

Is now the right time to push for an education system founded on ecology?

Literature and movement overview - version 1, 22nd May 2020.

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The call for educational transformation is ringing loud during this moment. The din of our classrooms replaced with the silence of empty exam halls. As with much of society, it now seems apt to reflect upon and question the faults in our education system and to look at how teaching and learning relates to the climate and ecological emergency we are facing. In this article I leave out much of the wider movement for ecological education, which is broad with decades of roots, some of which I skimmed through within my [previous piece on ecological education](#) (February 2020). Instead I want to look at the different voices talking about what we might return to after this current disruption, and why they do not want to return to what was considered normal. When we do return, at least for the next academic year, teachers will be frantically treading water. This splashing around in the remnants of a disfigured curriculum will be busy with concerns of mental health, 2021 assessments and attainment gaps of the disadvantaged. While trying to stop the young people - and ourselves - from sinking, perhaps we can also take moments to determine the direction we want to swim next.

Among the discussion of coming out of the covid crisis into a redefined normal, George Monbiot has called for this as the time to put 'ecology and Earth systems at the heart of learning, just as they are at the heart of life' ([The Guardian](#), 12th May 2020). Sir Ken Robinson has restated his position that the output focus of our extractive economy and agriculture has been replicated within our current assessment and outcome-focused education system. In a short talk he interlinks our crisis within education to both that of the climate and the pandemic, and applies his education reform ideas within an ecological perspective saying that 'we can reinvent school, we can revitalise learning and we can reignite the creative compassion of our communities if we think differently when we try to go back to normal' ([YouTube](#) (16mins), 7th May 2020¹). In Wales The Urdd, the largest Welsh youth movement, has issued 'a wake-up call to the world and warning against a return to some of the selfish, destructive ways of the past' ([BBC](#), 18th May 2020). While a myriad of statements shout of a non-return, there is uncertainty when it comes to the political pressure points and actors that could aid this shift. As within the wider Extinction Rebellion movement, we must reflect on this uncertainty

¹ I disagree strongly with an often repeated statement which Robinson uses, around the idea that the World will do just fine and that it is only a human existential crisis. Our damage of starting the 6th mass extinction will cause millions of years of ecosystem and evolutionary set-back.

about how to take action in this current time, and while we may not yet have the answers, it is still the case that ‘now more than ever, the future is up for grabs’ ([XR Newsletter](#), 29th April 2020).

On February 26th 2020, Teach the Future launched their parliamentary bill at Westminster with much interest from MPs from all major parties. This represents the most significant political push for environmental education reform in the UK, and they now state that we must ‘make use of the pandemic moment of change to decarbonise society quicker than ever before,’ and in the run-up to rescheduled COP26 place the UK as ‘the pioneering nation on climate education’ ([Teach the Future](#), 20th April 2020). Teach the Future is a youth-led movement bringing together the climate strike coordinators (UKSCN) with the NUS, and is supported by numerous organisations in their aims including XR Educators. They also recently sent [this letter](#) to Gavin Williamson calling for zero-carbon schools as part of the wider demand of the Committee on Climate Change to rebuild the economy with an environmental focus (11th May 2012). We will have to wait for a response, and to see how much political space there is for climate discussion, let alone related educational reform.

Pupil Power, a new youth-led organisation set up by Aliyah York, has been collaborating with the Radical Education Forum to help bring young people to the forefront in a discussion of educational reform (met on 11th May). They have started to highlight the raw and brutal faults that exist within education, publishing a few snapshots of the stories young people have been sharing under the hashtag [#IRealisedTheSystemWasBrokenWhen](#). Their other questions being ‘how do we all make change?’ and ‘what do we pledge to do differently when we return?’ I would not want to squeeze in an ecology agenda alongside stories of self-harm, exclusions and tragedy, but instead perhaps look at how there could be much more room for care and consideration within schools which are not pressurised in a system based on the same economic output model which is destroying nature. In this way, ecological education plays its part as the answer to how we do education differently, rather than trying to highlight it as what is wrong currently within education.

On 19th April the NEU hosted a Celebrating Education Zoom call, in which over 1,000 members were present and included Shadow Education Secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey and NEU Joint-General Secretary, Mary Bousted. The call focused on how we create ‘a new system, not constricted by the pressures of Ofsted and teaching for the test and better able to deal with the huge problems of inequality which coronavirus and the lockdown are revealing’ (event email, 16th April 2020). A

second online event asked the vital question which is at the core of both ecology and social justice, of ‘how can we develop an anti racist curriculum after the lockdown?’ On [their website](#) they set out a series of discussion points to form ongoing conversations and bring more educators together to celebrate and build new approaches to education. With the NEU’s strong climate and ecology stance we can expect these to become a key part of the conversation too.

The noise for a refusal to return to normal faces the critique of exploiting this opportunity to push long-held agendas. 200 academics and artists proclaimed that a return to normal is unthinkable, laying out what we need to leave behind but understandably not proposing what we have instead ([Le Monde](#), 6th May 2020). Not proposing the model has been the approach of Extinction Rebellion since its outset, and I believe this should remain the case with XR Educators. It is an indisputable requirement that carbon emissions need to start to dramatically fall from this year, as well as ecosystem destruction slowing to a stop. When we come out the other side of covid-19, there will likely be a push for rolling back climate commitments, or refusing to commit to the much stronger agreements that will be required during the delayed COP26. The British public, at least, are currently more in agreement than ever about how important it is to protect our environment, with 48% in a recent survey saying the Government should respond with as much urgency as they are to the pandemic ([The Independent](#), 16th April 2020). Educational reform and its relationship to the long-term crisis is a lesser concern with the public, and ensuring children catch up with learning, especially those who are already disadvantaged will remain the mainstay of the conversation. I propose that now is the time to highlight the faults with the current system, in the same way those answering Pupil Power’s first question have done: to start to amplify stories from within the education system, with ecology as the healing foundation for many of the faults.

The call for re-examining wider society within this temporary crisis has been usefully framed by Bruno Latour, in this [recent article](#) where he says we need to use this time ‘to describe, initially one by one, then as a group, what we are attached to; what we are ready to give up; the chains we are ready to reconstruct and those that, in our behaviour, we have decided to interrupt.’ (29th March 2020). Latour has six questions, laid out at the end of his article which provide a practical way for all sizes of institutions to reflect on what needs to go and why, then thinking forward to what comes next. Through the answering of these questions we can follow Christiana Figueres’ invitation to ‘open our eyes to the risks and opportunities on the horizon. We can recover better and choose the future we want’ ([Financial Times](#), 7th May 2020). These narratives of ‘why now?’ and ‘what was

wrong with education before?', as with wider society, are currently being formed, but they are going to require a whole lot more networking and noise from a range of organisations. So, step one is to discuss and build networks, step two make noise and step three is still to be decided.

XR Educators Connect, Saturday 23rd and 30th May 10am ([see Facebook](#)).

XR Educators People's Assembly Saturday 13th June, 10am - 12.30pm.
No Going Back: The Direction of an Educational Rebellion for XR ([register](#)).

Referenced articles:

George Monbiot - [Coronavirus shows us it's time to rethink everything. Let's start with education](#) (Guardian).

Ken Robinson - [Thoughts on how we can seize the opportunity to transform how we educate our children, and how we approach our relationship with the world we live in](#) (YouTube video).

The Urdd - [Corona has stopped the clock](#) (BBC).

Jon Stone - [Public want radical response to climate change with the same urgency as coronavirus, poll finds](#) (Independent).

Various - ["No to a return to normal": from Robert De Niro to Juliette Binoche, the call of 200 artists and scientists](#) (Le Monde).

Bruno Latour - [What protective measures can you think of so we don't go back to the pre-crisis production model?](#) (originally published by AOC).

Christiana Figueres - [Can we tackle both climate change and Covid-19 recovery?](#) (Financial Times).

Referenced organisations:

[Extinction Rebellion](#)

[XR Educators](#) ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#))

[Teach the Future](#) ([Twitter](#))

[Pupil Power](#) ([Twitter](#))

[Radical Education Forum](#) ([Twitter](#))

[NEU](#)

[Celebrating Education](#)