
Moving towards Climate Justice with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

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ABSTRACT Climate education is increasingly being taught in schools, and groups are looking to pass climate education into law. This article looks at climate justice, a framing of the overarching climate movement, to advocate for an education that inspires action. Drawing from Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', it makes a case for problem-posing education over the banking model of education, specifically when teaching about social issues.

Climate Justice

'Climate justice' is a term that has only recently entered the mainstream discourse. However, the concept has existed for as long as the idea of climate change; the two come hand in hand. When the notion of 'global warming' was first introduced, it was only considered an issue because it would exacerbate drought and loss of capital in hot climates, predominantly in Africa and the Middle East. These droughts were expected to have a massive impact on food availability. Food scarcity would drive up prices and the poorest would be unable to afford food, starting famine. These are issues of social justice, as they increase financial and health inequality.

Social injustice is at the root of climate change. Imposed neo-liberal values forced on the Global South through colonialism, slavery and the injustices of the Industrial Revolution collectively caused the onset of climate change. The legacies of these events have had grave, long-lasting effects on people today, especially those who are marginalised.

These legacies have become a barrier to people's involvement in climate action. I have heard so many stories as to why people are not involved in climate-based change. All of them are limitations rooted in social justice issues. At a community meeting, Walthamstow residents were planning to run a pedestrianisation campaign, which unfortunately the Muslim community was

unable to back. Islamophobia is so prevalent that the community feared for their safety when walking to the mosque. Young people from working-class backgrounds said at a London Youth Green New Deal event that they don't often think about the climate because there are immediate issues they are facing stemming from poverty – housing insecurity, caring responsibilities and unemployment are among them. I missed this event because I couldn't afford the train fare. Lack of inclusion and the criminalisation of people of colour are core reasons why climate groups in the United Kingdom are so whitewashed. It is even more alienating when these groups celebrate violent institutions.

Below is part of a transcript of an interview between two Wretched of the Earth (a people-of-colour climate justice collective) organisers, discussing the challenges faced at their first climate march. For context, the Wretched of the Earth people at this march were predominantly, if not all, people of colour protesting the racial injustice of climate change. The march organisers had suggested that Wretched of the Earth would be at the front, leading the march:

Keiran: So we were, we were told we could have the front, and then they were like, nah, nah, on the day. ... You know, it was all, like the idea was like black and brown and indigenous people to the front. And indigenous communities specifically at the front. And there were people from around the world who were at this demo. People from the Amazon, Sámi people from Norway ... lots of people from diaspora communities –

Joshua: From Aotearoa, New Zealand –

Keiran: From Aotearoa, which was called New Zealand by the colonisers of New Zealand. And, yeah, and in the end, we were like, Well, we're just gonna have to take the front. And so we like, as a group – it was really, this was a big thing for us that day, and it was very symbolic but it also was like, quite material as well. And so we went like, around the, like we basically were like, 123 go! And it was a big bloc but somehow we all just kind of stayed together. It was quite a beautiful moment. Um, I mean we got round. I think they called the cops on us didn't they? Didn't they call some cop over? Insane! That they can be calling cops on like ... just comrades who are there, fellow people who are like on the same side as them but two to a bunch of people of colour who were like ... You know what I mean?

...

Joshua: So, we were getting ready to move to the front of the march and then we suddenly, suddenly saw huge inflatable giraffes and –

Keiran: It's like they brought the cast of Lion King.

Joshua: – Being snuck around the side of the march and taken to the front. Um ... as we were told that we were going to be going there for our huge photo op and then ... Basically it was all trickery and when we went there, we had, we had very ... Yeah, they called the police because they, because we had the coffins. I've forgotten what the name of that is. It's actually from another group. (Virasami & Kirkwood, 2020)

The coffins accompanied a message of 'First to Fight, First to Die', a slogan reflecting the state- and corporate-sponsored assassinations of frontline activists in the Global South. These frontline activists are mostly leaders fighting against environmental and civil injustices imposed on their minoritised communities. To have an ally pit institutional power against people taking up a similar mantle is ironic given their message, but also ostracising, even for seasoned activists. Examples like this are why it is so important to tackle social justice issues alongside the issue of the climate. The resolution to climate change will undoubtedly involve a transition to new systems. However, if we don't tackle all injustice at the same time, these new systems will consolidate the struggles that marginalised communities are facing now.

Social injustice preventing people from engaging in climate action is a very important link to make. This shows us that any move towards social justice is a move towards climate justice. By moving towards social justice, the situations of oppression that are barriers, preventing people from taking action, are removed or weakened. The very act of seeing someone in your situation engaging with an issue galvanises you to act too. This is why it's so important to discuss climate change as justice and not removed from it.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire was an educator and activist from Brazil. After interacting for years with revolutionary organisers and leaders, Freire developed his ideas regarding oppression and education. In the preface to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2017) discusses *conscientização* ('conscientisation'), the process of becoming critically aware by exposing the contradictions we live by – making connections with the way that discrimination is woven into the structures of society, reaching into people's being and shaping lives in ways that privilege some and disadvantage others. This then enables people to recognise oppression as a political injustice or structural issue, rather than individual failure.[1]

Mainstream schools use what Freire (2017) describes as 'the banking model of education'; the teacher, who, theoretically, knows all, deposits information in the students, who are seen as empty vessels. In this model of education, there is no reciprocal interaction, and the teacher, therefore, treats the learner as a passive object. The teachers talk *to* the students, not *with* them. This conditions the learners to be passive – to take in information and obey hierarchy – which adapts learners to oppressive environments. By not allowing

students to engage in dialogue with the teacher, the students perceive themselves to exist solely in the world, not connected to it. Everything that happens happens independently of them, so there is no use in interacting. Even if students are sceptical of the information being given to them by the teacher, the lack of dialogue immobilises the students. Furthermore, if they think they're the only ones sceptical of the information, they're less likely to act on it in fear of rejection by the community and status quo. This is how mainstream education is used to dominate learners (Saxon & Vitzthum, 2012).

If you take it as a given that the systems of today are responsible for anthropogenic climate change, then the systems of today must be evaluated and changed. This evaluation cannot occur if people aren't educated to evaluate critically. The banking method consolidates these systems by assimilating more and more people into the current system, so it is counterproductive to teach about climate change by using this pedagogy. The same goes for teaching about other injustices – colonialism or sexism, for example. The kind of education we require for the injustice to be resolved needs to be valued by how much action is generated from discussions.

Freire (2017) proposed a method of learning called 'problem-posing', which stimulates discussion and allows for critical analysis of the world. In this method, there are no teachers, and the facilitators of exercises also learn themselves through a critical dialogue *with* the learners. The participants both learn and teach each other based on lived experience, which is a culmination of the learner's history, present and future. This dialogue navigates the relationship between people, the world and their oppressions with the underlying goal of transforming structural oppression. The purpose of this education is liberation.

I am therefore suggesting that climate education in schools must be taught by using problem-posing education. Using the banking method will only make students accept climate change as an inevitable outcome of human action, as opposed to an unfolding problem with the potential to be reined in if people act to do so (Saxon & Vitzthum, 2012).

There are many outcomes to problem-posing education, all of which work together to increase the power of justice movements. Framing education of this kind through the lens of climate justice may or may not result in direct engagement with the climate movement. However, any engagement with justice at all will be indirectly supporting climate justice.

The goal of problem-posing education is for the individual to perceive the world in praxis, which Freire (2017) describes as reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. Based on the purpose of this form of education, the most favourable outcome would be for a learner to engage in changing structural issues. This is an act of justice, and any act of justice supports the climate justice movement.

There is the possibility that a person may undertake problem-posing education but not engage with issues. However, they will most definitely be more critical of the world. This is always beneficial to a movement. Take the issue of wealth inequality. By attaining a critical mindset, education should

break the conservatism found in learners who have internalised oppression, such as working-class people who vehemently back billionaires. If wealth inequality exists, then for it not to exist something needs to change. Conservatism and tradition uphold these injustices because they are inherently anti-change. By breaking conservatism, the individual moves from a place of resisting change to a place of either neutrality or allyship. Either way, this is hugely beneficial to any movement. It is easier to effect change if there are less people resisting it.

If you take anything away from this article, I hope you take away that critical dialogue is the foundation of any valuable education on justice, and I implore you to practise it within all your circles, not just with learners.

Acknowledgement

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Note

[1] Interview with Darcey Williamson for *FORUM*, 19 April 2020.

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