



PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: A curriculum for climate justice: A collaborative investigation of the challenges and opportunities for climate change education through a social justice lens

Project type (delete as appropriate) :

A Research Project (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

Principal Investigator : Dr Callum McGregor

Schools/department : Moray House School of Education and Sport

Team members (including Schools and Departments) :

Dr Beth Christie, Moray House School of Education and Sport

For further details, please contact: callum.mcgregor@ed.ac.uk

Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project. Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

Report (maximum 1500 words).

What did you do?

We conducted an exploratory study into the development of climate justice education (CJE) within Scottish schools. Climate justice is a contested concept, but CJE is fundamentally education that explores climate change through a social justice lens. With this in mind, we set out to engage with a diverse range of educators, advocacy workers and young activists in order to understand how they conceptualise climate justice, and to debate and (re)imagine education in this context.

This research is located in the policy context of Learning for Sustainability (LfS) and a broader social context of resurgent civic activism to address climate change, often with young people at the forefront. The Scottish Government has made a commitment to ensuring that LfS is embedded within Scottish education. Nevertheless, despite this progressive policy architecture, young people striking from school are taking passionate and informed action to address a perceived gap between education and action on climate. In fact, young people striking from school are making demands explicitly framed around climate justice.



To-date, we have conducted exploratory qualitative research with a range of stakeholders, but predominantly we have focused on teachers engaged with Learning for Sustainability (LfS), NGOs and activists. We conducted six focus groups and 14 semi-structured interviews with a sample of 38 participants. We conducted three focus groups in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow with primary and secondary teachers from these surrounding regions. We conducted two focus groups with young people taking action on climate and one focus group comprised of Environmental NGO workers. Next, we conducted follow-up semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample drawn from the focus groups, as well as two interviews with relevant stakeholders who had not participated in the focus groups. The data collection had three aims:

- to consider the ways in which different stakeholders conceptualised climate justice;
- to examine how these stakeholders perceived challenges to, and opportunities for, developing climate justice education;
- to develop a better understanding of the relationship between formal curricular spaces and the more informal learning generated through civic activism.

What did you find out?

Our research was exploratory and led us to two main suggestions. First, given the Scottish Government's commitment to LfS and to embedding climate justice across different policy areas, climate justice is conspicuous by its absence in education. Climate justice is complex and requires a strong scientific evidential basis to be 'translated' (Tag and Jaffry, 2018). However, climate justice education also requires the translation of concepts from political philosophy given the normative pluralism of 'justice'. An important dimension of this is that educators develop ideological analysis skills in order to facilitate the development of critical thinking. There is no 'natural' or 'objective' rendering of the social problems and solutions associated with the unfolding climate crisis. Therefore, an important implication for education is that any orientation towards problem *solving* must be accompanied by a process of *problem posing*. Such an approach engages educators and learners in a form of ideological analysis, surfacing the origins and implications of the 'problem' before moving towards a solution.

Second, we would like to create spaces to co-produce CJE by working with teachers, activists and young people striking for climate, by recognising the 'messy' and open-ended, yet powerful, learning generated through engaging in collective action 'beyond the school gates'. Since undertaking the initial research in early 2018, we have witnessed an upsurge in climate justice activism in the form of Extinction Rebellion (XR) and the Strike for Climate movement. Future research will incorporate insights from deliberative workshops on climate justice education that we have already held with XR activists, and we will work with young people who have been striking on Fridays to secure climate justice for their generation.

How did you disseminate your findings?

It is vital that future research seeks to understand teachers' perceptions and understandings of



these movements as they evolve in real time. In spite of teachers' reservations about the epistemic legitimacy of social movements, and their assumptions about the emotional capabilities of children and young people, these insurgent movements are asking 'why study 4 a future we're destroying?' In doing so, children and young people are engaging in processes of transformative learning from the ground up, whether it is recognised as educative or not

We sought to disseminate our findings across a range audiences. First, we co-authored book chapter for the Routledge Handbook of Climate Justice [1]. Following the first year of initial data collection we devised and co-facilitated a knowledge Exchange workshop with the Centre for Climate Justice, Glasgow Caledonian University [2] which was open to the public, NGOs, academics and all with an interest in climate justice education. Then, following further data collection and preliminary analysis we presented our findings at the biannual conference of the International Environmental Communication Association [3], and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference [4], where we won a 'Best Paper' award within our Special Interest Group. We have written a short Blog Post for BERA news [6], highlighting our work and contribution in this area [7]. Finally, we have a paper under review in Environmental Education Research [8] which summarises our full research study and we are developing a further related paper.

What have been the benefits to student learning?

First, and most immediately, our research has benefited student learning directly through our own personal and professional development as this research directly relates to our own teaching areas therefore it impacts and enriches our coursework. Second, and more broadly, there will be a benefit across the Moray House School of Education and Sport (MHSES) because as an institution MHSES provides Initial Teacher Education, and as Learning for Sustainability is a key national priority and is central to the General Teaching Council Scotland's Standards for Provisional Registration, it is important that student teachers completing their studies are being taught in a way that both complies with the latest policy guidance but is research informed, giving them skills appropriate for their future career. Our research enhances teaching in this area and so has both an immediate and a longer term, more strategic direct benefit to students.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

The University of Edinburgh's 2016-2026 Climate Strategy outlines a whole institute approach to climate action, including learning and teaching. However, if climate change-related teaching in Higher Education (HE) is to translate into meaningful action, then two things must be considered: first, teachers and learners need to reframe 'climate action' by moving beyond individual behaviour change models and considering implications for social justice and begin to think in terms of climate justice education. Second, climate justice education in HE must be recognised as existing in an inter-related ecology of educational spaces, including schools, the wider community and social movements. Our research offers a way to begin to address these challenges, as such it could be used to help inform the professional development of staff who have a requirement to



bring sustainability education into their programmes and courses in line with the 2016-2026 Climate Strategy.

References

Tag, N. and Jafry, T. (2018) Engaging young children with climate change and climate justice. *Research for All*, 2(1): 34-42.

Attached material:

[1] Book chapter - Routledge Handbook of Climate Justice:

Mcgregor, C., Scandrett, E., Christie, B. & Crowther, J. (2018) Climate justice education: From social movement learning to schooling. In T Jafry (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Climate Justice*. Routledge.

[2] Knowledge Exchange Event in partnership with Glasgow Centre for Climate Justice:

Friday 30th 2018, Glasgow Caledonian University.

https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/files/77437334/Climate_Justice_Education_Knowledge_Exchange_Event.pdf

[3] Conference on Communication and Environment (COCE) paper:

Christie, B., McGregor, C., & Collacott, M. (2019). Climate Justice Education in the context of Learning for Sustainability: From schooling to social movement learning and back. Paper presented at Waterlines: Confluence and Hope through Environmental Communication, The 15th Biennial Conference on Communication and Environment (COCE) June 17-21, 2019. University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada [Virtual presentation].

[4] British Educational Research Association conference paper:

Christie, B., McGregor, C., & Collacott, M. (2019). Climate Justice Education: Between Social Movement Learning and Schooling. Paper presented at British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference 10th September – 12th September 2019, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.

[5] BERA Hot Topic Session:

Howard, F., Christie, B., McGregor, C. Rousell, D. (2019) Youth Activism and climate Change Education. Hot Topic Session (panel discussion) at British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference 10th September – 12th September 2019, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.

[6] BERA Award announcement:

BERA Annual Conference 2019 SIG Best Paper Award: Alternative Education SIG winners.

<https://www.bera.ac.uk/award/bera-annual-conference-2019-sig-best-paper-award>



[7] BERA blog post:

McGregor, C. & Christie, B. (forthcoming) 'Education for Climate Justice' British Educational Research Association News Blog <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog>

[8] Journal Article - Environmental Education Research:

Christie, B., McGregor, C., & Collacott, M. (in review). Climate Justice Education in the context of Learning for Sustainability: From schooling to social movement learning and back. *Environmental Education Research*.
