WHY ARE OUR TEACHERS SILENT? EXPLORING SELF-DETERMINATION IN POST-GLASGOW SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE EDUCATION

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Abstract

'There is No Planet B' was one amongst thousands of slogans chanted by young climate protestors at Glasgow in November 2021. Having studied many UN climate conferences since 2009, I can see why 'for the first time the adult delegates [at COP26] were more afraid of the kids outside than they were of one another or the press' (Friedman, 2021). In this paper, I will attempt to address some of these gaps using a self-deterministic prism. I will argue that the new youth climate activism could be better explained from a needs satisfaction perspective in the psychological theory of self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2020). Specifically, the theory focuses on social-contextual factors that foster or hinder students thriving through the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2017). From SDT's perspective, all students are inherently prone to learning, mastery, and connection with others, but these human tendencies are not spontaneous—they require nurturing conditions, such as need-supportive teaching behaviors, inclusive structures, and learning environments. In this paper, I will focus on several critical tasks for educators to undertake. First, they need to take bolder steps themselves to integrate climate awareness into their daily teaching practice. Second, teachers should act early to mitigate the negative side-effects of youth climate protests on the quality of and access to education in the long run. The key to both tasks lies in designing and implementing inclusive pedagogies to address the needs and expectations of the climate-conscious generation, as well as those who have not yet grasped the extent of the looming planetary collapse.

Keywords: Climate Change Education, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Environmental Education.

1 INTRODUCTION

'There is No Planet B' was one amongst thousands of slogans chanted by young climate protestors at Glasgow in November 2021. Having studied many UN climate conferences since 2009, I can see why 'for the first time the adult delegates [at COP26] were more afraid of the kids outside than they were of one another or the press' (Friedman, 2021a). It is hard to overlook that climate strikes and school boycotts are showing signs of institutionalization and sophistication with more youth organizations emerging, and merging (e.g., BBC, 2021). Organized or not, on a macro level the source of youth climate resentment is two-fold: most policymakers and businesses are failing to curb carbon emissions and most educators are falling short of underscoring the urgency of the climate crisis in their daily teaching and interactions with students. This new climate activism is a relatively new phenomenon (inspired by Greta Thunberg's solo protest in Sweden in 2018-2019), to date, there have been few attempts to discuss the meso- and micro-level implications of this development on sustainability education and instruction. In this paper, I will attempt to address some of these gaps using a self-deterministic prism. I will argue that the new youth climate activism could be better explained from a needs satisfaction perspective in the psychological theory of self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2020; 2017).

2 METHODOLOGY

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) focuses on social-contextual factors that foster or hinder students thriving through the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2017). From SDT's perspective, all students are inherently prone to learning, mastery and connection with others, but these human tendencies are not spontaneous—they require nurturing conditions, such as need-supportive teaching behaviors, inclusive structures and learning environments (Ryan and Deci, 2017; 2020). When pedagogical designs effectively satisfy these needs, students are more likely to be motivated to engage in learning tasks (Ismailov & Ono, 2021; Ismailov & Laurier, 2021; Ismailov et al, 2021; Ismailov & Chiu, 2022).

Both give the young people anything but hope that the future will be bright. The first problem is political, and with anything political, the uncertainty will always be in the air. But the second problem is rooted in social psychology and classroom pedagogy – both variables are predictable and malleable with smart action in place. Also, unlike politics, both are within the reach of educators but have not yet been exploited. Most of the educators who I come across act as if they are 'neutral' forgetting that from a Gen Z perspective 'climate neutrality is not much different than 'climate denialism.' Not to be confused with carbon neutrality.

We must focus on several critical tasks for educators to undertake. First, they need to take bolder steps themselves to integrate climate awareness into their daily teaching practice. Second, teachers should act early to mitigate the negative side-effects of youth climate protests on the quality of and access to education in the long run. The key to both tasks lies in designing and implementing universally adaptable multilingual pedagogies to address the needs and expectations of the climate-conscious generation (e.g., see Figures 1-2), as well as those who have not yet grasped the extent of the looming planetary collapse. We should also discuss the limitations of the widely cited framework of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). To better understand what the future holds for sustainability and climate change education perhaps we should get insights from other fields and disciplines, such as from a self-determination theory in social psychology.
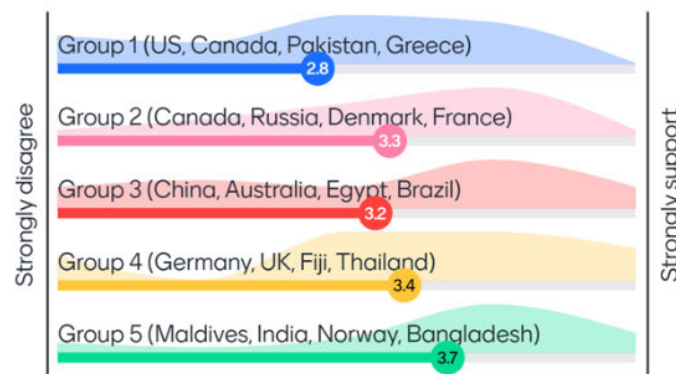

Figure 1. An example of self-determinist online activity on climate change negotiations

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a suitable psychological framework to assess how current pedagogical frameworks for sustainability and climate change education caters to learner inclusion and diversity. By underscoring *'the basic human needs and the diversity of ways they are expressed and satisfied'* (Ryan and Deci, 2017: ix), the theory explicitly supports inclusive teaching practices that are also highly relevant in the context of youth-propelled climate action. Specifically, the theory focuses on social-contextual factors that foster or hinder students' thriving through the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2017). From SDT's perspective, all students are inherently prone to learning, mastery and connection with others, but these human tendencies are not spontaneous—they require nurturing conditions, such as need-supportive teaching behaviors, inclusive structures and learning environments (Ryan and Deci, 2017; 2020). When pedagogical designs effectively satisfy these needs, students are more likely to be motivated to engage in learning tasks (Ismailov & Chiu, 2022; Ismailov & Ono, 2021).
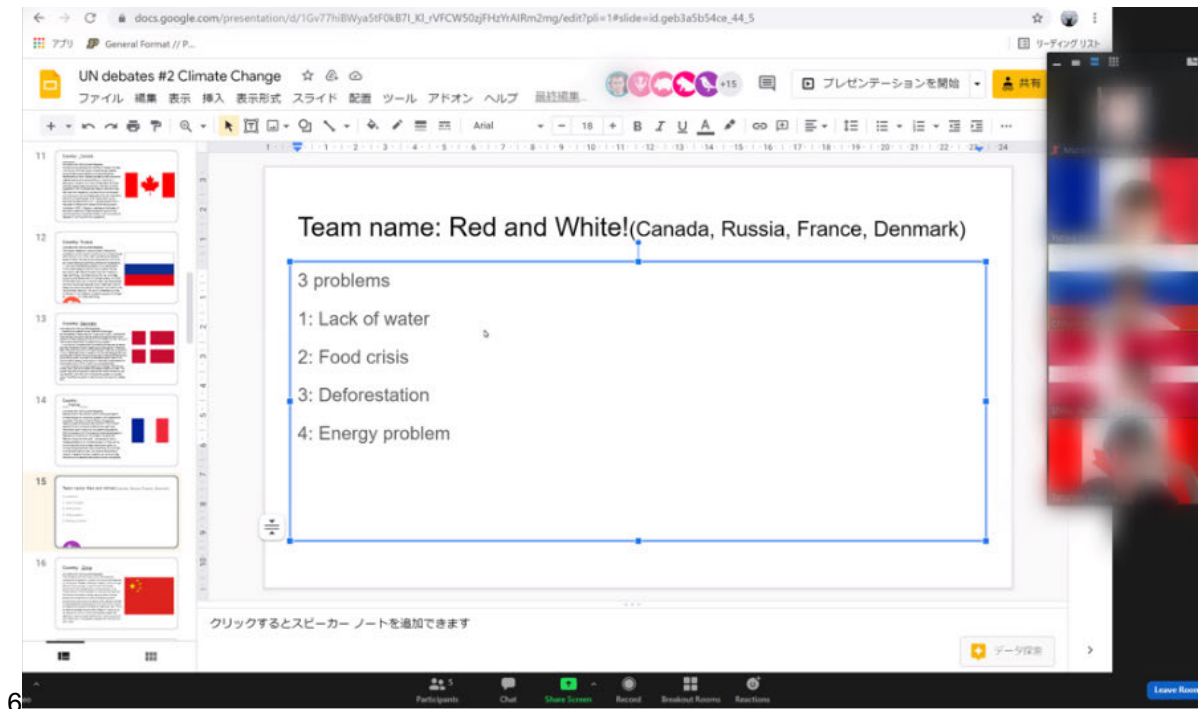
Figure 2. An example of self-determinist educational activity on climate change

The autonomy need is described by SDT as a sense of voluntariness that is supported by experiences of interest and value (intrinsic motivation) but hindered by experiences of control, punishment, and external reward (extrinsic motivation) (Ryan and Deci, 2017; 2020). A key factor that supports autonomy is the provision of choice through multiple learning modalities (Ismailov, 2021a; Ismailov, 2021b; Ismailov & Laurier, 2021). The second need – competence – is a feeling of mastery and self-efficacy that are best satisfied within a well-structured pedagogical design that offers optimal challenges, positive feedback, and opportunities for growth (Ryan and Deci, 2017; 2020). A sense of competence diminishes in contexts in which challenges are too difficult, feedback is absent, or feelings of effectiveness are undermined by the perceived difficulty of learning tasks (Ismailov et al, 2021; Ismailov, 2021c). The third need from the SDT's perspective concerns relatedness, enhanced by the sense of belonging and social connection. By feeling connected to others and by being a significant member of social groups, learners experience inclusion and belonging, for instance, by contributing to the group or learning with peers in formal and informal settings (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

3   RESULTS

Gen Z, as represented by 2.5 billion people who were born between 1997 and 2012 and who grew up in a technology-rich environment, is now the world's largest population cohort (Friedman, 2021a). A large proportion of this group is attending various levels of education. Their climate activism is good news for our planet but may not be so good for educators and the long-term education goals. Simply put, given the sluggish political activity toward CO_2 reduction, as it was seen at COP26, our students' growing climate activism and solidarity is expected to expand dramatically over time. With more students both energized and mobilized through social media, there is a reason to expect that educational practices will be disrupted at scales never seen before. Also, by observing these emerging discourses, one cannot but miss the point regarding the declining trust in the government-run education system in general. Personally, it is not the prospect of youth protest that worries me most, but the lack of much needed educators' voices and lack of climate-centered grassroots-based pedagogic innovations to display that the teachers are part of the solution.

The teachers of all disciplines and at all stages of education should take their portion of responsibility and use new approaches to nurturing productive, science-based climate activism that prioritizes robust social action along with publicly acceptable social rallies. To echo Thomas L. Friedman, to save the earth, along with 'a few more Greta Thunbergs and Elon Musks' (Friedman, 2021b), we also need even more Johan Rocktroms and Sir David Attenboroughs working with young people in the classrooms.

For now, teachers seem to be losing their ground. I have recently interviewed a dozen of young climate protesters during Fridays for Future rallies in Tokyo, Japan. To my surprise, every time I was there, I saw a few high school students. Given the strictness and thought uniformity of the Japanese K12 system, it seemed both surreal and courageous to observe these students quit their classes and join their older peers, mostly university students. In private, high schoolers echoed their fellow protesters outside Japan by asking 'Why should we go to school if we aren't sure that we can survive the heat?' Others voiced frustration with many of their teachers viewing 'climate crisis as none of their business.' One should expect such sentiments to grow stronger even outside more liberal regions, such as Western Europe.

4   CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I attempted to address some of these gaps using a self-deterministic prism. I argued that the new youth climate activism could be better explained from a needs satisfaction perspective in the psychological theory of self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2020). From SDT's perspective, all students are inherently prone to learning, mastery, and connection with others, but these human tendencies are not spontaneous—they require nurturing conditions, such as need-supportive teaching behaviours, inclusive structures, and learning environments. In this paper, I will focus on several critical tasks for educators to undertake. First, they need to take bolder steps themselves to integrate climate awareness into their daily teaching practice. Second, teachers should act early to mitigate the negative side-effects of youth climate protests on the quality of and access to education in the long run. The key to both tasks lies in designing and implementing inclusive pedagogies to address the needs and expectations of the climate-conscious generation, as well as those who have not yet grasped the extent of the looming planetary collapse.

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