

---

# Young People Have the Capacity to Change the Outlook of the Planet Using Climate Education and Justice to Build a Better Future: a conversation

LUCY GIBBONS, SHANNON JACKSON,  
ANNWEN THURLOW, HARRY BERRY,  
PHOEBE COOKSON & CHERRY TUCKER

**ABSTRACT** In this article, Lucy Gibbons presents a conversation between herself and a group of young people where they talk about their experiences and involvement in the YouthStrike4Climate movement and discuss some of their concerns about education in the context of climate crisis.

I (Lucy Gibbons) asked five young people about their experiences and involvement with YouthStrike4Climate in a conversation, trying to understand the common issues and experiences linked with the climate crisis and the role of education.

Shannon Jackson (24) is a graduate who is involved with YouthStrike4Climate and has been organising movements with the others in this interview since February 2019. Annwen Thurlow (17) is a student from Leeds and is involved in YouthStrike4Climate in the organisation's outreach team. Harry Berry (17) is a student from Skipton who helps with organisation and outreach for YouthStrike4Climate. Phoebe Cookson (17) is a student from Skipton who runs the social media platforms for YouthStrike4Climate, which reach over 15,000 people across the United Kingdom. Cherry Tucker (13) is a student, the youngest in this interview, who helps with organisation and outreach for YouthStrike4Climate. Lucy Gibbons (16) is a student from Oxford who is involved in a petition to get the climate crisis onto the national curriculum.

Shannon Jackson brought the group together. She now works for the not-for-profit organisation Solar for Schools [1], which has helped 59 schools across the United Kingdom to go solar at no cost since 2015:

It has been able to do that by crowdfunding the money for projects online, with the funds raised by people from all across the country wanting to do good, then helping provide a new way of supporting schools without money to take action on reducing energy costs and combating climate change for their students. The programme uses the selling of electricity to the schools and the national grid to fund climate change and clean energy education throughout their network. (Shannon)

Shannon was invited for this interview when Solar for Schools had just launched a new national campaign to get more young people, as well as staff, to make their schools solar and to push for more student education in 2020. Shannon links the organisation's new drive to her experiences with the other interviewees as part of the Leeds YouthStrike4Climate movement. Shannon got involved in this movement while studying at university in February 2019, and has worked with the other under 18s in the interview before and during her time working with the Solar for Schools programme.

Becoming involved in YouthStrike4Climate was different for each member of the group. Shannon was actually one of the organisers of the first student strikes in February 2019, when over 2000 people took part. For Cherry, her parents had encouraged her involvement, while the others went to strikes and were 'mesmerised by their atmosphere'. Annwen described her first strike as 'electrifying' and went on to attend regular meetings to continue to organise and galvanise action.

As the early strikes were driven by university students, schools and school students were not particularly involved. What is interesting, though, is that through the ongoing planning and organisation work, young people, especially 16- and 17-year-olds, became heavily involved: 'It started as an older generation running it and has been passed down to us as young people, therefore it has been an educational thing that has been shared through everyone' (Phoebe). The movement itself has become intrinsically run and energised by young people:

As the younger people have been leading it, I've seen more of a shift in the age of the people coming to the strikes. Also, more young families have come because they have realised it's a safer way to protest. (Cherry)

Being embraced by young people, and impacting schools with student (and parent) involvement in the strikes, has triggered schools to think more about the climate and their practices. Moreover, being involved created learning experiences and also showed very clearly how society in general undervalues the capacity of young people to lead projects and movements. This movement

has shown that it is creative, inspiring and practical in many ways and, by giving emotional support to a movement that's been going on for over a year, it reflects to society how capable young people are of enforcing change.

Harry spoke very powerfully about the positive impact the experience of being involved in the YouthStrike4Climate movement has had:

Before, I wouldn't have even imagined that I could be organising a strike, let alone hosting one – up on the microphone talking to so many people. If you were to tell me that a year ago, I would not have believed you at all. It's really helped to prove that I can do it, not just me physically, but as a young person you're constantly told that you can't do these things 'cause you're too young, that you need to leave it to the adults, but we have shown that that is not true.

Many may feel that these young people were sacrificing critical educational opportunities while at the same time not really impacting the global problem. However, the group were vehement in their views that education was at the heart of what motivated them to take action, and that the impact of their undertaking is already starting to manifest:

At the strikes, there were many different ways that education and learning have been woven into the movements – by giving fact-based speeches, dance and music, which are all forms of learning. But also, people learning about their right to protest, which has led to primary schools going on school outings to the strikes, thereby deepening their knowledge on the issues and the value of protest to effect change. (Annwen)

Over the past year, the increase in awareness has risen significantly. (Cherry)

Young people have never had the climate emergency explained to them in such a way that it sticks. 'These strikes are giving children necessary skills and developing different expertise emotionally and physically' (Phoebe).

As Shannon commented: 'The cost of not acting is an area not widely talked about'. The United Nations has talked about how COVID-19 is linked to the human impact on our environment and destruction of animal habitats; animal and human species coming closer is linked to making viruses like Ebola and COVID-19 more common. The coronavirus has led to many children across the planet having to take time off school. It has really demonstrated that the system is not ready for global breakdown.

Following the global climate agreement in 2015, goals and legislation were created which led to 274 climate emergency declarations being made by local councils, and the expansion of Heathrow airport being reversed. Young people have seen the lack of action relative to these to declare a climate emergency:

Why should we study for a future that we're not even sure of what it might look like? Instead, we can be actively protesting and gaining more attention on the problem. And we have had some success. The UK government has now set 2050 environmental targets that correlates directly to what the youth strikes have been calling for.  
(Harry)

Moreover, Shannon added that 'after the youth strikes began, we found that one new school a week was joining Solar for Schools, which showed a real change in attitudes'.

We then went on to talk about Solar for Schools. Solar for Schools is a social business whose mission is about empowering young people to fight climate change in a really different way. Shannon, who works with schools in the programme, explained:

We will help a school go solar so that it doesn't have to cost the school for doing the right thing, for changing its energy supply, which is the second-highest use of carbon in a school after its heating. The programme was really easy for the school and is run by us.

The next step is really innovative. Here, the revenue from selling spare electricity is used to fund climate literacy. This action helps students (and schools) to think in the long term, and to learn about climate change and clean energy. 'We feel the climate crisis is just not taught enough in the curriculum,' Shannon continued – which is something I and my friends feel strongly about.

We want Solar to not just provide energy [for schools], but also look ahead to the future and think about the importance of education. In relation to climate justice, I like how our programme was open to any school in the UK and also works in Germany, India and expanding to New Zealand, Spain and Colombia in the next year. I just liked how accessible it is because it's a global movement.  
(Shannon)

The student strikes pushed for climate justice, creating pressure to tackle climate change through new economies, including the clean energy economy. Solar for Schools is a part of this:

We think that schools should have a stake in that and get profit from doing the right thing. Therefore, any profit that's made in the programme that's not going towards education is then given back to the school, so they get 100% of the profit made. It's unusual in the sense that it is trying to push the most benefits towards schools, and that's because the company itself is a 'one member one vote' system. It is kind of like a cooperative, and our members, who have democratic control within the project, are the schools. We did that because we always wanted the project to be working towards what

schools want and empower them to have some kind of control over it.

There's this shifting in responsibility in young people, who ultimately still have the rights to be young people and enjoy being in school and socialising. It's not fair that we just shift that burden. One of the things that our organisation is trying to do is say that you guys, as young people, have done your best and set that goal and made the pathway that we need, and then the adults, who have had years of experience, who can put that into practice, now have a responsibility to say let's create actions that you guys can lead which are easy and simple and in line with what you want, and we can support you in reaching those goals as a collective. That's where organisations like Solar for Schools come in, and adults say how can we collaborate here and actually offer pathways that are easy and simple for you to take climate action, because it shouldn't be left on young people to work it out; it's too complicated. Everyone needs to get involved and provide that collaboration. It's too much emotional mental burden for one generation; it needs to be spread. (Shannon)



Figure 1. Solar for Schools runs an active education programme, led by head of education Sarah Finder, in partnership with a range of local UK educators. The programme delivers workshops and assemblies on clean energy and climate change, as well as providing online materials, programmes and games to help students and staff integrate teaching across their curriculum.

Making the decision to go solar is in many ways the hardest part for a school. With this scheme, it is now possible to make the change and benefit from it. That said, not all schools have got there yet.

As we get further ahead, everyone is going to have to adapt to the fact that we are living in climate breakdown and we're going to have to change how we live, but the longer schools don't act, the more stress they're putting on the next generation. (Shannon)

For any school that is interested, Shannon recommends going to the website [www.solarforschools.co.uk](http://www.solarforschools.co.uk) and registering interest to find out more.

Returning to the main topic of education in a time of climate change, we went on to discuss how learning in school had helped the students to understand climate change and its impact. The views in general were that the curriculum and how the climate crisis is taught were lacking:

Although we were taught what climate change is, we were only taught the basic science of it, like greenhouse gases, stuff about the atmosphere and then that's about it. The deep human impact is just not taught. The massive flaw in the education system at the moment, especially at GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] level, is that you're only taught what you need to know to pass the test and that's not enough to get a deeper mindset and actually appreciate it for what it is. I'm doing Geography A level at the moment and it does go into a deeper understanding of climate change, but it's still not as real and feels quite window-dressed and sugar-coated, in a way that you're learning the facts with a bit of reality so you can remember them to put towards your exams. But you're not taught the true impacts of it and, importantly, how we can change it. (Harry)

But Phoebe went on to outline that the problem is not necessarily that of the school or teachers: 'It's that there is so much in the curriculum to get through that teachers just end up rushing to get the content taught ... it's all aimed towards that one exam on one day'. The group clearly see education as more than this, and feel that involvement in climate education should build a stronger connection to society and the world: 'Our education system is designed to make people pass tests but is not educating us to be citizens – citizens in the sense of the human impact of climate change' (Harry). Shannon went on to describe her time working in the asylum-seeker support sector:

I found that a lot of people were moving and facing an awful, awful immigration system in the UK, but the reason they were moving, ultimately, was because they were moving from disaster zones – not conflicts, but disasters like drought or famine – and were being forced to move because of changes in the climate. There are 18.8 million people in the world that are now displaced because of

climate-related disasters, and by working in that sector I saw the human impact of that. It was that experience – seeing the human impact of this crisis – and that view was not scientific. It framed it in a different way. Our education system is failing to humanise these topics and create active citizens.

At this point, I shared how we, as a small group of Year 11 students, had visited primary schools to help teach children, even of that age, about their importance in having the power to make change. Shannon agreed that this was important, sharing how YouthStrike4Climate was invited to a primary school in Leeds and asked to do an active workshop about how to become an activist for the climate. So far, this was the only project or workshop she had heard of that was trying to do this: ‘The education system needs to focus on making brilliant citizens within our society and not just people who are going to pass tests’ (Shannon). The youth strikes and the involvement of the media have really helped to open a lot more people’s eyes to the realities of the current world situation.

What plans are there for the future?

Looking forward, YouthStrike4Climate and the teams across the country are now deliberating on how best to focus ahead:

It’s a difficult one because we’re still dealing with the current situation and what that’s going to do to our society. I feel that everyone in the group is still figuring out what they’re going to do. But we do want to focus a lot more on education at the moment ... what we have and classed as normal is no longer as fixed as everyone thinks it was. (Annwen)

Shannon believes that not only does society need to change, but the YouthStrike4Climate movement also has to allow itself to change and adapt: ‘When the strikes started, they were enough because they were an outlet of frustration and showed that young people are here and care’. Now, however, young people are looking to drive forward the strikes:

I think that bringing people together in the street is great but it’s got to work towards something else. I think one of the things that often gets forgotten is how this movement has brought together groups of amazing young people, all from different friendship groups. Not only are they people that care about the climate and this particular issue, they’re people who care about social justice and are willing to act on it. (Shannon)

Maintaining motivation can be hard, especially when there are so many issues at stake. The creation of these networks between fellow activists has been incredibly valuable. We know that the next generation is going to be coming up against a lot of crises: the climate, pandemics and economic. The support and power of these networks will be vital to our success: ‘I know I rely on these

wonderful people a lot and even if that's the only long-term outcome from this movement, that's enough' (Shannon).

But what about the outlook for young people today? The group shared different views. Harry acknowledged that the future is unknown:

We can never really know what the world is going to be like, especially in a time of such uncertainty, which is why it is so important that we keep movements like this going because we don't know what is going to happen. If YouthStrike is so constant for us and the fight for social justice is so constant and we keep it that way, we just have to hope that the world will change around us. We don't know how politics will change or how the economy will be. We can only control the simple and small things in our lives, and it's up to us to decide what those things are. So, if we focus on what we want, we can only hope that it will inspire change around us.

For Phoebe:

Especially the youth movement has brought a sense of community. I've met all these wonderful people and I feel like I'm a part of a family with them, and I feel like that's something that is going to continue on into the future. From a personal level, the achievements of individuals is something that I really hope will continue on into the future.

Political involvement is something Annwen can see happening, such as the vote for 16-year-olds:

You can see changes in politics at the moment with the ages of MPs [Members of Parliament] falling, even though it is very high still. There are more and more younger people in politics, and movements like this are not going to be the ones that stop in two years when people decide that the climate is not important any more or we solve it and everything is fine. It's set a precedent in many ways for other youth-led movements and tells an important message about a lot of things.

Shannon concludes:

Ultimately, all we want to do is create an open community of people that changes the world. If you think about how we're influenced by friends and family and the people who we care about, they make us think differently, they inspire us to change. All we are trying to do is expand that out onto a global level. If we can create that community, that is thinking about social justice and isn't afraid to speak out, has the will to take actions to see change, and we can support each other to see that through, then eventually we will get there, right? Wherever 'there' is – maybe there is no end goal? Maybe it's just



continuous, but in a great way because you can't predict where we are going to go.

This shows how important it is for young people to be involved, lead change and work in collaboration to tackle the crises ahead. There is much to learn from this fantastic movement.

### Note

[1] Students or staff interested in taking action in their school by going solar are welcome to contact Shannon at [shannon@solarforschools.co.uk](mailto:shannon@solarforschools.co.uk)

---

**LUCY GIBBONS**, aged 16, is a student from Oxford who is involved in a petition to get the climate crisis onto the national curriculum.

**SHANNON JACKSON**, aged 24, is a graduate who is involved with YouthStrike4Climate and has been organising movements with the others in this interview since February 2019. She currently works for Solar for Schools.

**ANNWEN THURLOW**, aged 17, is a student from Leeds who is involved in YouthStrike4Climate in the organisation's outreach team.

**HARRY BERRY**, aged 17, is a student from Skipton who helps with organisation and outreach for YouthStrike4Climate.

**PHOEBE COOKSON**, aged 17, is a student from Skipton who runs the social media platforms for YouthStrike4Climate, which reach over 15,000 people across the United Kingdom.

**CHERRY TUCKER**, aged 13, is a student and helps with organisation and outreach for YouthStrike4Climate.



# **ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING: Michael Armstrong's writing for *FORUM***

Edited by PATRICK YARKER, SUE COX  
& MARY JANE DRUMMOND

2019 224 pages ISBN 978-1-910744-05-5

Presented as a free eBook, this collection brings together almost all the articles, speeches, reviews and other writing which Michael Armstrong published in *FORUM: for 3-19 comprehensive education* across fifty-five years of commitment to the journal. It provides conveniently accessible texts in which Michael, whose books include 'Closely Observed Children' and 'Children Writing Stories', formulated and developed important aspects of his thinking and engaged with the work of those who influenced him as a teacher, researcher and independent scholar. Michael explores imagination's essential role in learning, the misguided nature of the National Curriculum and its associated assessment regime, the continuing importance of the Cambridge Primary Review, and the necessity of regarding children not only as cultural recipients but also as cultural creators.

In addition to contextual and reflective material by the editors, the eBook includes an appreciation by Dr Jenifer Smith of Michael as a teacher, an index of all Michael's writing for *FORUM*, and information about his other publications.

**The eBook is available as a free download from the FORUM website:  
[www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM](http://www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM)**

**ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING:  
Michael Armstrong's writing for  
*FORUM***

Edited by PATRICK YARKER, SUE COX  
& MARY JANE DRUMMOND

2019 224 pages ISBN 978-1-910744-05-5

Presented as a free eBook, this collection brings together almost all the articles, speeches, reviews and other writing which Michael Armstrong published in *FORUM: for 3-19 comprehensive education* across fifty-five years of commitment to the journal. It provides conveniently accessible texts in which Michael, whose books include 'Closely Observed Children' and 'Children Writing Stories', formulated and developed important aspects of his thinking and engaged with the work of those who influenced him as a teacher, researcher and independent scholar. Michael explores imagination's essential role in learning, the misguided nature of the National Curriculum and its associated assessment regime, the continuing importance of the Cambridge Primary Review, and the necessity of regarding children not only as cultural recipients but also as cultural creators.

In addition to contextual and reflective material by the editors, the eBook includes an appreciation by Dr Jenifer Smith of Michael as a teacher, an index of all Michael's writing for *FORUM*, and information about his other publications.

**The eBook is available as a free download from the FORUM website:  
[www.worlds.co.uk/FORUM](http://www.worlds.co.uk/FORUM)**