PART 4

*Toward Greater Accountability in Education for
Climate Action*

Perspectives from a Young Voice on Making Schools and Individuals Agents of Change

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Abstract

This chapter presents a student's opinions and views about how US schools are not properly doing their part to educate students on environmental, social, and economic issues. It introduces basic ways schools can further incorporate sustainability lessons into core-subject lessons. It also explains ways people can make changes in their daily lives to support the preservation of natural environments and to begin to live sustainably, while simultaneously spreading awareness and educating others. To conclude, the chapter discusses ways the author herself works every day to create changes in her family, her school, and her community. The chapter draws on the author's experiences as an environmental assistant in her California (USA) high school's sustainability programs and as an advocate for women's empowerment and environmental awareness locally and internationally.

Keywords

change – education for sustainable development – environment – secondary education – sustainability programs

1 Our Generation Is Motivated

As a proud member of Generation Z, I believe that it is our responsibility to protect and give back to Earth. My generation has taken into our own hands to be vocal and loud advocating for social and environmental issues. We take a stand, and we make ourselves heard, whether by spreading awareness online, making posters, signing petitions, or protesting. We stand up for what we believe is right and needed. We are known as the most diverse generation, and I can speak on behalf of all of us when I say we won't stop working. We want change, and we want a healthier world and future for ourselves and our

children. It is as important to listen to, and trust, the youth of today as it is to listen to, and trust, the adults. We want to be part of the conversation. We are listening, observing, and trying to contribute and make improvements. I hope that people are open enough to listen to me and the rest of the youth. Once they listen, I hope that they will make adjustments in their daily lives, educate others, spread awareness, and join us in the fight to reduce humans' negative impact on the environment and to create a more sustainable world.

2 Schools Fail Us

In all my school experience, from primary school through high school, I have noticed a general lack of relevant education and information being conveyed in the classroom, especially in science classes. I can recall many occasions that offered particularly striking opportunities to address current sustainability events; yet, we instead spent weeks at a time being taught how to master tasks such as how to take a particular style of notes (the "Cornell notes" system) on the carbon cycle or memorizing how to balance a chemical equation. As a recent example, last semester the first strike for Fridays for Future was happening in my hometown. Although the movement is intended to bring awareness about climate change, we were not told about it. Although acquiring academic skills is important, there should be an emphasis on providing teachers with a time and a way to teach about pressing environmental issues. Learning about climate change goes beyond learning about the carbon cycle; it is about the daily actions individuals have to take to lower the contributions of greenhouse gases and to become informed about the companies that try to be carbon neutral. The level of greenhouse gases being released into the atmosphere is interfering greatly with the natural temperatures and climate around the world, thus affecting countless natural environments, species, and human populations; great quantities of plastics are being poured daily into the oceans; Indigenous people who are environmental stewards are dying in large numbers because the Amazon is being destroyed and no one is doing anything about it. When all these things are happening while I am in class, the Cornell notes and memorization can wait, or at least our class time should be adjusted to make room for the sustainability issues.

In classrooms across the nations, students are spending more time learning about subjects that have been taught for years, in the same way, directly out of textbooks, instead of being taught those subjects in conjunction with the urgent sustainability issues that already affect the lives and livelihoods of my generation, and all others. I recall that in 2019, at the same time as another of

the local Fridays for Future protests, I was taking an Advanced Placement environmental science class. The teacher did not even mention the protests, and their consequent opportunity for activism, although they were evidently on his radar. The strikes were worldwide and revolutionary. Yet, instead, we were sat down in class and encouraged to listen to the teacher and take routine notes about the food webs of voles. Schools should incorporate aspects of current environmental and social issues, as well as youth activism, into their everyday curriculum in order to effectively teach all students the importance and significance of these issues and should provide a space for action and application of earned knowledge. Pupils should be learning how to lower their carbon footprint in class; they should go on field trips to learn about why local species are in danger of extinction; they should be watching engaging documentaries on environmental and social activism and conservation projects; they should be encouraged to take part in making a change and be given resources to do so. One documentary that spoke to me and delivered a powerful message that I've thought about often since I've watched it is *Food Inc.* It taught me about the unsanitary conditions of the facilities that the majority of people buy their food from, and it influenced me to decide to follow a vegetarian diet.

Along with a lack of information, there is a lack of conversation. Many people haven't had the realization yet as to why we need to make changes in our lifestyles to help the environment, because they don't understand the issues and the stakes. Speaking up and educating friends and family about environmental issues are helpful gateways to cultivating the knowledge needed for living in a more sustainable world. When I am learning about information that is current and factual and relevant and feels pressing, even after class has been dismissed, the information feels as though it has stuck with me, and I feel compelled to spend more time thinking and talking about it. If school systems in the United States would allow the youth to learn more relevant information from a young age, speaking up and critically thinking would be second nature. If class discussions incorporated such topics, the youth would incorporate them into everyday conversations and spread awareness. Schools are supposed to be where basic education is taught. Yet, schools are not providing the correct support to educate the youth about the current social and environmental issues which, consequently, causes a void of awareness across the nation. Examples of correct support could include a class on sustainability and lifestyle skills (how to consume less plastic, how to offset carbon emissions, how to find companies that are environmentally friendly), classes on how to do activism, and classes on environmental or social entrepreneurship.

Throughout the entirety of my education, I have not received lessons in any of my core subjects (such as English, history, and mathematics) that have

integrated information specific to social or environmental problems. Such integration could be achieved if, for example, English class would incorporate important environmental texts, history classes would explore how poverty and inequality are linked with environmental injustices, economics class would encourage discussion about the obvious links between consumption and the degradation of natural environments. It should be mandatory that teachers are taught how to build lessons that incorporate social and environmental issues that are related to the academic topics that we are supposed to learn. This training would help them to educate the youth in a much more effective way than teaching us how to learn from textbooks.

3 You Can Educate Yourself

Because schools fail to provide enough current information about relevant social, economic, and environmental topics and events, the youth have to take it upon themselves to be proactive and find alternate ways to educate themselves. A key tool to do this is to seek out, online, specific topics or issues, a search that can lead to further websites, pages, and resources that will inform us even more. However, not all young people are able to have opportunities to educate themselves, which is why the responsibility must be remain on the school system.

If you have access, a convenient way to inform yourself about these topics is through social media. Personally, I use it both to learn and to spread awareness, as I find it the easiest and most effective way to do so. So much important information on environmental and social issues is conveyed throughout social media, all of which is easily accessible when you have an account. If you want to inform yourself, follow accounts that spread meaningful and informative posts, and take the time to read the captions. Once you learn about a specific issue, read beyond those posts and further inform yourself by searching and using reliable websites that provide useful and educational information. Instagram posts can be helpful to start your outside-of-school education process but using other sources that have critical information on a specific issue can help you to further inform yourself. You should go beyond social media as your alternative means of self-education. In the end, you can have ownership of your own learning.

Once you have initiated the process of educating yourself through out-of-school channels, schools can support and continue this process by connecting it with classes. For example, an English teacher could integrate social media and learning about climate change into class by asking students to bring a

meaningful educational post from an account that focuses on climate education and have the whole class dissect its content. Another way schools could further connect what we read from social media is by bringing the people who write these posts into our classrooms as guest speakers who could answer our questions and thus create in-depth engaging discussions.

Another way to stay informed is to be in communication with people who are active around social and environmental issues and causes. This approach is definitely one of the most helpful for staying educated and finding opportunities to be engaged. When you communicate or interact with someone who is active in the area you want to learn about, you can have open conversations that provide you with the ability to become knowledgeable on the topic(s); learn the ways you can contribute on a small scale; and even learn how you can become engaged with organizations and programs that are working for environmental and social sustainability. People who are active with respect to the environment can be found everywhere. They can include staff at your school who either teach a class about environmental science, or who even if they don't, are always open to discussing environmental or social issues; staff at your school who take initiative to run programs like recycling, composting, upcycling, or working with the food gardens; teachers or mentors who make small changes to live more sustainable lives; fellow youth who attend activism events or post regularly about current events; and adults with a degree in related subjects.

4 You Can “Be the Change”

It is important to spread awareness about what you do know, no matter how small the issue, and then work to “be the change”. If you're old enough to vote and eligible to, it is critical to exercise your privilege to vote to support laws, policies, and officials that will help, rather than harm, the environment. The democratic structure in the United States gives its citizens the power to be active in changing environmental impact on a nationwide scale.

If you can't vote, there are many ways to spread awareness and make your voice matter. It's okay to start small. Begin with family conversations, urging family to embrace simple changes to daily habits, such as switching from buying plastic water bottles to only using reusable ones. I have this personal conversation at my home a lot. When we purchase groceries and we need water, instead of buying plastic water bottles, we buy glass bottles we can reuse, as well as making our best effort to purchase food items packaged in materials other than plastic. Our small decision makes a big impact, as we are contributing

to decreasing the demand for a product that is made from fossil fuels. Even the smallest changes, like daily grocery store decisions, can have an immense impact on the environment.

Another way of spreading awareness and making change without voting is to sign petitions. Online are hundreds of petitions that help make a positive impact and spread awareness about local and global environmental issues. After you sign the petition, you can easily copy and paste the link and share it with as many people as you'd like or post the petition somewhere. It's that simple.

Attending protests is another way to inform others and be part of the needed change. Before Covid-19, Fridays for Future held peaceful protests every Friday. Protesting peacefully is a way to show the world that we demand change and will not stop until we are heard.

Finally, a way to contribute to accomplishing the shifts that are so urgent is to volunteer with organizations or groups working on environmental or social initiatives. Through volunteer work, you can be directly part of, and see, the change you're making, no matter how big or small. Volunteering is a way to physically "be the change". In many ways I personally strive to make change. Every day I work to make sustainable decisions that collectively add up. For example, when I buy clothing, I am diligent in supporting those companies that offer it under fair-trade standards. Volunteering is another big way I aim to make a difference. I have a non-profit called A Single Thread in which my friend and I collect clothing donations and distribute them both locally and out of the country to girls in need of clothing.

The biggest excursion I have gone on for A Single Thread was in the summer of 2019: I went to Costa Rica with 100 pounds of clothing, which we sold at a very low cost in order to pass the revenues to a group of local women entrepreneurs in the small town of Pavones. During this entire trip we used only reusable water bottles and reusable utensils, and we received our meals from local women who used organic, home-grown produce.

As an upcoming senior in high school, I am going to be the sustainability representative for my school. This job entails meeting with the sustainability committee at my school many times a month, attending meetings with the local sustainability committee from other schools, and overall being the student voice for sustainability on campus. My school is committed to sustainability: for example, we have a sustainability committee made up of faculty of students, we have a plastic-free campus, and we hold many recycling events. The plans I have as a member of the sustainability committee include advancing the vegan and vegetarian options offered in the cafeteria, increasing opportunities for experiential learning in the gardens and with the composting

facility, and increasing the number of sustainability activism events held on campus.

As a member of Generation Z, I know that we can “be the change” the world needs. I have faith in my generation, and I strongly believe that everyone should have faith in us as well. Anything is possible when we put our minds to it, and if that hasn’t been exemplified yet, just wait. When the youth are able to find support in the adults around us, and the adults give us the basis and opportunities to voice our opinions, I believe that change will be much easier. Either way, we will not be silenced and will not be compliant. The youth of today will be active and loud, and we will not stop until we have “been the change” we want to see. We just need to keep fighting for a more sustainable world and work together so that we can achieve a balance between natural environments and our societies.