



**scottish universities
insight institute**

mobilising knowledge for a better Scotland

SUII Knowledge Exchange Programmes

Education for Climate Justice

Final Report Form

November 2021

Main Objective and Context:

Young activists leading the Scottish Climate Strikes demand a) climate justice and b) the prioritisation of climate crisis in education. Taking these demands seriously, the Education for Climate Justice Programme Team brought together diverse stakeholders over a series of events in order to examine what it means to truly place social justice at the heart of efforts to address the climate crisis in education. By diverse stakeholders, we mean young climate activists, young people of colour (who were not all climate activists *per se*, but rather were passionate about the relationship between climate (in)action and social justice), community-based adult learners, teachers, youth workers, academics, trade unionists and other key players such as Learning for Sustainability Scotland. Our workshops focused on three initial themes: centring anti-racist and decolonial perspectives in climate education and action; education for a just transition; centring the emotions in education for climate justice.

The overall aim of our series was to host a series of participatory online events in order to build relationships, clarify and interrogate our own thinking and, ultimately, influence policy and practice ‘from the ground up’. Our aims to generate dialogue and critical understanding on issues around education for climate justice firmly align with SDG 13 (climate action) and resonate across the SGD spectrum, in particular SDG 4 (quality education on these issues which meets the needs of young learners and enables educators to challenge colonialist and capitalist engrained injustices), SDG 5 (gender equality, by highlighting how the climate crisis affects people across the world differently depending on their intersectional positions), SDGs 11 and 12 (through their focus on sustainable cities and consumption) and others.

We worked towards achieving our aims by creating a space that prioritises the knowledge and experiences of frontline communities and young activists in order to ‘educate the educators’ and influence key powerholders, whilst hearing from leading domestic and international activists and academics. This programme has acted as a catalyst for longer-term conversations about the need for, and scope of, education for climate justice and it has also led to international dialogues and lasting collaborative relationships on these themes. In the short-term, we have co-produced creative film outputs with young people and as well as a number of other video resources now available through our collective’s YouTube channel.

[Click here to view and use our resources on the ‘Education for Climate Justice YouTube channel’](#)

Examples of these resources include community conversations, youth panels, keynote activist and academic addresses, inter-generational panels and a series of commissioned storytelling series on Education for Climate Justice, by artist Mara Menzies, also known as [Mara the Storyteller](#).

[Click here to view and use Mara the Storyteller’s series of stories on climate injustice](#)

In all of this, one key objective of our series was to conceptualise education broadly, as lifelong, life wide and rooted in the interests and struggles of communities. Conceptualising education in

this way required us to recognise activism itself as a process of education and knowledge production. For this reason, we centred the international and diverse voices of social, environmental and climate justice activists as keynotes, rather than beginning with academics. Yvette Williams MBE from the Justice4Grenfell Campaign, Ikal Ang'elei from the Friends of Lake Turkana, and Jayden Foytlin, a youth climate activist from Louisiana all highlighted how climate injustice, as well as racial, gender and other injustices are rooted in histories of oppression. Moreover, in conceptualising education beyond schooling we prioritised and centred community-based adult education and youth work throughout the series. SCOREScotland were key partners in this regard, as we centred workshops around community conversations with both adult learners and young people. This process generated follow-on work within YouthLink Scotland, led by SCOREScotland involving (1) a workshop on anti-racist education for climate justice held at the annual YouthLink conference; (2) an article on education for climate justice, co-authored with young participant Mahmoud Makkawi of SCOREScotland and the Education for Climate Justice Programme Team, which was published in the [Autumn issue of YouthLink's magazine, The Link](#). Building on this, Mahmoud Makkawi has also recently been asked to speak at an international student symposium 'No One Is Listening – A Frank Conversation About Diversity and Equity in the Climate Crisis' organised by Dream in Green, Miami (in collaboration with the Third Generation Project). Finally, the Third Generation Project, whose prime focus is climate justice education, continues to use the workshop resources in their wider programming.

Insights from the programme *(including lessons around the theme of the Sustainable Development Goals)*

Social justice as a starting point for education on the climate emergency

One of the primary insights to emerge from our programme of events is the importance of making space in education (SDG 4) to unpack and explore issues of social justice as they relate to both the causes of, and solutions to, the climate emergency. In the context of tens of thousands of children, young people and adults marching in Glasgow at COP26 for 'climate justice', these workshops emphasised that there is an urgent educational imperative to explore a meaning, rather than merely espousing a cause. Our workshops highlighted the contested, multi-dimensional and intersectional nature of climate injustice and underscored our belief that there is a need for climate justice (understood as the intersection of social injustice and climate crisis) to be explored through critical educational processes rather than educators, young people or activists assuming that we are all talking about the same thing.

The debates, dialogues, presentations and stories told in our workshops posed a fundamental challenge to the notion that we must move 'beyond politics' to tackle the climate emergency. On the contrary, in climate education (as in climate action) questions about whose voices are heard, whose knowledge counts, whose 'crisis' or 'emergency' counts and who stands to win and lose

in dominant narratives of ‘climate action’, are deeply political and get to the heart of the social and political and economic impediments to effective climate action. Why would we expect to generate political momentum for mass climate action when oppressed, marginalised and exploited communities feel excluded from such action or, even worse, recognise the disproportionately negative impact that climate action would have on their own material living conditions? Moreover, how can education equip people within the knowledge and capacities to act collectively as citizens if the reductive framing of ‘climate emergency’—equating human wellbeing with reducing carbon emissions—has no corresponding analysis of the political-economic and social root causes of the problems?

Given the timing of this report, it seems appropriate and timely to contextualise such insights in the context of the 26th Conference of Parties (COP), which is happening at the time of writing. In many respects, the policy context in Scotland is progressive. As a devolved administration, the Scottish Government has always been outwardly proud of the fact that it has the most stringent statutory targets in the world. The Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 was amended by the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019, which is aiming for net zero by 2045 with interim targets of 70% by 2030 and 90% by 2040. In addition to this, the 2019 act established an independent Citizens Assembly tasked with addressing how Scotland should tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way. The Scottish Government also established an independent Just Transition commission whose vision is “for a transition that is not solely about mitigating injustices that may arise because of climate change” but that seeks “to capture opportunities to address existing inequalities, making urgent climate action a driver of positive change that improves wellbeing”. On the face of it then, the Scottish Government has readily adopted a discourse of climate justice in their policy architecture.

Yet the question we urgently pose is “where does education policy sit in all of this?” Scottish education policy has embedded a commitment to Learning for Sustainability (LfS), stating that all learners have an entitlement to LfS and that all teachers and education professionals must address LfS in their practice. It might seem obvious but our workshops highlighted that Learning for Sustainability and Education for Climate Justice are not necessarily the same thing. Within this context, a number of insights emerged from our workshops, initially framed around the three themes of centring anti-racist and decolonial perspectives in climate education; education for a just transition (what it means and why it is important) and centring the emotions in education for climate justice. In what follows, we share critical reflections on three insightful themes that cut across all these workshops. The first reflection is the perceived disconnect that young people highlighted between an education system aspiring to centre learning for sustainability and the sense that there is little space, if any, to discuss capitalism and structural racism as root causes of climate crisis and injustice. Indeed, in some educational contexts, there is open hostility toward such “extremist” agendas. The second cross-cutting insight that we would like to highlight is a reflection on structural constraints on teacher agency and the need to broaden our conception of education for climate justice as an intergenerational practice rooted in

communities and civic action. In other words, education is not a formal process that happens before people act as citizens: rather, meaningful education and collective learning emerges through and alongside the action that we take. The last cross-cutting insight we would like to share concerns the importance of emotions as a hinge between education and action.

Profane knowledge: racial capitalism and climate emergency

Many young participants highlighted the tension between an education system aspiring to centre Learning for Sustainability and the perception that it remains profane to critique capitalism, colonialism and structural racism in formal educational spaces, despite their conviction that education must address these as root causes of climate injustice. Take for example, a youth-led community conversation from the second workshop that was framed around education for a Just Transition. The conversation was comprised of five young people of colour from youth work organisations in Edinburgh and Glasgow and one young white activist from Teach the Future Scotland, which is a youth activist group campaigning for educational change to address the climate emergency.

The six young people reflected on how they aren't really educated about the social and political dimensions of climate change – it's more about the physical sciences where it does exist. They also discussed how this lack of focus on systemic political-economic and social change in education only reinforced feelings of powerlessness and anxiety because of the disjuncture between the evident scale of the problem and the kinds of individualised and reformist solutions taught in education and promulgated in the media at-large. Young people in this conversation discussed schooling as an instrument of socialisation, addressing the ways in which, in their experience, schooling was about reproducing a capitalist workforce rather than challenging capitalism. Young people also talked of the colonial nostalgia for 'empire' in the school system, eloquently discussed the need to decolonise the curriculum and exclaimed that they had never experienced any critical discussions of capitalism in school. They also recognised how mis-education feeds into climate action and discussed the lack of diversity in the youth-led climate movement. Rather than learning about these issues in school, young people learned through their own action, through one another and educated themselves autodidactically about the connections between unsustainability, capitalism and colonialism through social media. Just to give a concrete example, one young person said "we were briefly taught about capitalism in Modern Studies when I was in secondary school but it was more like capitalism is the way forward and communist countries ... are so backwards ... Now I've self-taught myself a lot from social media and hearing other people's experiences and perspectives. It's crazy that I've learnt all of that from social media, that capitalism is actually destroying people's lives, it's destroying the planet, maybe its not the way forward".

This conversation was followed by an input from activist, youth worker and doctoral student Dena Arya, who is conducting research into young peoples' participation in environmental

activism. Dena's research is with young people who are not involved in activism as well as those who are, to find out more about how they see the solutions to the environmental crisis and what kinds of political responses they have to environmental concern. She shared her findings that on the whole young people tended to favour more radical responses to the environmental crisis pointing to capitalism being one of the number one drivers and reforms not offering the right solutions.

An interesting point of contrast for participants was the difference between the education system in Scotland and in England. Researcher Dena Arya highlighted the Department for Education's statutory guidance for schools and teachers in 2020, which restricts students' access to anti-capitalist material:

Schools should not under any circumstances use resources produced by organisations that take extreme political stances on matters. This is the case even if the material itself is not extreme, as the use of it could imply endorsement or support of the organisation. Examples of extreme political stances include, but are not limited to: a publicly stated desire to abolish or overthrow democracy, capitalism, or to end free and fair elections. (Department for Education, 2020).

What's interesting for us is that education is a devolved power in Scotland, so this directive doesn't apply. Despite this lack of state coercion in Scotland, this left participants questioning what the difference is, in practice? Are teachers and educators able and willing to make space for these sorts of conversations? About 50 years ago now, the infamous Club of Rome's 'Limits to Growth' report reasoned that perpetual economic growth based on increasing use and depletion of finite natural resources would lead to ecological and economic disaster. Ecological economics is awash with ideas around steady-state economics, zero growth economies and de-growth. While 'systems thinking' and ecological thinking is commonplace in Learning for Sustainability, our contention is that this ought to extend into mainstream economic education and literacy. The burden of responsibility surely lies with economists to explain and empirically justify how endless compound growth could ever be sustainable and how growth can be decoupled from calamitous overuse of natural resources, including carbon sinks. Yet, we are somehow expected to engage in this magical thinking and our education, or mis-education is complicit in this. We deserve better and young people deserve better.

Re-thinking education and addressing teacher agency

Throughout the workshops, young people, young activists and community participants were positioned as educators and their lived experiences of injustice and activism were recognised as sources of knowledge and starting points for educational engagement. Moreover, throughout the workshops, the role of youth work in facilitating young people's informal learning about the relationship between climate change and social justice was paramount, as was the importance

of highlighting the need to collaborate with youth activists. As youth climate activist, Jayden Foytlin put it:

“I think a key message would be to actually listen to the youth and actually hear what we have to say... actually talk to us about what we have experienced and what we are going through in our communities and ... really show us that you care about youth.”

Education for climate justice is this lifelong and lifewide, rooted in communities and their diverse knowledges. Moving beyond schooling, we think that education for climate justice ought to be based on three radical principles drawn from those of youth work: voluntary engagement; a curriculum based on lived experiences; and an intergenerational dialogue where young people act as ‘educators’ themselves. This however did raise questions and discussions about teacher agency in the midst of young peoples’ demands for educational reform. Teachers and educators need the institutional time, space and support to work in these ways and to think critically about their own values, their own feelings and their own ideological positions on climate justice and climate action, more broadly. The challenge we pose isn’t merely to teachers as individuals but to the education system to not just create and support policy development but to look at enactment – to truly give time and space to those teachers and educators who are being asked to enact policy. Whilst there is an urgency to teach – there is a need to slow down, analyse, process and also to engage with the realities of how young people continue to gain confidence in developing their own autonomous learning about climate justice through social action.

Centering the emotions and moving beyond ‘climate anxiety’

A core element pervading discussions at all events, and particularly highlighted at the final event, was the centrality of emotions in debates around climate justice education. Emotions can be conceptualised in different ways – as internal, psychological states of the individual, or as social and cultural practices which come to define identities, groups and collectives. The latter is helpful for considering how discourses around climate justice are invested with and reproduce particular emotions, and how these are experienced by individuals and collectives. In the field of climate justice, emotions have received increasing attention in recent years. Young people at our events highlighted a range of common emotions – anger, frustration, anxiety, hope, empowerment, feeling ignored, annoyed, or useless. Our presentations and discussions highlighted that emotions are shaped by and expressive of colonial, capitalist and intergenerational injustices – they are distributed unequally. Climate anxiety, which is often positioned as the main emotional frame around the climate crisis, needs to be critically evaluated due to its tendency to individualise, pathologise and sometimes also serve as a discourse to mask issues such as white fragility and the unequal distribution of ontological and existential insecurities. Our discussions, sparked by Karen Nairn’s keynote on ‘hoping well’, highlighted the ambivalence of emotions – activists and educators can have hope whilst accepting that the climate crisis is happening. A key learning from these discussions is that educators need to make explicit spaces for holding these

ambivalent emotions – hope and despair, optimism and pessimism – and to identify strategies to use emotions productively: to reflect critically on privilege and disadvantage in terms of who claims certain emotions and what they ‘do’ with them (e.g., weaponize them against others, or use them to dismantle privilege and inequalities, and fuel activism).

Main Outcomes and Impact

Educational resources

One of the primary outcomes and impacts from this project is the numerous high quality educational resources that we have co-produced through, and as a result of, the workshops. A huge benefit of hosting online workshops was that it broadened the scope of participation and also allowed us to easily record many of the sessions to share and use as resources. Across all three workshops, we produced the following resources, which are already being used by teachers, youth workers and others working in education:

- Community and youth-led conversations about education for climate justice;
- International keynote addresses from climate and environmental justice activists, as well as academics;
- Intergenerational discussion panels with young people, teachers, youth and community workers, activists and politicians;
- A series of commissioned stories on climate justice by [Mara the Storyteller](#);

You can find all of our resources here: <https://linktr.ee/educationforclimatejustice>

In addition to this, a professional filmmaker is currently working with young participants from Edinburgh and Glasgow to develop a high-quality educational resource on education for climate justice, co-produced by the young participants. This resource will be of interest to teachers, youth and community workers, educators working in further and higher education and, of course, other young people. It must be noted that whilst we originally intended to co-produce a policy briefing, the organising team (including the young people) decided that dedicating our time and resources to producing the aforementioned film would generate a more dynamic and engaging resource for influencing practice.

We have also co-authored an article with young participant Mahmoud Makkawi of SCOREscotland and the Education for Climate Justice Programme Team, which was published in the [Autumn issue of YouthLink’s magazine, *The Link*](#).

Further collaboration, networking and knowledge exchange.

Another key outcome of this project is that it has cemented a lasting network, comprised of organisers and participants, who are interested and committed to education for climate justice. As a legacy of the project, the organising team has formed a collective and we intend to continue to work together to develop further research, knowledge exchange and educational activities.

Already, SCOREScotland has led a workshop on Education for Climate Justice, at YouthLink Scotland's [annual conference in 2021](#).

Significantly, this collaboration directly informed the production of a live Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on Learning for Sustainability, held during COP26. The MOOC, led by organising team member Dr Beth Christie, drew in contributions from several people from the organising team, including Zarina Ahmad ("Climate Sisters") and Jennifer Ba, of SCOREScotland. The MOOC engaged 1505 learners from 109 countries.

Beyond this, the events have fostered international networking and knowledge exchange such as an invited presentation about the project to an Australian academic/activist climate justice network called "Earth Unbound", whose work shares many resonances with our own, as well as the aforementioned event involving one of the young climate activists and his contribution to the international Dream in Green event. This has led to international dialogue and potential further collaboration. Below is a summary of further education and knowledge exchange work that has been fostered through this project:

- 13.9.21 Two of the programme team (Zarina Ahmad and Ali Watson) took part in a conversation facilitated by the National Library of Scotland about knowledge, power and climate justice (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=283xWbl1Ruk>).
- 28.10.21 Invited talk to Australian "Earth Unbound" network (Beth Christie, Marlies Kustatscher, Callum McGregor)
- 05.10.21 Workshop on Education for Climate Justice in Scotland (SCOREScotland, Third Generation Project)
- 16-18.11.21 Global RCE conference (Beth Christie)
- 19.11.21 Speaker from SCOREScotland at the Dream in Green, Miami event – 'No One Is Listening – A Frank Conversation About Diversity and Equity in the Climate Crisis' – (co-organised by the University of St Andrews (Third Generation Project).

Attendance and participation

A key success and outcome from the events was the consistent attendance and engagement from both speakers and participants. From the outset we were keen to ensure that the events were

about creating spaces for knowledge and experiences to be shared, explored and that the series led to knowledge creation and production through engagement and discussion. Each event was held on a Saturday 10:00 to 16:00 and the audience stayed for the duration. We took this commitment to not only attend but to actively engage as a sign of the need for dialogical spaces such as this to prioritise and examine education for climate justice.

All three events were very well attended with well in excess of 150 registrations per event and between approximately 50-80 attendees across all sessions. The events were attended by teachers, activists, youth and community workers (both public and thirds sector), academics, policy makers and even the Scottish Fire Service!

Key recommendations for policy and practice

- Education on the climate emergency must centre social justice. Social justice is a complex, contested and far-reaching concept that is central to learners' understanding of the social, cultural and economic causes of, and solutions to, the climate emergency. It must be the starting point for educational engagement rather than an assumed value.
- Education for climate justice means making space to decolonise learning for sustainability and education on the climate emergency. It also means making space for young people to discuss the obvious contradictions they see between sustainability, climate action and growth economics. These are difficult conversations but educators ought to understand that young people seek out their own knowledge and engage in their own individual and collective learning regardless of what is covered by the official curriculum
- Education for climate justice must engage the emotions and address learners' ambivalent emotional responses. This means understanding emotions as a hinge between knowledge and action and understanding that emotions are shaped by and expressive of colonial, capitalist and intergenerational injustices. Thus, education for climate justice engages the emotions in a broad sense that goes beyond the discourse of "climate anxiety".

Planned follow-up activities

Our collective will be working together to further develop our research and knowledge exchange activities potentially collaborating with international partners and networks that these events helped to establish. For example, we are in dialogue with the Australian Earth Unbound collective. Furthermore, and as mentioned above, we are in the process of co-producing a film with young participants from the project and this will be widely used as an educational resource disseminated through our respective professional networks, for example Learning for Sustainability Scotland, YouthLink Scotland, SCOTDEC and more.