

“Can we talk about the Oil Companies, though?”

Students’ Perspectives on School-level Structural Change for CCSE

Introduction

Decades of literature on Climate Change and Sustainability Education (CCSE) point to a persistent top-down, science-dominated approach to instruction, despite repeated calls for a more social and political focus. Yet student voice on this gap remains underexplored. This research investigates how students aged 14–19 personally experience issues relating to the environment and environmental education, and what they believe could change at the school level to make CCSE more effective.

Findings reveal a pattern of hyper-individualization: CCSE, as currently taught, locates responsibility for the climate crisis in individual choices — recycling, diet, consumption — rather than systemic or political structures. Students internalize this framing even as they resist it, describing guilt and helplessness the curriculum does little to resolve.

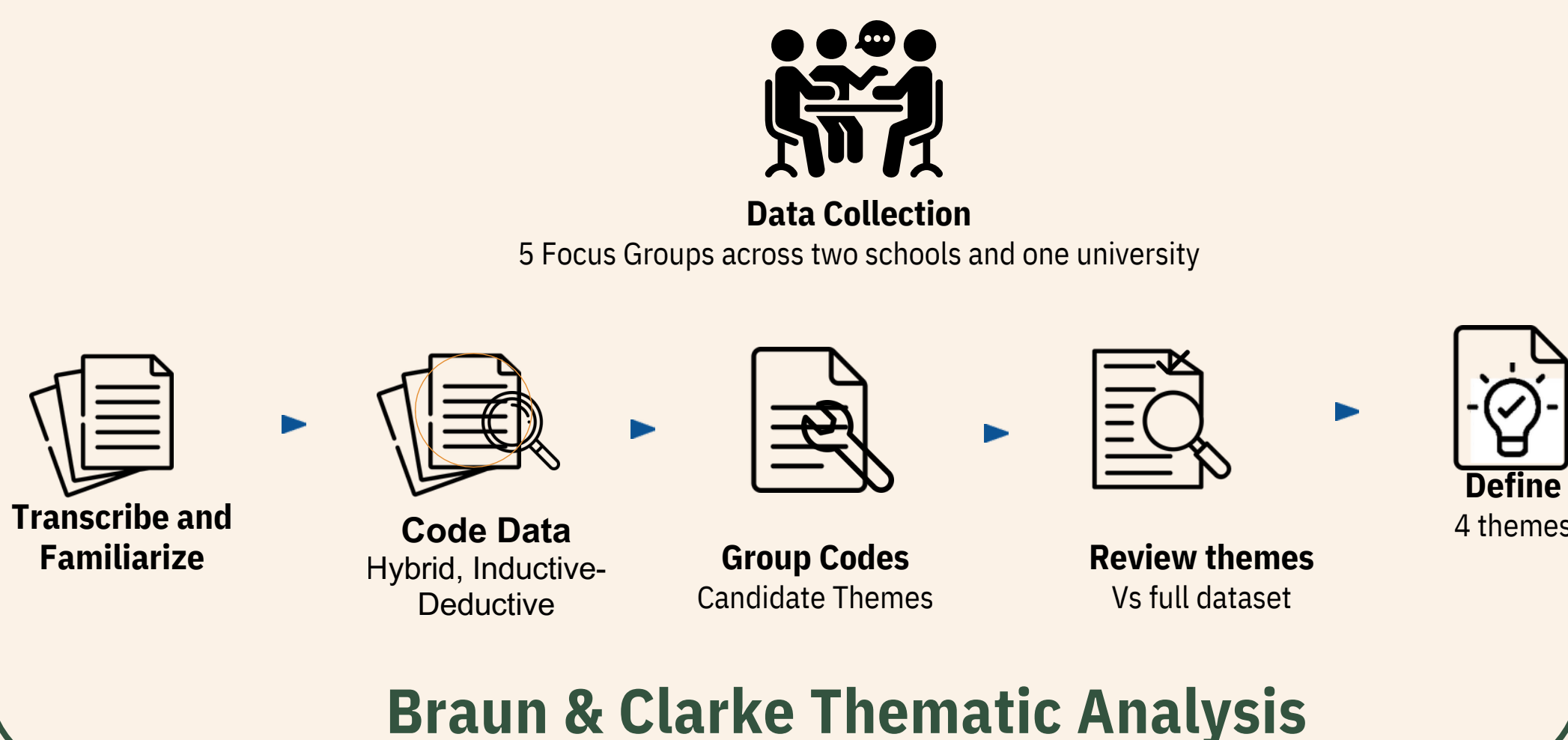
Goals & Objectives

This research aimed to examine how students aged 14-19 experience Climate Change & Sustainability Education at School (CCSE), and how they understand the responsibility for address Climate Change Issues

Research Questions

- How do students perceive the way CCSE is delivered by teachers and structured within their school?
- How do students emotionally and psychologically respond to learning about climate change, and how effective do they feel their actions are?
- How do students attribute responsibility for climate change — to individuals, institutions, or systems — and what does this reveal about the current framing of CCSE?

Methodology



Findings

Theme 1 — Teacher-Level Delivery

"It's like my teacher doesn't even care about this."

Theme 2 — School-Level Structural Provision

"We want it everywhere, not just here and there."

Theme 3 — Efficacy and Emotional Response

"I feel like the world is going to end and no one cares about it."

Theme 4 — Responsibility and Systemic Attribution

"The responsibility is placed fully on individuals."

Students want more interactive learning formats and prefer emotive, passionate delivery from teachers over passive recitation.

“We had this lecture from this really passionate guy and it had, like, an real impact on me.”

“I think we should hold more debates in class about these topics.”

Most schools treat CCSE as sustainability as peripheral, repetitive, and occasional rather than integrated and developing. Students prefer interactive learning methods incorporated into their favorite subjects.

“It's all good having one eco week... but if it's not continued throughout the year, then it doesn't really feel like it's got much benefit”

Many students hold a pessimistic view of the future of the environment and society, along with numerous complaints about the lack of a safe place to vent their urgency and hopelessness.

“No matter what we do, it's just going to keep going downhill”
“If I talk about this, everyone says that I care too much and it's not that deep.”

There's a common frustration with the responsibility for climate change being put on individuals and their actions. of the current generation rather than calling out those who are responsible for large-scale climate destruction.

“We don't necessarily address that it's a systemic issue enough. I don't think there's enough attention put on massive corporations and businesses that cause these [problems].”

Conclusion

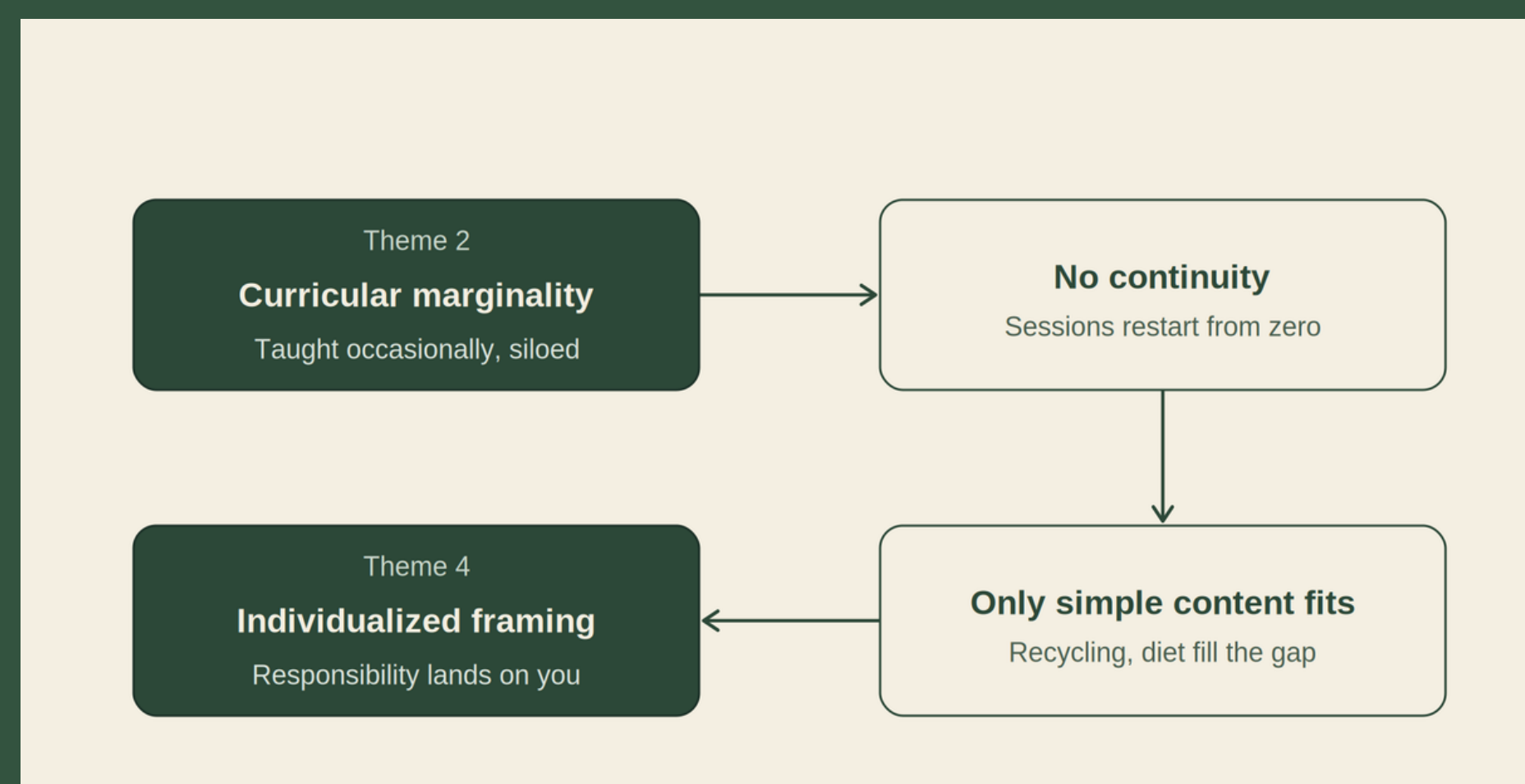
- Despite decades of literature suggesting a change, CCSE remains Science-dominated.
- Students prefer more hands-on, activity-based, and discussion-based learning formats.
- Students despise the fear-mongering style of teaching, which only fuels pessimism.
- Many students find it difficult to express their climate concerns openly as they are often shut down by others for “caring too much”
- CCSE activities and inclusion in the curriculum is occasional and inconsistent
- The inconsistent structure is the cause of the content being hyper-individualized and science-based, as it omits the potential for continued in-depth exploration of economic, social, and political aspects

Recommendations

- Embed CCSE across *all* subjects as an integral part in different shapes and forms, rather than as an additional piece of content the teacher mentions (or not).
- Replace one-off sessions (Eco week, one-time lectures) with sustained coverage across year groups
- Formally support and scale ECA and Place-based learning
- Train teachers to embed CCSE content within their subjects and encourage open political discussions
- Introduce students to safe spaces for debates, discussions, and open expression of anxiety or frustration
- Provide career counselling to students who want to integrate the career of their interest with sustainability.

Is the school-level structure for CCSE responsible for the notorious hyper-individualized focus?

- Most students encounter CCSE sporadically and inconsistently, with no continuous initiative sustaining it across their schooling.
- CCSE sits outside students' regular subjects, so educators can't build on prior discussions — each session effectively starts from scratch.
- Under these fragmented conditions, only the simplest, most immediately actionable content survives: individual behaviors like recycling or driving electric.
- Structural and political dimensions of the climate crisis are rarely addressed, leaving students with either individualized instruction or bare scientific fact.
- As a result, students internalize a disproportionate sense of personal responsibility for the climate crisis.



References



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