

# Chapter 19

## Nurturing Female Outdoor Educators: A Call for Increased Diversity in Outdoor Education in Precarious Times

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### Introduction

This chapter examines the need to nurture female outdoor educators so that they too can contribute to new imagining of education for sustainability in these precarious times. Various researchers such as Cochran-Smith (2005), Futrell (2008), Gale (2006) and Westheimer (2008) have espoused a globalised view of best teacher preparation practice and in particular, the need to attract a variety of individuals with diverse backgrounds to the teaching profession. In this chapter, I draw from a cultural nature theoretical foundation (Rogoff, 2003) and am informed by queer theory, contemporary feminist theory, and post-millennial feminist theory (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; McNeil, 2010; Rustom Jagose, 1996). With these theoretical lenses I aim to scrutinise current complexities of practice in the outdoor education profession. A contemporary analysis of the study involves a “reorientation of feminist thinking and a strikingly affirmative phase in feminist theory” (McNeil, 2010, p. 428), in an attempt to provide ways forward for the outdoor education profession (Rasmussen, 2009). The outdoor education profession faces challenges like retaining a diverse teacher population while also trying to implement a complex new curriculum. Presently in Australia, all states are implementing a national curriculum for the first time. The new Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, n.d.) require teachers to implement sustainability outcomes as a cross-curricular priority. In the following discussion, I argue that it may be difficult to achieve the cross-curriculum sustainability outcomes with the predominance of the current dominant discourses in outdoor education. I suggest that teachers with diverse backgrounds may be driven away from the field because they may have different perspectives and ideas than those that are guiding the profession. In particular

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for this discussion I now focus on the reason female teachers may drop out of the profession. Research by Allin and Humberstone (2006), Humberstone (1996), and Lugg (2003) acknowledges that there have been notable impacts from the domination of males in the outdoor education profession on female colleagues.

Current research suggests that the outdoor education profession is male dominated and that this impacts on female outdoor educators in various negative ways. One of those negative ways is to conform or leave. For example, Lugg (2003) found that females felt they had to conform in order to survive in the 'male dominated' profession. Similarly, Allin and Humberstone (2006) argue that women in their study who failed to adapt to the male dominated culture were left out of academic debates and isolated, so they often organised to 'change field' and exit out of teaching outdoor education. Recent research by Wright and Gray (2013) also suggests that female outdoor educators have faced "distinctive challenges and roadblocks" (p. 12) in the outdoor education profession. Thus highly capable females drop out of the profession and this has a lasting effect on development of future outdoor education curriculum and programs.

A second negative impact on females was the hidden ramification suggested by Wright and Gray (2013) that female outdoor leaders feel that in order to survive the culture dominant discourse they must face "any challenge" with great success or suffer the consequence because "any failure is taken to indicate that women do not belong in the outdoor learning field" (p. 19) and thus placing immense pressure on women to perform with superhuman abilities. Females espoused that "unrelenting scrutiny and judgment" and being "held to a higher standard" and "if left unrestrained, eventually lead to exhaustion" when they taught outdoor education (Wright & Gray, 2013, p. 19).

Another example of an issue that negatively affects female outdoor educators is when they are bombarded by media and cultural messages from society that "outdoor activities are...Testosterone driven" and are more socially accepted activities for males (Wright & Gray, 2013, p. 12) thus favouring the male dominant discourse. Another research study by Riley (2014) was based on the findings from her study of Year 10 Outdoor and Environmental Studies students. Riley explored feminine and masculine identity in relation to activities. She observed that the students perceived the curriculum based around hiking activities as masculine and the meditative ones as feminine. Therefore offering another reason to incorporate femininity to the outdoor and environmental programs, and calls for "rebalancing of gender-ideologies" and that "femininity" can provide another way to interrelate and engage with the outdoors (p. 81). We must acknowledge that this extra pressure on women "to defy gender-role stereotypes" becomes "burdensome" for female outdoor educators (Wright & Gray, 2013, p. 19). Thus, there is a need to find ways to incorporate diverse perspectives to inform the field, and support notions of femininity to subsequently make changes to the current discourse.

There are flashes of change however in this situation. One paradigm shift that has been positive for female outdoor leaders is the move away from outdoor activities focused on "quest" or "conquering" outcomes... to activities that include "journey" or "empowerment" outcomes (Wright & Gray, 2013, p. 13). Curriculum changes

stated by Riley (2014) show a shift in outcomes has occurred: “the fundamental components within this discipline shifted from a practical recreation focus” back in 1982 “towards a more reflective education for an environmentally sustainable future” in some outdoor programs in 2014 (p. 53). The sustainability cross-curriculum outcomes (ACARA, n.d.) require teachers to defy gender-role stereotype based learning and incorporate more gender-balanced activities. Furthermore, there is a need for recognition within the curriculum and outdoor education more broadly that gender is a social construction. Therefore, there is a need for a more diverse and inclusive outdoor education discourse for today’s young people. These changes to the curriculum also provide an opportunity to encourage a variety of individuals from other fields of education to teach in the outdoors. With the inclusion of sustainability-focused activities, a shift has been created from just teaching adventure-based activities, to also involve teaching activities that focus on sustainability, like creating a school vegetable garden.

Denise Mitten (Chap. 12) also acknowledges gender issues that arise from the discourse in the outdoor education profession, and she shares her perspective on how it affects sustainability education in ways that it affects outdoor education. Mitten also provides a contemporary and robust argument for the important role outdoor leaders and outdoor educators play especially in teaching the moral responsibility of nurturing sustainable practices that care for the health of the planet. Thus providing us with another example of using a gender natural philosophy to teach all students about caring for the planet.

The final part of this chapter will focus on ways to nurture and retain capable female outdoor educators. If we retain capable females in the profession they can challenge the uneven political and narrow social dominant discourse that exists when one gender is over represented in the decision making on curriculum content and outcomes. Another positive to retaining expert female outdoor educators is that they can help the outdoor education profession change practices in order to meet the complex pedagogical and sustainability curriculum issues that face the profession. The next section considers teaching practices from a global view of educational research and then progresses towards an argument to retain female outdoor educators.

## **A Global View of Teacher Education**

In this section, a global view of teacher education and preparation unfolds with a discussion of the implications to outdoor educators. Teacher education research calls for the need to support quality novice teachers grappling with the fears of learning to teach in the outdoors. There is a need to openly dialogue ways to support quality teachers because as Sanders and Rivers (1996) stated “Teacher quality is the most important factor influencing educational success” (p. 5). Various researchers of teacher preparation programs highlight the issue of limited literature to inform teacher educators’ practice, and request for more studies into successful ways to

teach individuals how to teach effectively (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Dewey, 2008; Gale, 2006; Loughran, 2007; Marsh, 2008; Nuttall, Murray, Seddon, & Mitchell, 2006; Quay & Seaman, 2013). Furthermore according to Futrell (2008):

Schools (Faculties) of education pre-service teacher programs must maintain and improve ongoing efforts to re-design the teaching and learning paradigm to more effectively ensure that citizens are well educated and well prepared for our global society (Futrell, 2008, p. 537).

This research suggests the need to re-design the teaching and learning paradigm, similarly argued by Tania Ferfolja and Jacqueline Ullman in Chap. 13, through educating teachers and preparing them to effectively teach a more diverse range of students. The classroom of the future will have a mixture of students from more diverse cultures and backgrounds, and therefore teachers need to be prepared to meet this complex challenge (Futrell, 2008). According to the literature, in order to prepare for future changes in teaching and learning paradigms there is a need for more research on the practices of teacher educators (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Futrell, 2008; Loughran, 2007). Teacher educators are prompted to do more research concerning the effectiveness of teachers with diverse backgrounds (Johnson & Kardos, 2008; Westheimer, 2008). There are many complex issues in teacher preparation research literature. Therefore I researched the effectiveness of a teacher preparation program on the development of pedagogical practices in pre-service outdoor education teachers. The research captured the effects of a program that was specifically designed to develop the pedagogical practices of pre-service outdoor educators, in an attempt to devise a program in the future that nurtures quality outdoor teachers (Philpott, 2014). In this chapter I will draw from study and not specifically report on it. I wish to reflect on a particular finding from the study that rouses a call for increased diversity in the profession.

## Outdoor Education and Sustainability Definitions

This chapter was written at a time when outdoor education curriculum content was described by Knapp (1997):

As a handful of terms: ... school camping, conservation education, nature study, nature recreation, and outdoor recreation... earth education, ecological education, energy education, expeditionary learning, environmental and environment education, adventure and challenge education, outdoor ethics education, bioregional education, science technology-society education, global environmental change education, and sustainable development education (as cited in Quay & Seaman, 2013, p. 3).

In the study that this chapter is based upon, outdoor education definitions were described through the type of activity or via the goal the program aimed to achieve. This built on an earlier definition of outdoor education by Ford (1986) that emphasised education in, about, and for the outdoors which is still relevant today as well.

Past outdoor education outcomes can be found in the present Australian Curriculum (ACARA, n.d.) under the banner of cross curriculum priority of sustainability as well as the usual place in physical education outcomes. The cross curriculum sustainability priority has outcomes that encourage education for sustainability (EfS) and aims to “develop the knowledge, skills, values and worldviews necessary for people to act in ways that contribute to more sustainable patterns of living” (ACARA, n.d., p. 1). Also this priority highlights that “Sustainability education is futures-oriented, focusing on protecting environments and creating a more ecologically and socially just world through informed action” (ACARA, n.d.). Significantly more outdoor education-oriented outcomes can now be found in the cross-curriculum priority area, which address the sustainability of the environment and protection (ACARA, n.d.). Perhaps the term outdoor educator needs to also incorporate a role as Educators of Sustainability (EoS). Thus think of the POETs in my past study as potentially the new future teachers capable of teaching EfS.

## Background of the Research Setting

The cultural nature research setting of the study entailed videoing the POETs as they taught real outdoor activities in the outdoors (Philpott, 2014). The footage became a tool that allowed the participants to critically analyse their teaching. They could view their images as many times as needed, which then allowed them to effectively perform an in depth critique of their teaching. The POETs’ lecturer simultaneously provided constructive feedback that was also timely in their phase of pedagogy development, especially when clarifying meaning of feedback as technique improvements were easily pointed out when reviewing the footage. The POETs were very appreciative of the feedback for their teaching and it allowed them enough time to devise ways to improve their outdoor pedagogy before their next session. In summary this research process captured a rich view of the effects of educating POETs using an experiential education approach (Philpott, 2014). The research setting was examined stringently using data analysis techniques devised by the author from recommendations of Lankshear and Knobel (2004), Rogoff (2003), and Yin (2003a, 2003b). Rogoff conceived that four lenses of analysis were needed to unpack the data collected from a learning environment, so that education researchers could develop a richer view of the scenarios taking place in all types of learning environments. This study also had four lenses to the analysis phase to capture the effect the experience had on their pedagogy development: the participants’ views of their teaching, peers’ feedback of POETs teaching, lecturer/tutors’ feedback of the POETs teaching, and the effects of the outdoor learning environment on their pedagogy.

The study aimed to provide ways to improve teacher quality. The data helped develop ways to provide an effective teacher preparation program that successfully helped a variety of POETs become quality teachers. This is based on the premise that quality teachers are more capable of transforming their pedagogy practices that

enable them to effectively deliver a new curriculum (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Futrell, 2008). POETs and teachers are currently expected to change their approach to education and learning, and consider ways to incorporate new imaginings in the sustainability priority, due to the implementation of the new Australian Curriculum (ACARA, n.d.). POETs will be amongst a number of teachers expected to become leaders of change in their schools and implement EfS in these precarious times. They will be challenged to find ways to engage with more than the human world, in new ways, in order to educate for sustainability differently.

## **Alternative Perspectives to Challenge the Dominant Discourses in Outdoor Education**

In order to educate differently and meet educational needs of the future, Futrell (2008) stated we need “diverse individuals who can teach” (p. 537). The domination of males in this area of teaching is opposite to the rest of the teacher population, which is dominated by women of various cultures (Allin, 2000; Futrell, 2008; Johnson & Kardos, 2008; Westheimer, 2008). Thus, in this chapter I am arguing for increased diversification in the outdoor field in order to balance the current domination of homogenous male outdoor education teachers in the profession, and offer that by retaining females in the profession aids the diversification of teachers. The domination of males in the outdoor education field has been attributed to female outdoor educators leaving the outdoor education profession (Philpott, 2014). During my study I noted that talented effective female POETs conveyed many reasons that led them to believe they needed to drop out. If females leave then it leaves a majority of male POET teachers in the program and thus repeating the cycle of males in the outdoors teaching adventure-based activities.

Predicated on this stance, the retention of effective outdoor education or EfS teachers is important in the process of transforming a current dominant discourse that involves a majority of male teachers planning adventure based curriculum outcomes (Futrell, 2008). Retaining quality teachers that are capable of challenging the dominant discourses of past curriculum ideas in outdoor education is ideal. This will challenge those educators that continue to believe outdoors lessons should be based solely on adventure-based activities. I believe the new curriculum has a more balanced approach to outcomes, so that students with diverse interests can equally enjoy outdoor education and sustainability lessons. Another consideration of the sustainability EfS curriculum is that it does not require teachers to teach adventure-based activities that involve risk, which could lead to better retention of excellent teachers who would have otherwise dropped out or left the profession due to fear of teaching activities that involved risks. Also acknowledge that this situation has the potential to start to change the skills and knowledge that is required to teach new EfS outcomes and challenge the existing dominant discourse (ACARA, n.d.), thus rebalancing the outdoor education profession.

## Ecofeminism Perspective to Nurture Change and Retain Quality Teachers

This following vignette provides a clear explanation of a female POETs thoughts and conversation with her lecturer about leaving the outdoor education teacher program. According to the findings many of the females in particular expressed that they feared teaching outdoor education so much that they wanted to quit. The journal entries from other participants in the study expressed thoughts that they too felt uneasy about teaching with inherent risk in their outdoor lesson. The vignette provides an example of the candid conversation between the lecturer and Betty in a real teaching scenario.

### Vignette

Betty arrived at the IT room ready to view her first outdoor teaching session on the computer. The lecturer handed her a copy of her teaching DVD and she sat down at a computer and proceeded to watch herself teach. After watching the footage Betty stated to the lecturer that she was uneasy about teaching year 8's on the ropes course. She stated, "I don't know how to tie knots properly, I haven't done anything like this before" (her face was serious and exhibiting stress in her voice). Betty went on to say "I don't want anyone to get hurt while I'm running my challenge course activity, (pause), in fact I feel so scared, I want to quit the program" (after only three weeks of the 13 week experiential education program). The lecturer reacted to Betty's comments and said in a reassuring voice, "its ok that you are feeling scared at the moment... you are teaching a risky activity" and, "this demonstrates that you have identified the risks, Betty, and you have demonstrated to me that you acknowledge the risks to others" (as this identification of risk is an important part of risk analysis). The lecturer continued to chat to Betty, and went on to say "instead of quitting you should give yourself a chance to learn, what is scaring you at the moment?" Betty responded "the ropes activities", and the lecturer replied, "you should take up the offer of extra time to practice and master the new rope skills" that would in turn help her address most of the risks involved in the challenge course high ropes activities. The lecturer also stated to Betty "your skill of identifying the risks was immensely important to keeping students safe and is an important part of being a great outdoor teacher. The lecturer also stated to the class "it's not good teaching practice to take on a 'she will be right mate' attitude and ignore the risks, or pretend to be more competent than you are, because failing to identify risks can lead to harm of your students".

Betty later stated in her teaching journal that the time to practice the ropes skills in particular was an important factor that helped her overcome her fear of teaching the new ropes course activities. She completed at least 30 h of practice before teaching real Year 8 students.

This is an important finding for any teacher preparation program trying to retain a variety of effective teachers in its cohort of pre-service teachers (Futrell, 2008; Loughran, 2007; Shulman, 1986; Westheimer, 2008). This situation needs to be taken seriously and dealt with effectively to stop future female and other good POETs experiencing high levels of fear that can cause them to quit the profession.



The lecturer of the program provided effective teaching approaches to nurture all of her POETs that also retained a variety of great teachers in the program. Retaining a variety of individuals who can teach effectively means retaining individuals with the knowledge and skills to make appropriate education based changes to the curriculum (Futrell, 2008).

## **A Way to Nurture POETs and Classroom Efs Teachers in the Future**

The vignette highlights that you can enact processes to alleviate fears of teaching. Essentially this situation means putting in time to practice (rehearse) and acquire new outdoor pedagogy and as stated by Betty it did help alleviate her fears of teaching in the outdoors. Allocate time to practice the subject-matter (or curriculum) and teaching approach before the new content is taught to students, this process can be adopted in a classroom setting or anywhere one experiences a fear of teaching. Eventually when enough time is spent on practicing new pedagogy a feeling of competence will help alleviate the fears of teaching new content. This process should allow for growth in confidence in teaching and in turn this lowers apprehension and feelings of distress about teaching. This type of approach to handling stress is a thinking process that was designed to help pre-service teachers gain confidence in what they are teaching and how they teach it (Burton, 2009; Craske & Barlow, 2007; and National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2009). The notion of adequate time to practice your teaching skills is so you are able to teach and acquire information effectively (Hansen, 2008). The amount of time dedicated to development of new pedagogy is dependent on how long it takes to feel confident with the curriculum and the various ways to teach it in the outdoors. Hence, acquisition of a teaching approach could take a day if not too complex, but if the teaching situation is very complex it could take years to become competent in a variety of pedagogical approaches.

The vignette depicts the POETs fear of teaching a lesson that has elements of risk and explains some of the steps taken to address the POETs fears. The lecturer also took further steps to address the POET's fear and those will be explained in the following sections of the chapter. Also note that the steps taken by the lecturer in the experiential education program can be transferred into a classroom or school based environment where classroom teachers also experience a fear of teaching too. In addition acknowledge that teaching can be stressful at any stage of your career because it is multifaceted and requires constant adaption to curriculum changes, working with students that have different needs and abilities, building a rapport with their parents and various colleagues and communities (Loughran, 2007).



## A Way to Face Fear

In this section, I discuss ways that female teachers can develop more resilience to the negative dominant discourse they face in the outdoor education profession. When faced with moments of fear, anxiety, and stress during teaching in the outdoors implement these strategies to face them. This is also example of how to retain good teachers in the profession.

One way to debunk fear is to understand what it is. Fear and anxiety can cause physical and mental stress that can lead to novice teachers in particular leaving the teaching profession. To manage and eventually overcome these challenges, Craske and Barlow (2007) encourage the development of skills to be able to calm ourselves when we experience feelings of fear. Burtom (2009), Craske and Barlow (2007), and NIMH (2009) recommend techniques such as ‘thinking skills’ and ‘breathing skills’ to help deal with the triggers of anxiety or feelings of stress in the everyday setting. So to adapt this approach to teaching a ‘thinking skill’ would be something that makes you concentrate on what you are teaching. So when think through teaching a lesson it is good practice to identify learning tasks that make you feel fear or stressed. The points that raise your level of fear or stress should be addressed. For example if feelings of stress or fear arise from thinking about teaching students on a ropes course because it puts the students in a perceived risky situation, then the stress points ought be addressed. For the POETs the stress point was at not being capable of tying effective knots. So they found that the extra time spent on correctly tying knots helped them face the fears of teaching the lesson. The key here is to identify the issue or point in the lesson that is stressing and devise whether the fear is rational (real risk) or irrational (perceived risk) (Priest & Gass, 2005). Also acknowledge that when learning to teach there can be many situations that cause fear, so it is of benefit to take the time to face our fears. If we face our fear of failure enough times the feeling will eventually subside when you have a growth in competence of teaching. Then becoming a more competent teacher can become a more enjoyable experience.

Once the stressors have been identified the next challenge is to find a way to address the stress, fear or anxiety when preparing to teach. Aptly Craske and Barlow (2007) suggested different types of ‘thinking skills’ or strategies to overcome anxiety attacks. Another example in a teaching scenario would be, before teaching the lesson, take steps like: think through the teaching plan, identify the risks to student from environment or the learning experience, and manage the risk by removing the risk or change the activity to eliminate the risk (Priest & Gass, 2005). This process will minimise the risks and also help face the fear of teaching that lesson. This could also apply to other ‘thinking’ strategies that are designed to improve our understanding and abilities to teach complex content. Therefore to reduce our fears of teaching and help reduce stress caused by “unrelenting scrutiny and judgement” that is caused by the hidden discourse of the outdoor profession (Wright & Gray, 2013). Wright and Gray research findings offer suggestions to help females stay in the profession, if teaching in the outdoors becomes more enjoyable and fun, then

there is more chance that quality female teachers will continue to be outdoor educators. Thus adding vital diversity to the outdoor teaching profession.

## Conclusion

The post-millennial feminist theory or contemporary feminist theories inform my critique of teacher education programs. In particular the need to devise programs that encourage a culturally vibrant population of teachers who can provide various pedagogical approaches in the outdoors, in order to explore other ways to experience nature and encourage new ways to connect to nature. We need to avoid scaring off excellent teachers who drop out if they perceive the risks to their students are too high. For far to long POET's have been told you must climb this mountain if you want an A in my class.

Contemporary feminist theory suggests that if we want a more sustainable future we need to think of ways to address the issues of disconnection from nature (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). The classrooms of the future will contain more culturally diverse student populations so teacher education programs are asked to produce teachers with capabilities to address this deficit (Futrell, 2008, Westheimer, 2008). Maybe in the future, we could aim to retain quality teachers who are able to improve teaching approaches and curriculum development of EfS. Maybe a more inclusive approach to teach EfS from a variety of educators could provide in depth learning experience that support all students and help them create a strong human connection with nature and nurture this relationship in the hope that in the future they will learn to care about nature. At present the new EfS curriculum priority affords teachers with the opportunity to teach their students to care and understand the need to protect our planet. This could also lead to outcomes that encourage stronger links to sustainable practice that protect our environment. If we retain good teachers in the field then we have the potential to change the dominant discourses of the outdoor education profession to explore new and diverse ways of interacting with others and the planet.

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