

'The world is under threat and we had best get a move on': Canadian climate activist teachers

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Abstract

As part of mixed-methods research, we interviewed 30 K-12 teachers in Canada who teach about climate change, in part to see if they identified as climate activists. There is almost no literature available that explores whether people teaching about climate change identify as activists, which seems odd, given that we are deep into a climate emergency. Sixteen of our participants felt comfortable identifying as climate activists. With activism defined as taking action in an attempt to change things for the better, we believe any early-adopter teaching climate change seriously is a climate activist. While some participants were happy to call themselves climate activists, others felt they perhaps “didn’t do enough” to be an activist or preferred to see themselves as “advocates” or “educators.” We examine teachers’ thoughts around the identity of climate activist, document some of the amazing climate teaching described by participants—both those who considered themselves climate activists and those who did not—and discuss why we hope more teachers will adopt this identity in these dying days of the fossil fuel age.

Résumé

Dans le cadre d’une recherche à méthodes mixtes, nous avons mené des entrevues auprès de 30 enseignant·es canadien·nes du primaire et du secondaire qui abordent les changements climatiques en classe, pour déterminer, entre autres, s’ils et elles s’identifient comme activistes pour le climat. Il n’existe pratiquement aucune littérature à ce sujet, un constat surprenant étant donnée l’ampleur de la crise climatique. Dans le cadre de cette étude, l’activisme se définit comme la prise d’action pour améliorer les choses. Conséquemment, nous considérons toute personne qui enseigne sérieusement les changements climatiques comme activiste. Toutefois, seulement seize participant·es se considéraient comme activistes pour le climat; les autres avaient l’impression de « ne pas en faire assez », ou préféraient se définir comme « porte-parole » ou « éducateur ou éducatrice ». L’étude s’attarde aux réflexions des enseignant·es sur l’identité d’activiste pour le climat. Elle documente également certains enseignements sur le climat très inspirants décrits par les participant·es (autant ceux et celles s’identifiant comme activistes que les autres) et explique pourquoi, à cette époque de déclin des énergies fossiles, nous espérons qu’un nombre croissant d’enseignant·es revendiquent cette identité.

Keywords: Climate Change Education; Activism and Education; Environmental Education; Petro-Pedagogy

Introduction

We write primarily from the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe under the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850 and would like to acknowledge that if Anishinaabe laws were being followed here and across the planet, we would not be in a state of climate breakdown. We want to acknowledge that our thoughts on teachers' climate activist identity might not resonate strongly across cultures.

We are in a climate emergency. We write not long after the worst wildfire season on record in Canada (Byrne et al., 2024), in a time of coral reef die-off (Hughes et al., 2018) and on a trajectory for the collapse of the Greenland Ice Sheet (Krinner & Durand, 2012), Amazon Rainforest (Deutloff et al., 2025) and Atlantic Meridional Overturning Current (Ditlevsen & Ditlevsen, 2023). We write in the years where strong and definitive climate action is needed, not to stop global warming, but to save some of what we love, slow the catastrophes and avoid thoroughly apocalyptic outcomes. We write at a critical time when turning the blue sky white to block the sun is being seriously considered, because ending nature seems easier to imagine than ending capitalism (Carton & Malm, 2025).

Canada has made and missed nine climate targets (Thurton, 2022) and is a world climate laggard, recently building a new oil pipeline and scrapping its price on carbon emissions (Major, 2025). The Climate Action Tracker (2025) listed Canada's progress on climate as "highly insufficient" even before more climate policy was scrapped (Tumilty, 2025).

While action is lacking and the consequences are already devastating in Canada, they are disproportionately felt around the world by those who have contributed the least to the problem (Nature Climate Change, 2024) and we are heading toward tipping points that would shift the planet from the current state—where it dampens our climate impacts—to one where it amplifies them (Rockström et al., 2023). As part of a broader study exploring climate change teaching across Canada, we set out to find whether K-12 teachers who are leaders in teaching about climate change in their classrooms identify as climate change activists, a term we will abbreviate from now on as *climate activists*.

When we included teachers' climate activist identity as part of the broader research, we had a feeling that it was important. We did not start with the conviction that K-12 teachers should identify as climate activists and we had encountered very little literature that explored the subject. We were convinced that the ominous climate science and inadequate government responses call for activism but wondered if climate change teachers considered themselves

activists. Teachers are at the heart of K-12 schooling. They are role models and they support students. Students often trust teachers. With students striking from schools to themselves push for change as climate activists, perhaps, we thought, it would be good if some of their teachers identify as climate activists. Maybe climate activist teachers would be well-positioned to help students “see themselves as critical ecological citizens and active participants in the necessary socio-ecological transformation” (Guimerà-Ballesta et al., 2026, p. 13). Here, we explore participants’ thoughts on this identity and return to exploring possible benefits of teachers identifying as climate activists in the discussion. We turn now to the literature on teachers identifying as climate activists.

Literature Review

Environmental activism is a contested term (Dono et al., 2010). We see climate activism broadly as actions meant to lead toward Canada tackling climate change more seriously. In the context of teaching, we agree with Everth et al. (2023) that “climate-activist teachers” are “educators who are actively engaged in conversations and initiatives concerning climate change, its implications for future generations, and their role as educators within this context” (p. 152).

We found very little literature on whether K-12 climate change teachers consider themselves to be activists. We did find work calling for teachers to include students in activism (e.g., Hodson, 2017, 2021). For example, Agne and Nash (1976) wrote:

Environmental educators will have to engage in educational activities that are more imaginative than simply taking field trips and nature walks. . . . Far bolder and more inventive educational techniques and materials will have to be available if educators are to help students demythologize the propaganda of strong multinational corporations and other vested interests. . . . Such activities might include letter writing, organizing meetings, picketing, planning and carrying out boycotts. (p. 143)

Fifty years later, there are some activist teachers (e.g., Harrison, 1998), teachers who believe climate change requires “an activist stance” (Bigelow & Dankbar, 2016, p. 2) and teachers who believe they have an ethical duty to support their young students’ climate activism (Whitehouse, 2016). Still, we believe the overwhelming narrative around schooling remains that it should be “neutral” and teachers apolitical (e.g., Berger et al., 2015; Borgerding & Dagistan, 2018). This belief was clear in Favier et al.’s (2024) research on climate teacher identity with Dutch geography teachers, some of whom did not even tell students that they themselves believe in anthropogenic climate change. Trott et al.’s (2023) systematic review of climate justice education research suggests that most climate teaching does not involve any climate action, while Kranz et al.’s (2022) review suggests it typically does not even focus on needed public-sphere changes.

This may be due in part to the institutional logics of schooling. As Stevenson (2007) noted, while the philosophy of environmental education is rooted in socially critical and political action, schools discourage engagement with disruptive ideas. Climate breakdown is deeply political, a failure of institutions to act—yet educational responses rarely acknowledge this dimension and instead engage in democracy denial and neoliberal approaches (Orr, 2020). Leaders track math and reading scores when we should be fostering planetary thinking (Kwauk & Iyengar, 2021; McGregor & Christie, 2021). Ostensibly apolitical, schools focus mostly on the “what” and “how” of climate change (Karsgaard & Davidson, 2023); under accountability regimes, many teachers avoid controversial topics altogether (Hess, 2009), standardized testing creates a barrier to even teaching climate change (Dunlop et al., 2021) and activist teachers may leave teaching or disavow “the label ‘activist’ to describe their work in schools” (Zaino et al., 2022, p. 578).

Some studies report on climate change teaching and activism without saying whether the teachers identified as activists. UK teachers favoured putting participation in climate activism in the curriculum (Howard-Jones et al., 2021). New Zealand secondary teachers supported students participating in climate strikes with almost one-third of primary and intermediate teachers agreeing that students in their classes should “undertake social actions for the environment (such as letter-writing, climate action marches, social campaigns)” (Bolstad, 2020a, p. 35). Verlie and Blom’s (2022) Australian primary teachers wanted to teach about the Australian bushfires in their classrooms, but they did not say whether the teachers considered themselves activists.

Several studies named teachers climate activists. Everth and Bright (2023) found that climate activist teachers felt their school leadership stance on the climate emergency greatly impacted their experiences. The teachers’ thoughts on their climate activist identities were not reported, though a direct quote gives an idea of one teacher’s approach: We “need to stop nibbling at the edges because that’s just not going to cut it anymore. We need significant major, systemic, international, radical change to actually address these problems” (p. 26).

Hunter and Jordan (2020) reported that many US middle and high school teachers felt very limited environmental efficacy, believing their climate-friendly actions were small and outweighed by their own harmful behaviours. Some felt that mistrust in the political system stopped them from pursuing political or legal options for advocating on climate, but the main reason given was not identifying as “political” or as an activist. One said: “I’m more of an educator and not so much of an activist. . . . I’ll sign the petitions, I’ll talk to people when I have the chance in person, but I’m not out on the picket line” (p. 677).

“Persuasion” was seen by some as an extension of their roles as educators, but there was fear of being “preachy” and concern about bringing personal views into the classroom. Some of Hunter and Jordan’s (2020) participants believed that environmental issues are controversial and must be taught neutrally. They

felt that activism entails extreme acts and conflict, rather than being about engaging in various collective behaviours; they may take part in activism but eschew the label. Hunter and Jordan were concerned that teachers without a feeling of environmental efficacy would not be able to support students in engaging in significant system-level environmental actions.

Campigotto and Barrett (2017) interviewed 13 teacher candidates in Ontario, Canada, finding that although eight identified as activists, only one identified as a teacher activist. Some felt they did not do enough to be considered activists, most identified activism with extreme acts, and most were uncomfortable with being “political” as a teacher. The authors recommended communities of practice to support teacher activist identities and changes in teacher education to support teacher activism. Our work adds to the literature on the activist identity of teachers who are teaching climate change in Canadian classrooms by presenting K-12 teachers’ thoughts on adopting or rejecting the identity of climate activist and by arguing for the possible benefits of teachers adopting a climate activist identity.

Methodology

This qualitative interview-based exploratory research was part of a broader mixed methods study (Creswell, 2014). The first phase was an online survey completed by a convenience sample of 106 self-identifying Canadian K-12 educators who teach climate change. The survey contained a mix of questions with Likert-Scale and open-ended responses, plus demographic data. The invitation to participate was publicized in teacher publications. Ninety-five indicated that they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview; 30 were interviewed between June and September, 2022. The study received ethical approval from the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board.

Teacher respondents chose how to be named in this paper or whether to remain anonymous. Anonymous participant contributions are identified with their transcript number (e.g., T3). Twenty participants identified as female and 10 as male. Fifteen were teaching in British Columbia, 12 in Ontario, two in Nova Scotia and one in Saskatchewan. Twenty-seven taught in the public system, three in private schools. Participants taught elementary sciences, arts, languages, social sciences, math, and physical education, and secondary sciences, social studies, physical education, math, technological design and arts.

Interviews followed a conversational semi-structured interview guide, looking at many aspects of participants’ experiences teaching climate change. This article is based primarily on a question about whether participants considered themselves climate activists, including their definition of an activist.

Data from the interviews were first analyzed by Sydney using thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in the qualitative Dedoose software, then Paul read all transcripts and double-checked codes related to activism. This

process was messy; participant answers often did not lend themselves to easy categorization. This can be seen in our findings reporting below.

The sample was biased by the self-selection process for the survey and by selecting interviewees. It does not represent all Canadian K-12 teachers who teach climate change. It did include early, middle, and late-career teachers from different grade levels, teaching a wide range of subjects. While the findings are not generalizable, they provide a snapshot of climate change teachers' beliefs that help us identify some of the barriers to teachers adopting a climate activist identity and help us to think through the benefits of teachers considering themselves climate activists.

Findings & Discussion

We begin by reporting selected responses to the survey that were made by people we later interviewed. These give a sense of the participants and the contexts in which they teach. We then explore teachers' climate activist identities from the interviews. Finally, we describe some of their climate teaching, which helps to situate their thoughts on their climate activist identities.

Surveys: Teaching Time, Concern and Goals

Asked how many hours they spend teaching climate change in their courses, some noted that it is not easy to determine. For example, Helen responded:

I teach multi-grade, multi-disciplinary classes. I am teaching students in grades 8 through 11. . . . Conversations about climate change are a part of our work all year, and we make connections to what we have learned about scientific processes and human activities throughout all of our courses.

Kevin Lyseng wrote, "As an elementary teacher with an environmental steward background there is no way I can quantify this—I teach with a curricular integrated approach." Or, as Kiersten Chase Brookes put it, "I try to integrate it in everything I do. It is hard to estimate because of my commitment and obsession." Another teacher wrote, "Grade 10 Science—it is the focus for the entire semester. We are learning all the concepts of the course through climate change" (T3).

Asked to indicate on a Likert Scale how worried they are about climate change, 21 selected "very worried" and nine "somewhat worried." In answer to a "chose one" question, 22 chose, "Humans could slow the rate of climate change, but it's unclear at this point whether we will do what's needed"; six chose, "Humans could slow the rate of climate change, but people aren't willing to change their behaviour so we're not going to"; one chose, "Humans can slow the rate of climate change, and we are going to do so successfully;" and one chose, "Humans can slow the rate of climate change if teachers make kids think about it."

Asked “to what extent is the goal of your climate change teaching to help foster transformative change in society,” 21 chose “to a great extent,” seven “somewhat” and two “little.” Asked “to what extent is the goal of your climate change teaching to encourage students to be agents of transformative social change,” 23 chose “to a great extent,” three “somewhat,” and four “little.” While not unanimous, most participants see their teaching as potentially contributing to societal change—one of the reasons we consider them climate change activists.

Surveys: Climate Teaching Motivation

Asked on the survey to “please explain briefly why you teach about climate change,” answers from interviewees included the need for change makers. Some examples include:

I think students want things to change and they’re in the position to make significant changes; they just need the support to get started. I don’t want them focusing on the crisis, I want them to learn about why it’s a crisis and focus on being a change maker. (T5)

I don’t want the human race to continue causing extinction of the biodiverse life here on Earth or our own species survival. Big change is needed and fast. . . . Kids are adaptable and good agents of family change. (Catherine Everett)

It’s the biggest issue of our times, and the future of my children and students is at risk unless we deal with it. I am hoping that students’ learning will impact their parents. (T23)

The urgency of tackling climate change was also salient:

Really the only issue that matters at the moment—it affects nearly all other issues: employment opportunities, community issues, food sustainability, transportation, recreation, etc. (T9)

I think climate change is the most important issue of our lives. It will have a huge impact on the lives of the students I teach, and I feel it is important that they understand the issue deeply. (T3)

Climate change is the MOST important issue of our age. It connects all people and will require individual and systemic societal change if humankind will be able to prevail. (T18)

The world is under threat, and we had best get a move on! (Kevin Lyseng)

Some framed it as a responsibility:

It is extremely important to me because I am a human living in a warming world. It feels like a civic duty often. It encompasses every aspect of my science curriculum. (Geoffrey)

It is essential to recenter our relationship with the planet for our own survival and if we don't teach about climate change and the impact that it can have on our lives, we leave the place worse off for future generations. It is a moral imperative to teach climate change. (Holly Groome)

Some noted that it provided motivation for students:

Because it's the biggest threat to human well-being in the long term, and as such it motivates students to do excellent work while becoming knowledgeable about this urgent problem. (T8)

My students are interested and want to learn more. They love learning about Greta Thunberg and Autumn Peltier. It is important to me and to them. (Kindersley Brucker)

Some just wrote that it would help students:

I believe that learning about climate change will help students feel less fearful and more hopeful. (Helen)

I truly believe it is the most important thing to teach our youth about. I want to give our youth hope that their future is not predetermined and that they can play a vital role in making this world a better place. I think today's youth are faced with a lot of big challenges and I aim to give them a safe space to explore these challenges—but more importantly give them hope for a better future. (Joanna Linger)

Most participants are concerned about climate change, find tackling it to be urgent, want their teaching to contribute to transformative change in society, and feel responsible for teaching climate change or feel motivated to do so by their students. Do they identify as climate change activists?

Interviews: Climate Change Activist Identity

Of the 30 people interviewed, 16 identified as climate activists, four were conflicted, seven did not identify as climate activists, and three we could not code.

16 Participants Identified as Climate Activists

Of the 16 who identified as activists, 11 did so definitively. For example, asked how she would define climate activism, Joanna Linger responded, "I think a climate activist would be someone actively pushing for positive change and really kind of getting out in the community and speaking up for what they believe in." Asked if she would describe herself as a climate activist, she said:

Yes, and I think even just with my teaching. It's something that I believe we need to talk more about, and so I bring that to my classroom. I'm not down at our legislature with signs and camping out on my weekends. (Joanna Linger)

Another teacher said:

I feel like activism could be in different ways; it doesn't always have to be loud and, you know, in your face. . . . I'm a very shy person and I'm not very loud—so my climate activism is through my classroom. . . . I tell them the same thing, that their activism can be shown in different ways as well; it doesn't always have to be out at rallies and you know, loud and yelling and things like that. (T5)

These sentiments were similar to the one teacher candidate in Campigotto and Barrett's (2017) study who considered herself a teacher activist.

Another participant in the current study, Michael DiPietro, explained:
I think there's a range. I think there's people who embed it in their own job. . . . kind of in the way that I'm doing it in terms of it's part of my everyday lexicon, it's part of my everyday teaching, it's part of my work.

Catherine Everett responded:

Yeah. I struggle with that one a little bit because I wear a lot of hats right now. I wouldn't even say it's a hat. I think it is the heartbeat inside of me. Climate activism is who I am. Am I always out there writing letters or raging on the sidewalks in terms of making my activism—I do wave that flag sometimes—but I think for me the climate activism is in my everyday work with young people.

While these teachers may resonate with Hunter and Jordan's (2020) teachers in thinking that climate activism can be loud or engage with conflict, they clearly understand activism more broadly, including in what they do in bringing climate change teaching to their students.

Five of those we coded as identifying as climate activists were less definitive, typically due to the definition they gave and to feeling like they might not be doing enough to be considered activists. For example, Mariam Hazhir said, "I'm the crazy activist teacher 100 %," but also added, "I don't want to be an imposter. . . . I don't think I'm the leading activist person for climate change." This suggests that the definition a person holds of activism—especially if it involves going to extreme lengths (Hunter and Jordan, 2020)—may dissuade people from considering themselves activists.

Four Participants were Conflicted

The four people we coded as conflicted all described things that *we* consider climate activism. Their conflict, like Mariam's, was typically definitional, which led to them not knowing if they were doing enough. For example, one participant stated: "I don't know, like, I'm sort of 50/50. Am I a climate activist or not? I think that I don't know. The better answer is, is that I'm a very big supporter of keeping our environment clean" (T27). Another, who we also see as a climate activist, said she feels it in her heart, but finds on-the-street climate activism stressful. In her estimation, the RCMP is out of control—"a colonial

nightmare”—and she is very uncomfortable with violence. She explained that she is perhaps an “armchair activist”—writing letters and signing petitions—but does not know if that qualifies her as an activist. She wondered if there is a category called a “chicken activist” (T23).

This, again, resonates with Hunter and Jordan’s (2020) finding that teachers’ definitions of activism may include more extreme acts and conflict, leading them to be less likely to identify as activists. Asked if she identifies as an activist, Aleeya A. replied:

I don’t think so. I don’t think I consider myself an activist. But that depends on your definition of activists. You know, when I first think of what’s an activist, I think of the sign and the protest, and I don’t go to protests, and I don’t have signs, but I have a lot of voice.

I’m in a position where I can influence a lot, and I just think that’s so cool. . . . I’m now at a point in my career where I’ve taught, I think by rough calculation, just over two thousand students. That’s massive to me. That is really, really massive to me, and I think there’s a bit of an activist twinge to all of that. But to answer your question, do I consider myself an activist? You know, I really waffle between the two. I see an activist as being a strong voice, and I don’t know that I have a strong voice.

Seven Did Not Identify as Climate Activists

We found that their definition of activism led some people *not* to identify with the term climate activist. We coded seven people that way. Jeff Cole said: “I don’t consider myself as a climate activist in the way that, with the meaning that people would ascribe to the word that I’m in a march carrying a sign; not at all.” Still, Jeff did things such as having his students create videos, with one getting posted on Facebook. While not comfortable with the term climate activist, he suggested the term “climate ninja”—and said he preferred to work “behind the scenes.”

Another teacher told us he identifies more as an educator than as an activist. He said that activism has a negative connotation for pushing an agenda but then added: “I am pushing survival so, yeah, I guess in a way, I am an activist. Or, I am taking a stand, but, for me, this is just good pedagogy” (T8). Teachers may avoid an activist identity out of “strategic centrism” to better fit into the cultural environment of schools (Cherry, 2019). Howard (2023) reported that ridicule and stereotyping was commonly experienced by climate activists in the UK, suggesting the negative connotation carried by activism is real. Grewal and Berger (2025) found that some BIPOC youth climate justice activists also felt uncomfortable with the term activist, preferring “intersectional environmentalist.”

One teacher defined activism as, “someone who actively shows up and tries their best to affect change”—and said he gave that up after frustration working for a political party. He said:

So I use education as my outlet. . . . I don’t have time to give up a weekend and go down and protest the local pipeline. I would rather teach kids and encourage them

how to change legislation and teach kids how to navigate the system, rather than protesting. (T21)

He said that if educators are working within the system, he does not see it as activism.

There was one outlier in the group. She believed activists are “full of enthusiasm, instead of knowledge” and said, “I will not associate myself with the way people behave in public that call themselves activists” (T7).

Interviews: Climate Change Teaching

In their early adoption of teaching climate change across subjects, in some cases far beyond specific curriculum expectations, we believe all participants could be considered climate activists, even if they did not resonate with that identity. To understand why we think this, we now provide some examples of what participants described doing with their students.

Joanna Linger took her class on a field trip to a school climate strike. Another teacher (T8), who said he was not a climate activist, did so as well, after making protest signs with the class. Hargis and McKenzie (2020) suggest that schools should “support participation in climate protest marches” (p. 11). A teacher in the current study, who also did not consider himself a climate activist, said: “I tend to engage my students in discussions about taking action and social justice pedagogy near the beginning of the year and I try to weave it into all aspects of my instruction” (T27).

Katie Gad gave her students the freedom to work in groups on climate projects they found meaningful. In one, the students hosted a town hall on climate change and invited the Mayor, MPP and MP. The following year, the MP’s office organized the town hall and invited the students to moderate; the students had to pause proceedings when a community group showed up to protest!

Holly Groome mentored students as they researched and created a climate action plan for their whole school district. Jillian Fraser took her elementary school students to a nearby community to speak with classes about their experience being on evacuation alert due to flooding. A teacher (T21), who said he was not an activist, had grade seven students learn media skills by creating short climate activist videos and posting them online. His grade 10 students simulate presentations to the UN General Assembly.

Aleeya A. requires her students to contact someone from an outside agency. She explained: “And so I’ve had kids come to me and say, like, miss, we got a response from NASA. . . . Miss, we have to go to the office now. We have our phone call with that cryogenics lab in Germany.” Kiersten Chase Brookes has taken her students to the BC Legislature to speak with politicians.

Most of the participants felt some support for what they are doing teaching climate change although many felt like they were the only ones doing much on climate in their schools. Some spoke of resistance, such as one of the

teachers (T8) who took his students to a climate strike. While the principal had approved, the board ended up creating a policy to prevent such participation in the future.

One teacher told us: “You know I’m always very careful. All teachers run around scared of parents’ reactions, right” (T23). Speaking of what holds some teachers back, another stated: “yeah, this is their fear of the political gods and doing anything politically in the school system and it kind of depends on admin and school culture and all that stuff too, and also community makeup” (T9). This resonates with some of Lowan-Trudeau and Fowler’s (2025) participants and reminds us of Hunter and Jordan’s (2020) teachers who wanted to avoid being “political.” The importance of a supportive administration resonates with Everth and Bright’s (2023) finding that what is possible may depend a lot on school leadership. Unfortunately, the attempt to stay “neutral” despite strong beliefs about climate change can negatively affect pedagogy, as seen with US science teachers (Nation & Feldman, 2021).

Further Thoughts on a Climate Activist Identity

We have presented a picture of K-12 teachers who teach about climate change, about half of whom consider themselves climate activists. We heard resonances with the literature with some participants defining activism as extreme. Some said a lack of time prevents them from being an activist and others that they do not think they do enough to have earned the term, both of which appear in the literature (Bolstad, 2020b, Hunter & Jordan, 2020). To feel yourself a climate activist, you probably need to believe that you are taking part in climate activism (cf. van der Werff et al., 2013). Like birders who often do not identify as “activists” or “environmentalists” despite their advocacy work (Cherry, 2019), the school environment, identification as educators, and negative stereotypes—amplified strategically by fossil fuel interests (Lewin, 2019) and contributed to by government and by media (Cherry, 2019)—may prevent people who behave as activists from considering themselves activists.

We think that whether teachers identify as climate activists matters. Teachers need to know how to advocate for system-level change to help their students do so, but “negative beliefs about politics and activists act as barriers to systemic behaviours” (Hunter & Jordan, 2020, p. 673). Perhaps teachers should be trained in climate activism (Kowasch et al., 2021)?

We did hear of system-level activism from participants who did not themselves identify as activists, but we wonder if identifying as an activist would increase the depth of system-level engagement with students or would make it more likely. Might it help teachers push the boundaries of what they are willing to do? In the literature, “explicit (but not implicit) identity [as an environmentalist] is a strong predictor of pro-environmental behavior and policy preferences” (Brick & Lai, 2018, p. 14; see also Whitmarsh & O’Neill, 2010).

Does this suggest that having an explicit climate activist identity would predict stronger personal and political actions (Kashima et al., 2014)?

Climate knowledge is not often enough on its own to create change (Bofferding & Kloser, 2015), while social identities and belonging do impact pro-environmental behaviours (Fielding & Hornsey, 2016; Fritzsche et al., 2018). An openly climate activist teacher might lead students to feel more comfortable with an activist identity—an identity that climate activists sometimes feel they must hide (Howard, 2023). This could help to break the negative connotations the word has acquired (Bashir et al., 2013; Stuart et al., 2013). In neoliberal schooling, compliant citizens are “good” while activists who challenge social and political norms are seen as irresponsible (Kennelly, 2009), even deviant (Alexander et al., 2022). This needs disrupting. Activist identity-modelling might be the most powerful influence climate activist teachers could have on students.

Students trust teachers to provide accurate information (Borde et al., 2022). If schools are to become sites of social transformation—rather than sites of social reproduction—they will need to welcome political discussions, even critiquing vested interests and political candidates (Agne & Nash, 1976). Teachers who are open about being climate activists may be particularly effective, helping students consider difficult truths and modelling considered conclusions (Warnock, 1988). If climate change education should help students gain skills for creative climate activism (Selby & Kagawa, 2018), climate activist teachers will help.

At a time when young people “are forced into civil disobedience” to push for climate justice (White et al., 2022 p. 36), schools should teach “skills for political engagement” (p. 37) and engage “with climate (in)justice” (Sharma, 2021, p. 144), perhaps by facilitating mock trials mirroring recent youth climate litigation (Fuchs et al., 2026). Teachers may try to be “neutral” and to avoid sociopolitical issues, but that just leaves important things “for others to decide” (Hodson, 2017, p. 10). Certainly, teachers want to avoid indoctrination—trying to get students to believe something without evidence or against the evidence—but if they try to be “impartial,” they risk reinforcing the dangerous status quo (Jickling et al., 2018). Students need to know the obstacles to tackling climate change are political, not technical (Fuchs, 2026).

Political leanings can predict whether science teachers teach climate change, how they teach it, and how effectively they teach it (Henderson et al., 2024); self-identification as a climate change activist may do so as well. If identity motivates action (Fielding et al., 2008), climate activist teachers may more forcefully push back against petro-pedagogy—teaching and resources that are aligned with fossil fuel interests (Eaton & Day, 2020; Tannock, 2020). All of Eaton and Day’s Saskatchewan teachers adopted the problematic framing of the fossil fuel industry in their climate change teaching. They assumed continued fossil fuel use to be inevitable and emphasized individual change rather than policy change. Only one of their participants taught in a way that “confronts the corporate power of the fossil fuel industries” (p. 470). This is unsurprising when fossil fuel interests have flooded Canadian schooling with misleading resources

(Keary & Chesnut, 2025; see also Worth, 2021). Canadian curriculum and policy do not push back against petro-pedagogy (Karsgaard & Shultz, 2025); a climate activist identity may help teachers resist it.

To avoid pushing past planetary boundaries we must start telling the truth. At a time of climate anxiety when youth feel betrayed by governments (Galway & Field, 2023; Hickman et al., 2021), climate activist teachers might make students feel less alone. If engagement in activism can help with climate anxiety (Clayton & Parnes, 2025; Schwartz et al., 2023; Vamvalis, 2023) and “collective climate change action can lead to constructive hope” (Ojala, 2023, p. 1), teachers who identify as activists and engage their students in activism may make a real difference. Trott (2024) found that young climate activists want adult support but also *want adults to join them*. Grewal and Berger (2025) found that BIPOC youth climate activists wanted mentors and teachers to validate their work and provide guidance, while Neas (2023) found that schooling’s “apolitical framing of climate change” (p. 1842) leaves students disempowered and anxious. Youth climate activists want climate justice education supportive of climate activism (Vamvalis, 2023). What kind of a world leaves students feeling that they need to confront climate change on their own (Brennan et al., 2022) or is openly hostile toward youth climate activists (Dupuis-Déri, 2021)?

Looking back on learning about climate change in school, Jones and Davison’s (2021) participants felt disempowered, angry, and betrayed. They wanted to “act in response to their learning” (p. 195) and wanted their teachers to be active. Young people’s own climate activism provides transformative learning—better than their schooling; why not, then, have climate activists as teachers who could help prevent the “systematic silencing of young people on climate change” (Verlie & Flynn, 2022, p. 5)? The political aspects of climate change and preparation for public-sphere actions must be, but rarely are, included in climate change teaching (Kranz et al., 2022).

Despite the warning to avoid new fossil fuel extraction projects (International Energy Agency, 2023), we will not stop warming at 1.5°C. Climate activist teachers can bring this knowledge to their students to discuss the ramifications and to explore why current federal, provincial and municipal governments of all stripes seem intent on breaking the planet. Identifying as a climate activist teacher may not be necessary to do this work but may make it more likely. This requires further study.

Drewes (2025) wrote that teacher education programs have a role to play in helping teacher candidates develop a climate change teaching identity. This could be a climate activist identity as teacher candidates discuss the urgency of climate action and their agency as citizens and teachers (Field et al., 2024a; Zaino et al., 2022). Teacher education can challenge the idea of teacher neutrality and can disrupt schooling’s typical role in creating conformity (McGimpsey et al., 2023).

We cannot be neutral about the climate deaths and suffering that would have been avoided if fossil fuel companies had not waged massive disinformation

campaigns to slow climate action—campaigns that continue to this day (Brown, 2017; Dembicki, 2022; Lewandowsky, 2021). We know that every million tonnes of carbon dioxide emitted will cause 226 deaths from heat alone this century (Bressler, 2021). We should be clear that capitalism, with its imperative for growth and production for capital accumulation, rather than production for human thriving within planetary boundaries, is clearly failing us socially and environmentally (Hickel, 2020; Selby & Kagawa, 2018).

Conclusion

If “the more important and salient an identity is, the greater the probability of role-consistent action” (Fielding et al., 2008, p. 320), it seems important to encourage teachers to consider themselves climate activists. We need to very quickly stop burning coal and oil and gas. The survival of low-lying island nations and coral reefs depends on it (Ripple et al., 2025). “Should we not all be activists” (Field et al., 2024b, p. 583)? Education is a key lever for change (Apple, 2012; Otto et al., 2020). Our participants are doing a lot of amazing work whatever they call themselves; we hope this paper will encourage all climate change teachers to consider calling themselves climate activists.

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