

The Earth Care Teacher Institute in Sustainability Education
By Christina Selby

This summer, Earth Care International held its first ever Teacher Institute in Education for Sustainability here in Santa Fe. Over the course of seven days we considered - when measured against the massive environmental and social challenges of our time, “What is education for, What is education called to do?” An overarching theme that emerged was that of releasing authority in favor of authenticity.

Authority. noun. The power to determine, adjudicate, or otherwise settle issues or disputes; jurisdiction; the right to control, command, or determine. "Authority" refers to a claim of legitimacy, justification and right to exercise that power.

Authentic. adj. Not false or copied; genuine; real. Entitled to acceptance or belief because of agreement with known facts or experience; reliable; trustworthy. Synonyms: genuine, real, veritable.

According to Wikipedia, a philosophy of authenticity is a particular way of dealing with the external world, being faithful to internal rather than external ideas. It refers to the truthfulness of origins, attributions, commitments, sincerity, devotion, and intentions.

In the closing ceremony of the Institute, the teachers shared their intentions about how they would work to implement education for sustainability as they return to school in the fall. As we went around the circle, many spoke about their desire to create a kinder, more authentic and empowering relationship with their students and to make education more authentic by learning from and creating a relationship to place – the social and ecological place we call Santa Fe.

In the teachers’ words:

“[I’ve realized] how much power a teacher really has. I guess I have to really take that potential to heart and take responsibility for it.”

“Most of my ideas are ideas that are imposed by me on the school/students. But I really want to shift that to capitalizing on student energy and student generated ideas.”

“[I intend to] continue to encourage and support my students to be their most authentic self both in and out of the classroom.”

“Grounding curriculum and school in place in a radical way could really drive lessons, create energy in a new way.”

Listening to the teachers share their closing intentions, it became apparent how this very act - of being authentic - is not common place in our modern educational system. These teachers work in a system that many times encourages authority over authenticity; knowledge over wisdom; memorization over application; learning in

classroom rather than learning from and in the community. In this environment, creating a more authentic relationship - between teachers and students, and, between education and the community is no small task. Relating to students in a way that empowers them to participate authentically in their education, and contribute to the sustainability of their community is truly a radical act. These teachers are now set on a course to practice radical acts of kindness.

But, as one teacher pointed out, “our sustainable efforts cannot be personality based, but must become part of the system.” The authenticity these teachers will now bring to their relationships is just the beginning. This is the ground on which they will stand to create a sustainable society through by manifesting a sustainable system of education. Over the next three years this group of teachers will explore how to do just that in Santa Fe.

Young people spend 8 hours a day 5 days a week for 10 months of the year in classrooms, spending more time of their young lives at schools than involved in any other endeavor. Thus schools substantially influence the beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors of young people. Yet, most education today teaches students to think and see the world from an unsustainable paradigm. Transforming the paradigm of the educational system is vitally important to achieving sustainability. Earth Care is committed to evolving a process for educating that involves an authentic connection between teachers and they youth they work with as well as between the classroom and the greater reality and experience of community, including nature.

Thirty teachers applied for the 20 slots in this intensive 7-day Institute facilitated by Earth Care staff Rachel Balkcom and Tammy Harkins in conjunction with Dana Richards of Earth Works Institute, Ashley Nielsen of Living Education Group, Ted Fish of Philos Institute, and Paige Prescott, former teacher at Monte del Sol Charter School. Look for more information about these Summer Teacher Institutes, teacher trainings offered throughout the year, and Earth Care’s work to create a system of sustainable education on our website www.earthcare.org.