

A climate change curriculum to empower the climate strike generation

September 17 2019, by Ria Dunkley



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It's too late to protect them from it, so how do teachers tell children about climate change without scaring them? The good news is that young people are already engaged—the students taking part in climate strikes show that young people want action and are willing to skip school to show how serious they are. But while in class, children shouldn't feel

their time is wasted. Primary school teachers have an ethical responsibility to bring climate change into their classrooms and they're well placed for the task.

Imagining a [climate](#) change curriculum is no mean feat. How to cover the range, scale and scope of the climate emergency? From the global effects on Earth's biodiversity to the human sources of greenhouse gas emissions—climate change will dominate the future of today's [children](#) and reshape every aspect of their lives.

Then there's the biggest question of all—what are we going to do about it? This seems to animate children more than the adults in power, and the free imaginations we usually attribute to children are needed to remake the world in light of the climate crisis. A key task of educators in the 21st century is to make such abstract concepts tangible.

Springboard stories

Storytelling offers a way through for the educator and every primary school teacher I've ever met seems to have a gift for it. I saw how powerful storytelling could be when I worked at the [Eden Project](#) in Cornwall—the world's largest indoor rainforest. Here, visitors learn about the [natural world](#) while immersed in it.

One teacher told a story about ancient Polynesians who traveled the Pacific taking plants they grew with them to use for medicine, food and clothing. He explained to the school group that this led to the dispersal of plants—like coconut-carrying palms and bananas trees—all across islands in the Pacific. "Your island is sinking," he told the children. "You're setting off to find new lands and changing your life. What plants would you take with you?"



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With that thought, the children wandered off amid Eden's rice plants, the banana and rubber trees that make tires and the [periwinkles that cure childhood leukemia](#).

Their lives might feel a million miles from those ancient travelers, but the dynamics are the same—we all rely on the natural world. It's not just something pretty to look at, it's vital for our survival. Stories can act as springboards that catapult young people into new ways of seeing, thinking and being in a constantly changing world.

Reading time

Every [primary school](#) should amass a climate change book shelf. This

could inspire an enduring love of nature and begin to build familiarity with ecological terms and concepts. A good example is Rob McFarlane's [Lost Words](#) – something of a rescue mission for nature words that have been erased from the Oxford Junior Dictionary. The book introduces children to otters, conkers and kingfishers through poetry and beautiful paintings.

Books that deal more directly with environmental destruction and climate change are also needed. Lara Hawthorne's [Alba, the hundred-year-old fish](#), tells the story of a beautiful coral reef that becomes a littered graveyard. Alba the fish gets stuck in a plastic bottle and is only saved by a little girl who recruits her community to clean up the ocean and release Alba.

Telling these tales could lead into discussions about helpful activities for outside the classroom. With a well-planned reading list, language can be a surprisingly effective bridge to the great outdoors, and a powerful motivator for taking care of it.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

From students to stewards

Schools by the sea might read "Alba" before taking part in a beach clean. Teachers could help pupils record data in citizen science projects, like [spotting seagrass](#) along sheltered coastlines to help scientists understand where these underwater meadows are and protect them. Urban schools might find patches of ancient woodland, parks and gardens to [undertake surveys](#). Here they might identify lichen and moss on trees to measure air pollution—where there's more growing on tree bark, the air quality tends to be better. They might also dip test paper in ponds to understand local water pollution or plant trees and sow new wildflower meadows.

There are also opportunities to explore nature within school grounds. [The Natural History Museum's Microverse project](#) helps children identify the species that live on walls and in the little nooks and crannies of a playground, and the ecological roles they play.

Children may learn the effects of climate change in great detail throughout their time in school, but for the sake of hope, we need to take them through ways of mitigating those effects.

An ambitious [climate change](#) curriculum in primary schools could empower young people to understand the natural world and to see themselves as part of it, before giving them the chance to engage with and help it. It's important, however, that the climate strike generation aren't allowed to feel their efforts are hopeless—[school](#) should nurture their passions and help them shape the future they stand to inherit.

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