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Educating for a Changing Climate

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The haze affecting parts of Southeast Asia and the floods that recently swept through Nepal are more than passing headlines. They are a vital reminder that environmental events will not confine themselves within their historical boundaries. Instead, they reach into public health, infrastructure, livelihoods, education, and everyday life.

Students are often introduced to climate change through science or environmental subjects. However, its impacts extend far beyond these fields, affecting infrastructure, migration, food security, public health, education, and employment. Climate change is a multifaceted challenge that necessitates interdisciplinary collaboration, as it affects numerous aspects of society.



Regional haze clearly shows how environmental issues affect everyday life. Poor air quality can threaten public health, limit outdoor activities, and disrupt learning and work. Flooding can similarly damage infrastructure, interrupt education, threaten food security, and affect household incomes and livelihoods. In 2024 alone, extreme weather events such as heatwaves, storms and floods disrupted schooling for at least 242 million students across 85 countries (UNICEF, 2025). The environment is therefore not just an ecological issue but also a social, economic and educational one, requiring students to approach it from multiple perspectives.

Preparing Students for Better Futures

If climate challenges are as interconnected as they appear, raising awareness alone is not enough. Students need the skills and confidence to respond, including sustainability competence, a sense of responsibility, problem-solving skills, and the ability to imagine more desirable futures (Stifterverband, 2026). This calls for a shift in how schools teach about climate issues, moving beyond merely explaining problems to helping students explore potential responses. Importantly, this approach is not limited to science or environmental studies; schools can integrate climate education across disciplines, enabling students to examine climate challenges from scientific, social, economic, creative, and civic perspectives. Instead of asking only, “What is climate change?”, students can be encouraged to ask, “What can we do to address it?”

This approach can turn the classroom into a space for inquiry and action. For example, students could investigate how excessive heat affects their school, identify areas with limited shade and propose practical solutions such as planting trees, creating shaded spaces or improving access to drinking water. In science, they might examine temperature data; in mathematics, analyse heat trends; in language classes, develop a proposal to present to school management; and in design or technology,

develop a practical model of a cooler, more sustainable school space. Through activities like these, students learn to identify problems, evaluate evidence, weigh different solutions, consider their consequences and explore how their communities can become more resilient. The objective is not simply to prepare students for the world as it is, but to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and agency to help shape the world they will inherit.

Climate education should also aim to develop decision-making, empathy, and communication skills. Some argue that the most important of all is a real sense of efficacy, since people need to feel that what they do is relevant and useful (UNESCO, 2024). This may be explained by its role in fostering empathy. Rather than presenting climate change as a single, detached problem, climate education should encourage students to recognise that its impacts affect people's lives in different ways. Global issues may feel overwhelming, even paralysing, but education can make a critical difference by giving students the tools to see that meaningful changes are happening at international and local levels. Pairing honest discussion of climate risks with solutions-focused learning helps nurture hope and agency rather than despair (Finnegan & d'Abreu, 2024).

Understanding Climate Change Through a Justice Lens

Fairness is another piece that climate education too often leaves out. Impacts and opportunities to respond are rarely spread evenly, with vulnerable communities that have historically contributed the least to climate change disproportionately affected (IPCC, 2023). This varies sharply by community and identity (UNESCO, 2024), meaning the same event can be experienced very differently depending on who you are and where you live. A justice-centred approach pushes students to ask harder questions, each one grounded in something concrete.

1. *Who is most impacted?* During the haze, an office worker can simply turn on an air purifier and stay inside. An outdoor labourer or street vendor cannot. This shows they inhale the same air but suffer substantially greater harm.
2. *Who has the means to take action?* When floodwaters threaten, a well-resourced school can switch to online lessons, while a rural school without TV or internet must close its gates.
3. *Who benefits from a given solution?* A flood-mitigation project that defends a city centre could instead send floodwaters into farmland and villages. What is a "solution" for one community could threaten another.



Questions like these help students see sustainability as more than an environmental concern. At its core, it's about people, communities, and fairness.

Education for a Better Future

The haze over Southeast Asia and the floods in Nepal are reminders that environmental problems never happen in isolation. They cut across the systems that shape our health, education, institutions, and economies. We often believe test scores and employability are the only indicators of success, but crises like these call for a bigger idea. It demands preparing the students to understand complexity,

make responsible decisions, solve real problems, communicate clearly, empathise with others and imagine futures worth working toward. We cannot predict the crises that will unfold in the future, but we can ensure that the children of tomorrow are prepared to face them. Education alone cannot promise a better future; it can only train the people who will build it.

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