Climate change widespread and intensifying: new report



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I want educators to get excited about climate change. Not because it is a good thing, but because there is so much that we can do to play a constructive, positive role in the solutions for a better future.

That may sound strange. Let me explain. I have been to education conferences and forums recently where climate change was barely mentioned. When it did come up, the tone felt heavy. People seemed eager to move on to other topics.

Why is climate change a conversation-stopper? Research suggests it is because we feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem and powerless to solve it.

Teachers and parents also worry about creating anxiety and despair in young people. It is natural to want to protect ourselves from these feelings. However, Professor Michael Mann warns that these are the result of climate inactivist tactics – those who seek to stall climate action by making us feel hopeless.

That is why I want educators to get excited, and energised, about climate change. Not because it's a good thing – it's clearly not.

I want educators to be excited and energised because there is so much that we can do to play a constructive, positive role in the solutions.

Education has a key role to play in responding to the climate crisis

Global climate action policies state very clearly that education has a key role to play in the climate crisis, by enabling society to be a part of the solution.

However, national education policies are often not aligned to this call, and “the education sector remains under-exploited as a strategic resource to mitigate and adapt to climate change” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 66).

Part of the problem is that national educational policy structures and systems have been slow to provide clear direction and supports for effective system-wide climate responses. Another problem is that we may not see where to start. We can teach about climate change in the curriculum, but what else can we do?

Models for climate-ready schooling identify the need to weave climate and sustainability thinking into all school practices and decision-making at every level.

This includes engaging school leadership, staff, students, governance bodies and the wider school community.

In terms of practical actions, it can be useful to consider two domains over which we have influence: Material things and immaterial ideas and ways.

In the material things domain, there are direct climate benefits to reducing the environmental footprint of our materials and infrastructure, and seeking more efficient, cleaner and longer-lasting alternatives.

Schools can also have a direct influence on living systems within or near the school grounds. Planting trees, restoring wetlands, maintaining food gardens, composting, worm farming, avoiding food waste and building healthy soil all have climate impact benefits and present rich opportunities for student learning.

Climate-ready schools can also plan for resilience and recovery when the impacts of climate change affect their communities.

In the immaterial ideas domain, education can help to support people to develop knowledge, values, attitudes and capabilities needed to live sustainably on a planet with finite resources. Schools are places where we can normalise practices like using only what we need, minimising waste, creating circular systems and understanding the true environmental and climate costs of our day-to-day choices and decisions. Normalising these practices in schools and other learning settings can help these practices become normalised in communities and across society.

Education must focus on solutions, not just the problems

Climate activists, including youth, have called on governments and other people in power to tell the truth about climate change and to base policy decisions on the science.

They are right to demand this. It is important to learn the science behind the causes and impacts of climate change.

It is important to understand how the climate crisis relates to economic, political and social systems, and how it is a social justice issue. However, understanding the problem is not enough.

Education also has the power to shine the light on solutions and to activate people to play a part in these solutions.

This requires a holistic education approach. The Bicycle Model (bit.ly/3yWF8za) for climate change education is a good way to think about how to design learning experiences that build knowledge, motivation and capabilities for action.

The Bicycle Model highlights the importance of values, identities, world views and emotions – as well as knowledge – in helping us light the path to socially just, culturally-sustaining climate solutions.

Education must support the transition to a low-carbon future

Instead of talking about climate change education, let’s talk about education for a low-carbon future.

Today’s global economies are mostly built on unsustainable, high-carbon, environmentally destructive practices.

Most of us live in towns and cities built around high carbon ways of living. This needs to change. I am inspired by the work of the Transition Engineering community, who see it as their professional responsibility as engineers to transition our unsustainable built environments to sustainable and low-carbon systems.

We need to make it our professional responsibility as educators to support this transition, too.

Through education, we can help learners to see pathways for further learning, community participation and work in a low-emissions future.

We can also design curriculum and learning opportunities that support learners to actively create low-carbon living in our schools, homes, communities and cities, right now.

Educators must act collectively

I have met climate-concerned educators who feel isolated in their schools or in their profession. They are doing their best to support change but feel like everyone around them is still carrying on with business as usual.

Michael Mann says that one of the tactics of the climate inactivists is to make us think that it is up to each of us to take personal responsibility to solve the problem.

None of us can do this alone. Instead, we should be focusing on structural and system solutions, and how we can help to make these changes happen.

We need to harness the deep strengths and collective capabilities of our sector on a global scale. Education unions can help by:

- Advocating for coherent policy and system changes.
- Supporting their members to build their own climate change/climate solution knowledge.
- Collaborating, sharing knowledge and working on projects for collective impact.

The Teach for the Planet manifesto (teach4theplanet.org/manifesto) is a powerful call to action.

I am excited about the work that Education International is doing – I hope you are, too.

Now, let’s get to work!

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