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Climate Education and Action: The Role of Academic Leadership in a Canadian Faculty of Education

Interview with the researcher Richard Barwell

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***Richard Barwell** was Dean of the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, from 2017 until 2024. During this time, he was also Chair of the Ontario Association of Deans of Education (OADE) (2022-2024) and co-led the creation of a national Accord on Education for a Sustainable Future, adopted by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) in 2021.*



1. What motivated you to get involved with the creation of the ACDE Accord on Education for a Sustainable Future?

I've always been interested in and concerned about environmental issues. I grew up in a rural part of southern England and took a keen interest in the countryside where I lived. As I became more aware of issues like ozone depletion, endangered species and climate change, I joined organizations like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. At University, I joined a Green Society and participated in workshops and demonstrations. When I became a mathematics teacher, I de-stressed by working as a conservation volunteer in my weekends and holidays. I liked it so much, I considered changing career! Later, as a mathematics educator and researcher, I looked for opportunities to bring these interests and concerns into my academic work. One collaboration resulted in a book for mathematics teachers called *Teaching Secondary Mathematics as if the Planet Matters* (Coles et al., 2013) and I have written about climate change (Barwell, 2013; Barwell & Hauge, 2021), biodiversity (Barwell, 2023) and environmental ethics (Barwell et al., 2022) in mathematics education.

When I was appointed Dean, I started to think about environmental issues, or what I now prefer to call the ecosystem crisis, in relation to the work of faculties of education, such as in teacher education, graduate programs in education and educational research. One of the challenges of leading a Faculty of Education is figuring out how to respond to multiple urgent and important challenges. At the University of Ottawa, we first prioritized equity and social justice, Indigenous Rights and minority francophone education, all important for the communities served by the Faculty. As I got to know Deans of Education from across Canada, however, I discovered several who wanted, like me, to also find a place for attention to the ecosystem crisis.

For me, these different issues are all interconnected. It is often the most marginalized that bear the brunt of the various manifestations of the global ecosystem crisis. More fundamentally, the exploitative systems, mindsets and

discourses that underpin the extractive, exploitative relationship between human society and the rest of the planetary ecosystem also underpin the extractive, exploitative relationships that marginalize so many people around the world. As educators, we can inform, ask questions, create spaces for learning and reflection, and work for change.

The Accord was drafted by a working group, which I coordinated along with Professor Ron MacDonald, then Dean of Education at the University of Prince Edward Island (and a keen ornithologist and photographer). The group included Deans, early career scholars, Indigenous scholars and experts in environmental education. There was a real sense of urgency and strong support from Deans of Education across the country.

2. How does your Faculty's action plan connect to the ACDE's Accord on Education for a Sustainable Future?

At the time of the adoption of the national Accord in late 2021, the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, did not have a policy or plan for sustainability of any kind. A mid-term review of the Faculty's strategic plan created an opening, however, since the need for such a plan was raised by members of the Faculty community. After consultation, climate change was added as a new priority. A Faculty working group led by Vice Dean Giuliano Reis was tasked with preparing an action plan.

The ACDE Accord sets out six principles which were instrumental in formulating our climate action plan. For example, one of the principles is the importance of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, highlighting the connections between the Faculty's plan on Indigenous Rights in Education and the plan for Education and Climate Action. Recognizing these intersections is important to avoid dividing energy and resources into more and more distinct plans, with the results that little progress is made on anything. The Faculty's plan for Education and Climate Action shows how taking action on climate

change should also be a way of taking action on social justice and Indigenous rights.

The ACDE Accord also emphasizes the *responsibilities* of faculties of education in relation to education for a sustainable future, including their responsibilities to their students and Faculty members. The Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, has taken this responsibility seriously, with various symposia, book clubs, and student-led conferences to encourage and educate and ensure some clear attention to climate change and sustainability. Elective courses on environmental education were also created for our teacher education programs.

3. *Could you tell us about the international symposia that were organized as part of the year of action on education and climate action? What were their main goals?*

During the COVID pandemic, the Faculty of Education began organizing international virtual symposia as a way to stay connected with international partners and engage with international experts on the Faculty's priority themes. This format was ideal for promoting international exchange about climate action and education – and aligned with climate action commitments to reducing international travel. Four symposia were organized during 2023, each two hours in length, featuring presentations by scholars from Canada, Finland and Brazil, both in French and in English in line with the University of Ottawa's French-English bilingualism.

The symposia focused on climate denial, the intersection of climate change with equity, diversity and inclusion, institutional change, and the role of risk. These are important dimensions of climate action with which the Faculty, like many other faculties of education, is also grappling. What is the role of a Faculty in combatting climate denial? We prepare future teachers and of course they have a range of opinions about many things including climate change. While few

would entirely deny the existence of climate change, I imagine that there is a range of opinions about how significant or dangerous it is and about how much it should be discussed in schools. Teacher educators need to engage with a range of opinions without imposing a particular view.

Another of the symposia took a positive perspective on institutional change, with contributions on curriculum change and collaborative approaches to climate education. This symposium was particularly connected with the importance of hope, one of the principles mentioned in the ACDE Accord. It provided positive ideas for the future of education, bringing some much-needed optimism to our thinking in the Faculty of Education.

4. *What advice would you give to other faculties of education trying to bring climate action into their reality / raison d'être?*

The ACDE Accord deliberately does not provide a ready-to-use plan for each and every faculty of education, because each faculty is unique – it serves a unique community, is uniquely located on the land, and in Canada that means it has unique relationships with First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities. These relationships are important in working towards meaningful action. The ACDE Accord emphasizes the relationships we have as educators; these relationships are also important and valuable. For example, in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, a project co-led by Giuliano Reis and Florianne Tsering obtained funding from the Accelerate Climate Change Education project (led by Ellen Field [Lakehead University] and Hilary Inwood [OISE, University of Toronto]) to support a student-led conference on climate action and the implementation of other parts of the Action Plan. Similarly, within the University of Ottawa, the university's sustainability office was a valuable source of support. Finally, developing institutional goals and plans ensures that resources and focus are applied and that sustainability remains in focus as a priority, all while coordinating them with other priorities such as Indigenous

Rights, EDI or mental health. These goals should be negotiated collectively and help all members of a faculty share the responsibility.

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