Greening education: A multidimensional power struggle

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Education can be understood as a process designed to further the discourses of those agents, both state and non-state, who enjoy positions of power. These discourses are often environmentally destructive – promoting human mastery over nature and technology as the solution to the ecological crisis. However, by 'greening' education, and empowering individuals as ecological citizens, it is possible to challenge these approaches and balance the inequalities of power that shape our society. Such an undertaking would seek to incorporate both the intrinsic and instrumental value of nature into decision-making processes and promote non-anthropocentric relationships with the more-than-human world.

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In our dynamic world, profoundly shaped by the values of self-interest and capitalist growth, education can be understood as an instrument of social engineering employed to maintain social and economic norms. However, education can also be a site where those norms are resisted and critiqued. What would it take to 'green' education and make it capable of challenging our society's ecocidal anthropocentric norms?

In this article, I examine the key challenges to the 'greening' of education and the dimensions of power in which this battle is fought – with a focus on the situation in the UK. I shall draw on the examples of Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil as grassroot movements, before examining the UK government's response to these challenges, to provide a background to the structural reforms that I would argue are necessary to achieve a shift towards the 'greening' of education and an ecologically just society.

The purposes of education

Education – comprising knowledge, values, skills and attitudes as well as the systematic processes through which they are delivered – is more than an

occupation of youth. It is an ongoing process shaping our understanding of, and interactions with, the world around us. Rigorously designed and monitored, the education system in the UK explicitly details acceptable areas of study, the frameworks through which they should be approached and the measures used to assess the efficacy of knowledge dissemination. Utilizing the curriculum, and the institutions charged with its delivery, policymakers are able to subtly instil social, political and economic values into those in its care – including a capitalist work ethic, conformity and a respect for institutional hierarchy – to fabricate citizens that uphold the agreed norms of society. This secondary process of learning has been referred to as the "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1990) and teaches not only respect for authority but also that failure to comply with established rules will result in punishment and sanctions, creating a culture of fear that prevents individualism or challenges to social and political discourse, limiting the potential for significant change.

This use of education to shape the terms of a social contract is not an accidental occurrence. It is the deliberate application of structural power, designed to legitimize the UK's economic approach to the environmental issues of today. Communicated through institutions and government policies, this approach is grounded in the principle of *techno-optimism*: the belief that technology holds the answer to the issues of climate change, terrestrial and marine pollution and the ever-growing need for energy. In this arrangement, we are automatically assigned the rights and duties of 'environmental citizens'. As such, we are expected to accept that our environmental wellbeing can be ensured without radical change to our ways of life or to the economic system. All that is needed, we are led to believe, is the market-led application of net-zero strategies and perhaps the use of Pigouvian taxes (Pigou, 1938; Hawkins, 2020) to offset the negative environmental consequences of economic growth and state-led environmental policies. In this way, economic development is permitted to continue provided it outsources its environmental destruction to regions beyond public concern. The establishing of environmental citizenship as the social norm leaves us apparently free to pursue our own interests, to continue our profligate consumption of energy and resources, and secure our own futures safely insulated – or so we are assured – from the ecological impact of our actions.

This model of so-called 'sustainable development' or 'green capitalism' is – despite its obvious inadequacies in the face of the ecological crisis – now the only approach allowed to be formally taught in the UK, as government guidance prohibits the teaching of any anti-capitalist views (HM Home Office, 2022). This means that, for educators, any attempt to provide a *genuinely* ecocentric education is now a risk to their own job security and reputations.

To strengthen the anthropocentric discourse of 'sustainable development', a "false separation" has been engineered between the human and more-than-human world (Latour, 1991, 2004), reinforced by those holding structural power to project a sense of human mastery over the natural world. This ecocidal ideology is embedded in society through bodies of knowledge and systems of formal education that impart an impersonal, mechanistic

understanding of the natural world, planetary systems and the biophysical processes that govern them.

The 'impersonal' approach to environmental education fails, however, to provide the learning experiences required to foster ethically rich connections between students and the more-than-human world around them. The natural environment becomes something that is studied, analysed and explored solely through detached scientific observation. This can hinder students' development of a sense of wonder and an intimate love of the natural world for its intrinsic value – such as can develop from the joys of walking in the woods or waking up on a mountain above the clouds. Those of us seeking to champion the cause of ecological justice and the 'greening' of education have already experienced the transformative power of the natural world and developed a love for the environmental spaces we view as sacred. It is this love for the natural world that holds the power to overcome the structural constructs of those seeking to maintain the present economic system, and achieve the realization of an eco-centric society with an education system fit for the future.

Such a system would transcend the confines of formal education, drawing on the lessons and experiences from around the world to create an informal network in which all citizens, not just those engaged in higher education, could be considered students. The beginnings of such a network are already to be found – for example, in the UK farmer-to-farmer education is already widely utilized, and community engagement initiatives, such as the Thames 21 project (https://www.thames21.org.uk/), are delivering training schemes for those seeking to lead environmental campaigns and pursue a greener future. These steps are a gradual way to instil ecological values into the collective national identity. However, the UK is still far behind a state such as Ecuador, which recognizes the agency of the natural world, *Pachamama*, in its constitution (Berros, 2015).

An education for ecological citizenship

Pursuing the transition to a genuinely 'green' education is a controversial and complex undertaking – particularly when one considers the contested nature of the international order. With current power structures favouring anthropocentric attitudes towards domestic and international interactions, the definitions of 'sustainability' and 'green' are continuously being reframed to support the belief that economic growth is limitless.

Central to this conflict are the different dimensions of power, concentrated in both institutions and people, that shape the norms of daily life. For states, this power is structural, channelled through policies that govern the curriculum and dissemination of knowledge, decide what areas of research and education will receive funding and resource allocation, and write the social narrative to frame selected issues as security concerns. As ecological citizens, we do not have these vast reserves to draw upon; instead we must skilfully employ the power of language and communication to share information, raise awareness of ecological values and advocate for environmental justice to influence changes in social behaviours.

Drawing on the intrinsic moral value of the more-than-human world, ecological citizenship aspires to transcend traditional understandings of national borders, incorporating both human and non-human rights in decision-making processes, to achieve a just use of ecological space through systems of asymmetrical obligations (Humphreys, 2019: 66). These asymmetrical obligations recognize that rights are not reciprocal and that actors with large and destructive ecological footprints have a moral duty to reduce their consumption. In doing so, it presents citizenship as a universal global contract, in which a conscious individual choice must be made to protect the integrity and wellbeing of planetary processes, immediately enacting the positive duties to reduce one's own consumption and challenge those who would take more than their just share.

In challenging others, the use of language and the means through which it is communicated have the power to realize a social transition; however, it must be used effectively to influence the public and mobilize change. Consider, for example, the words of Extinction Rebellion's famous letter to the press:

> *When a government wilfully abrogates its responsibility to protect its citizens from harm and to secure the future for generations to come, it has failed in its most essential duty of stewardship. The 'social contract' has been broken, and it is therefore not only our right, but our moral duty to bypass the government's inaction and flagrant dereliction of duty, and to rebel to defend life itself. (Green* et al., *2018)*

The language was clear and the accusation legitimate, yet the movement failed to communicate effectively to generate lasting change. Disruptive protests in the UK alienated those who had not yet embodied the ecological values of the organization, and allowed the government and media to rewrite the narrative and criminalize environmental rights defenders. As a result, the UK government has been able to consolidate its power over environmental issues through the implementation of the Police and Crime Bill, limiting the scope and scale of citizen action, while justifying the ban on the teaching of ecological material by categorizing it as an 'extreme view' (HM Home Office, 2022).

This erosion of civil freedoms, the right to peaceful assembly, self-determination and a balanced and meaningful education has seen the UK being formally downgraded by the CIVICUS Monitor as having an obstructed civic space (CIVICUS, 2023). This loss of hard-won rights has surely contributed to the anxiety and helplessness experienced by the large proportion of the population concerned about climate change (Office of National Statistics, 2021).

This feeling of powerlessness highlights the failings of the current education system in creating the human capabilities necessary for citizens to engage with state and non-state actors in a meaningful way to address ecological issues. Despite an unprecedented abundance of environmental literature being readily available, it has not translated into the empowerment of the public and the

implementation of citizen-led solutions. For many, the only option available is to raise awareness for campaigns, such as Just Stop Oil, by protesting and lobbying policymakers. Though it provides a means for the public to express their concerns about the lack of meaningful interventions in the fight against climate change, it fails to engage in dialogue to develop solutions.

While we may not condone or encourage actions currently deemed illegal, history teaches us that laws are reflective of the populations' preferences and can be changed if enough pressure is applied in the correct places. Through education both formal and informal, we can create a society capable of realizing ecological changes. To champion this change, we must utilize the readily available data and information to highlight the need for individual behaviour changes, translating it from cold, clinical statistics to meaningful stories that create personal responses. Doing so will remove the monopoly on information held by academic and political actors, to achieve an ecologically literate society (Kahn, 2010).

This literacy needs to be the focus of 'green' education initiatives – returning the responsibility of education to both teachers as paid state employees *and* family, friends and communities sharing knowledge and the importance of engaging with the local environment. Such initiatives must communicate ecological values in a language that holds enough weight to counter the social and economic costs of an ecological transition. In this struggle, education and learning are key tools through which change can be achieved.

A multidimensional approach

When seeking to reframe the parameters of education to include the agency of the natural world, we must bear in mind that governments around the world seek to create policies that are seen to protect their citizens from harm while allowing for the pursuit of economic growth and energy security (*cf.* HM Government, 2022). Such an approach inevitably favours the security and survivability of the state ahead of environmental protection. In real world terms, this means polluters escape prosecution, additional licenses being granted for fossil fuel extraction, and the freedom for citizens to cause environmental harm within the constraints of a system of economic sanctions and incentives designed to modify social behaviour (HM Government, 2023: 59–62).

However, this same need for security can be utilized to drive change as political parties are dependent on public approval for their representative authority. To effectively 'green' education, we need to create a system that educates not only those who consent through silence to the false solutions offered by the government, but also state and non-state actors.

Whilst we cannot directly educate industries, who are interested solely in growth and profit, we can influence them by educating consumers – most importantly, by raising awareness of the ecological costs associated with their purchases. A simple example would be the introduction of graphic warnings (similar to those now found on tobacco products) on products with a high ecological impact. Such an approach would help to ensure that the invisible

costs of economic action are factored into decision-making. While not a formal learning experience, it would enable consumers to make informed purchases and raise awareness of the ecological cost of their lifestyle.

For the wider public, we need to ensure a structured system of education for ecological activists is available. Before the rise of a network society, these activists were educators taking upon themselves the responsibility to gather, analyse and share information on areas of environmental concern. Combining this historical approach with the technology that is available today, we can create communities and citizens with the capabilities necessary to campaign in a language that communicates ecological values to create an affective response within their target audience.

For institutions, we must first seek to overturn the legislation that criminalizes environmental activism and prohibits teachers from developing the critical thinking skills within future generations. We must call for a decentralized curriculum that allows educators to undertake training in their local environment to create individual learning experiences that enable students to connect with the environment, learning to see the more-than-human world as intrinsically valuable, and not merely of instrumental worth.

This transition will not be a quick process, but with a growing awareness of the ecological crisis among the public, these strategies can empower individuals to take action, mobilize collectively for change and take a multidimensional approach to the pursuit of a genuinely 'green' education – one that champions ecological values, uses language that empowers, communicates strategies for the decentralization of environmental governance and fosters a spirit of individual accountability and passion for the natural world.

For such a transition to be realized, both structural and grassroot powers need to converge and find a way in which their values can align, moving away from disruptive protests to effectively communicate ecological values in a way that engages and empowers all elements of society. A genuinely 'green', or ecocentric, education can then be understood as one that has abandoned the hierarchical constructs of traditional education – in which passive students are taught to cultivate a detached, impersonal relationship with the more-than-human world – and instead actively encourages an intimate, loving, ethically rich understanding of our Earth, and promotes a transition towards an ecocentric society.

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