

The activist curriculum & global climate change education Interruption, intervention or integration?

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The activist curriculum & global climate change education

Interruption, intervention or integration?



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In an era of sweeping changes, accelerated by a pandemic that is driving nations to make rapid responses in their systems of schooling, the question arises: how is the fundamental purpose of education being altered? The realities of global effects on work, travel and access to learning have brought home a key message – that national dilemmas cross boundaries and are shared. One such concern is for the climate, the future of the planet and our place on it. How can the curriculum be the means of reshaping and giving voice to this?

Activist movements have garnered significant global attention on a range of societal issues, involving collectives of citizens (Niblett, 2017). However, the role schools should take on climate education is often contested by curriculum stakeholders, who tend to disagree not just on learning about the climate, but also about the individual and collective response that might be possible. Here, the curriculum delivered in schools serves to either maintain or interrupt the status quo, and any interruption begs the question of whether to change the curriculum, or to see curriculum as change itself. The latter position argues for a curriculum that is the source of, and vehicle for, change through transformative activist curricular movements (Gorlewski & Nuñez, 2020). Below I introduce two cases that illustrate this division.

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The first case, the Climate Action Project (CAP) (TAG, n.d.-a), exemplifies a curriculum approach to teaching climate change in schools that is taken by organisations such as Take Action Global (TAG, n.d.-b). The aim is to teach environmental awareness and provide resources and initiatives for schools to get involved. CAP, founded by Koen Timmers in 2017, held a six-week event in October 2020 focused on climate change, involving 2.6 million young people across 140 countries. Children worked collaboratively on solutions and meaningful action to stimulate positive thinking about change. Working with ministries of education in 15 countries, the project created a curriculum for climate change, co-authored with the World Wildlife Fund International. Teachers became part of a networked community of practice, guided by facilitators. The project made an impact in many countries, culminating in a Climate Action Day webinar hosted by Sir David Attenborough, involving scientists from across the world. While this approach might be characterised as an *intervention*, in that the effect on the curriculum may not be permanent, it raised awareness of the need for curriculum action.

The second case is one of curriculum *integration*, in which schools make longer lasting and further reaching changes to what is taught. XP in Doncaster, UK, is a small multi-academy trust that follows a curriculum based on cross-curricular, project-based learning, taught via ‘expeditions’ that last from six to 12 weeks. Recently, the schools decided that climate change is an existential threat and an imperative part of the curriculum. They identified ‘climate emergency’ as



Figure 1: XP pupils work on their turbines

one of three key ‘strands’, and teachers are designing expeditions that address this theme in all years of the secondary schools. The focus is on the local community as the immediate context, leading to global issues related to learning.

One expedition in year 8, ‘RE:VOLT’, asks the guiding question, ‘Could harnessing the power of the wind uplift developing countries?’. Taught through case studies and fieldwork, the final product is the design and testing of wind turbine blades (figure 1). They also study an inspirational extract from *The boy who harnessed the wind* by William Kamkwamba, in which he describes how his curiosity about dynamos led to him making his own wind turbine for his home in Malawi. Students create a final product that is authentic and purposeful, while contributing to making the world a more equitable, just and fair place.

However, the idea of climate emergency as an issue that schools and the curriculum need to respond to is challenged by a view that it is a distant or future problem rather than a local, immediate one. This is further complicated by climate change being seen as a ‘socioscientific issue’, requiring specialised knowledge and a critical interpretation of the issues (Hodson, 2020). Here, the preparation of students to learn through and from an integrated, or embedded, environmental curriculum, invokes the idea of citizens informed by a deep and broad curriculum. It raises the question of whether education is preparation for action, not from a common-sense understanding of everyday life, but from a deep political understanding of the world, underpinned by civic knowledge that provides the intellectual basis for engaging in public discussion and planning for citizen action (Jerome, 2018).

Returning to the purpose of education, the ability to deal with cultural objects and to self- and co-determine one’s place in the world is closely related to an active curriculum. The European notion of *bildung* arises, as the formation of the educated person in which the learner asks what a prospective object of learning can and should signify to them, and how they can experience this significance (Hudson, 2007). While the

case remains to be made for schools being responsible for developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions for active citizenship, it is clear that teachers who are active in curriculum and policy creation are empowered both as teachers and activists. This posits the school as both democratic and open, with boundaries that are fluid and permeable to the concerns of society (Pountney & McPhail, 2019). The open flow of ideas is important in order that people can be as informed as possible, have faith in their individual and collective capacity to solve problems, and, ultimately, have concern for the welfare of others and the common good. This rests on the principle that democracy is not so much an ‘ideal’ to be pursued, as an ‘idealised’ set of values that we must live and be guided by. Moreover, to achieve this, teachers need to nurture democratic and caring classroom communities, because ‘to be a teacher is to be actively engaged in a social movement that is shaping the future of our society and our world’ (Gorlewski & Nuñez, 2020, p. 14).

Disclaimer: Richard Pountney is Chair of Trustees of the XP Schools Trust and leads the Curriculum Committee as a director.

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