

Redefining Resilience Through Ecology at School

Article by Chris Sakellaridis

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Aspects of environmental education have been introduced into school curricula across Europe over the last 30 years, cultivating wider awareness of climate change. However, this has done little to alter our trajectory. Chris Sakellaridis argues that these programmes can go further to teach young people to adapt to and mitigate climate change by increasing their resilience and sense of belonging as well as harnessing their skills for change.

Our upcoming edition “Making our Minds: Uncovering the Politics of Education” further explores this and other challenges facing education in Europe. Pre-order or subscribe now to receive your copy straight from the printer.

You are 13 years old. For the past seven years, you have received lessons on the environment, recycling, respecting and loving nature, dirty and clean energy, a future with frequent disasters. You have made posters and artwork, written letters, sang songs, acted in school plays, cleaned your local park. You have probably gone on field trips to woodlands, farms and shelters, nature parks or other areas; listened to talks from scientists; learnt about different species and habitats. Today, in class, you are learning about CO₂ and its effect on the warming of the planet, the water cycle, and extreme weather phenomena. You know that many things are wrong with the way the world works, and teachers, parents, environmental organisations, and activists all tell you that you should do something about it.

Hopefully, all this exposure has helped you gain a lot of knowledge about “the climate”, “nature”, “the environment”, “fossil fuels”, “sustainability”, “activism”, “the planet”, and other issues. Does this mean that you feel capable and empowered to deal with the impacts of climate change? Or is this knowledge perhaps too abstract and detached from your everyday life?

For the past 20 to 30 years, school curricula in Europe and around the world have progressively adopted different forms of environmental education, including climate awareness. Various educators have successfully incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals and UN principle of teaching for sustainability into their lessons. They have also helped young people develop the four most important skills of the 21st century: creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. For all this work, they should be applauded (and rewarded).

Yet the latest IPCC evidence reports an accelerating climate emergency. Increases in the frequency and severity of torrential rains and flooding, wildfires, heavy and persistent snowfall, erosion, and desertification have made it all the more necessary to equip everyone – but especially young people – with the skills they need to face these extreme

events and incremental shifts. Added to this is the social emergency caused by harmful economic policies, extreme inequality, trade imbalances between North and South, a global pandemic, and war. Ahead of November 2021's COP26 in Glasgow, scientists warned that "our biggest challenges are not technical, but social, economic, political and behavioural."

These are the challenges education in climate and sustainability must focus on. Presently, the dominant approach to educating young people on the threats we face is to present them with facts, figures, and scientific arguments. But as the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccine hesitancy have demonstrated, people cannot be persuaded to act simply by means of scientific communication; lived experiences are central to behavioural change. Recent proposals on EU education systems by the European Commission seem to be learning these lessons; they emphasise whole-school and community-based approaches to teaching on climate change, sustainability, and the environment.

Lived experiences are central to behavioural change.

Teaching resilience

Resilience is a fundamental 21st-century skill entailing the capacity not only to withstand and endure change or hardship, but also to survive and bounce back. But while present discourses around building resilient cities, communities, and infrastructure and institutions imagine resilient individuals who have the skills, knowledge, and emotional capacity to cope with a difficult and rapidly changing environment, the teaching of resilience itself is noticeably absent from today's education systems.

What might it look like to teach resilience? Forest schools, outdoor education activities, and traditional survivalist groups are good examples to draw from. Their pedagogy connects positive outdoor experiences with cultivating healthy social and adaptive skills. Behind this approach is the philosophy that by giving young people the opportunity to experiment, take risks, make mistakes, and socialise, they develop both skills and a sense of belonging. Such alternative models redefine success, challenging our present education systems that breed excessive stress among young people and make them more likely to disengage.

A green approach to resilience goes beyond "character building"; it teaches values and climate mitigation and adaptation. It is important to be honest with young people about our current trajectory, as well as to show them that the best way to deal with this is to work collectively and equally; to share and repair resources; to prevent pollution, destruction, and loss; and to preserve and restore natural ecosystems.

Teaching resilience from this perspective requires school curricula that are not only practical but also meaningful for everyone involved. One simple change to curricula, which would have immediate results, would be to introduce ecology as a stand-alone subject. To enable a maximum degree of localisation and school input, the scope could be kept broad yet designed to address the six processes that have the greatest impact on our climate and society: food production and distribution; water management; energy production and transmission; resource extraction; industrial production and product lifecycles; and waste

management.

One hour a week in primary school and two hours in secondary, along with educational visits, talks and other activities, would ground students' understanding of the climate emergency in these very real and tangible aspects of human life and how they might change. Additionally, skills such as food-growing, repairing, reusing, reducing energy and water use, and finding innovative ways to bring down our daily resource consumption could be woven into the broader curriculum at school. Teaching these processes would introduce an ecological systems-thinking approach to today's challenges. Although not test-based, ecology should nonetheless be formatively assessed, with students' skills and knowledge reviewed and reflected upon.

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about our current trajectory.*

Facing facts and spotting false hopes

In Greece, the pressing need for a more ecologically minded education system to develop the skills and resilience needed for the future is clearer than ever in the context of extreme weather events, wildfires, and environmental degradation. For years, environmental education initiatives, organised by devoted teachers and parents, have been successful despite extreme challenges. However, participation remains voluntary. Recent education reforms by the Greek government have promised to remedy past failures but also to introduce a "greener" agenda in schools. Whether these will go beyond mere window dressing remains to be seen.

Fully embedding ecology within our education systems and incorporating deeper and more systemic approaches within climate and sustainability education would help cement the initiatives of the last 30 years. Crucially, such a move would also allow schools to invest more time and resources in this crucial task. With the right support and training, primary and secondary school teachers would be given the opportunity to connect different subjects and create even more engaging learning environments.

Talking to children and young people about the climate emergency and the real threats it poses should not be confused with doom-mongering. The climate debate often generates a false binary of hope versus despair. While it is certainly important to avoid creating the paralysis that comes with helplessness, false hope is an even worse road to take, leading to passivity and apathy. Facing the facts head on is important if we are going to mitigate some of the worst outcomes of a warming planet.

Helping children and young people develop their adaptability, fortitude, and thrift will empower them to approach changing circumstances with confidence, and to take appropriate action, both individually and collectively. Providing young people with a deep understanding of the ecological impacts of the systems that meet our basic human needs will also foster within them a solid sense of belonging in the world. Highlighting our very real inter-connectedness with the life systems that support us, as well as with each other, would be a starting point for renouncing hyper-consumerism, exploitation, and excessive

individualism for a truly green society.



Chris Sakellaridis is a trainer, poet, and translator. He has worked in various educational settings in the UK, Greece and Italy, including working with excluded and vulnerable young people and as a trade union representative. He is currently the coordinator for youth programmes for the Green Institute of Greece. His research focus is on how to make school curricula more meaningful and engaging for both students and teachers through fostering the imagination and a connection with the physical world.

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