

Inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change

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Background to this submission by the Climate Change Education Network

The Climate Change Education Network (CCEN) is a collective of 17 colleagues from across Victorian universities and beyond - focussed on ***climate change education***. We met out of need - each impacted by the **Black Summer Fires 2019/2020** which were then quickly ghosted by the **global pandemic** leaving us all looking for collegiality and ways of engaging in change making through education. We use research-informed practices to work in collaboration with teachers and communities to deepen climate change education opportunities for all.

This includes:

- Conference workshops - to support teachers and broader communities (Public Pedagogy Institute 2020, Drama Victoria 2020, Science Teacher Association of Victoria (STAV) 2020/2021, Proposed for World Environmental Education Congress 2022)
- Teacher Workshops (Gippsland Teachers 2020, Sustainability Victoria – Resource Smart Schools facilitators 2021, Victorian Certificate of Education – Environmental Science teachers 2021).
- Writing for practitioner focussed journals (Environment Education Victoria – Eingana Newsletter – 2020 Issue 1, 2, 2021 Issue 1)
- Writing academically to contribute to the fields across academia (Special Issue proposal accepted for the Journal of Education for Teaching – Learning from COVID-19: continuity or change in teacher education?)
- Pre-service teacher program (starting in 2022) *Creating Climate Change* - for graduating teachers leading conversations for school/community practice

We collaborate with other networks and organisations (eg: Regional Centre for Excellence Gippsland, Drama Victoria, STAV, Sustainability Victoria, Public Pedagogies Institute). We meet regularly to complete tasks and focus our attention on our own wellbeing in this practice/scholarship. We also host a website that shares information and resources: <http://www.climatechangeeducation.net.au/>

Three colleagues from CCEN have volunteered to collate this submission. We are an interdisciplinary team with many years of experience in school and teacher education. We present contributions for two terms of reference (C and D).

What is climate change education?

This question might seem surprising, and clarity is imperative to move forward confidently and successfully. The answer is not education about climate science. Climate change education is not sustainability education. It is not about civics and citizenship. It is not about responsible research and innovation. It is ***all*** of these things aligned with students' voice and agency challenging our current philosophies of economics, governance, and society. Taking this reflexive step requires boldness and resourcing, trust in our young people, and in our ability to listen and act accordingly. We hope that, in what follows, we provide thought-provoking comments. We wish you all the best in devising productive ways forward for supporting WA schools to respond to climate change.

Issues of climate change and climate action cut across multiple learning areas. While primary school teachers may consider themselves generalists, secondary teachers are often experts in their chosen method area and either do not or are not frequently given an opportunity to teach across the learning areas. Climate change education needs to be informed by civics and humanities (Monroe et al. 2019), Indigenous knowledges (Thornton, Graham, and Burgh 2019), philosophy and the arts (Cole and Malone 2019), fostering forms of critical climate literacy that actively encourage young

people's 'voices' and agency, and that situate young people as part of multi-species ecologies (Hadfield-Hill and Zara 2020). The teaching of climate change needs to be interdisciplinary, drawing on the content and skills from multiple learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curricular priorities. Interdisciplinary, inquiry-based learning about climate change must be integrated, creative, critical and responsive to students' emotions and experiences (Jones and Davison 2020; Stevenson, Nicholls, and Whitehouse 2017; Verlie 2019). Further, the teaching of climate action needs to be realised at local, national, and global levels, and inclusive of the various types of climate action that students can become involved in. Finally, climate change and climate action education need to be inclusive of student participation in how it is taught in the classroom along with community engagement, this leads to changes that are grounded in student voice and agency.

C. Barriers that schools encounter in undertaking climate action and how these can be addressed

In enacting such approaches to climate change education, the following barriers and challenges can be experienced by teachers and schools:

Teacher workload

This kind of interdisciplinary approach takes time and whole school support, which is often lacking for teachers engaged in this kind of teaching and learning. The constraints on teachers trying to create these interdisciplinary approaches is often due to demands of an *ever-increasing workload*, where units of work are developed in between lunch and recess breaks, meetings, yard duty, marking and so on. Climate change education can be perceived as time-consuming since it involves working with other colleagues. Pressures to meet subject content mandates may push complex engagement with climate change and student and community participation in educational decisions related to taking climate action at school even further to the margins.

The professional challenge of interdisciplinarity and professional knowledge

Complex and broad concepts such as climate change and climate action, can be difficult to be adequately studied and acted on within each discipline area, and require *interdisciplinary and inquiry-driven approaches*. Students need both a strong knowledge base around the causes of a warming climate, but also a strong set of skills and dispositions that will allow them to apply their knowledge for climate action, including problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, coping with uncertainty, empathy, and negotiation. Teachers face barriers of what and how to teach these concepts, skills and dispositions, including their own thoughts on climate change and action, and how to best develop learning experiences that encourage students to develop knowledge and skills through personally relevant climate change initiatives of their own design.

Teachers may lack knowledge and/ or confidence to teach about climate change, but this is not a simple fix. Teaching is more than just imparting knowledge, and changing practice entails more than merely changing the given curriculum. Indeed, the Australian Curriculum affirms the general capabilities of critical and creative thinking, ethical understanding and intercultural understanding, along with cross-curriculum priorities of Sustainability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures and Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia. However, it is widely documented that these capabilities and priorities are sidelined by the more primary mandate to cover disciplinary subject content (Barnes, Moore, and Almeida 2019; Lowe and Galstaun 2020).

Teachers need *confidence* and *support* to engage in these significant social and environmental issues. Research indicates that teachers will make time to learn the content in areas they deem important and then they will find a way to weave these ideas through their teaching practice (Hart, 2002). It is imperative to generate *engagement* in the necessity of educating about climate change as well as providing *resources* that enable this process. It is also important to note that some teachers may need support to establish the connection between climate change and the discipline-based subjects for which they carry responsibility.

Teachers need to be given the *time* and *support* to draw on and integrate cross-disciplinary perspectives, to make connections that students can obviously see, which facilitates deeper conceptual understanding and learning that can be acted on. These kinds of approaches often involve for example project-based learning, inquiry learning, and experiential learning. This type of teaching and learning is unfamiliar for some teachers and requires *teacher training and the opportunity to workshop ideas*. Allowing teachers and students to be creative within these types of teaching and learning units will support them to develop and implement climate action projects within their schools, communities and more broadly. Such approaches are grounded in decades of research on how students learn and help to build their academic skills whilst also instigating climate action. Finally, these types of approaches can also provide opportunities to integrate issues of climate justice and links to intergenerational justice.

A focus on climate change ‘facts’ over students’ concerns about the impacts of climate change may undermine students’ sense of agency

Green at 15 – What schools can do to support the climate (Masters, Thomson, and Schleicher, 2021) states “Climate change is likely the biggest test facing humanity. Equipping young people with solid scientific knowledge and understanding of environmental issues is key to their realistic appreciation of the environmental threats ahead. It is one of the greatest investments a society can make in its people and the future of the planet.”

Teaching and learning experiences that focus on the scientific facts of climate change alone have been found to leave young people feeling ‘stripped of power’, ‘stranded by the generational gap’ and ‘daunted by the future’ – as Jones and Davison (2021) found in their interview study with young people about learning about climate change at school (p. 192). Disembodied cognitive knowledge about the warming of the world is insufficient; what is needed is another way of thinking, feeling, acting and living in the midst of social-planetary crises (Verlie, 2022). Specific Indigenous knowledges and Aboriginal pedagogies provide another way to think, feel, and act about the planet and climate change education (Whyte, 2017).

Educators have been urged to not only teach the scientific facts, but also to nurture critical thought – that is, “how to think” (Kwauk, 2020, p. 12) about the politics of communicating climate change, and how to critically interrogate climate change mitigation strategies in students’ local and national contexts (Svarstad, 2021). Environmental education scholars have called for explicit attention to emotions in teaching and learning about climate change – rethinking the relationship between knowledge and feelings and apprehending and centring “feelings as potent apparatuses for knowing climate” (Verlie, 2022, p. 2).

Ready access to resources and activities on climate change and action that are linked back to the curriculum and that are contextually appropriate

Whilst a teacher may want to teach about concepts, skills and dispositions associated with climate change and climate action, it may be challenging to find accessible resources that are easily implemented into the classroom, or that can be adapted to fit the teacher’s unit design. In integrating Indigenous knowledges, for example, teachers may struggle to find appropriate resources, or may feel hesitant about not doing it ‘properly.’ These resources need to focus on systematic changes, rather than individual changes, with a focus on student-centred learning. Further, they need to be developed to work with the specificities of the places where such learning happens. This means that resources developed outside of Australia may not necessarily be suited to the local or state context, with climate change impacting in different ways globally, nationally and within states.

School leadership and the politics of climate change

Teachers who are drawn to teaching climate change education need to be supported by school leadership to enact a whole school approach to climate action. One of the major barriers teachers

may face is hesitancy or reluctance from principals and/or the school board in supporting teaching and learning of these concepts, skills and dispositions. Whilst there may be leadership support for teaching of the causes and effects of climate change (the ‘facts’), teachers may simultaneously face barriers to supporting student political participation in climate action (e.g. the climate strikes), because this may be perceived to be in *opposition to existing school policies* (e.g. violation of school attendance) or *risk assessment outcomes* (e.g. duty of care for students during school hours) (Brennan, Mayes & Zipin, 2020; Mayes & Hartup, 2022).

Educational policy constraints in some jurisdictions:

In other state contexts, educational policies have constrained teachers’ capacity to discuss climate change, climate justice and climate action in their classrooms. For example, in NSW in 2019, *The Daily Telegraph* reported how a Sydney primary school was “ordered” by the NSW Department of Education to “remove two letters from students published in an online newsletter because they breached the department’s Controversial Issues in Schools policy” (Harris 2019). The teachers were described in an editorial as “preachy” and as having “coached children as young as nine to write letters addressed to Prime Minister Scott Morrison criticising him for not taking action on climate change” (Blair 2019, headline, para. 3). Such restrictive policy frames put school staff in difficult positions. In such contexts, teachers and principals are mandated to report what policy defines as ‘controversial issues’ and to respond in ways that limit their options to take young people’s fervent concerns seriously. Teachers may feel anxious about the professional repercussions of discussing or enacting climate action if there is not a strong policy mandate for this work in schools.

D. What more can be done to support schools to respond to climate change

Schools are often placed in un-enviable positions with regard to social issues. They are considered the ideal site to engage young people in public health and awareness programs (e.g., bicycle education, driver education, safe sex, healthy eating, bullying, etc). These programs sit alongside the school program and the curriculum; they are not embedded or linked to the community. We urge the Western Australian Government to not do this with climate change education. Do not develop a ‘climate change program’ and roll it out hoping it will ‘enable mitigation and adaptation’ across Western Australian schools and, therefore, communities. Instead, embed it comprehensively in the curriculum and throughout all parts of school life.

While schools may be an important location for climate change education, it should be a well-resourced part of the curriculum, woven into the school program, and supported by the school community. A multi-faceted and systemic approach is necessary to ensure that Western Australians experience climate change education that results in *change*.

What capacity is already there?

Educational policy capacity: There are strong national educational policy justifications for robust forms of climate change education. According to the Mparntwe/ Alice Springs Education Declaration (Education Council 2019, 8), a national goal is that young people graduate from school as ‘active and informed citizens’ who ‘are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice’ and ready to ‘participate in Australia’s civic life by connecting with their community and contributing to local and national conversations’ - including on climate action. As Brennan, Mayes and Zipin argue, “Students’ evident public commitments to climate action should be recognised by Ministers of Education – who endorsed the Mparntwe Declaration – not as a ‘controversial issue’ requiring ‘risk-management’ and public speech against student activism, but as rich assets for galvanising proactive student work with/on relevant knowledge” (2020, p. 7). It is timely, now, for ‘Student Voice’ policies and ‘Civics and Citizenship Education’ (as a part of the Australian Curriculum) to be mobilised. Calls for education reform are strong, especially with regard to the embedding of climate change education across the curriculum and into school cultures (White, *et al*, In Press).

The capacity to negotiate and co-construct curriculum: Capacity is already present in historical and contemporary examples of teachers and students negotiating and co-constructing curriculum – which offer excellent models for schools seeking to be responsive to the climate crisis. For the last 20 years, Student Action Teams (SATs) have been a feature of many Victorian schools (Holdsworth 2006). SATs involve teams of students who identify an issue of concern within their school and/or (hopefully) wider community, investigate it, and then design and take action to improve it (Holdsworth 2010). Student Action Teams define areas of shared, ‘fervent concern’ (Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020) and devise their own curricula within school structures. They build on existing opportunities within schools’ approaches, such as ‘Inquiry’ time, transforming this from abstracted and individualised ‘investigations’ of prescribed or even student-chosen topics (for example, climate action), towards deep investigations and planning around shared concerns, with the intention of culminating in collective action and change efforts. The formal curriculum – knowledge and skills – is thus re-generated to serve shared needs – the learning of both students and teachers – in addressing their collective concerns. The curriculum becomes the way in which students work together with others – teachers and community – to identify fervent concerns, envision the world in which they/we want to live, and gain the knowledge and skills required to change circumstances and re/create that world (Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020). It is anchored in present realities and shared concerns of young people, their teachers and their communities, rather than deferred ‘until’ students achieve ‘future citizenship’ in the world.

An example of a negotiated mode of curriculum, from Victoria, is a bushfire safety unit that unfolded in a Grade 5/6 classroom in the wake of tragic 2019/2020 bushfire season; this learning culminated in students creating their own Bushfire Safety Committee and writing a Manifesto (<https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/resources/poster/7462>). A further example of such negotiated Climate Change education work is the Climate Change + Me project, where 9–14 year old students engaged as artists, writers, social scientists and philosophers in reimagining climate change education (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles and Rousell 2019). Finally, a guided learning program was designed in 2020 to support young people to explore activism as education. The teacher resource (funded by the Australian Association of Environmental Education) is called Stand Up for your Climate/Futures: Youth activism is education (<https://sustainable88future.wixsite.com/climatefuture>).

Programs and resources: There are some school leaders, classroom teachers, and/or communities working to generate community climate change teaching and learning opportunities. A quick web search provides ample examples of schools managing complex, successful, and ongoing sustainability programs (e.g. Resource Smart Schools Awards <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/energy-efficiency-and-reducing-emissions/resourcesmart-schools/resourcesmart-schools-events/resourcesmart-schools-awards/2019-resourcesmart-schools-awards>). Professional Associations acknowledge schools and teachers awards annually (e.g.: NSW AAEE <https://www.aaensw.org.au/articles/2021-environmental-education-awards>). Organisations manage school based programs regularly - across Australia (e.g.: Landcare, Coastcare, WaterWatch) and other citizen science initiatives (e.g.: Atlas of Living Australia) some run named programs across many schools (e.g.: Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Gardens <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/>).

It is important to acknowledge that the Climate Council provides many diverse (and highly engaging) resources that could scaffold quality education and learning (<https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/climate-conversation-guides/>). Many organisations also provide programs that are wonderful assets to the education system (e.g.: Little Green Steps - WA <https://littlegreenstepswa.org.au/>).

The list goes on with many more programs and initiatives focussing on specific environmental issues such as waste, biodiversity, pollution. We suggest, however, that this is one more way that our state and federal governments continue to devolve the responsibility of educating our future generations and managing our resources. Organisations provide extensive educational programming that they

design, deliver, and define what is to be taught. We suggest a more refined and consolidated approach would yield more connected and significant impacts, outcomes, and, ultimately, change.

Student capacities: The School Strike 4 Climate (SS4C): Australia is a movement where young people express their concerns for our future. The three current demands of the SS4C (which are now highly refined and nuanced) are:

- Resourcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions that guarantee land rights and care for Country.
- Funding the creation of secure jobs that fast track solutions to the climate crisis and help communities recover.
- Funding projects that transition our economy and communities to 100% renewable energy by 2030, through expanded public ownership. (<https://www.schoolstrike4climate.com/pledge>)

The success of the SS4C evidences young people's dissatisfaction with the government's inaction about climate policy. The national, intergenerational response to this youth led civil disobedience demonstrates how many Australians feel compelled to act to ensure their voices are heard. Large numbers at SS4C events, including family and community members, suggest broad-based readiness for environmental education that combines knowledge and action within a re-invigorated citizenship education. What if we had venues where young people gathered, where voices could be expressed and heard, and where agency for change was cultivated? We suggest many would consider the place as being *school*. However, we are aware that this does not reflect the goals for Western Australian schools to cultivate active, informed citizens, and that is a missed opportunity.

What capacity is still required?

We now are required to acknowledge that our world is in a new epoch – the Anthropocene – where human impact has significantly changed earth systems. Change has increased since the start of industrialisation in the early 1800s and exponentially since 1950. Understanding that life on earth is in crisis, with the greatest issues of our time, climate change and biodiversity loss, impacting all species, many irrevocably (the sixth mass extinction). Agency is required to set appropriate sustainability goals, reflect on resource use/ recycling, and act responsibly to effect change based on critical appraisal and evaluation of the evidence.

Systemic change is what is fundamentally needed for schools to adequately respond to the climate crisis. Calls for climate *justice* education stress the need for greater connections between formal education and informal learning through climate activism, a greater reckoning with the histories and continuities of colonialism, capitalism and extractivism in the climate crisis and climate inequalities, explicit discussion of the necessity for a just and fair transition from fossil fuels for workers, and the importance of First Nations people leading energy transitions (Kwauk, 2020; McGregor & Christie, 2021; Stapleton, 2019; Svarstad, 2021; Whyte, 2020). The concept of climate justice emerges from long-standing environmental justice and ecofeminist demands; climate justice encompasses critiques of inequalities between industrialised countries in the Global North and the Global South, gender inequalities, environmental racism, the dispossession of First Nations peoples, and multi-species injustices (Jafry, Mikulewicz, & Helwig, 2018). Working towards climate justice requires deep unravelling and decolonising of the education system.

School leaders require *permission and resourcing* to prioritise climate change education in collaboration with their local communities. The imperative to devise localise school-based climate change programs will require the mandating and allocation of resources (financial and time).

Teachers require *professional learning programs* that practice connecting with nature, healing country, respect for all beings, and response-ability for evidence-based decision-making. Again, time and resources are required to ensure that teacher's learning is prioritised so that they can lead their students and communities towards sustainable futures and to manage the implications of these

uncertain times. We have provided a few potentially useful resources for teachers throughout our submission; however, professional learning resources need to be deeply embedded into practice and modelled. We are not advocating just developing and sharing teaching or professional learning resources as a solution. Financial resources must be provided to schools for the development of community driven programs that deliver localised, relevant climate change education.

Students: The SS4C pledges three insightful demands for our common future, demonstrating the skill and capacity in many of our young people. We are confident that these same young people will have suggestions for how they want to learn about climate change education, while also engaging in a change agenda for our society. We suggest that you ask them about what they would like to see in their schools, and to collaborate with them in devising policy and resources, in ways that are respectful and inclusive. We suggest that you listen to them and act now.

Are these suggestions too difficult?

To many it will seem as though these suggestions are too hard, too much, or are impossible to enact. However, there are international schools and educational systems that have made changes, respecting that climate change is the greatest challenge for humanity (human generated, yet impacting all beings).

For example, two years ago (5th November 2019) Italy mandated that climate change become the core of their curriculum “Each year, teachers at all grade levels will be required to include 33 hours of education about climate change and related topics.” (<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/news/italy-first-country-require-climate-change-education-all-schools>). There are other examples all over the world. The OECD has mandated that the 2025 PISA assessment include climate agency (Masters, Thomson, & Schleicher, 2021) “The next PISA science assessment in 2025 will take these issues up again. It will show how students’ knowledge about the environment has evolved over the past 20 years, also in light of the much greater prominence these issues have gained in both the scientific and public sphere. And more importantly, the next PISA science assessment will make researching, evaluating and using scientific information for decision making one of the core PISA competencies on which students around the world will be assessed.”

Does Western Australia want to achieve well on the 2025 PISA assessment? Western Australia is the first state to host an inquiry into schools' response to climate change, perhaps Western Australia can lead Australia in enacting effective climate change education.

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