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EDITORIAL



A double bind: youth activism, climate change, and education

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ABSTRACT

The effects of climate change are becoming ever clearer. Young people's participation in movements demanding action on climate change has grown and achieved new visibility. Yet the relations between climate change and education remain under-theorised. Such a theorisation should, we argue, take account of the current disconnection between climate change education and action, and the exclusion of the complex social, cultural, aesthetic and political effects of climate change from curricula. Further, it should consider a changed relation to young people as political subjects, that takes climate action as the moment and means of a more imaginative, interdisciplinary climate change education. Finally, we must confront the contradiction of such a climate change education to fundamental aspects of formal schooling including its governmental function. This special issue draws participants and contributions from across four continents and includes papers that take global or transnational perspectives and foreground the perspectives of Indigenous peoples. Its contributions engage with the problematic of climate change education by exploring the relationship between youth climate activism and education in terms of both education's responsibility to foster generative encounters with young people whose futures will be conditioned by climate change, and the role of young people's climate activism in disrupting and changing educational systems. Collectively the contributions pursue three broad lines of inquiry: (i) the dramatisation and visualisation of climate change for and by young people, (ii) the need for culturally responsive frameworks for climate change education, (iii) alternative pedagogical approaches that bring climate activism and education together.

KEYWORDS

Climate change education; activism; youth; politics

Introduction

Climate change has a clear and accelerating urgency, and is now imbricated in global economics, politics, social relations, aesthetics as well as science and technology. The planetary-scale effects of anthropogenic climate change are becoming ever clearer, with leading climate scientists confirming that immediate action is required to prevent the catastrophic effects of a global mean temperature rise above 1.5°C by 2050 (IPCC, 2019, 2020). The urgency of action on climate change was mediated starkly in the images of devastating bushfires in Australia, which killed or displaced an estimated 3 billion

native animals, destroyed over 3000 homes, and took the lives of 33 people (WWF, 2020). The fervency of climate change as a global political issue has further been raised in the public consciousness through the global school strikes movement inspired by Greta Thunberg, and the rise of Extinction Rebellion among other global activist movements. While media coverage of the youth-led school strikes has brought youth activism and participation in social movements into new visibility, it has also served to further polarise politically disparate views on climate change, and in particular, the role of the current generation of young people in demanding political action (Mayes & Hartup, 2022).

Despite this unprecedented public visibility of young people's demands for governmental action on climate change, the relationship between climate change and education remains a "relatively nascent and undertheorized area of inquiry" (Rousell et al., 2017, p. 656). As such, a coherent international agenda for climate change education has yet to be proposed (Stevenson et al., 2017, p. 70). While climate change has for some time been a curricular topic within certain disciplinary areas, typically Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects and Geography, recent reviews of climate change education literature suggest that scientific knowledge is not a strong indicator or driver of change in the attitudes or behaviours of young people (Jorgenson et al., 2019; Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2019). The literature concerning climate change education often depicts young people either in terms of a gap between scientific knowledge and action, or as the "burden bearers" of climate change. Most civics or citizenship education within schools remains devoid of climate change education, or discussion of the role of global citizenship in relation to policy change or collective action (Roemhild & Gaudelli, 2021). As a new generation of young climate activists has emerged in global social movements, it is perhaps unsurprising that their relation to education has often been ambivalent, if not overtly oppositional.

This Special Issue explores the complex relationship between youth climate activism and education as interpenetrating fields of political subjectivity and social (re)production. It comprises papers which take global or transnational perspectives, foreground the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, and draw participants and contributions from countries across North America, Europe, as well as Australia and New Zealand, and Vietnam (one paper draws its participants from 13 countries). Many of the papers collected here explore the responsibility of education to foster generative encounters with young people whose futurity is conditioned by the profound uncertainty of a climate crisis. Others reverse this normative direction of social responsibility and concern to investigate how young people are variously disrupting, disassembling, even hacking educational systems which explicitly perpetuate the *certainly* of ecocidal climate change, as Finn and Phillips (this issue) argue. Working across these varied directions of approach, the collection as a whole recasts youth climate activism as an expression of political agency at levels including the social, aesthetic and cultural, and considers the complex implications of a nascent youth subjectivity that is radically challenging established forms of schooling.

Climate change education and schooling

The varied contributions to this collection further highlight the pervasive disconnect between youth activist subjectivities and a dominant curriculum that emphasises scientific knowledge to the exclusion of the complex social, cultural, aesthetic and political

effects of climate change (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2019). Given the evidence on the ineffectiveness of existing climate change education with respect to youth knowledge, experience, attitude, and behaviour change, this issue makes a necessary and distinctive contribution by exploring the potential role for education in relation to the emergent political subjects of youth climate activism. The contributing authors take seriously young people's activist affectivities, sensibilities, actions, practices, and experiences, staging youth perspectives as the grounds from which the papers in this issue speak rather than privileging existing school structures, subject disciplines or educator subjects.

Such explorations can be understood to involve, as Breeze et al. (2021) have elsewhere argued, a reversal of the dominant logic in education's relation to young people as political subjects whereby schooling addresses a perceived problem of "politically disengaged" youth by educating them in their responsibility to participate in electoral politics. Instead, young people should be presumed to be "critical rather than apathetic" (Cammaerts et al., 2013, p. 661), maintaining political interest despite their subjection to an electoral politics inadequate to their demands and the demands of the present crisis. Neither should participation be presumed to be downstream of schooling (Breeze et al., 2021). Rather climate action is the moment and means of democratic education. We propose this as a basis to explore the changing role of education in relation to action on climate change, and the more imaginative, interdisciplinary and participative approaches that are needed. This means that papers in this issue often (though not exclusively) seek to work from informal educational processes or are exploring cultural and political formations, as a point from which to reflect on their implications for our more dominant formal educational pedagogies, systems, and relationships.

Taking seriously the idea that there should be a relationship between education and action on climate change and associated youth activist subjectivities raises what might be described as a double bind (Kraftl, 2018) of climate change education within formal systems; one that is already apparent in the contradiction between the explicit concern about climate change expressed as part of schools' curricula (at the level of disciplinary knowledge and also activity undertaken within and through the wider school community) and the educational values, both explicit and tacit, of individual conformity and success. This double bind finds reiterative expression in a series of contradictions. Schooling on the one hand teaches about the planetary-scale and, therefore, shared implications of climate change, and on the other fails to support, and may even seek to repress, young people's collective action on climate change. Widespread climate strikes on the part of young people in the UK in 2019 were opposed by both the main school leaders' unions (Barrance, 2020), while the then Secretary of State for Education referred to attendance at the protests as "bunking off" (BBC News, 2019). Children and young people can be discursively positioned as bearing the burden of future action on climate and view the future with deep anxiety, if not hopelessness (Cook, 2016). At the same time the projective futures (Mische, 2009) of schooling are individualised and temporally constrained, confining (or at least seeking to confine) young people's action to making choices in relation to personal aspiration and ambition for successful transitions to adulthood (Threadgold, 2012). Disciplinarily organised knowledge about climate change is presented to children and young people whose situated experience of their environment, including the contemporary effects of climate change, is complex, an entanglement of

experienced human/non-human relations, traditions, interdisciplinary forms of knowing, and structural positioning.

This series of contradictions highlighted above is by no means complete, but illustrates the sense that the double bind of climate change education, its contradictions and tensions, are repeatedly and iteratively expressed. Drawing broadly on Engeström (2001), the notion of the double bind is further useful in holding open the possibility that such contradictions could drive change in the relation between education and climate change; that under specific conditions, climate change education itself may place its systemic basis in formal education in question, and be made the object of deliberate and sustained transformative effort. Such a statement is, on its face, aspirational. However, it is not intended optimistically. The conditions that sustain the contradictions of climate change education are central to the activity of schooling, to its disciplines and to its individualised educational performance. They are bound up in the governmental functioning of schooling. As such, to hold open the possibility of transformative change with respect to climate change *education* is to be in an important sense pessimistic about its possibility within *schooling*. To advocate for climate change education in the sense it is approached in this special issue is to resist the idea that it can be a matter of doing more or doing better within schooling as it so often is. To think about climate change education is to reject efforts to redeem current arrangements and instead to try to “think education differently” (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2021). Collectively, the articles presented here suggest three lines along which such thinking might proceed.

(1) Visualising and Dramatising Climate Change

The dramatisation and visualisation of climate change for and by young people emerges as a key theme that bears significant potential to impact future encounters between climate activism and education. Collin and Catanza’s article focuses on visual approaches to communicating young people’s concerns regarding climate change. The photographic images are analysed as a way of showing the educational and political work that placards do. Exploring, in particular, placards created for the SchoolStrike4Climate protests, the authors position these as relational, socially situated, pedagogical, and artistic creations. Their analysis of these “visual assemblages” have implications for the role of visual communication in education on climate change, and in particular, the emerging role of young people in guiding the aesthetic styling and political messaging about climate change to reach mass audiences.

The contribution from Rousell, Wijesinghe, Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles and Osborn then focuses on the role of digital media in staging new possibilities for climate change education and activism. Drawing on Deleuze’s philosophical method of “dramatization”, they theorise how young people are using digital platforms to perform climate activism and construct new political subjectivities through affective investments of feeling and desire. By attending to the affective politics of youth digital activist practices, the authors establish a posthuman framework for understanding young people’s entanglements with climate change as a “theatre of problems” composed of environmental, technical, subjective, and socio-political dimensions. Using data gleaned from the co-production of a climate change education App with young people, their findings highlight the affective saturation of digital media in the lives of contemporary young people, a

situation which affords new powers of social surveillance and control alongside new potentials for political resistance and speculative experimentation with alternative social worlds.

(2) Climate Justice and non-Western Knowledges

A second theme arising from the collection focuses on the need for culturally responsive frameworks for climate change education that are inclusive of non-Western and Indigenous knowledges. Drawing on decades of experience working with Indigenous communities in early childhood contexts, Ritchie and Phillips propose listening to Maori and Aboriginal Australian worldviews as a way forward for intergenerational action in response to the current urgency of climate justice issues. They argue that Western approaches to education policy and practice continue to perpetuate an “adultism” that is endemic to Eurocentric cultures, essentially adhering to a hierarchical “chain of being” inherited from the Enlightenment era. This chain of being enshrines the white, adult, able-bodied, heterosexual male as the pinnacle of transcendent reason and the de facto model of “human” being, with all “others” (including women, children, Indigenous peoples, animals, and plants) consigned to sub-standard positions. Ritchie and Phillips aim to show how a recuperation of children’s agency in the face of climate change can be drawn from Indigenous wisdom traditions, many of which embed children within complex kinship systems that respect, nurture, and value their contributions to cultural life from a very young age. This leads the authors to identify a series of embodied and emplaced pedagogical approaches drawn from Indigenous wisdoms, including ways of placing trust in children’s judgement, attending to their complex relationality, and cultivating forms of collective identity.

Karsgaard and Davidson’s article also seeks to move beyond Western universalist approaches to develop a culturally responsive framework for climate change education. They frame their approach in terms of critical global citizenship education oriented specifically toward climate justice. Their study, commissioned by the Intergovernmental Panel on climate change and spanning 13 different countries, sought to bring young people from diverse contexts together to share their perspectives and experiences of climate justice. The authors argue that despite young people from many different contexts acknowledging climate change as a structural issue, neo-liberal notions of individual responsibility and action remained a dominant theme across cultures. Karsgaard and Davidson strongly suggest that an alternative pedagogical approach to the Western “save the planet” mentality is necessary and should engage with non-dominant knowledge systems, question naturalised conceptions of growth and development, and consider radical alternatives to neo-liberal approaches to climate action and responsibility which continue to dominate global discourse.

Lastly, through their conceptualisation of “Stand-by Youth”, Arya and Henn articulate the political agency required by young people to navigate inequalities in their lives through environmental activism. With a particular focus on young people from positions of low socio-economic status, they propose that collective agency and individual feelings are integral to make positive change happen. Arya and Henn argue that often Stand-by Youth face greater barriers in relation to capitalism, colonialism, the economic system, western imperialism and corporations to being able to see themselves as orchestrators of their own existence.

(3) Alternative Pedagogical Approaches

A third and final theme arising from the collection reflects a focus on alternative pedagogical approaches that bring climate activism and education together in potentially transformative ways. The article contributed by Finn and Phillips begins by asserting the “certainty of ecocide” that accompanies the global regime of Western capitalism and its associated educational systems. They write against the current saturation of neo-liberal “uncertainty” and “vulnerability” discourses which, as they argue, often serve to personalise responsibility under crisis while enabling governments and corporations to continue programs of calculated and *certain* ecocide as “business as usual”. The authors then turn to recent youth climate activist movements and eco-psychological theories of perception to develop alternative propositions for practical teaching and learning experiences. This leads them to consider the potential of permaculture activism as a mode of ecological recuperation which directly counters ecocide while also providing new opportunities for human flourishing and community building.

Moving in a converse conceptual direction, Kirby and Webb’s article develops an affirmative take on the notion of “uncertainty” and its value (and responsiveness) for educating children and young people about climate change. Their data, gleaned from nine different sites of education in England, is supported by an in-depth exploration of the work of Ranciere in relation to politics and education. Applying “thing-centred” pedagogy to education on climate change, Kirby and Webb offer a valuable alternative perspective for slowing down the urgency and hyperspeed that typifies many contemporary learning environments, and outline several pedagogical practices that pursue climate change education through outdoor and place-based experiences.

Conclusion

This special issue has centred on the response and responsibility of education to the figure of the new young political subject who has imposed its image into the media and political spaces in the global rise of youth activism. Young climate change activists might be regarded as conventional political subjects in the sense that they are opposed by various forms of State power. Their collective action has necessitated a critique of the depoliticised account of climate change that dominates schools’ curricula, which articulates action in terms of individual behaviour change if at all (Jorgenson et al., 2019). Young people taking up an embodied, organised, and vocal presence in public space has seen the deployment of States’ security services and militarised police against them. And the youth activist subject position is increasingly having to grapple with its axes of differentiation along lines of class, race, nationality, and gender as it seeks to maintain a point of collective action inclusive of differing experiences of the effects of climate change. This context creates an urgent motivation for educators to think through the tensions and contradictions that climate change education within formal systems implies, and to acknowledge the potentially transformative implications of surpassing them. To the degree that such a transformation would bring education into new relationships with action on climate change and activist movements, we should acknowledge the likelihood that this will engage educators themselves in oppositional forms of politics requiring their own collective action (Jones, 2020; Lewis, 2020).

And the responsibility of education must extend temporally to the *becoming* of the young subject of climate activism, with further potentially radical implications for change. For as well as these recognisable features of political subjectivity, the emergent young climate change activist is distinctively being produced in contingent relation to the rapidly changing material conditions of what has been termed the Anthropocene. This subject emerges at and beyond the limits of the State's capacity to manage the global effects of human production and consumption, and in the failure of the modern distinction of "human" from "nature" (Braidotti, 2013). It is thus bound up in emergent theorising of the human in its productive socio-material relations with the non-human. This entanglement of the human in its environment, and the decentring of desire and redistribution of priority from the human that it enacts, brings to the fore questions of political responsibility, agency, ethics, affective attachments and the future as resolutely *more-than* human. These questions mark the distinctive affective and aesthetic motivation for collective political expression and action documented across this collection of papers, and chart a new set of priorities and trajectories for educational praxis and thought in the current epoch.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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