up both discourses of femininity (caring) and masculinity (acting). Likewise, if students were allowed to embody contradictory discourses simultaneously and without condemnation, boys like Robert[6] could choose to protect the trees without the risk of failing to constitute himself as appropriately male.

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[6] When challenged by the interviewer with the apparent contradiction between his views on the use of the machine and his earlier suggestion that the trees be saved, Robert positioned himself within the interventionist, rather than conservationist discourse, stating that he would cut down the trees if he needed money (Barron, 1995).

   The desire to produce themselves as appropriately masculine or feminine made it difficult for the girls and boys to take up discourses such as independent agency and caring, respectively. Challenging dominating cultural narratives such as unfettered development and consumerism would also mean transgressing appropriate subject positions. Similarly, the humanist demands that one produces oneself as a coherent, essentialised, and non-contradictory subject, seemed to suggest that the students could not simultaneously take up contradictory discourses (see St. Pierre 2000). Instead, they responded to Barron's questions from within the available discourse that carried most cultural capital.

## 13.5   Implications of the Discursively Produced Subject

When advocates of environmental education, sustainability (e.g. Government of Canada 2002; UNCED 1993), or education in general (e.g. the UK's Department for Education and Skills 2003) call for student empowerment, participation, and action, the 'student' they allude to is most often assumed to be a fixed, rational, coherent individual capable of independent choice and action. By challenging this notion of the self, mismatches between programme goals and student learning like that encountered at Kirkwood and Hillview, as well as contradictions like those experienced by Robert in his responses to *The Lorax*, can be interpreted differently. For instance, rather than being seen as instances of student apathy, teacher incompetence, or personal hypocrisy, these tensions can be read as the effects of competing discourses.
   Acknowledging that gaps between pedagogical aims and 'results' are often linked to available and dominant discourses rather than to individual failures or contradictory essential selves can open up new ways to understand and interpret student experiences in participatory pedagogies that encourage student activism. Continuing to assume a stable subject with independent agency can maintain limited notions of what is normal and appropriate (Butler 1992). By asking how meanings have been acquired and changed, how some meanings have 'emerged as normative and others have been eclipsed or disappeared', and what these shifts in meanings 'reveal about how power is constituted and operates' (Scott 1988:35, cited in St. Pierre 2000:484), feminist post-structural theorising can make the ways in which language, discourse, and desire work to enable and constrain student engagement visible (Davies 2000).
   As McKenzie points out, when positioned as objective knowers and independent autonomous selves, students had difficulty fully engaging in issues that were rife with partial and politically charged knowledge. Similarly, when positioned within dominant discourses of femininity and the subject as unitary, the girls in Barron's study could not simultaneously care about and have the agency to speak for the trees. These two studies suggest that instead of condemning students for not caring, being apathetic, or simply unskilled in taking action, teachers, students, and educational researchers would benefit from examining discursive barriers to engagement,

including those that may inadvertently be reproduced by teachers' actions within their own classroom. This does not mean ceasing to help students develop appropriate action skills, but it does, however, suggest assisting them in deconstructing ways in which they have been discursively produced – ways they have been constituted, and constituted themselves as, for example, a good student (McKenzie 2004a; Sammel 2004).

Conceiving of themselves as discursively constituted releases individuals from the pressure to produce themselves as unitary (Barron 1995; Bloom and Munro 1995) and opens the subject up to both interrogation into its construction and possible reconstitution (Butler 1993; Kelly 1997; Davies 2000). Rather than seeing themselves as fixed subjects or victims of a system beyond their control, students and teachers have more options for change, resistance, and reflexivity (Boler 1999, 2004; Kumashiro 2002b, 2004; McKenzie 2004a, 2006).

## 13.6    Implications of Attention to Subject Positions

Both studies show how the cultural narratives, or discourses to which students have access, make certain subject positions available and attractive to students and others much less accessible or desirable. Subject positions are the discursively produced storylines and corresponding 'conceptual repertoire and…location' (Davies 2000:89) from which one views and makes sense of the world. From a given subject position, only certain understandings of the world make sense. Depending upon what subject position(s) students have access to and take up, or are positioned in, their experiences of schooling, and what they see as relevant, will vary (Davies 2000).

The subject positions available to students reflect discourses in the schools and the broader community. In McKenzie's study, this was most evident in the contrast between the limited aspirations of the Hillview students for the future and the 'big plans for effecting change that many (mostly upper class) Lawson students express' (McKenzie 2004a:154). In Barron's (1995) study, it appeared as though for primary school girls, available and dominant discourses of femininity clashed with those of agency, and for the boys, discourses of masculinity eclipsed the option of caring.

The studies also suggest the need to pay attention to ways teachers and researchers (re)position students through speech and action (Davies 2000). Students in McKenzie's study made this positioning visible as they talked of their conceptions of knowledge, whereas Barron's spoke of how her interview questions pushed Robert to position himself as unitary.

The important point here is that educators who wish to engage students in action-oriented approaches to education may be asking students to take up subject positions to which they do not have access. As both McKenzie and Barron suggest, being locked into particular notions of who they could or should be, limits possible ways students can engage with issues raised in their classes. If teachers conceive of the subject as discursively constituted and recognise how they constantly reposition their students, they may then be able to work towards 'exposing' dominant discourses

and giving students access to alternative ones. In addition, they may be more able to position students differently (Laws and Davies 2000). It is important to note, however, that at the same time teachers may be working to open up subject positions for students, they are simultaneously, and powerfully, being positioned themselves – often in ways that make it difficult for them to challenge normative notions of teaching and learning (Kumashiro 2002b).

## 13.7  Further Discussion

Given that some discourses hold more power than others, some subject positions are more likely to be taken up than others. As student positioning within dominant discourses shifts, the power a student holds in relation to teachers, parents, and peers also changes. In asking students to formulate and articulate their own beliefs or speak up against hegemonic norms, teachers may be asking students to contradict notions of what it means to be a proper person, teen or student in their local context – in other words, to position themselves as the illegitimate Other (see Kumashiro 2004; Whitehouse 2001). An analysis of power relations perpetuated through discourse highlights how some responses may be much more possible than others (Kumashiro 2002b, 2004). Scrutinising cherished beliefs and assumptions may provoke strong emotions (Boler 2004) and it takes skilful negotiation of what are often competing subject positions to successfully and simultaneously position oneself as both teenager and environmental activist (Whitehouse 2001).

What all this suggests for educators is that rather than assuming that most teenagers lack the interest, ability, or courage to take up unpopular subject positions (see Sammel 2004), and thus student engagement in action-oriented education is blocked from the outset, students could be taught to use words and actions to resist those very structures that may inscribe them (Davies 2000) as incapable or unconcerned. Furthermore, through their talk and action, teachers may make different subject positions more accessible to students, shift power relations in the classroom (Boler 2004; Kumashiro 2004), and open up possibilities for what Barron refers to as 'radical environmental reform' (Barron 1995:117).

The power invested in maintaining particular subject positions as normal (Davies 2000) means that making these changes can be an uphill battle. As these two studies illustrate, basing one's analysis on notions of the subject as discursively constituted, and assuming that teachers' talk and action continuously (re)position students, highlights how reproduction of particular notions of normal can constrain student engagement in socio-political action. It is not enough to introduce students (or teachers) to counter-hegemonic discourses and assume they can adopt them, even if they sincerely wish to do so.

Unless dominant cultural narratives of participation are made visible and in some cases, disrupted, participatory approaches to research and education risk reinscribing the status quo and reproducing familiar subject positions as the unmarked normal. Helping students understand how they are constituted by discourse

and constituting discourses simultaneously, can help ameliorate this risk (see Boler 2004; Kumashiro 2004; McKenzie 2004a, 2006), as can helping students understand ways in which they can use language and everyday practices to resist dominant inscriptions and negotiate multiple subject positions. And as Davies (2000:71) claims, locating 'sources of the contradiction' in available discourses can make it 'possible to examine the contradictory elements of one's subjectivity without guilt or anxiety and yet with a sense of moral responsibility'.

## 13.8   Limitations of Critique

Like participatory processes where 'tools provided can limit the performance' (Kothari 2001:149), feminist post-structural analysis also has limits and must interrogate what it might itself be (re)inscribing. For instance, Barron and McKenzie constitute identity and agency in specific ways. Barron's study seems to essentialise particular notions of what it means to be a girl or boy by focusing on single discourses (e.g. that of girls as caring and boys as active agents). Her analysis also reproduces the subject as unitary by failing to account for multiple, often overlapping and conflicting subjectivities available to the primary school students. Similarly, in naming discourses such as 'achievement', 'knowing', and 'agency', McKenzie tends to (re)produce them as fixed entities rather than constantly shifting conduits of power.

As St. Pierre and Pillow (2000:6) suggest, it is important to turn a feminist post-structural analysis back upon itself to examine 'the functions and effects of any structure or grid of regularity that [theorists] put into place, including those poststructuralism itself might create'. While feminist post-structural analyses provide no 'sure ground' (Butler 1995:131) from which to learn or research, I suggest the kind of expansive critique it enables can reduce the risk of a participatory educational or research project (re)inscribing oppressive agendas and assumptions, even as it disrupts others. As the two highlighted studies illustrate, this kind of critique can be particularly useful given the change-oriented aims of much environmental education and the challenges students and teachers encounter when negotiating dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses.

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