
The Need for Civil Disobedience and Radical Change in Education

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ABSTRACT This article argues that it is necessary to fight for a radical and immediate restructuring of our educational systems. Young people are currently being prepared for a future that does not exist, and we are lying to them and to ourselves by pretending that we can address the climate and ecological emergency from within existing educational and political paradigms. The author's argument that direct action and civil disobedience are essential in achieving the change that is needed might sound extreme to some people. But the consequences of inaction are far more extreme. We are taught – constantly and not only in schools – that breaking the rules is wrong. But if following the rules means conforming with collective behaviours that are rapidly destroying the living planet and our chances of continued life on it, then we must quickly learn to constructively disobey. Radical change for a more humane educational system is needed for its own sake, but, in the current emergency, this need for change is not only necessary but also urgent.

We need direct action, probably amounting to civil disobedience, to effect radical and immediate educational reform in light of the current climate and ecological emergency. There are many aspects of our existing educational system that are in dire need of reform for reasons aside from our world being on the brink of ecological breakdown. But the emergency we now face makes this need for change urgent as well as important. There is no time for incremental change by way of more conventional methods alone (although traditional forms of campaigning and union action are also essential). Pedagogy and educational policy are not exact sciences: they are based on values and principles which will never elicit universal approval. We must, therefore, walk a narrow line between a convoluted and emotive discussion of educational values, on the one hand, and the factual reality of the climate and ecological crisis, on the other. I will argue that the values we will need to respond to the crisis are the same values that any humane educational system should be built on. We must use the

urgency of the crisis to do what should have been done long ago. Because of this urgency, we must also be prepared to speak in unusually direct terms. Climate change has been described by the World Bank (2014) as a 'wicked problem' – difficult to define, constantly shifting, uncertain and suggestive of a range of potentially incompatible solutions. Its complexity cannot be dealt with by way of discrete or specialised theoretical discussion. Indeed, the tendency towards specialised expertise, as opposed to addressing what is urgent or important to society at large, is one of the many problematic habits of our culture, and particularly our educational practice. I make no apology, therefore, for drawing on disparate sources and bringing a range of arguments together in support of my conclusion. I will argue, first, that there is a need for radical societal change and, second, that educational reform should be not only a part of this process but also a necessary starting point for change. I will then make some suggestions as to the kind of educational reform we need and why. Finally, I will argue that the only way to achieve these reforms is through 'direct action' or civil disobedience.

The Need for Change

We need to change because we are in an emergency. As highlighted in a 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, change is needed throughout our society and economy. The scientific evidence is no longer hypothetical: record temperatures, wildfires and flooding are already the new normal. It is difficult to comprehend the reality that human activity has destabilised our global weather systems and quite possibly triggered an irreversible cycle of warming, but this was the conclusion of a recent report published in *Nature* by a global collaboration of leading climate scientists (Lenton et al, 2019). In less than 50 years, we have destroyed 60% of wildlife (Charlton, 2018). Now, only 4% of land mammals are wild (Bar-On et al, 2018) and insect populations are collapsing (Sanchez-Bayo & Wyckhuys, 2019). We are witnessing a mass extinction of species. Fertile soil and predictable weather for farming may soon be historical phenomena. Rising sea levels, food crises, epidemic disease, mass migration and conflict are already a reality and likely to define the inheritance of our children.

We must drastically reduce emissions, but we must also remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This challenge seems so overwhelming not because the necessary action appears impossible, but because we are invested in a particular way of life. During the Second World War, the United Kingdom's industrial economy was repurposed in a matter of months. The global economy was put on pause by governments to limit the spread of coronavirus. Such action is demonstrably possible. Over the next six months, we could ban or massively reduce fossil-fuel emissions and plant trillions of trees to absorb existing atmospheric carbon dioxide. But every year global emissions rise (Peters et al, 2020) and every year an area of forest the size of the United Kingdom is destroyed (Harvey, 2019). The problem is not that we cannot

change; it is that we are collectively choosing not to. Radical societal change should, therefore, be seen not as a practical impossibility, but as a necessary course of action that we must choose to take.

Educational Reform Is the Starting Point for Change

It might reasonably be argued that, if this crisis is unfolding as we speak, educational reform is far too slow a process to have any practical benefit. But practical – or technical – responses to the climate crisis will only be possible once we have collectively accepted the need for societal change. We understand the necessary practical steps, but it seems that we are socially incapable of taking them. The requisite short-term action from policymakers will not be undertaken without political will, which means public support, and voters have not yet been convinced of the urgency of this issue. We must reassess our societal values and priorities. An educational system is a reflection of the values of a society. If we can rethink our educational priorities – in the light of a climate and ecological emergency – this should be the basis for a reassessment of our wider societal values while also, crucially, preparing young people for the future they face. Needless to say, this necessary re-evaluation and reform must happen in the short term, and this is why, as discussed later, direct action and civil disobedience, as well as more traditional methods, will be required to effect the change we need in the limited time we have.

Many of the catastrophes of our current educational model mirror our wider social and private discontents. In this reflection, we can also see the causes of the current climate and ecological crisis, and our failure to deal with it. Our obsession with exponential, competition-fuelled economic growth requires the constant exploitation of people and nature. ‘Successful’ (wealthy) people are almost always responsible for higher emissions, pollution and direct or indirect exploitation through their consumption habits and investments. Those who contribute least to the problem will invariably suffer most and first (see Gore, 2015). We have undermined the resilience of our ecosystems, our soil, our debt-driven economy; we have left ourselves entirely unprepared to live sustainably, locally, and in collaboration with our communities and with nature. We are invested in a culture of reward and punishment that causes stress and profound harm to young people while deepening social injustice. An edifying discussion of the roots of these cultural phenomena in our religious traditions would need more space than is available here. What is relevant is that our prisons, as an example of how we treat some of the least fortunate in our society, are places of punishment for people who have, in the majority of cases, suffered abuse, mental health problems, addiction and financial hardship, and our economic model, which drives so much of our political discourse, is premised on the notional fairness of free markets when it is patently obvious that those born with privilege, wealth and power are statistically destined to be rewarded with more privilege, wealth and power.

The same system of reward and punishment operates in our schools: 'challenging' students (with challenging backgrounds) are placed in isolation units to be 'taught a lesson', while high achievers (predominantly from affluent or well-supported backgrounds) are praised and rewarded with places at our top universities. It is no wonder that the success of schools has to be measured by progress rather than attainment: low-grade students are expected to achieve low-grade outcomes – we can be pleased with ourselves as long as their failure is proportionate with their beginnings. It is not only disadvantaged students who suffer in this environment: everyone, including adults, learns to fear failure and its attendant punishments. The stress and shame that we impose on young people force them into a fight, flight or freeze response. For those who struggle most with this stress, 'bad behaviour' is often the outcome, eliciting further punishment and shame. There is constant talk in schools of a 'growth mindset' culture, in which we work with an open attitude to personal improvement and avoid believing that we are fixed as a failure or a success; there is constant talk of building students' intellectual and emotional resilience; there is constant talk of equality of opportunity. These are important ideas, and practitioners struggle every day to promote them in the classroom. But they stand in such stark opposition to the structure of the system. The dissonance is overwhelming. We talk of building emotional resilience while punishing failure. We talk of community and the value of collaboration while forcing students through an exam system that is intrinsically goal-oriented, individualistic and competitive.

Whether they are values that we explicitly support or not, our existing education system is based on and promotes an ideology of individual success at any cost. We are now learning what the costs are – to the well-being of young people and to the ability of our planet to sustain us and the natural world.

Jem Bendell (2018) argues that societal collapse is inevitable, catastrophe is probable and human extinction is possible. Such explicit and dire predictions are unusual from academics. But this was part of the point of Bendell's paper: to highlight our blinkered approach in education and academia to what is so obviously happening around us, to link the dots and think beyond technical specialism or success criteria. Similarly, our educational practices and priorities must look beyond easily quantifiable outcomes and the neat categorisations of a Victorian curriculum. Bendell (2018) also argues that we must respond to the future he describes with *resilience* (emotional, practical and cognitive), the *relinquishment* of much of what we are used to, and the *restoration* of what we have and what we had that might sustain us. In our schools, it is clear that we must place resilience at the heart of everything we do so that young people can face the world with courage and confidence; we must relinquish aspirations of unlimited success, beauty, wealth, longevity and love that will all come true if we can only get some solid exam results; and we must learn to restore the natural world and sustainable local communities. Critical to the conclusion of my argument is the claim that the realisation of the necessary change outlined above is far more likely in our educational systems than in wider society. This is true for several reasons. First, young people are less invested in conformity and

the illusions of the current system: they are as yet unburdened with debt, dependents or an indoctrination in individualistic success. Second, there is scope for an ideological shift in education (less so in wider society). This potential for change will be increased as the climate emergency deepens and also as parents see the positive effects of change for their children's well-being and future lives. Finally, and most importantly, educational reform will happen because young people will demand it.

The Need for Action

This brings us to my final argument: that direct action and civil disobedience will be necessary to effect the changes discussed above. Traditional attempts at reform have not worked in the same way that traditional or conventional environmental campaigning has not led to a reduction in emissions or the destruction of nature. Global and national school-strike movements, along with the mass civil disobedience of Extinction Rebellion, have put radical change on the table. As the urgency of the crisis deepens and as awareness increases, these movements will continue to grow. Students, parents and educators must play their part and continue to demand radical educational reform. We must resist and, where necessary, shut down the existing system. This will require us to countenance short-term sacrifice. Teachers are rightly fearful of risking the loss of their job, which is not only a loved vocation but the source of their financial security. But with a critical mass of professionals willing to reject the toxic system they work in, employers and policymakers will start to listen. Civil disobedience demonstrates the seriousness of the cause by a willingness to face personal risk, and also, by way of disruption, demands the attention of the public, the media and, ultimately, the state. Unions understand that any liveable future will involve an entirely different model of education. The youth strike movement will increase pressure, increase its numbers and levels of inclusion, and increase strike days so that real disruption means real change. Some students, with the support of their parents, might consider boycotting the exams which perpetuate inequality and will anyway be useless as our current economy and society collapse. In schools and universities, educators and students must unite in this cause and reimagine what it means to learn, to live, to hope and to change.

At the start of this article, I acknowledged that I would not be developing a conventional academic argument. Similarly, I make no apology for making an emotional as well as rational argument. We only need to open our eyes to see the rational and empirical case for radical change: the beginnings of this crisis are unfolding all around us in the breakdown of our weather and ecosystems. The scientific evidence is uncontroversial. Predictions are never certain and always varied, but they start with grim and end with apocalyptic. So, we do not need more evidence or rational persuasion: we know what is necessary. What we need is to feel moved to action. We are in an emergency that requires a radical and urgent response. Reimagining education can be the starting point

for societal change, as well as providing the resilience and wherewithal that young people will need in the coming years. In the best case, this could result in meaningful mitigation of the climate and ecological crisis; even if this were not achieved, we would have resourced the next generation with the fortitude and compassion to enter a new time of existential upheaval. Radical change will not happen by way of conventional methods. With discipline, courage and love, we must now learn to rebel.

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