Not My Problem Anymore: A Study of Students' Attitudes, Pedagogy Critiques and Fatalism in Climate Change and Sustainability Education

Nethra Srimal

Supervisor: Nicola Walshe, PhD

UCL Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability Education; Laidlaw Foundation

BACKGROUND

Education is a central mechanism in preparing youth for a climate-driven future. Foundational research suggests that existing climate change and sustainability education—CCSE—education (didactic and transmission-based) has been "largely ineffectual in affecting students' attitudes and behavior," and calls instead for a highly participatory, transdisciplinary form of CCSE that provides young people with both a voice and a hand in redressing climate change (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020, p. 191).

Survey evidence from England echoes this sentiment (Walshe et al., 2024, 2025). Of 2,400+ students aged 11–14:

- 76% said learning about climate change matters
- 46% enjoyed doing so
- 29% felt able to influence their school's response
- 17% aspired to a climate-related career

Longitudinal work finds that holistic, pluralistic CCSE raises students' knowledge of action possibilities and willingness to act, but leaves confidence in one's own influence flat (Olsson et al., 2022). Since gains appeared only in taught groups, adolescent disengagement appears curricular as opposed to developmental.

Closed and short-response instruments establish that students find provision narrow and unengaging. They focus less on how it is experienced from the inside, or what students themselves attribute their disengagement to.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are students' attitudes toward, and experiences within, climate change and sustainability education?
2. What are the perceived deficits of science-based sustainability provision? How can these be reconciled by helping students to think cross-disciplinarily?
3. How might understanding students' fatalistic perspectives inform strategies to ignite action competence in climate and sustainability contexts?

METHODOLOGY

Design	5 focus groups of 45 minutes
Cohorts	2x nonselective state secondary schools, 1x UCL undergraduates
Participants	4–7 per group, aged 16–19, voluntary and self-selecting
Sampling	Convenience; no sampling for region, provision, or intake
Data Handling	Audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymized at transcription
Analysis	Inductive-deductive framework, 9 parent codes with children, coded with NVivo 15
Ethics	Approved by UCL CCCSE, participants compensated, informed consent gathered

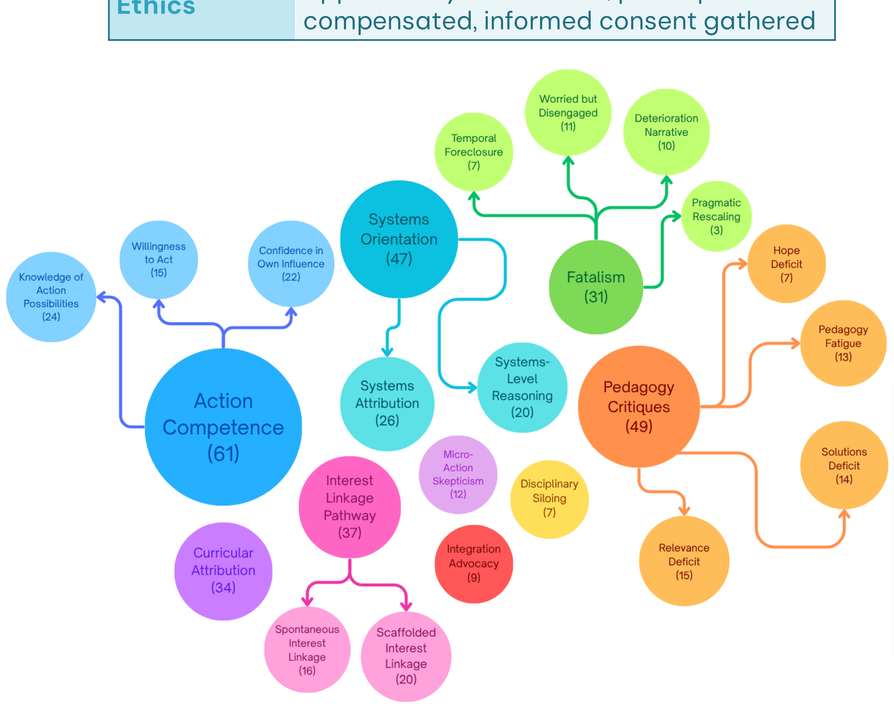


Figure 1: Coding Framework
Codes with frequency (in parentheses) across the corpus. "Pragmatic Rescaling" and "Temporal Foreclosure" were generated inductively during analysis.

FINDING 1:

THE KNOWLEDGE DUMP

Students' objections throughout leaned more towards the style of content delivery as opposed to the content itself.
Provision was described as impersonal, heavy, and repetitive, with teachers "throwing loads of really scary statistics at us about how screwed we are." Mitigation was undercut by the notion that "it's not looking great for us."

"They just take info, and dump it on you."

"Nothing was presented… as something that would be personal… or affect you."

FINDING 2:

OUTSIDE INTEREST

Environmental inclinations seemed to arise from activity undertaken outside curricular instruction. Art meant "always reusing things, finding ways to upcycle things," and gardening was where "the sustainability comes through."

"Not sure if it came from…formal studies. It was more just [their] interests and hobbies."

In most cases, the connection established was a by-product of curricular content; though where it generated authentic inclination was through a **solutions framing**,

Students formed cross-disciplinary connections themselves, but existing curricular architecture rarely invited them to.

FINDING 3:

SYSTEMIC SKEPTICISM

Dismissal of individual action was reasoned through scale and accountability.

"As long as we're not holding these big firms accountable, it means nothing what individuals do."

"Education has a 'real focus on individual impact' while neglecting that 'BP's dumping oil into the Gulf of Mexico.'"

Students noted that they're in "the right mindset…but a lot of the time it's just so difficult to [be sustainable]." Existing critiques locate the failure of individualized framing in what it does to students' sense of efficacy, but the focus groups' accounts attend more toward the inaccessibility of sustainable behaviors (Eaton & Day, 2020; Morrissey-Gleeson & Morrissey, 2024).

FINDING 4:

PATHWAY ADVOCACY

Participants proposed solutions that the literature advocates for, but reframed it through the lens of career.

"It just needs to be integrated more, especially over a range of subjects, not just geography and biology."

Teach energy systems in physics, so that "when I take that qualification… I can specialize in that field."

This supports the Department for Education's (2023) green-career framing while also fortifying Walshe et al.'s (2025) finding that CCSE surfaces green pathways across subjects. However, existing findings are largely grounded in in principle (holism, critical capability): the focus groups' advocacy favors **pathway-based integration.**

FINDING 5:

PRAGMATIC RESCALING

Participants affirmed climate change as an issue, and accepted their responsibility, then relocated it.
Deferral was tied to material capacity or influence.

"As you grow up, you have more opportunities to [be sustainable]. Like if you have your own house and more money, then it's not as much of an issue."

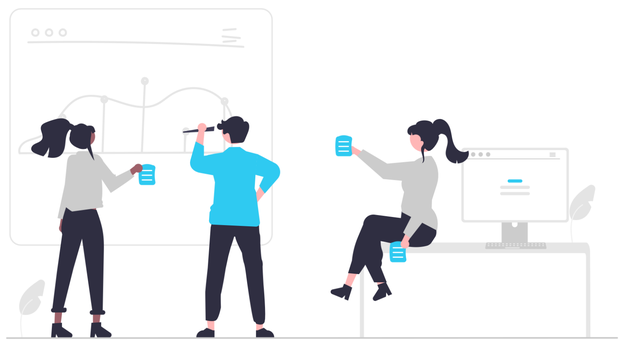
Reassignment is pushed onto others, or onto a future self.

"You should go into this field of work to fix it because I want to go into finance. I'm already at uni, so it's not my problem anymore."

Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2020) report children fearing the world will end within their lifetimes. The lifetime here bounds obligation instead of expectancy.

"If it won't be catastrophic in my lifetime, then I'll leave it for the next one."

Existing literature treats temporal foreclosure as a byproduct of the hope deficit, while current distance literature documents perceive remoteness in time; neither directly evidences the reasoning that a problem may devolved to a successor generation because it will not be personally catastrophic.



IN PRACTICE

- Programs of study and subject content guidance where teaching causes and consequences is stipulated, should require specifying the social, political, and economic levers that extend beyond individual behaviors should be required.
- Sustainability should be distributed beyond the sciences and framed around career specialization.
- Fueling interest without outlets risks deepening the frustration it aims to resolve (Walshe et al., 2025) so integration should be participatory.

REFERENCES

Department for Education. (2023). *Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems*. United Kingdom Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy/sustainability-and-climate-change-a-strategy-for-the-education-and-childrens-services-systems#scope-and-purpose

Olsson, D., Gericke, N., & Boeve-de Pauw, J. (2022). The effectiveness of education for sustainable development revisited – a longitudinal study on secondary students' action competence for sustainability. *Environmental Education Research*, *28*(3), 405–429. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2022.2033170

Rousell, D., & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, A. (2020). A systematic review of climate change education: giving children and young people a 'voice' and a 'hand' in redressing climate change. *Children's Geographies*, *18*(2), 191–208. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1614532

Sass, W., Boeve-de Pauw, J., Olsson, D., Gericke, N., De Maeyer, S., & Van Petegem, P. (2020). Redefining action competence: The case of sustainable development. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, *51*, 292–305. https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2020.1765132

Walshe, N., Perry, J., & Healy, G. (2025). Student perspectives on climate change and sustainability education in England: experiences and expectations. *UCL Open Environment*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444/ucloe.3341

LAIDLAW SCHOLARS