

Research articles

Enabling grassroots activism and human rights-based education for sustainability: case studies of Australian youth organisations

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Abstract

Across Australia many young people are taking action to address the issue of climate change and educating others through leading grassroots activism on local and global issues of sustainability. This paper discusses findings from an online document analysis that investigated three case studies of how youth-led organisations in Australia are leading and developing human rights-based education for sustainability (Efs) to empower others to enjoy and exercise their rights in keeping with the guidance of the 2011 UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training. This paper discusses how these organisations represent their activism online to empower young people to lead democratic action to achieve climate crisis justice. Drawing on a conceptual framework developed by Jensen & Schnack, the authors argue that the data suggests that the young activists in these case studies demonstrate high levels of 'social action competence' through raising awareness and taking action.

Keywords

Youth climate action, climate justice, human rights education, education for sustainability, social action competence

Introduction

Across Australia young people are taking action to address the issue of climate change through educating others and leading grassroots activism on local and global issues of sustainability (Verlie, 2022). Inspired by Greta Thunberg's peaceful protest outside the Swedish Parliament in 2018 as a 15-year-old, where she campaigned for a radical reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, a social movement led by young people from all over the world has taken action on this issue (Lee, O'Neill, Blackwood & Barnett, 2022).

This paper discusses findings from an online document analysis that investigated case studies of three youth-led Australian organisations: School Strike for Climate (SS4C), Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC), and Seed. The paper discusses how they are taking action and developing human rights-based education for sustainability (EFS). It explores how they represent their activism online and their approaches to educating and empowering young Australians, including First Nations youth, who are engaged in leading democratic action to achieve climate crisis justice (Henderson & Tudball, 2016).

The paper explores online documents that demonstrate these organisations' visions, direct and indirect strategies, and approaches to educating and empowering young people to fight for sustainability and climate crisis justice. The document analysis found evidence of these young activists demonstrating high levels of 'social action competence' (Jensen & Schnack, 1997) and the capacity to be advocates for 'empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights' (UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, 2011). This was achieved through inclusive and rights-based approaches to taking action for a more sustainable future. The analysis captures how their activism is represented and enacted in varied ways, including their use of social networking sites and their engagement in peer-learning about sustainability.

The activities of these organisations are not delivered through formal school education programmes, but led by young people from all over Australia. The first organisation, School Strike for Climate (SS4C), formed in response to Greta Thunberg's call for climate action, provides comprehensive documentation of their goals and activities on their website. The second organisation, the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC), runs projects and campaigns to help young Australians take action to solve the climate crisis (AYCC, 2022). It was an AYCC initiative that in 2021 formed the third organisation, Seed, as a separate branch to empower First Nations young people to address climate issues. Seed's vision is that of a just and sustainable future with strong cultures and communities, powered by renewable energy (Seed, 2022). They argue that 'climate change is one of the greatest threats facing humanity, but we also know it is an opportunity to create a more just and sustainable world' (Seed, 2022).

Young people 'believe that the irreversible damage caused by climate change ... is the most complex and urgent problem currently facing the world' (Major Group for Children and Youth, 2021, p. 13). This view is a widely shared concern that is motivating young people's global grassroots activism. Their central argument is that governments and world leaders are failing to address major environmental challenges. Their concerns are fuelled by the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which concluded that holding global warming to 1.5 degrees is no longer likely to be achieved (IPCC, 2022). Commenting on the urgent need for action on climate change, the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres said:

We owe a debt to young people, civil society and indigenous communities for sounding the alarm and holding leaders accountable. We need to build on their work to create a grassroots movement that cannot be ignored. If you live in a big city, a rural area, or a small island state; if you invest in the stock market; if you care about justice, and our children's future; I am appealing directly to you: demand that renewable energy is introduced now – at speed and at scale. (United Nations, 2022)

States and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increasingly recognised that climate change has adverse impacts on a wide range of human rights, and 'existing human rights obligations defined under legally binding treaties must consequently inform climate action' (Centre for International Environmental Law, 2018, p. 1). This includes the rights of children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), such as the right to life (article 6), freedom of expression (article 13), health (article 24), an adequate standard of living, including food, water, sanitation, housing (article 27), and education (article 28). The United Nations has also recognised the connection between climate change and the rights of children. In 2021, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child examined a petition filed by 16 children against Argentina, Brazil, France and Germany, and found that a State party can be held responsible for the negative impact of its carbon emissions on the rights of children within and outside its territory (Office of the High Commissioner Human Rights [OHCHR], 2021).

The most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data showed that 83 percent of 15-year-old Australian students are familiar with the issue of climate change, compared with 78 percent across the OECD (Thomson, 2021). Sustainability is featured in Australia as a cross-curriculum priority, the curriculum stating that:

Young people require the knowledge and skills to engage with contemporary issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, equitable access to resources, and preservation of cultural and language diversity. They are looking for social, economic and political models that provide solutions to these issues. (Australian Curriculum,

Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2022)

However, the extent of this focus is still highly variable amongst schools, and the need to develop education for sustainability through youth action is an urgent education priority (Henderson & Tudball, 2016; Verlie, 2022). Young Australian climate activists do not believe enough is being done to address this issue. For example, in a direct, high-level action in 2020, eight Australian teenagers took the Australian Minister for the Environment to the Federal Court in a bid to prevent her from approving the expansion of a coal mine, arguing that she had a duty of care to protect the young from the harmful impact of climate change. Although this legal bid was ultimately unsuccessful (Slezac & Timms, 2022), young Australians continue to campaign for climate justice.

In the federal election in Australia in 2022, climate change was a key issue of concern for young adults, many of whom were voting for the first time. This issue also had a strong influence on the election of Greens Party candidates and six independent ‘teal’ candidates, who were not aligned with either of the major parties. These candidates successfully campaigned on the platform of ambitious carbon reduction targets and other actions to address climate change (Slezac, 2022).

Unlike the bureaucratic and hierarchical civil society organisations that prevailed in the twentieth century, recent social movements engaged in issues like climate change have been characterised by:

... direct action strategies and internet communications, loose coalitions, relatively flat organisational structures, and more informal modes of belonging focused on shared concern about diverse issues and identity politics... [they] adopt action repertoires combining traditional acts such as voting and lobbying with a variety of alternative modes such as Internet networking, street protests, consumer boycotts, and direct action. (Norris, 2002, p. 3-4)

This paper discusses documented evidence of how young Australians represent their varied approaches to striving for climate justice through a mix of online and traditional social action campaigning. They do this to ensure inclusive and rights-based approaches to achieving a more sustainable future.

Conceptual frameworks

In this section, the core concepts used to frame the analysis of the three activist groups are discussed. The concept of ‘action competence’ was developed by the Danish educational theorists, Jensen and Schnack (1997), to frame an educational pedagogy for school-aged students engaging in environmental activism. This framework can be applied to young activists

who are motivated to act through their personal commitment to the issue of climate change and who desire to address injustice through social movements that question and change established social structures. Jensen and Schnack (1997) argue that present and future citizens should be 'capable of acting on a societal as well as a personal level' (p. 164). A crucial factor is that 'concerns about the environment, health and peace must be coupled with a corresponding concern for democracy ... or political liberal education' (p. 165).

Jensen and Schnack (1997) describe four components in their framework. The first focuses on knowledge and insights into 'what the problems are, how they arose and what possibilities exist for solving them' (p. 173). This also involves the development of social skills, such as the ability to cooperate and articulate a point of view. The second component is a commitment to resolve the issue under investigation, which requires 'motivation, commitment and drive' (p. 173), as well as the building of coherent knowledge. The third involves the capacity to envisage positive futures for society, as 'having visions about the good life and future worlds is an important part of being action competent' (p. 174). The final component, action experience, stresses the benefits of taking concrete action, so that young people's reflections, values, knowledge, and action are valued in their schools and the wider community. Young people can position their activism to include direct actions of environmental concern that they themselves engage in, as well as indirect actions whose purpose is to 'influence others to do something to contribute to solving the environmental problem' (Jensen & Schnack, 1997, p. 170). Their actions are designed to address the social, economic and cultural implications of climate change, as part of their fight for climate justice. These concepts are used to analyse the grassroots activism of the youth organisations this case study discusses.

The paper is also framed by the view that Education for Sustainability (EfS) recognises that upholding fundamental human rights and social justice are also essential for sustainable development (Tilbury, 1995; Gibson, 2015), and investigates the ways the youth organisations express these ideas. Henderson and Tudball (2016) argue that to meet challenges such as climate change:

... young people need to develop a wide and adaptive set of knowledge, skills and competencies to approach problem solving in critical and innovative ways, to ensure they can contribute to the creation of a more productive, sustainable and just society. (p. 7)

According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Expert Group (UNECE, 2013), EfS involves understanding issues such as alternative energy resources, disaster risk reduction, declining biodiversity, poverty reduction and sustainable consumption. It involves not only learning 'about' climate change, but crucially also learning to engage in addressing these issues in authentic ways. This paper discusses the way that programmes such as the

AYCC's Switched on Schools are an example of learning which occurs in informal learning environments, and which can be a trigger for change (McGivney, 1999). EfS has clear links with human rights education, since they both emphasise the importance of empowering people to participate in real world action to achieve change.

In the paper, we also frame the discussion through the Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011), which emphasises that *how* human rights education is taught or learned, has equal significance with *what* is taught. Tibbitts (2002) emphasises that the pedagogy of human rights education should be 'about, through and for' human rights. In particular, 'learning for' human rights includes building respect and responsibility, and empowers and encourages participation in the transformation of community life and society.

Jennings (2006) argues that while knowledge of the principles outlined in the various human rights instruments is important, it is not necessarily sufficient to bring about the compulsion to take action. Similarly, Osler and Starkey (2010) state that:

Human rights education implies a deeper understanding of human rights principles, the encouragement of commitment to social justice and solidarity with those whose rights are denied; the development of critical thinking skills, and skills to effect change. (p. 18)

By framing their actions as a 'fight for climate justice', we discuss how the young people engaged in these organisations are positioning themselves within a rights-based approach.

Methodology

This study was conducted in the interpretive paradigm, through case studies of three youth organisations. It involved an analysis of each organisation's online documents which are available in the public domain, including materials on these organisations' websites and social media. These provide information about the context in which they operate, their vision, mission, goals, activities, events, and campaigns. They also contain news articles about this issue.

Document analysis is a systematic procedure in qualitative analysis for evaluating data to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Bowen (2009) notes that 'document analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies... producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organisation or program' (p. 29). Atkinson and Coffey (1997) refer to documents as 'social facts' which are 'produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways' (p. 47). As Merriam (1988) points out, 'documents of all types can help the researcher develop understanding and discover insights relevant to the research problem' (p. 118).

The case study organisations were selected because of the public online availability of their documents, and because they are examples of youth-led organisations which focus on climate justice and education for sustainability and use a combination of direct and indirect action in their strategies and approaches.

Each youth organisation is discussed as a case study of ‘action competence’ (Jensen & Schnack, 1997). This is an appropriate method for this qualitative research, since it is exploratory and explanatory research which aims to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ type questions about contemporary events (Yin, 2009). Analysis of the qualitative data involves perceiving what is happening in key episodes and then representing these happenings with direct interpretations and narratives, which are used to optimise understanding (Stake, 1995). Case studies enable the words and actions of each group to be analysed and a complex and layered picture based on an interaction of factors to be built (Creswell, 2007). To undertake a critical analysis of the grassroots activism undertaken by these organisations, we explored the vision statements, key goals, and the factors that enabled or challenged each organisations’ actions, and, importantly, how each organisation framed its direct and indirect action with regard to human rights-based intentions.

Case Study Findings

School Strike 4 Climate Australia (SS4C)

In Australia, the SS4C network state that they are ‘student led, decentralized, grassroots, non-partisan, inclusive, non-violent, mission focused, ambitious and creative’ (SS4C, 2022). Their website includes information about how to join the organization, upcoming events and resource guides about how to organise actions, as well as key messages and slogans such as ‘What do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!’ SS4C campaigns for an end to all new coal and gas projects, investment in renewable energy, and job creation funding for all fossil-fuel workers and their communities. The document analysis showed that this organisation shares similar goals with the AYCC and Seed organisations and was prepared to use what Jensen and Schnack (1997) define as direct, democratic action that is critical of the underlying structures of society. These strikes are an important opportunity for the under-18s to enact their participatory citizenship, given the barriers they face when it comes to formal means of civic participation, such as voting and standing for elected positions.

Verlie and Flynn’s (2022) Australian research found that what students learn through their participation in climate strikes stands in contrast to the often-limited climate change education and opportunities for active participation provided by schools. This is reflected in the quote from one student striker, who said:

To be honest I have learned a lot more stuff at the strike than I learned in the

classroom... I think we should all be here, learn more stuff about what's happening, climate change, the environment and sustainability. (Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC] News, 2021)

In 2018, then Prime Minister Scott Morrison responded to the school strikes for action in Australia by saying 'What we want is more learning in schools and less activism in schools' (AAP, 2018). Some students interviewed at the SS4C protest said their schools dissuaded them from attending, while others said their schools were very supportive, even allowing the posting of flyers about the event on school grounds (ABC News, 2021). Verlie (2022) argues that 'young people are learning a suite of skills through striking from school - leadership, communication, team building, and organisational, democratic and critical analysis skills - and are teaching others as they do so'. Heggart and Flowers (2019) describe a 'justice pedagogy' that was developed within a civics and citizenship education programme in a school, where students focused on and responded to real-world problems that impacted on their lives by creating films and campaigning on social media. While programmes such as this are not widely available in all Australian schools, groups such as SS4C are using similar approaches in their grassroots community organisations. For example, leading up to the Australian federal election in 2022, the SS4C ensured that students had access to varied resources to educate them on a range of sustainability issues (SS4C, 2022).

In 2021, thousands of young students across 47 different sites across Australia walked out of their classrooms to take part in the global climate strike (ABC News, 2021). Organisers of the strike demanded that the federal government address climate change issues and turn its back on emissions-intensive energy sources. There were a number of other demands: the resourcing of First Nations peoples to work for solutions that guarantee land rights; funding for the creation of secure jobs that fast-track solutions to the climate crisis; and funding for projects that will transition the economy to 100 per cent renewable energy by 2030. One student told the media that they 'were too young to vote, so were choosing to protest so their voices could be heard' (ABC News, 2021). Another young protester was quoted as saying:

It is our future that climate change is going to be affecting, young people are often on the front lines of the climate movement and we know that the continuing impacts of climate change will affect us for generations. (Rachwani, 2021)

In 2022, SS4C Australia was part of the Twitter campaign #FundOurFutureNotGas, to encourage individuals, businesses and other organisations to pledge and 'stand with school strikers to oppose public funds being wasted on dirty gas' (SS4C, 2022). The SS4C Twitter feed also demonstrates the organisation's commitment to the rights of First Nations peoples. For example, a post from #School Strike 4 Climate Australia showed a video of a young woman who attended the SS4C Protest in Sydney voicing her concerns about a company's proposal to

build coal-seam gas wells on the traditional lands of her community, the Gamilaroi people from the Pilliga region of New South Wales. In these ways, SS4C is using social media effectively to spread its message through using the voices of young people who are directly impacted, educating others about the issue, and providing ways of taking action, in what can be described as an example of 'social action competence' (Jensen & Schnack, 1997).

Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC)

The mission of the AYCC is to build a social movement of young people and grassroots activism that will lead to solutions to address the climate crisis. On their website, the AYCC explains:

... we are building a movement of young people, standing in solidarity with those on the frontlines of climate change, to lead solutions to the climate crisis... It is only through a huge, diverse and committed social movement, led by those with the most at stake, that we will see just and sustainable solutions to the climate crisis realised. Decision makers in governments, businesses and our communities will only make the changes required if there is a strong social movement demanding it. (AYCC, 2022)

As well as framing itself as part of a social movement, the AYCC positions itself as taking direct and indirect action as a rights issue, because:

... the climate crisis as an issue of social and environmental injustice. Climate change affects everyone, but not equally. It is often the most marginalised in our societies who are hit first and worst by climate impacts and carry the burden of polluting industries. (AYCC, 2022)

Since 2009, the AYCC has run the 'Switched on Schools program' across Australia, where thousands of students across more than 250 schools have been engaged in taking action on the climate crisis (AYCC Switched on Schools, 2022). Through student leadership programmes and youth-facilitated school workshops, the programme empowers the young to build their knowledge, skills, and networks to create change. The website states:

Our in-school climate justice workshops and presentations that use a peer to peer approach, and are delivered by our passionate youth facilitators. The workshops are designed to spark students' interest in climate change and solutions, and how they can lead climate action in their school and community. (AYCC Switched on Schools, 2022)

This peer-teaching model, which can be conceptualised as Efs (Tilbury, 1995; Gibson, 2015), operates outside the formal classroom curriculum. It includes a number of approaches: awareness raising; problem solving and community action; traditional forms of activism such as letters to politicians, marches, banners, slogans and chants; and social media campaigning including tweets, texts, Instagram photos and YouTube clips.

One of the campaigns, 'A Plan for Repowering our Schools', aims for public schools to be powered by 100% renewable solar energy and become clean energy hubs for their entire community. The Switched on Schools website includes resources such as how to build a team, how to run an event, and how to engage decision makers (AYCC Switched on Schools, 2022). This campaign has achieved a number of 'wins': students who 'led a campaign to repower their school after attending one of our summits - and ended up being successful in installing over 100kw of solar, LED lights and doubling the size of the enviro team in just a few months'; 'students in South Australia who are passionate about renewables in schools organised a meeting with the Minister for Education, as well as in-school campaigns and community actions on renewables, resulting in a \$15 million commitment from the South Australian government for solar and energy efficiency for over 100 high schools'; 'young people and high school students in the Latrobe Valley, a community transitioning away from coal, have been changing the conversation on climate change and energy, leading solutions by transitioning their schools and community to renewables' (AYCC Switched on Schools, 2022).

The Switched on Schools website also describes their Student Climate Leadership Programme, a six-month peer-to-peer programme for a diverse range of students in years 8-12 from secondary schools across Victoria. The programme challenges them to 'master skills in leadership, change-making, campaigning and communications'. In addition, they 'strongly encourage applications from students identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, students with a disability, students from rural and regional areas, and LGBTQI students' (AYCC Switched on Schools, 2022). This demonstrates that the AYCC is focused on inclusion, social justice, and human rights dimensions in their programmes and actions.

The AYCC Twitter feed (#AYCC) demonstrates other direct actions such as meeting with the Federal Climate and Energy Minister, as well as creating a 'Fund Our Future Not Gas' light installation at Parliament House in the Australian national capital Canberra. The representation of activism and well organised human-rights based campaigns in these documents demonstrates how the AYCC are empowering the young to be well-informed, justice-oriented citizens and climate change activists.

While this paper has discussed the SS4C and the AYCC organisations as separate entities, the document analysis found many connections and crossovers between them. For example, the Switched on Schools website includes a page about the SS4C, and information about joining the AYCC strike committee (AYCC Switched on Schools, 2022). Both organisations also campaign about the same issues, such as #FundOurFutureNotGas, and focus on the rights of First Nations peoples as part of their climate campaigning.

The AYCC Twitter feed also highlights a partnership between the AYCC and other activist organisations involved in enabling grassroots activism. The AYCC, along with SS4C, promoted the Environmental Music Prize through their social networking sites. This prize celebrates artists who inspire action for climate and conservation, and young people are encouraged to vote for the environmental song they perceive as being the most powerful. The prize demonstrates the 'loose coalitions' (Norris, 2002, p. 3) that exist between the AYCC and other environmental organisations in facilitating creative activism, including Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, who were impact partners in this initiative (Environmental Music Prize, 2022). These organisations, and other youth-led organisations, including SS4C and Seed, have similar goals and strategies in helping to spread the message across a movement of young people, and are working together as part of a social movement to try and achieve their goals in collective ways (Jensen & Schnack, 1997).

Seed

Seed is 'Australia's first Indigenous youth climate network' (Seed, 2022). The organisation began as a part of the AYCC, but in 2021 became an independent organisation. It is led by First Nations young people who recognise that they are already experiencing the impacts of climate on their community, culture, and country (Seed, 2022). This is of international significance, since:

Indigenous peoples are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change, due to their dependence upon, and close relationship, with the environment and its resources. Climate change exacerbates the difficulties already faced by indigenous communities including political and economic marginalization, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination and unemployment. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs- Indigenous Peoples, 2022)

In the Statement on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) to the Parliament of Australia, the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs said:

Indigenous peoples must have the opportunity to develop and drive solutions if we, as a nation are to achieve real, lasting change. The right of Indigenous peoples to improve their economic and social conditions, in the areas of education, employment, housing and health is central to achieving this. (Parliament of Australia, 2009)

The latest data from the 'Closing the Gap' National Agreement (Productivity Commission, 2022) demonstrates that while some of the life issues of First Nations peoples in Australia are improving (such as the healthy birthweight of babies), others are not (such as rates of adult imprisonment). The Seed organisation argues that:

Climate change is an issue of environmental and social justice... Low-income people, communities of colour, women, youth and in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia are on the frontlines of this crisis. It's our communities that are hit first and worst, not only by the impacts of climate change but the impacts of extractive, polluting and wasteful industries that are devastating our country and fuelling the climate crisis. (Seed, 2022)

In this way, Seed is also positioning its work within an action-oriented, rights-based framework led by First Nations young people, one which goes beyond environmental campaigning to focus on issues of equity and social justice, a key part of EfS (Tilbury, 1995; Gibson, 2015).

In 2021, Seed organised and supported a campaign by remote First Nations communities to protest against gas fracking plans on their lands. This campaign included young people travelling to the national capital Canberra to directly lobby politicians (Seed, 2022). In June 2021, the Senate established a Parliamentary inquiry into oil and gas exploration and production in the Beetaloo Basin in the Northern Territory (Parliament of Australia, 2021), which Seed contributed to through a submission. These documented examples demonstrate how these motivated young people have developed the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and actions to be 'action competent' (Jensen & Schnack, 1997) within a democratic framework.

In solidarity with the 'Our Islands Our Home' campaign, Seed has also become a partner organisation to support the voices and leadership of Torres Strait Islander people to protect their island homes from the effects of climate change (Our Islands Our Home, 2022). This website explains that:

Zenadh Kes (the Torres Strait Islands and surrounding seas) is home to Traditional Owners who have lived with a deep connection to land, sea, sky and culture for over 60,000 years. Right now, Torres Strait Islanders are on the frontlines of the climate crisis and urgent action is needed to ensure they can remain on their homelands... As part of this, eight Torres Strait Islanders have taken a complaint against the Australian Government to the United Nations for failing to protect Zenadh Kes from climate damage – demanding Australia rapidly reduce our emissions, and immediately resource adaptation needs. (Our Islands Our Home, 2022)

This campaign was successful, as in September 2022 the UN Human Rights Committee found that Australia's failure to adequately protect Torres Strait Islanders against the adverse impacts of climate change was a violation of their rights to enjoy their culture and be free from arbitrary interferences with their private life, family, and home (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). This is a demonstration of the power of sustained advocacy and awareness-raising about this issue by groups such as Seed.

Seed provides a leadership training programme for First Nations youth to build their skills and confidence in leading climate justice campaigns. In 2021, the Seed Twitter account #Seedmob posted a fundraising campaign to enable a representative from Seed to travel to Glasgow for the COP26 2021 Climate Summit, in order to call for action for their climate justice campaigns and to elevate the stories and leadership of First Nations young people. In 2021, the National Director of Seed, Amelia Telford, appeared on Q & A, a nationally broadcast current affairs programme focused on the topic of 'Australia's Climate Future'. On this programme, she said:

When you talk about leadership, you know, if you're not prepared to step up to the game, if you don't know what leadership looks like, then, honestly, get out of the way and let First Nations people, first people of this country, who've been looking after this land sustainably for tens of thousands of years... Step back and let us stand up, because we know what to do in a crisis. (ABC, 2021)

The Seed website describes how in October 2022, they took their 'Heal Country Declaration' to the steps of Parliament House in Canberra, and asked elected representatives to 'invest public money into supporting our communities through public services, sustainable and renewable energy developments, and solutions led by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' (Seed, 2022). These publicly documented examples of concrete actions taken to address this issue can be categorised as social action competence (Jensen & Schnack, 1997).

Discussion

It can be argued that these documented journeys, campaigns, and powerful stories of EfS demonstrate how the young people involved in the SS4C, AYCC and Seed organisations meet the criteria of 'action competence' (Jensen & Schnack, 1997). They demonstrate they have knowledge and insights into the problem (climate change), how it arose (industrialisation and fossil fuel burning), and what possibilities exist for solving it (such as reducing fossil fuels and increasing the use of renewable energy). They also demonstrate a commitment to resolve the issue of climate change, through volunteering their time and energies to these organisations, encouraging renewable energy solutions, and lobbying elected officials and businesses to reduce carbon emissions. These online documents demonstrate that these young people are engaged in taking intentional, well-planned action to achieve a future better world, and are motivated to take action to mitigate climate-change challenges such as fire, flood, drought, and storms so they are not so prevalent and destructive. The members of SS4C, the AYCC and Seed are similar in that they engage in direct concrete action including strikes, lobbying, education, and awareness-raising programmes, as well as indirect action to encourage their communities, governments, and businesses to take action on climate change. In these ways, they are empowering young people, conversant with the science of climate change, to use their voice to demand action.

Through using the term 'climate justice', the SS4C, AYCC and Seed situate the work they do within a rights framework. For example, a protester at the SS4C protest was quoted as saying:

The government is not taking the action it needs to, and it is our future we are fighting for, and we deserve to live in a world where we have... rights. (Rachwani, 2021)

Similarly, the AYCC and Seed also situate climate change as both a social and environmental injustice and emphasise that it is often the most marginalised in our societies that are most impacted by climate change. In addition, the developing countries which have contributed the least to the crisis in terms of burning fossil fuels may be the most affected by it (Bathiany, Dakos, Scheffer & Lenton, 2018). In order to address these social and environmental problems, these young people are questioning and taking action to try and change established systems and structures which have reproduced patterns of injustice over time.

The notion of 'intergenerational justice' is a potent one regarding the issue of climate change. In an interview with a newspaper before the 2022 federal election in Australia, a 19-year-old said:

All through school or through uni, we've been told: 'This is your generation's problem. You're the ones who are going to fix it'. Yeah, we'll try to, but that doesn't mean we can't do stuff now. You don't need to exacerbate the problems. I think it's just a bit demoralising, when so many of us are like 'action needs to be taken'. (Chrysanthos, 2022)

Another 21-year-old said:

When you look at the climate change movements – who are leading, who are organising – it's all young people. The adult generation, older generation are all, like, supplementary. (Chrysanthos, 2022)

According to Thompson (2009), intergenerational justice is about 'how benefits, burdens, responsibilities and entitlements should be distributed among members of society' (p. 5), and yet many young people are feeling that they have the responsibility to demand action be taken to find a solution. Anthropogenic climate change poses a dilemma about how the intergenerational costs of climate change can be dealt with in a just and fair manner. While young people are being empowered to develop greater agency through involvement in a blend of old and new forms of action competence development (through groups such as SS4C, AYCC and Seed), questions remain about the 'fairness' of the young having to manage a crisis and an environmental disaster not of their making, but one which will disproportionately impact them.

Challenges and conclusions

Despite the enthusiasm with which many young people have engaged with organisations such as SS4C, AYCC and Seed, underlying much of their participation is a deep fear and anxiety about what their future lives will be like as the climate crisis intensifies. Recent research shows many young people in Australia are concerned about climate change (Sciberras & Fernando, 2021). In 2019, a survey by youth mental health organisation ReachOut found 80 per cent of Australian students aged 14 to 23 were somewhat or very anxious about climate change (ReachOut, 2019), with close to half experiencing these emotions on a weekly basis. A 20-year-old who was interviewed by a newspaper said:

I'm deeply, deeply anxious about climate change... We are faced with a future impacted by climate change but feel we have very little say in that future even though we inherit it. (Topsfield & Aubrey, 2022)

Educators need to understand that concerns about climate change can be an overwhelming, existential experience for many young people (Sciberras & Fernando, 2021). Jensen and Schnack (1997) acknowledge concerns about 'whether creating anxiety and worry in children is wise or useful' (p. 164), but their conclusion is that it is empowering 'for students to learn to be active citizens in a democratic society' (p. 164). In this way they can develop some agency through their action competence, rather than feeling helpless and powerless.

In this paper, we have argued that despite the challenges they face, and the immense difficulty of the task, young climate activists in Australia involved in these youth-led organisations are working tirelessly to use their knowledge skills, dispositions, and capacities to take action for climate justice through a rights-based approach. The documented evidence discussed provides examples of what can be achieved when EfS is enacted through well-planned, highly collaborative real-world opportunities and informed action beyond the classroom.

More than two decades ago, the need for action competence was recognized in the Citizenship Education Policy Study project (Cogan & Derricott, 2000), which concluded that informed and active citizenship must include opportunities for the young to be involved in considering problems from a global perspective, working co-operatively and taking responsibilities in society to achieve this (Henderson & Tudball, 2016). The SS4C, the AYCC and Seed provide continuing examples of these kinds of socially responsible actions. Young grassroots activists in Australia involved in these organisations have demonstrated that, through education and activism, they have developed the capacity to create and lead change to try and mitigate the impact of this urgent issue of climate change and other sustainability concerns that are infringing on their rights.

Note from the authors

Please note that the authors have been guided in their use of inclusive and respectful language by referring to the advice by Reconciliation Australia (n.d.).

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