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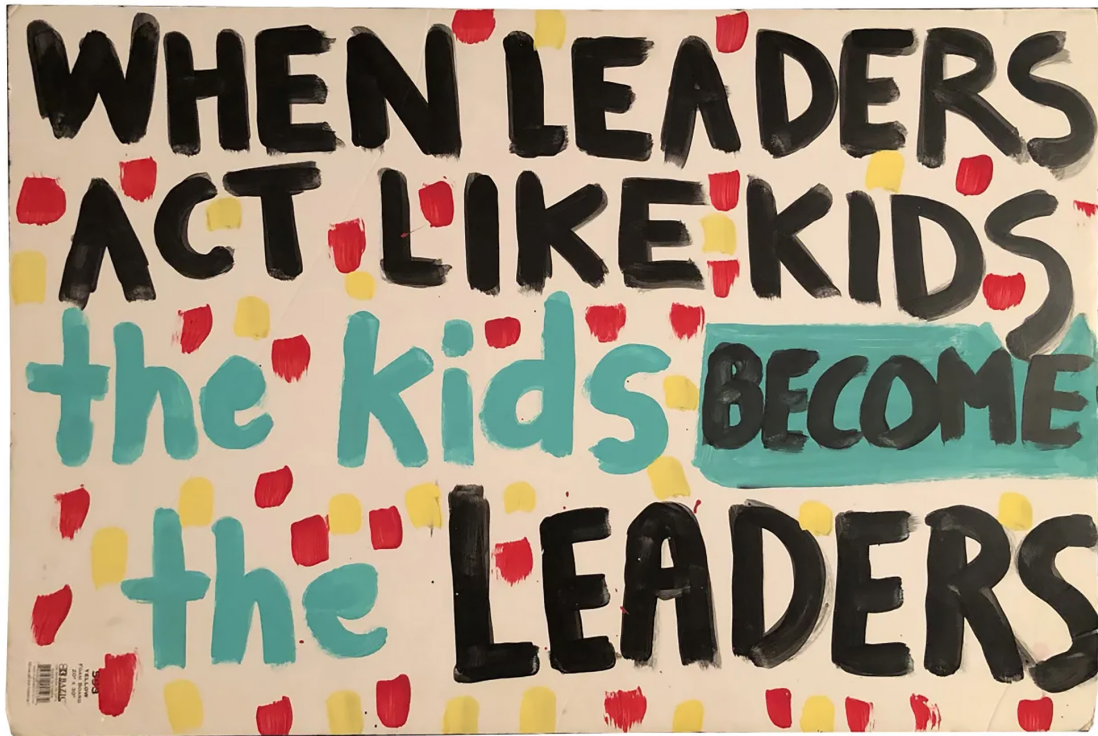
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## Learners in the role of eco-journalists explore global environmental challenges

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### Abstract

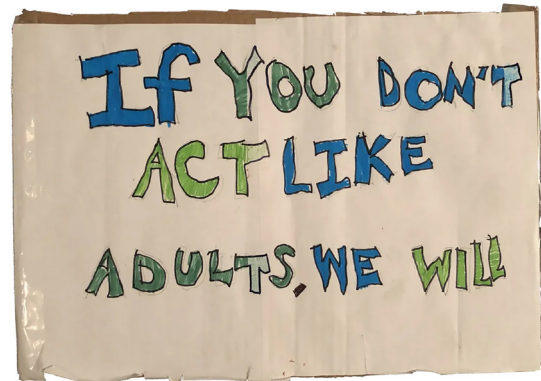
This article presents a pedagogical scenario where an educational approach of drama-based practices at the upper primary or secondary school level was developed. The proposed interdisciplinary and differentiated learning approach combines (native or foreign) language teaching, drama workshop techniques and environmental education concepts, values and desired attitudes. Language and arts education open up to the extra-disciplinary horizons of the curriculum by integrating socio-ecological concerns, particularly the climate change, which is documented to be a most vital contemporary challenge, thus raising awareness on the intersections of nature, human rights and culture, fostering ecological literacy, sustainability values, students' creativity, critical thinking and active engagement. The proposed six teaching hour activities, described step by step, will allow learners to assume the roles of eco-journalists, visual storytellers and artists, take interest in tackling major global issues and manage to acquire competences for life.

**Keywords:** *climate change, interdisciplinary differentiated pedagogical scenario, eco-journalists*

## Theoretical background and rationale

An urgent need has been acknowledged worldwide for a fundamental rebalancing of the human-nature relations to preserve ecosystems and promote a more sustainable resource use (Haglund, 2019). A convincing body of evidence demonstrates that the activities and habits of *Homo Sapiens* are leading to the natural world's exceptional dysfunction (Wals & Benavot, 2017) and are undermining our planet's capacity to regulate itself (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000; Waters et al., 2016). However, by mobilising education, we empower people to recognise and effectively respond to the crucial global and local environmental concerns. In fact, by bringing forward and processing ecological challenges in the classroom, learning becomes more meaningful for the students who adopt active roles of responsible citizens. According to Wals (2012), there are two complementary ways of understanding the role of education for environmental sustainability. The first one, called "instrumental" approach, aims at developing some specific environmental behaviours considered to be essential, particularly social marketing-based and policy-driven; the second one, called "emancipatory" approach, focuses on education that develops autonomous, responsible and reflective citizens, able to make up their own minds and follow appropriate courses of action. The emancipatory approach promotes collaborative, participatory and transformative learning. How can we, educators, realise students' emancipation so that they critically engage in meaning-making discourses on global issues and be willing to participate in safeguarding the Earth's future? A modern learning process allows new relationships between the inner world (internal) and the external world of students involved in the educational transition space (Ellsworth, 2005). Besides, the holistic vision of education includes a sense of the whole person who is connected to his/her surrounding context and environment (Miller, 2004) and is willing to take response-ability (one's ability to respond). Through a flexible and dynamic process, holistic education launches an exciting journey for both the educators and the students.

Therefore, we may suggest several steps which the teacher needs to take during the groundwork/preparation phase of this intervention: Identify learners' goals and focus on their needs, establish good relationships, trust and a positive, inclusive classroom climate, join forces with teachers of various subjects (interdisciplinary method/integrated learning), plan thoroughly, by scaffolding learning step by step, the contents of the lesson and its implementation building on the learners' prior knowledge, opt for diversified learning methods and as-



sign collaborative/project-based work, whereas during the implementation phase he/she just has to monitor/facilitate the activities performed by the students and make clear that committing "errors" is a constructive means of learning.

One of the most effective methods to differentiate the learning process are the drama-based activities in class. Drama, by dealing with immediate situations in daily life, broadens the concepts of character and therefore deepens perceptions of oneself and others. Accordingly, students experiment with the idea of "otherness", offering them significant practice in empathy. Winnicott (2005) repeatedly underlined that play has an important role in shaping democratic citizenship. Moreover, Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the importance of the social nature of the imaginative play in children's development, considering the fictional situations emerging during classroom communication activities as "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), which indicates the level of task that the student can accomplish independently, which, in turn, demonstrates the actual activity that can be accomplished with teacher-guided support or in collaboration with more capable peers.

On the other hand, students assuming the role of eco-journalists is of great immediate interest, since a high alarm is being expressed by the public globally; people are a lot more concerned now because of the increase in weather extremes (Molek-Kozakowska, 2017), such as biblical floods, heat waves, violent storms, cyclonic winds, hurricanes, etc. What is more, the students gain awareness of the fact that the media plays a vital role in the way society perceives the environmental concerns. A critical way for education





to encourage sustainability is through the notion of environmental stewardship (Wolff, 2014), which signifies the responsible use and protection of the natural environment through conservation and sustainable practices to enhance ecosystem resilience and human well-being (Chapin et al., 2011). This notion highlights the ethical and moral commitments that individuals make so as to being mindful of a more sustainable planet and encourages key principles such as empowerment, collaboration, transformation and resilience.

In primary and secondary education, the environment is mostly treated as a stand-alone subject, not mainstreamed into the curriculum (Benavot, 2014). Our attempt is to bridge this gap by integrating environmental education into the teaching and learning of a varied assemblage of subjects, such as languages, drama, visual arts, geography, science, civic education and computer science. The scenario which we designed and carried out is addressed to learners of upper primary and secondary classes. The implementation may combine the co-teaching of various speciality teachers or their collaboration with the class teacher.

### Learning objectives

- Draw students' attention to the human impact on environmental issues/Cultivate civic ecology education values and life skills for the promotion of resilient societies and sustainable development
- Foster critical consciousness and civic responsibility
- Explore various ways of self-expression
- Empower students' respectful advocacy, allow them to re-think attitudes and behaviours
- Develop life-long skills to research, discuss, evaluate the data and collaborate with their peers

### The learning procedure/ Implementation stages

Each of the following six steps has an average duration of one teaching hour.

**Step 0:** Negotiate and establish a pedagogical contract of the ground rules of how students should present their arguments and counterarguments within a climate of mutual respect.

#### Step 1: Visual storytelling

1a. Visual stimulus/prompt: Youth-made climate-strike signs (Kalman, 2019)

1b. Brainstorming activity: What is being affected by climate change/global warming? Name the impacts.

The students provide their answers (orally or using the interactive presentation tool Mentimeter in case the lesson is delivered online) and the teacher writes (or projects) them on the board. He/she may organise all students' ideas proposing a mind map.

1c. Students familiarise with notions and terms, such as weather extremes, ecological interaction, interconnected ecosystems, carbon footprint, greenhouse effect, global sustainable development goals (SDG), renewable energies, alternative means of transportation, decision-makers, G8 countries, summits, take urgent action to respond to a crisis, petitions, a cause, activism, eco-journalism and its functions, Pulitzer Prize.

The teacher forms 6 working groups of 4 students and assigns them the task to search on the web and employ multimodality to express themselves, which is to write down or draw the definitions and concrete examples of the above-mentioned concepts. This practice of strategically combining words and images to convey information is called visual journalism or visual storytelling. It enables readers to



better understand complex, sophisticated topics in a shorter amount of time. Students' creations are to be published on the school's blog.

**Step 2:** Interview an agent of positive change

The girl named Helga Thunberg was the catalyst for the worldwide movement that raised people's awareness on climate change. The students assume the journalist's role, while the teacher steps into Helga Thunberg's role and provides answers to the students' questions who take turns to ask. Authentic, either simple or more elaborate questions are formulated by the students, according to their level of language fluency:

- What is your name?
- Where are you from?
- How old are you?
- Have you got any siblings?
- Have you got a pet?
- What is your favourite subject?
- What inspires you the most?
- Which countries have you already visited? Have you ever been in Greece?
- What made you famous?
- What does "activism" mean?
- How did you develop this special interest?
- What are your feelings while fighting for a cause?
- What do your parents say about your involvement in tackling the climate change?
- How do you imagine yourself in ten years? What career would you like to pursue?
- Do you "see the glass" half-full or half-empty?
- Could you suggest what actions should we, schoolchildren, take in order to save our planet?

**Step 3:** Let's tackle climate change together. Students discover the 20 challenges proposed by the British Council (n.d.).



**Step 4:** Young people's voice can be heard!

4a. Present to the class the Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change launched by the United Nations in July 2020 (United Nations, n.d.): the profiles of seven young people on the front lines of climate action.

4b. Reflection and class discussion in a circle to exchange perspectives, ideas and possible solutions to the problem. Explain to the students the rules of the Fishbowl technique and allow 10 minutes so that they prepare their questions. Name the topic (i.e. Is sustainable development an oxymoron?), according to the students' level. They may consult the webpage European Data Journalism Network by the key term "climate crisis". Then, they form a circle of 5-9 chairs ("the fishbowl") and enough room around the circle for the remaining students to observe what is happening in the "fishbowl". Students seated inside the "fishbowl" actively participate in a discussion by asking questions and sharing their opinions, making sure everyone in the inner circle has a chance to speak, while students standing outside listen carefully to the ideas presented. They take turns in these roles, so that they practise being both contributors and listeners in the group discussion (Vogel, 2019).





The teacher suggests they use “I-statements” (I feel, I believe, I think, I read, I learned). I-statements make a person ask oneself, “Why do I think and feel this way?” This reflection can lead to greater self-knowledge, which in turn can help to have better conversations with people.

### Step 5

Students, by using upcycled materials and natural resources, create art objects in order to express themselves and raise awareness among the rest of the school’s pupils and inspire green transformation to as many people as possible.

Finally, a Mime & Guessing Game may be played whenever there is available time: “The top 20 climate-smart cities of the world”.

First, we may visualise their locations for 5 minutes on Map Hub. Then, students are randomly divided into two groups. The procedure evolves as follows: while one member of the first group practises non-verbal communication and mimes one location and this city’s most striking characteristics, the members of the second group try to identify which city it is about.

### Dissemination

Upload the project’s creations and outcomes on the school’s blog. Also, organise a happening with presentations, a flashmob performance and more interactive activities devoted to the protection of the planet and invite all the local community and stakeholders (i.e. on the occasion of Earth Day on the 22nd of April).

### Assessment

The assessment descriptors focus on the learning outcomes being consistent with the learning objectives. Students fill in a self-evaluation form, which identifies their accomplishments as well as their area(s) for improvement. They also receive verbal feedback from the teacher. Overall, this learning journey has a positive effect on the students’ holis-

tic learning, the teachers’ professional growth and the school community’s well-being. As for the effectiveness and the added value of these activities, the feedback we received can be summarised as follows:

We shift the focus from the teacher as a unique source of new knowledge and place students in the position of co-creators of knowledge, providing them clues for creation and reflexion, sharpening their critical thinking. The proposed experiential approach strengthens the collaborative culture, students’ self-efficacy by expressing their beliefs through roles, mitigating the inhibitory factors of self-exposure, developing the production of oral speech, tackling environmental themes, discovering universal values with the ultimate goal of their adoption for the common good in their adulthood, developing skills such as active participation in solving the problems of society (Walker & Shore, 2015).

### Concluding remarks

Taking everything into account, the best educational practice is rather reflected to be a “whole school” approach to education for sustainability. This allows to create an integrated and systemic response to global concerns, that is to nurture a positive mindset within the school context to foster a variety of actions aiming at raising students’ awareness and engagement to tackle major environmental issues and cultivate everyday habits and behaviours for leading eco-friendly lifestyles, in order to involve all students, teachers and parents to assume responsibilities (support recycling, reduce waste, conserve energy and water, purchase local foods, encourage eco-art practices) and therefore avoid overburdening the Earth’s bio capacity, manage to decrease our collective carbon footprint and increase our ecological handprint/positive impact. The challenging vision feels right to re-design and create educational institutions where policies, operations, contents and practices work together in an integrated way and, hopefully, build an extended network of eco-schools where there are possibilities to connect, share resources, and join forces. Then, education will be a valuable contributing factor to halt unsustainable practices and develop the agency of learners to act in meaningful ways towards the environment.

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