

Insights: Putting Climate Education at the Heart of How We Build Student Leadership

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Climate change and environmental risks are the lived reality of today's students, especially of those in disadvantaged communities who disproportionately suffer the impacts. While these problems are caused by human activities, they can also be solved by humans, and there is no path to a better future without tackling climate change. It's therefore crucial that we support students' agency and leadership so that they can pioneer the necessary solutions to the climate crisis through their values, creativity, and collaboration — now and throughout their lives — and climate education needs to be at the heart of that endeavor.

Yet, out of 100 countries surveyed by UNESCO in 2021, only 53 national curricula make reference to climate change or environmental sustainability¹ — and those that do are predominantly from regions most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (as opposed to those largely responsible for the emissions driving climate change). In most cases, the depth of including climate change or environmental sustainability in the curricula is minimal and actual implementation in schools and classrooms is lagging.

Through our engagement with staff, teachers, alumni, and students across the network, we see the following patterns emerging in their practice and in what they believe will be necessary to foster the climate leadership we need:

1. Our students want solidarity, knowledge, space and agency to take on the climate crisis they have inherited — but our education systems are failing to meet these needs.

- Students want to build their understanding of climate change, to have safe spaces for their views on it to be heard, and to be encouraged towards taking concrete action with their peers and teachers.
- Experience from various network partners that engage students in leadership projects shows that when students (and their teachers) are free to choose a project based on their interests and passion, they very often opt for climate and environmental projects that address local problems.
- This is also reflected in a global survey, where children and youth stated climate change as their top concern,² and in the fact that youth around the world are already organizing in climate action groups. However, they mostly do so despite, rather than because of what's happening in schools.
- Education systems are failing students when they don't provide a space for them to develop the mindsets, knowledge, and skills they will need to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis.

¹ UNESCO (2021), [Getting every school climate-ready](#)

² Amnesty International (2019), [Climate change ranks highest as vital issue of our time – Generation Z survey](#)

2. Climate education cannot simply be an academic pursuit. It must be about shifting mindsets and understanding of our interconnectedness with the planet, and through building agency and problem-solving skills within the context of students' lives and communities.

- Tackling the climate crisis is about more than awareness and small adjustments to the status quo. It's about a mindset shift towards environmental sustainability and a realignment of priorities that cuts across all actions. This must involve learning from traditional and indigenous practices around the interconnectedness of people and nature, and ways of living sustainably.
- Examples from network teachers particularly show the power of fostering such deep learning through the approaches to teaching and learning we are exploring as the network works together to build the Teaching as Collective Leadership framework. In these examples, students and teachers work together to develop climate/environmental solutions in their local context, thereby nurturing the agency, awareness, and problem-solving skills that students need to take on the climate crisis.
- Examples also show the power of children being outside and experiencing nature for deep learning.

3. Putting climate at the heart of our education systems will require us to integrate it into all subjects across the curriculum and to rethink educational objectives.

- Climate education should not be a new, standalone subject on the school timetable. It should be holistically integrated into all subjects in the curriculum in ways that reflect students' lived realities and position the climate and environmental crisis as the key challenge for this generation to take on.
- One example is the Funghi Thinking project in Spain, where students learn about problem-solving for a circular economy across seven subjects, including Math, Technology, Biology and Linguistics, to develop a holistic approach and toolkit/skill set for local problem-solving on climate change.
- Supporting students to develop agency to address climate change through cross-disciplinary, problem-based projects has also been shown to foster their 21st century skills and raise their overall engagement and aspiration in school. This illustrates how we should not think of climate education as competing with other educational objectives (like numeracy, literacy, and 21st century skills), but rather as supporting or reinforcing them.
- Creating space for such projects requires us in many cases to rethink the objectives and expected outcomes of education. For example, the Cajamarca region in Peru redefined the objective of education as the "pursuit of human and environmental health" for today's and following generations.

4. We need to enable teachers to overcome the barriers that are preventing them from engaging in climate education — by giving them the permission and by building their capacity to do so.

- Teachers across the Teach For All network often show an emotional response to climate education, characterized by a great concern and desire to do something, mixed with feelings of

imperfection (too little knowledge to confidently speak/teach about it) – “do I have the capacity?” – and hypocrisy (worries that they can’t teach climate education if they themselves still live in such unsustainable ways) – “do I have the permission?” This results in the majority of teachers feeling daunted and overwhelmed by the prospect of teaching about climate change.

- This is mirrored in a 2021 UNESCO global survey of 58,000 teachers, where 95% of teachers indicated it is important or very important to teach about climate change, but less than 40% were confident in teaching it and only one in five felt clear on explaining how to take action to address climate change.³
- Enabling teachers to integrate climate education into their classrooms will require intentional professional development to this end. Within the Teach For All network, several partners are currently planning modules for their training institutes to enable their teachers to feel confident incorporating a climate change and environmental lens into their teaching from the beginning. It also requires providing teachers with easy-access, free, and localizable climate education resources.
- Foremost, it requires teachers who have a strong mindset towards environmental sustainability and who are leaders in pioneering education for climate action by not waiting for permission and guidance, taking initiative rooted in a strong sense of possibility, and by being role models and inspiring others.

Implications for our Climate Education and Leadership work:

- We are building a global Climate Education Community of network alumni, teachers, staff and student leaders, where we facilitate connecting, learning, and acting together on climate education.
- We are planning to build a group of climate education champions through a specialized fellowship.
- We support network partners to design and deliver teacher training on climate change, including fostering a mindset of interconnectedness with nature and of the teacher as a learner and co-creator with students (as reflected in the Teaching as Collective Leadership framework).
- We are compiling a one-stop shop for teachers of freely available, easy-access, high-quality climate education resources, as well as guidance for customizing resources to the learners’ local context.
- We capture and surface inspiring stories of climate education leadership from our network.
- We are raising awareness across the global network of how climate education is integral to supporting all children to build a better future and how it can be integrated with our core work.
- We raise awareness and advocate for climate education through national and global conversations.

³ UNESCO (2021), [Teachers have their say: Motivation, skills and opportunities to teach education for sustainable development and global citizenship](#)