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Student Agency around Climate Action: a curriculum response

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ABSTRACT Students around the world have led protests over inaction on climate change. They have done this through 'climate change strikes'. These actions raise larger questions about young people's perception of the relevance of schooling to their concerns. What should and could be the response of schools? What would it take for students to recognise that schools were supporting them to not only know about these concerns, but to act effectively around them? What would it take for education to remain relevant for all young people and be seen to be equipping them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to make those changes today? This article suggests some principles, and some possible curriculum approaches, around renegotiating the purposes of education with young people. It asks of young people: "What would it take for this school to address our issues of concern, so that you didn't have to walk out?"

I want to ask bluntly: *What would it take for students to know that they didn't need to strike from school in order to address climate change?* I want to ask this of teachers – but even more importantly, I want to ask this of students and invite collaboration in transforming education.

Students around the world have, on several recent occasions, walked out of school for a day to protest inaction on climate change. There have been similar student-led actions on other issues, notably on gun violence in the USA, but also around such issues as safety, gender-based violence and discrimination, and with a focus from local to global. The climate change strikes have, however, highlighted a particular sense of crisis.

Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swedish student who inspired the global student marches for climate change, in speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, said:

> Adults keep saying, 'We owe it to the young people to give them hope'. But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I

> want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is. (Thunberg, 2019)

Students' actions have been greeted with perhaps predictable reactions, including the Australian Prime Minister, who was reported to say:

> We don't support our schools being turned into parliaments. What we want is more learning in schools and less activism in schools. (*Guardian* ParlView, 2018)

Commentators have subsequently predicted that we will see a surge in such activity in the next few years, as more students see that they can, and should, be agents of action around their futures.

But for me, that activism raises the larger question of young people's perception of the relevance of schooling to their concerns. While many students indicate that they feel supported to understand these issues in their school studies (they learn *about* the issues), why aren't schools enabling them to *act* on these issues? How do we understand what these students are saying about the relevance of their education to the global crisis – and to their role in its solution?

In trying to understand this, I realised that there are strong connections with arguments I've been advancing for several decades. If we think and talk of education as only being future-oriented – as having *deferred outcomes* (learn this now because it will be useful to you as an adult) – then the lack of an assured future throws the present of education into severe doubt.

Initially, I'd talked with students who were substantially disengaged from school (either actively resisting school or passively compliant but disconnected), and came to see that, for students experiencing intergenerational poverty, unemployment or exclusion, statements to them about education being a pathway to success are seen as naïve lies: we cannot guarantee, on an individual basis, that those outcomes will be delivered. Their lived experience is that they won't. So, they disengage from a relationship with education, either physically or mentally.

I'd been influenced in this thinking by what James Coleman wrote in 1972:

> The student role of young persons has become enlarged to the point where that role constitutes the major portion of their youth. But the student role is not a role of taking action and experiencing consequences ... It is a relatively passive role, always in preparation for action, but never acting ... The consequences of the expansion of the student role, and the action poverty it implies for the young, has been an increased restiveness among the young. (Coleman, 1972)

Derry Hannam, ex-Ofsted Inspector in the UK and adviser/trainer for the Council of Europe on Education for Democratic Citizenship, specifically notes how this applies to the difference (as he says) between learning *about* democracy and learning to *do* democracy:

> Learning about democracy and citizenship, when I was at school, was a bit like reading holiday brochures in prison. Unless you were about to be let out or escape, it was quite frustrating and seemed pointless. (Hannam, 2000)

Outcomes of education are deferred to a future – 'for when you will be a citizen'. But outcomes of this future are increasingly uncertain ... and students know this. Beyond this uncertainty, there is also a lesson for all students: *Your only value is in what you will become, not what you are or can do today.*

Someone once said to me, 'If this relationship has no future, then it has no present'. End of relationship. I think we are now seeing this same view mobilising an articulate group of students who are becoming increasingly convinced that that future may not exist for any of us, and so are exhibiting the 'increased restiveness' described by Coleman. If the house is burning now, what's the point of furnishing it with ATARs [Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks] and degrees? If there is massive species extinction happening now, and accelerating into the near future, what's the point of learning that will enable us to put non-existent food on the table? And so they walk out of schools to protest the inaction of those who they see can make a difference.

So, I return to my starting questions: What should be the response of schools? What would it take for students to recognise that schools were supporting them to not only know about these concerns, but to act effectively around them? What would it take for education to remain relevant for all young people and be seen to be equipping them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to make those changes today?

In the larger sense, we need to renegotiate the purposes of education with young people. That primarily and centrally means seeing that education is about today, not about the future; and that young people are, and can be, active participants in decision-making and action today, not being prepared to do that at some future time.

Practical approaches can be based on these principles:

1. *Purpose*: Education must be centrally directed to defining and constructing the world and society in which we want to live. This is not about short-term economics or jobs, but the future of the planet. Education then critically identifies, investigates and understands what is happening. It does not pull punches in naming what oppresses and marginalises people, or who benefits from inaction.
2. *Shared*: Education must recognise that these issues aren't young people's issues. They affect us all. They are shared concerns. However, while we who are older can (possibly) be assured that we may continue to live relatively comfortably without seeing the full impact of climate change, violence, war,

etc., it is clear that young people's lives will be substantially affected. They have the fervent concern that will drive changes; they will be leaders in change – but they will do this in partnership with others.

3. *Skilled*: Education must recognise young people as change-makers and active citizens now. It must provide them with the skills to make a difference – to work together and to be able to bring about change.
4. *Attitudes*: Education must provide a realistic optimism that students' actions (whether that be advocacy or direct action) can achieve change. This is not a naïve or simplistic hope 'given to' young people, but a realistic one, owned by them because it is grounded in actually achieving changes, however small.

Figure 1. Primary school change-makers at work.
(Photo by Roger Holdsworth; first published in *Connect* and used with permission).

There are already various approaches in schools on which to build. Bronwyn Wood canvassed some of these in her article in the first issue of *Ethos* for 2019. I want to add some possibilities that are often seen as co-curricular, and suggest that these become central aspects of a curriculum that would be negotiated with students about their concerns. I want to suggest that 'active citizenship' is at the core of learning, rather than activism that is divorced from learning. Bronwyn's description of New Zealand students who gain credits when they 'take personal social action' opens up direct curriculum possibilities.

Many students have their own organisations within schools that can form the basis for sharing, discussing, debating and deciding on student-led issues. These groups may have been restricted in the past to marginalised work around fundraising, socials and so on. However, we are seeing a transformation, and student groups are now tackling (and leading on) issues including learning and teaching, relationships, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, exclusion and discrimination – building the sort of society they want within the micro situation of the school.

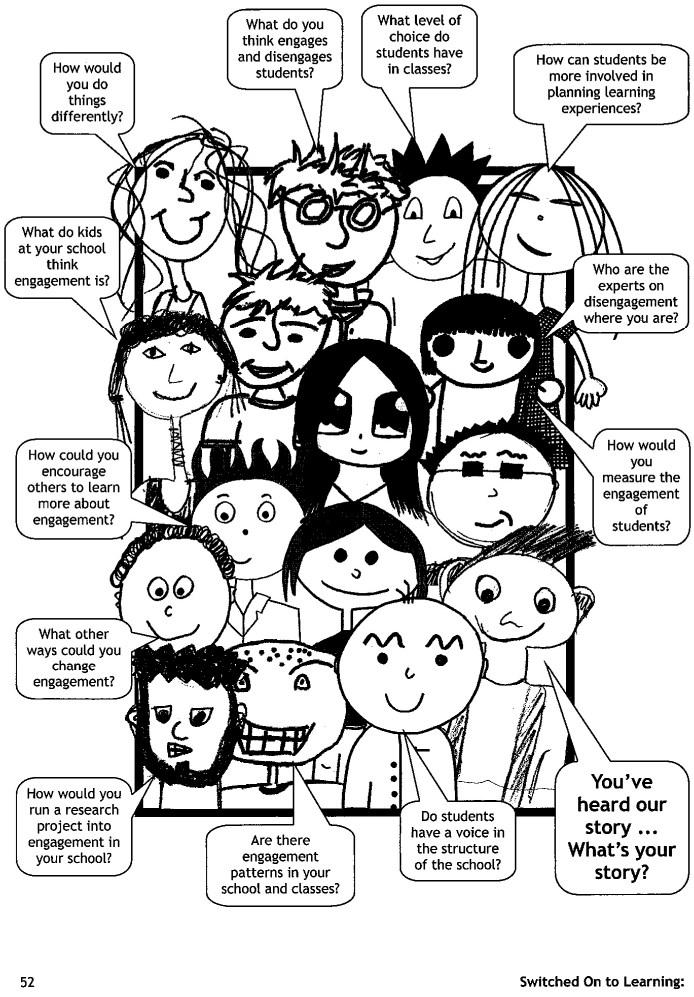

Figure 2. Questions posed by student for schools to consider. (Image from 'Switched On to Learning'. First published by *Connect* and used with permission.)

Action-oriented curriculum and pedagogical approaches – from authentic inquiry learning through to student action teams, students as researchers and similar – involve teams of students beyond those typically selected as 'school leaders' or the 'popular representatives', and enable students to define and take action around issues of concern (Holdsworth et al, 2001, 2003; Holdsworth, 2006, 2010). Knowledge and skills within the formal curriculum are generated to serve shared needs – the learning of both students and teachers – in addressing their collective concerns.

In a similar example from earlier this century, the Public Achievement (PA) model has seen school students work as community leaders, with support from tertiary students and others, to address situations of crisis:

> It gives young people a framework to learn citizenship skills by doing work of real importance in their own communities ... The main idea behind PA is that young people have the potential to address society's problems and build a stronger community for everyone ... Young people in a school or community site identify real-life issues significant to them. Next they form a team around each issue. Working in teams each week and with the help of a coach (a college student or teacher), young people design action projects that have real impact. (Değirmencioğlu, 2008)

More recently, there have been similar approaches of the 'equalisers and organisers' in the Equal Education movement in South Africa (Robins & Fleisch, 2016), where high school students were supported by university students to research and address inequality in schools and the local community, and the 'warrior researchers/scholars' in New Zealand (Milne, 2017), in which Maori and Pasifika students researched and 'called out' the causes of their marginalisation and oppression.

Such examples of student agency can also translate into shared school decision-making through such approaches as the VicSRC's 'Teach the Teacher', which provides a physical and metaphorical space within schools in which dialogue and action between students and teachers can occur (Holdsworth, 2014; VicSRC, 2018). Students define a curricular or pedagogical issue of concern, investigate it, and then organise and lead a professional development session for school staff in which students and staff collaborate in developing solutions.

Michael Fielding has pointed to the range of partnerships that can exist between students and others, and identifies possibilities for 'intergenerational learning as shared democracy'. This

> extends the shared and collaborative partnerships between students and staff in ways that (a) emphasise a joint commitment to the common good, and (b) include occasions and opportunities for an equal sharing of power and responsibility. (Fielding, 2012)

He recognises this work as being 'an inevitable expression of a set of values and assumptions, not just about teaching and learning, but about the kind of society we wish to live in' (Fielding, 2012).

Figure 3. Teaching the teacher – moving from a top-down approach to collaborative solutions. (Photo: Teach the Teacher program. First published in *Connect* and used with permission.)

There are possibilities to build approaches within the current language of voice, agency and participation. We recognise that students already have voices, they have agency, and they do participate and lead – in all sorts of ways, including notably around Students Strike 4 Climate and, in the USA, around opposition to gun violence. The other half of a social contract, however, is to pay attention to the capability and willingness of others to listen, support action and enter into respectful partnerships.

We need to listen seriously and respectfully to the voices of all young people, whoever they are, however expressed. This doesn't mean always agreeing: understanding how to discuss and debate with respect is part of our emerging society. And we recognise that young people's voices will be as contradictory as those in the rest of our society – young people cannot be seen as homogeneous in their concerns or desires for change.

This listening can help us all to understand and improve what we, as teachers and others, do. But *voice* is not enough (and students tell us it is not enough – they are frustrated by clearly having a voice and seeing no action). We must support students to exercise their *agency* and provide the structural and learning opportunities for that to happen – and be willing to challenge and inspire. But that's also not enough (particularly where student agency is seen only as individual choices between adult offerings). We must be willing to recognise the knowledge, expertise and commitment that students bring to

education – to classrooms, to schools, to systems – as well as to other aspects of their communities and lives, and be willing to *participate* with them in making decisions about our future, our existence.

Figure 4. There are many possibilities for 'intergenerational learning as shared democracy' – Teach the Teacher Program. (Photo: VicSRC. First published in *Connect* and used with permission.)

I recognise that all of this is fraught and difficult, and hardly a clear blueprint for action on Monday morning. For some students, their sense of exclusion, and hence of hopelessness and alienation, will already be so great that they will not believe they can do anything – and therefore they may see that there is no possibility that school will ever be relevant. We must continue to do the slow work there, and demonstrate possibilities – often in the most challenging situations.

Students are taking the lead in questioning the relevance of school to our futures, whether that be striking over lack of action on climate change, calling BS on gun ownership or individually deciding that school will not deliver outcomes for them. We must respectfully challenge them and share this question with them, for joint discussion and debate: *What would it take for this school to address our issues of concern, so that you didn't have to walk out?*

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