Trauma-sensitive climate change education can build hope



Summer is a time for educators and students to recharge. For educators, this opportunity to reflect and regroup often includes planning for how to support students in the next school year. It is becoming increasingly important that this support involves helping students navigate the impacts of the climate crisis.

Doom and gloom discourses encountered at school and through multimedia exposure risk evoking worry, fear, anxiety and hopelessness.

To enhance a growing understanding of complex climate emotions, we think it's important to notice feelings like climate anxiety and climate trauma, among others.

We, a group of teacher-educators, are concerned about how teachers address students' experiences of climate change, and the supports needed to do so well.

Encountering climate trauma

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, describes trauma as "an event or circumstance resulting in physical harm, emotional harm, and/or life-threatening harm [and] … has lasting adverse effects on the individual's mental, physical, emotional health, social and/or spiritual wellbeing."

Extending from this definition, we highlight that climate trauma has long-lasting adverse effects which persistently impact people's overall wellbeing. Climate trauma can result from knowing about or experiencing climate change crises.

Canadian youth experience climate emotions like fear, sadness, anxiety and helplessness. In a recent survey by Lakehead University researchers of 1,000 youth between the ages of 16 to 25 across Canada, almost 80 per cent of youth reported climate change affects their mental health.

We think it's critical for educators to consider how young people are susceptible to symptoms of climate trauma, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance use disorders.

For Nathalie, one of the authors of this story, concern about symptoms of climate trauma hit home when her 10-year-old came home from school with a declaration: "I am not going to have kids. I am not bringing kids into a world that is going to blow up," referring to what he was learning about the climate crisis.

Pessimism about having children due to the bleakness of the future is a sentiment that's becoming more common among youth. According to research from the United States, so is it among women of colour.

Forward-looking stories

How teachers encounter and address narratives of trauma and associated complex feelings influences how students think about their lives and futures. Being able to shape forward-looking stories amid potentially traumatic experiences is paramount.

When that ability is interrupted, individuals, and/or communities are negatively affected. Lacking forward-looking stories (that is, amplifying narratives that the world is going to end) causes an understandable sense of alarm.

Preliminary research insights

We are researchers in a preliminary qualitative study. We inquired with five Saskatchewan teachers, who have varying years of experience and school settings, to explore how some of their teaching approaches aim to hold space for complex climate emotions.

We met with each participant and talked about their practices teaching climate change education, how they approach associated climate emotions and how they shape possibilities for nurturing hope. We were particularly curious about how teachers and students foster hope collectively to envision possible futures and better worlds together.

Our initial analysis of this data points to pressing directions for teachers and school system leaders as they contemplate plans for the upcoming school year.

Heavy weight on students

Teachers we spoke with acknowledged students are being asked to cope with, and solve, a global crisis they did not create. The effects of possible annihilation weigh heavily on young people and can affect students' capacities to learn.

Teachers implemented personal reflection and emotional regulation strategies as part of their trauma-sensitive climate change education practices.

Engaging in climate change education in ways that carefully respond to their own and students' complex climate emotions is fundamental.

Recommended professional development

Providing professional development about trauma-sensitive climate change education would benefit current teachers and people studying to become teachers. Possibilities for professional development include:

1. The importance of learning outside: Teachers said moving away from the structures and competition of indoor classroom settings was important. Being outside decreases student anxiety and increases students' sense of community and belonging. This also invites students to enact good relationships with the land and each other and presents opportunities for educators to ethically embed Indigenous and place-based perspectives in teaching and learning.

2. Interdisciplinary inquiry: Teachers commented on how climate change education is often relegated to science curriculum and instead is best done experientially across all subject areas. Interdisciplinary inquiry learning requires a rethinking of how to design student learning experiences, activities and assessments.

3. Questioning climate action: Field trips and encouraging individual actions at home (like asking students or families to reduce their carbon footprints) can be useful for inspiring hope, but these do not always address climate change itself. Professional development opportunities need to encourage teachers to engage students with the societal systems and structures that are causing the climate crisis. Strategically choosing climate actions for social and ecological justice is crucial. While students' action projects can generally make them more hopeful, this comes with a reminder: inadvertently tasking kids to "save the planet" can have harmful mental-health effects. Balancing truth telling with trauma sensitivity is necessary.

4. Sharing hopeful stories: Rather than teaching doomsday clock narratives, it is more helpful to share concrete examples of community-led climate mitigation, adaptation and financing initiatives. Sharing stories of hope and climate action can guide students to imagine better futures while knowing the truth about climate change and its widespread ecological, community and personal impacts.

Future thinking

We call for more complex understandings of the social, emotional, psychological and spiritual impacts of climate change education, which we have come to understand as truthful hope. Truthful hope attends to both forward-looking stories and complex climate emotions in the practice of trauma-sensitive climate change education.

The participants in this study showed us, repeatedly, how hope is individual and collective, but also complicated. Since young people are living with ongoing climate change experiences and exposures to fear-based apocalyptic narratives, how climate change education happens is central to this endeavour.

Our research findings to date will shape grant applications and direction for follow-up studies.

How climate change education happens

As we continue to analyse the qualitative data from teachers, we wonder: How might trauma-sensitive climate change education affirm the rights of nature and invite students to act in solidarity with, and express gratitude for, the Earth and all inhabitants?

We all need to do this ongoing trauma-sensitive climate change education, together.

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