

“Can we talk about the Oil Companies, though?”: Students’ perspective on Climate Change Responsibility Burden and School-Level Structural Provision for Education Reform

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Introduction

The impacts of climate change are being increasingly felt by regions around the globe, and its risks are being taken more seriously. National governments and international organizations recognize education as an instrumental tool for addressing global issues and preparing the coming generation to confront challenges — including climate change — that threaten our existence (Walshe & Rushton, 2026). According to Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2020), the earliest distinct publication on Climate Change Education (CCE) can be traced back to 1993, with Henderson and Holman's *Global Climate*

Change Education: Technology Transfer to Schools. Though a stark rise in CCE literature is observed since then, changes in ground-level education are still widely thought to be inadequate.

To develop an effective education system, it is necessary to understand and empathize with the perspective of students themselves — and this is the objective of this paper: to understand how young people aged 14–19 experience current Climate Change and Sustainability Education (CCSE) in UK schools, and what changes, in their view, should be implemented. This paper therefore attempts to answer the following questions, which merge the initial objective of the research with ideas that emerged during the process itself:

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

Literature Review

It is a long-observed and documented tendency in Environmental Education to isolate and individualize issues that are, in practice, structural and beyond the individual. Jensen and

Schnack (1997) criticized the focus of Educational Institutions and existing pedagogies on modifying students' personal behaviours rather than providing the tools to understand the causes of these societal issues and to independently decide their behaviours and actions. They quote Hellesnes (1976) to highlight the concept of “conditioned-socialization,” which aims to make—out of humans—objects for political processes which they do not recognize as political, a phenomenon deeply familiar to Climate Change and Sustainability Education (CCSE).

The downsides and ineffectiveness of the focus on individual actions within Environmental Education are well-theorised and documented. Demanding behaviour change from individuals diverts the collective attention from demanding accountability from fossil-fuel-based companies, say Eaton and Day (2020). Morrissey Gleeson and Morrissey (2024) name the education system to be the perpetrator of low-impact individual actions which fail to threaten the capitalist neo-liberal regime. Similarly, Kwauk (2020) argues that sustainability education has been shaped by neoliberal assumptions privileging individual behaviour change over collective, structural response — a critique that recent work extends specifically to young people, showing that individualizing narratives (green consumerism, personal responsibility) circulate through media, corporate communication, and educational framing alike, shaping how youth themselves come to interpret responsibility for the climate crisis.

Where responsibility for addressing this gap sits is itself contested. Priestley's ecological approach to agency, applied to CCSE by Rushton, Walshe, and colleagues, understands agency as emergent rather than individually possessed — constructed across micro (classroom/teacher), meso (school), and macro (national curriculum/policy) levels, each shaping what a teacher is practically able to do. This framework offers a structural vocabulary for distinguishing what an

individual teacher can change within a lesson from what requires institutional or curricular reform — a distinction this report adopts directly in separating teacher-level delivery from school-level structural provision as separate analytic themes.

This distinction matters for the present study: existing critique largely infers individualization from curriculum documents, teacher surveys, or media analysis. Whether students themselves recognize and name this pattern — rather than researchers inferring it on their behalf — remains comparatively unexamined. Taken together, the literature establishes that individualization in CCSE is a long-recognized, still-persistent, and mechanistically understood problem — but one documented chiefly through adult-authored analysis of systems, texts, and practice. This report seeks to look at the picture from the other side, through the lens of the students.

Research Methodology

This research uses reflexive thematic analysis, building on the six-phase process originally described by Braun and Clarke (2006) — later refined into the "reflexive" approach in their subsequent work. Data were collected through five focus groups involving 4–6 students aged 14–19 per group (total N = 25), with the research supervisor, the author, and a colleague facilitating the discussions across sessions. While the format allowed free discussion, a prepared question set structured the conversation (Exhibit 1).

Four focus groups involved Sixth Form students, and one involved students from University College London. Participation was voluntary, which introduces a risk that participants held an elevated interest in Environmental Education relative to the broader student population in this age group, and the sample should not be read as representative on this dimension. No school

official was present during the discussions, reducing the risk that participants moderated their answers.

Interviews were transcribed and manually coded to generate initial themes, which were subsequently refined into final themes through a hybrid deductive-inductive process informed by the DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch (2011) codebook framework, combining theory-driven codes with codes emerging from the data. Exhibit 2 presents the initial codebook for inductive analysis; Exhibit 3 presents the final codebook, developed through refinement and deductive coding.

The UCL Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability Education (CCCSE) granted ethical approval for the data collection [insert approval reference if applicable]. All participants provided consent via a signed form, were informed of their right to withdraw their data at any time, and were assured of anonymity and compensation for their time.

Findings & Discussion

Overview: Themes 1 and 3

Through the above-elaborated analysis process, the sharings by students were classified into four overarching themes: Teacher-level delivery, school-level structural provision, efficacy and emotional response, and responsibility and systemic attribution. While this report's primary focus is on responsibility and systemic attribution, school-level structural provision, and the interrelation between the two, the remaining themes of teacher-level delivery and efficacy and emotional response are briefly touched on below:

Theme 1 (Teacher-Level Delivery)

This theme captured students' opinions on how CCSE is currently approached within the walls of classrooms and preferences on how it should rather be addressed in order to be effective. Most of the students mentioned wanting inclusion of environmental discussions in all of their classes across disciplines beyond science— specifically in regards to the career path they're interested in. Teachers' agency has a definite role to play in this, as they are indeed capable of making contextual integrations of environmental education, if not changing the official specification guide (Walshe and Rushton). Students consistently wanted more interactive formats over passive delivery and specifically asked for more debate-based formats to engage and build the understanding needed "to know what to vote for in terms of climate policy" (E175). Particularly emotive and passionate deliveries by lecturers proved to be effective in many cases to ignite an interest; several students credited a single emotionally engaged teacher or guest speaker with shifting their own engagement more than the standard curriculum did (E013, E133). This suggests delivery quality, independent of content, has a real effect

Theme 3 (Efficacy and Emotional Response)

Theme 3 captured students' internal, affective relationship to the crisis — largely characterized by fatalism and disengagement. Students described feeling that "no matter what we do, it's just going to keep going downhill" (E085) and that "our impacts are too small" (E089) to matter. Several also described active social discouragement from engaging with the topic at all, noting that showing concern risks being seen as someone who "just cares a little bit too much" (E056, E058). Many students named Social Media as their primary source of information for sustainability information and criticized the lack of broader discussion on the socio-political aspect of climate change and our future, which could explain the general pessimism.

Theme 4: Responsibility and Systemic Attribution

Across the focus groups, often with some frustration and a sense of powerlessness, students repeatedly pointed out a sense of hypocrisy in having the burden of this planetary issue placed on their generation and individual actions, while barely, if at all, pointing a finger at the actors causing large-scale environmental damage.

One secondary student mentions this:

"I also think that, like, we don't necessarily address that it's a systemic issue enough. We place a lot of responsibility on individual [action]. I don't necessarily think there's enough attention put on massive corporations and organizations and businesses that cause these [problems]. And I think if we taught people to recognize that and those patterns..." (E046)

This is not an isolated observation. Another student made the same point through a specific example — that CCSE "hasn't focused... on BP's dumping oil into the Gulf of Mexico" (E136) — while others extended the critique to the perceived futility of individual action in the face of unaddressed corporate behaviour: "sure, we can go vegan, sure, we can recycle everything, but these massive companies and corporations are still doing all the bad things, so it just feels a bit useless" (E086). A further extract makes the same structural point even more bluntly: "there's literally nothing discussed about what these big corporations are doing globally... as long as we're not holding these big firms accountable, it means nothing what individuals do" (E163).

This attribution extends beyond corporations to government and the broader political-economic system. Students wanted "a lot more... government-led policies, sort of forcing companies to be more sustainable" (E108), and were sharply critical of symbolic political commitment without follow-through: "net-zero pledges are unrealistic... either they don't do it or

you don't see them working on it at all" (E106). Several students framed the absence of political content in their education as a specific, nameable gap. One noted plainly that how climate ties into politics "literally wasn't mentioned at all" (E154), and connected this directly to civic disengagement — "young people don't vote as much as the government wants to... because we have a lack of information about the parties" (E158). Another wanted political education "as a weekly thing" (E157), on par with the standing the topic already has in science.

What makes this particularly significant isn't the unsurprising political awareness of the internet-savvy generation but rather the fact that students consistently describe arriving at this understanding outside their formal education and identify the absence as a specific deficiency. As one student put it: "it kind of left it up to me to actually find out what the biggest drivers of it was, which was just big industries and like billionaires" (E140). This finding sits in direct conversation with the individualization literature reviewed above. Where Kwauk (2020) and related work describe individualization as something done *to* students by curricula shaped by neoliberal assumptions, these extracts show the same pattern from the other side: students experiencing that framing, recognizing it as incomplete, and — largely on their own initiative — seeking out the systemic account their education did not provide.

Theme 2: School-Level Structural Provision

Theme 4 shows a gap that students have identified; Theme 2 shows why that gap exists at the level of curriculum design and school-level initiatives. The central claim of this section is that CCSE's marginal, peripheral status within the wider curriculum is what leaves room for the narrow, individual-behaviour-focused version of the subject that Theme 4 shows students objecting to. The marginality and hyper-individualisation are not two isolated issues, but the former causes the latter.

Three separate patterns were often named in relation to CCSE's presence. First, coverage is thin and repetitive rather than developing in depth: one student described CCSE content as material "we'll learn knowledge that we already knew" (E037), while another described it as confined largely to science. Second, where CCSE does appear, it often arrives as an isolated event rather than sustained content — "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" (E075) — and students argued that flagging it as a special occasion is itself counterproductive, since normalizing it "more naturally" into existing subjects would land better than "highlighting the fact they're doing something... out of what they would normally do" (E159). Third, students were notably clear that this is not a matter of teacher effort: "most of [the teachers] will just say what they need to say" (E026) — a constraint on what teachers are given to work with, not a reflection of individual teacher care.

These three patterns emerge from the same structural condition — sustainability treated as supplementary rather than integral — observed from three angles. The consequence of that marginality is visible directly in how students describe the moments CCSE does surface — disconnected, occasionally alarming interruptions rather than scaffolded understanding. One extract describes this pointedly as a "problem dumped onto us... before we've gained those tools" to act on it (E048), while another rejected generic messaging disconnected from students' actual circumstances, noting that advice like "you should use more public transport instead of driving" lands oddly for students who are not yet driving at all (E095). Marginal, occasional content, in other words, does not simply mean *less* CCSE — it means CCSE that arrives without context, proportion, or follow-through, which is a plausible part of why the individual-behaviour framing persists: a curriculum with no room to build complexity defaults to the simplest available frame.

Notably, students also showed what the alternative looks like when it does occur.

Extracurricular and place-based experiences were consistently described as more formative than classroom content — one student credited a self-driven local sustainability project with a lasting shift in understanding of "the impact that technology has on climate change" (E039), another described weekly environmental teaching through the Scouts Association (E045) — yet these same students noted this provision is under-promoted and effectively invisible: opportunities are "fully self-driven and you might receive an e-mail or two... but you won't get any encouragement to go do it" (E129). The capacity for integrated, sustained engagement clearly exists, but it is simply not structurally supported or made visible at the school level.

Connecting Theme 2 and Theme 4: Structural Absence and Individualized Framing

Read separately, Theme 4 documents *what* students think is missing (structural, systemic, political-economic content) and Theme 2 documents *why* it's missing (a curriculum architecture that treats sustainability as peripheral, repetitive, and occasional rather than integrated and developing). Read together, it becomes clearer that curricular marginality is the condition that makes individualized climate framing the path of least resistance.

This is worth stating precisely, because the two themes are not simply thematically adjacent — one plausibly produces the other. A subject given no sustained space to develop complexity cannot easily accommodate content that requires structural, political, or economic literacy to teach well; content of that kind demands continuity and scaffolding that occasional "eco week" sessions or single-subject coverage cannot provide (Theme 2). What remains teachable within those constraints is the simpler, decontextualized behavioural message — recycle, use public transport, eat less meat — which is exactly the framing students in Theme 4 describe as inadequate and, in places, as actively obscuring where responsibility actually sits

(E086, E163). Theme 2's marginality and Theme 4's individualization are therefore best read not as two separate findings, but as cause and consequence of the same curricular design choice.

A school-level policy response, then, is not primarily about adding more content, but about restructuring where sustainability sits in the curriculum: embedded across subjects rather than siloed in science, sustained rather than occasional, and — critically — with enough continuity to support political and economic content that a single isolated session cannot carry.

Conclusion

In line with the research questions posed in the introduction, this report has shown how CCSE is perceived by students aged 14–19 in the UK, along with the structural issues shaping that experience and their impacts on students more broadly. A decades-long science-centrism persists in how CCSE is delivered, driving away students who are interested in its social, economic, and political dimensions. The current framing of climate threats is described by many participants as "fear-mongering," and its effects are visible in a common fatalistic and pessimistic outlook among students toward the future — alongside a broader sense among participants that individual action does little to change outcomes at the scale the crisis demands. The free discourse enabled by the focus group format also revealed a notable degree of political awareness among a portion of participants, who called for more direct discussion and debate around the accountability of corporations and governments. The individualization of climate action was frequently noted by participants and heavily criticized, seen as shifting responsibility away from prior generations and major corporations onto individuals alone.

Taken together, these findings point to a central argument of this report: curricular marginality — climate change's peripheral, fragmented placement within the existing curriculum — appears to structurally produce the hyper-individualized framing of climate responsibility

observed among students. Rather than a coincidence of separate findings, this report treats the relationship as a plausible cause-and-effect pathway, with the school-level structural side actively shaping how students come to understand their own agency and responsibility.

The limitations of the data must be considered when interpreting these findings. Reliance on voluntary participation for the focus groups risks attracting students with a greater-than-average interest in the subject, to a degree not representative of the broader population within this age group.

The central question this report raises — whether the school-level structure of CCSE is responsible for its hyper-individualized focus — is grounded in theory and a limited dataset, and stops short of establishing causation empirically. It nonetheless offers a clear direction for further research, and its findings can serve as a foundation for structural changes aimed at making CCSE more effective. As the climate crisis grows more urgent, how the next generation is equipped to understand and respond to it will only become more consequential — making this a question worth pursuing further.

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Appendix

Exhibit 1 — Focus Group Questions

I. Opening questions (2-3 mins)

What comes to mind when you think of ‘climate change and sustainability education’?

II. Main questions

A. Experiences of climate change and sustainability education

3. How did climate change or sustainability feature in your school/college education?
4. Which subjects or activities included these topics?

B. Perceived quality and impact

5. What was your most memorable or useful learning experience in this area?
6. Were there aspects that felt unclear, limited, or unhelpful?

C. Gaps and improvements

7. Where do you think climate change or sustainability education was missing or insufficient?
8. If you could redesign this aspect of education, what would you alter or add?

D. Feelings and action competence

9. Did learning about climate change affect how you feel about the future?
10. When you left school/college, did you feel well prepared to engage with climate issues?

E. Forward-thinking

11. What are the biggest challenges for improving climate/sustainability education?
12. What are the biggest opportunities?
13. If advising government, what is the first change you would recommend?

III. Closing (2-3 mins)

- Ask if there is anything else they would like to add.

- Thank participants.
- Remind them they can request the withdrawal of their data within two weeks
- Confirm £20 voucher will be emailed.

Exhibit 2 — Initial Coding Framework

Theme	Code	Definition	Criteria	Source
Action Competence	Knowledge/Insight	A real understanding of the CCS issues, including but not limited to scientific, social, and political.	Statement displays an understanding of the distinction between cause and effect/symptoms.	<i>Jensen & Schnack (1997)</i>
	Commitment	An independent motivation/drive to act beyond just automated behaviour changes.	Expresses personal motivation, urgency, or its absence — an independent conclusion.	<i>Jensen & Schnack (1997)</i>
	Vision	Ability to picture an alternative desirable future and methods to get there.	Reference to an imagined future state and ideas. Optimist or otherwise.	<i>Jensen & Schnack (1997)</i>
	Action Experience	Reference to having actually taken action (individual/collective) tied to school learning.	Describes a concrete action and links it to something learned.	<i>Jensen & Schnack (1997)</i>
	Agents of Change	A sense of capacity to bring meaningful change.	A self-perceived capacity to act and bring change, not the act itself.	<i>Morrissey Gleeson & Morrissey (2025)</i>

Pedagogy	Discipline	Was it confined to Science/Geography or was it featured in other disciplines?	Names subject(s) where CC was taught.	<i>Morrissey Gleeson & Morrissey (2025); Howard-Jones et al. (2021, via Walshe)</i>
	Participatory learning	Discussion-based, hands-on activities or just passive delivery?	Describes doing/discussing vs. being told/lectured.	<i>Morrissey Gleeson & Morrissey (2025)</i>
	Beyond classroom/Place-based	Was the teaching just in the classroom or also tied to the physical school environment, outdoor spaces, and local context?	References school grounds, field trips, gardens, local issues.	<i>Walshe and Rushton (2025) — flagged as major student/teacher divergence</i>
	Repetition	Was it the same information repeated over and over again with no progression/depth?	Explicit mention of repetition across years.	<i>Walshe and Rushton (2025)</i>
Feelings/Emotions	Anxiety/Distress	Worry about the future.	Expresses worry, fear, and overwhelmingness.	<i>Ojala (2016), via Morrissey Gleeson & Morrissey (2025)</i>
	Constructive Hope	Hope that coexists with the acknowledgement of the problem, not ignorance/denial.	Different from denial-based assurance.	<i>Kolenaty et al., via Morrissey Gleeson & Morrissey (2025)</i>
	Powerlessness	Sense that individual or small-scale actions are futile.	Mentions doing or not doing something thinking it's all pointless.	<i>Morrissey Gleeson & Morrissey (2025)</i>
	Suppressed/Unaddressed Emotion	Reports of not being able to openly discuss CC related feelings/worries.	References teacher or peers not sharing the same sense of urgency or curiosity.	<i>Beasy et al., via Morrissey Gleeson & Morrissey (2025)</i>

National Policy/Governance	Curriculum/exam constraints	Content was limited to exam specifications and the bare minimum to meet requirements.	References syllabus, exams, limited classes talking about CCS.	<i>Walshe and Rushton (2025) — material resources</i>
	Political sensitivity/avoidance	Reluctance to engage with political dimensions.	Notes teachers' hesitancy, neutrality, avoidance, etc.	<i>Vamvalis; Cajigal & Tippins, via Morrissey Gleeson & Morrissey (2025)</i>
	Institutional priority	Perceived value placed on CCSE relative to other subjects/activities at school-leadership level.	References funding, opportunities (lack of), staff availability, permissions, etc.	<i>Walshe and Rushton (2025) — structural resources</i>

Exhibit 3 — Final Codebook

Theme	Organizing Concept	Codes	Includes	Excludes
Theme 1 Teacher-Level Delivery	Captures students' preferences and critiques regarding how CCSE content is taught within individual lessons — pedagogical approach, classroom climate, and teacher conduct, insofar	We have too much focus on Science in our classes.	Activity-based learning, discussion/debate, exam-centrism, solutions- vs. problem-focus, engagement/enjoyment, teacher care, relevance to students' futures.	Decisions about curriculum structure, subject allocation, or resourcing, which sit with the institution
		We get some non-science topics.		
		We want more activities-based learning.		

	as these are within an individual teacher's control.	We want more Discussions and Debates. We want a less exam-centric approach to CCSE. We want to be told more about solutions and less about problems. The lectures/activities should be fun, interesting and not sleep inducing. Our education focuses too much on just individual behaviours. How does CCSE relate to the career that I want to pursue? We are fine with provided instructions for sustainability without reasoning. We want our teacher to also show some care. We want our classes to help us feel personally connected to this issue.		rather than the teacher (→ Theme 2).
Theme 2	Captures students' preferences and critiques regarding institutional	The Official curriculum needs to be changed in following ways.	Curriculum breadth/coverage of CCSE across subjects, tokenistic or inconsistent	In-lesson teaching method (→

Structural Provision	decisions about how CCSE is structured, resourced, and offered across the school as a whole — decisions that sit with the school board or curriculum design rather than an individual teacher.	Most of our subjects barely ever talk about Sustainability.	inclusion, ECA opportunities, outdoor/experiential programs.	Theme 1) and matters outside the school's control (→ Theme 4).
		Only Occasional Focus (same as above).		
		Only certain subjects properly feature it.		
		It's just the same thing over and over again.		
		We want to learn by being outdoors and close to nature itself.		
		Mentions of CCSE feel too random and forced.		
		CCSE is just there in the background always but not actively.		
		We need more and well-maintained ECA opportunities for CCS.		
		Being a part of this Activity/Action actually helped me learn ____.		
Theme 3 Efficacy and	Captures students' internal, affective relationship to CCS issues — how they feel	It won't affect me, no need to worry/act.	Fatalism vs. optimism about outcomes, perceived futility of individual action, disengagement/refusal to	Attributions of blame or responsibility to external actors

Emotional Response	about the problem and their own capacity to act on it, independent of who or what they hold responsible.	I think the situation will keep getting worse.	learn, desire for personal connection to the issue, fear-based messaging, freedom (or lack of it) to express views on CCS.	(→ Theme 4), even where the emotional register is similar.
		We/I as individual(s) can't really do much.		
		I can't do anything about it, so I'll choose not to learn.		
		My surrounding doesn't let me express about CCS freely.		
		The school is out to scare us.		
		I think things might get better.		
		We want to understand our own actions.		
		Give us other reasons to be here.		
Theme 4 Responsibility and Systemic Attribution	Captures students' views on where responsibility for climate action should sit, beyond themselves and beyond the school — critiques of individual-behaviour-focused framing and calls for accountability from larger systemic actors.	Can we talk about the Oil companies though?	Critique of individual-behaviour-centric education, government/political accountability, corporate accountability, structural/economic conditions, sense that too much responsibility is placed on students personally.	Purely internal/affective responses with no external attribution (→ Theme 3).
		We want the government and politicians to also show that they care.		
		It is just difficult for us to be sustainable.		
		Too much has been put on us.		

		Can we discuss the political and economic condition of the world right now?		
		The problematic behaviours are too ingrained into our daily lives.		