

## Engaging children's climate change experiences for action

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At the relaxing of England's lockdown this spring, many people enjoyed the hottest recorded March temperatures for over fifty years (Met Office, 2021<sup>i</sup>). However, with the sun comes a long shadow: alerting us to the cold reality of climate change. This is a concern for children, as well as adults, prompting questions about what they and others might do. For example, recent research with those aged eight to 16-years-old found that 80% say the problem of climate change is 'important' to them; 41% do not trust adults to tackle climate challenges; and a fifth had had a related bad dream (BBC, 2020<sup>ii</sup>), although there is no primary/secondary breakdown of these figures.

We focus on the wellbeing and educational importance of supporting pupils to make sense of their experiences of climate change, in all its uncertainties. Valuing diverse experiences and perspectives, as part



of democratic education (Starkey, 2021<sup>iii</sup>), and enabling pupil agency 'in thinking and acting' (Biesta, 2009, p. 41<sup>iv</sup>), is key to addressing climate change. We draw on our research with schools in the UK, as well as in Global South contexts where pupils already experience severe climate change and biodiversity loss.

Many pupils, teachers and parents

are engaged in transforming their school grounds and local environments, including some creating Forest Food Gardens that mimic the multiple canopied layers of a naturally growing forest. We use the example of engaging with nature's powerful carbon sequester, the 'forest' (used here literally and metaphorically), that we have been

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exploring with teachers, to unearth pupils' experiences and responses to climate change. Forests link to the Geography curriculum, with attention to place, seasonality, climate zones, global interconnections, observational skills and fieldwork. Going outside shifts what is possible: allowing for different articulations of pupils' voices, opportunities to foster connections and the desire to preserve the natural world, as well as supporting emotional wellbeing (Harvey et al., 2020<sup>9</sup>). Teaching outdoors is also likely to remain important given the continuing pandemic.

### Into the forest: learning facts and getting lost

To address climate change, our approach assumes the importance of teachers sharing curriculum knowledge, drawing pupils' attention to what is wondrous and worth preserving in the world (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019). We might think of this as going into a forest with a map: teachers set out expectations about what pupils need to learn, including accepted ideas about what can be done in the here and now. For example, they may provide data for national species surveys.

Extending our metaphor, pupils also need opportunities to get 'lost' in the forest, going beyond designated curriculum knowledge: there is no map, except perhaps a faint sketch, and no one knows quite where their journey will end. Educationally, pupils can be in the moment and drawn to the unexpected, so that they might notice feelings, thoughts, questions and tensions. For example, pupils may enjoy a campfire whilst querying the release of carbon and particulates



contributing to poor air quality and health. They may imagine new ways of doing things that allow us to live more sustainably, in ways previously not considered. This approach embraces difficulty, supporting pupil agency in identifying what might be done. It is inherently hopeful.

Getting lost can be daunting for teachers given the constant push to stay on route to defined curriculum outcomes. Paradoxically, having slow 'forest' time allows pupils and teachers to work out how to respond to the urgency of climate change. There might be concerns about the behaviour of some pupils: teachers can find it helpful to begin with short bursts of outdoor activity, allowing themselves and their pupils to find out how to 'get lost' together. Such getting lost is not about pupils doing what they want: instead, they participate in intellectually and emotionally demanding activities that require engagement with complexity and uncertainty. Opportunities to get lost with a teacher prepares pupils to

cope when there is no such support, including when alone, in some peers or family contexts, as well as in their future adult lives.

Creative outdoor activities (which can be extended into the classroom) give pupils permission to examine diverse feelings, experiences and thoughts, to think differently and to imagine alternative futures. Sharing narratives revealed through artworks, pupils reconfigure the expectations of teachers to notice, listen and respond to how climate change is experienced. In *Overstory*, a tale about the destruction of trees and a desire to protect them, Powers (2018)<sup>10</sup> emphasises the need to go beyond the science: 'The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story' (p.607).

### Engaging with pupils' experiences of climate change

Our framework below outlines four ways that pupils can be supported



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to engage with their environments and the dynamic nature of climate change uncertainty. It hooks onto the statutory primary English curriculum, with its emphasis on the cultural, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual: all are important for engaging with existential issues of climate change.

### Exploring the material world in all its diversity

Nature fosters an appreciation of being in, and attending more closely to, the world, surfacing experiences of climate change and biodiversity adaptation/loss. The pandemic has enabled many to recognise a connection of humans to nature, as illustrated in the picture book, *Unlocked: Stories of Hope* (Tiny Owl Artists in Lockdown, 2021<sup>vii</sup>), which can prompt pupils' experiences of lockdown. Another activity encouraging pupils' attention is asking them to find their own 'sitting spot': they begin by focusing on the air they breathe, becoming aware of what is in and around them (including feelings); then identifying a nearby tree (or plant/object), thinking what they would like to ask of it. This mindful approach promotes feelings of interconnectedness with the natural world (Adams & Beauchamp, 2020<sup>x</sup>). Inviting children to recount their dialogue foregrounds what matters to them.

### Recognising climate change is felt in bodies

Paying attention to the natural world configures emotional connections to the environment that might enhance pupils wanting to protect it. Climbing trees is an exhilarating



experience of emotional shifts: from fears of heights, to the thrill of mastery, and the love of friends who show the way, as well as prompting the imagination as pupils describe themselves as animals as they climb (Duckett and Drummond, 2014<sup>xi</sup>).

A traditional story that presents opportunities for pupils to think about how they support each other with fears and anxieties about changing weather patterns is A.A. Milne and E.H. Shephard's *The House at Pooh Corner*. Faced with an autumnal wind Piglet's ears 'streamed behind him like banners as he fought his way along', and he conveyed his worries, 'supposing a tree fell down, Pooh, when we were underneath it?' 'Supposing it didn't', said Pooh after careful thought. Pooh does not optimistically dismiss Piglet, but proffers a more hopeful way to think (Hayward, 2020<sup>xii</sup>). Pupils can reflect on how to listen to each other and respond without dismissing feelings of uncertainty or ambivalence.

### Being open to the spiritual and ethical

Getting lost extends education beyond what we know, to include a focus on what we can 'be' in the world (Nicholson et al, 2014), resonating with many faith/non-faith beliefs of human connection and responsibility to nature. Climate change throws up inherently uncertain questions about this relationship, that pupils require support to navigate. For example, discussions on the role of the individual, including what personal wishes might be suspended (such as an accumulation of throw-away plastic toys), ensuring the good of all. One way to address such 'big' questions uses a Philosophy 4 Children<sup>xiii</sup> format. This teaches how to formulate questions with no easy answers, in response to a provocation, agreeing questions to deliberate. The process of engaging with difficulty demands that pupils keep focused, avoid straightforward but unsatisfying solutions, and attend to 'being' in the world with others.



Age-appropriate provocations are: Dr Seuss's (1971)<sup>xiv</sup> *The Lorax* for Key Stage Two; and Michael Foreman's (1993)<sup>xv</sup> *Dinosaurs and all that rubbish* for Key Stage One. Both allow pupils to examine feelings about deforestation and other harmful environmental practices, and stimulate discussions on action for change.

## Examining different knowledge

Teachers play an important role in supporting pupils to navigate multiple sources of information (including media, family and own experience), that might conflict with school messages. Foregrounding (not ignoring) such tensions offers possibilities for dialogue to agree joint action: this involves respectful listening, proffering opinions, verifying information, and reaching a resolution. The teacher is integral to keeping everyone focused on verifying what can be known and done.

There are multiple sources of knowledge and perspectives to consider when, for example, planning to plant trees in school grounds. First, are the scientific considerations of soil, wind and

light conditions. Second, is how to accommodate interests and preferences of children, teachers, caretaker, neighbours, etc., with a diversity of views. Pupils are supported to consider factors with others (such as budget; shading; dropping leaves; aesthetics; wildlife habitats). A range of views and experiences is important for ensuring community resilience, as are biodiverse habitats for ensuring plant resilience, for example: tree 'communities' have an underground mycelium fungal network that feeds neighbours and warns of pests.

## Conclusion

Supporting pupils to grapple with climate change complexity is important for wellbeing and education. Getting lost, in both real and metaphorical forests, supports children to identify and articulate how they experience aspects of climate change. This is important because fearful pessimism and naïve optimism can both be immobilising and deny pupil agency. Hopefulness is required to foster love for the world as it is now, and the opportunity for pupils to make meaning of their experiences, in order to take action to transform our world.

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## Pen Portrait

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Rebecca Webb and Perpetua Kirby have co-founded TRANSFORM-IN EDUCATION ([www.transformineducation.org](http://www.transformineducation.org)). Their current climate change research with children, teachers and schools sits under this initiative.

## Feedback

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