

Global Youth Activism on Climate Change

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Abstract

This literature review explores the recent exponential growth of a global youth movement that is focused on addressing climate change. It examines the casual factors for the growth, and through a critical lens examines some of the ageist and paternalistic responses the movement receives from politicians, the media and the general public. The positive impacts of the movement are explored, including the pressure the movement puts on governments and big businesses to act, by drawing attention to the structural and systemic causes of climate change. It was also found that the movement provides a sense of unity and hope, and helps to connect people, groups and organisations around the globe. The review concludes by outlining the role and responsibility social workers have in addressing this social justice issue and the ways in which they can work in solidarity with and support youth activists. Eco-social work is explored as a useful framework and how social workers can support this movement by being involved in more proactive, rather than reactive, responses to climate change. A key role identified was advocacy, with a focus on advocating for children and young people's right to participation and involvement in formal discussions and decision-making regarding this issue.

Keywords

Children; young people; climate change; activism; eco-social work

Introduction

The last decade, and the last few years especially, have seen the exponential growth of a global social movement fighting for our planet. This movement is unique because it was started and is led by children and young people, most of which are aged between twelve and eighteen years and are in secondary school (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020). This literature review examines some of the causal factors associated with the rise of this movement, as well as the responses it incites and its impact. Climate change is a social justice issue which, historically, social workers have had limited involvement in. This essay explores the emerging presence of social workers in this fight and how the profession can utilise their position, power and resources to work alongside and in solidarity with children and young people.

The seriousness of the issue of climate change means there is a plethora of literature on the topic, however, as the rise of this youth movement is relatively recent there is a limited number of articles specifically focused on it. This literature review therefore combines literature on climate change, its impact on children and young people, youth activism generally, youth-adult partnerships, environmental movements and eco-social work. A social work perspective is applied through the theories of critical, structural and ecological theories and it promotes the use of an emancipatory approach. A global framework is adopted to examine this movement, but as the author is based in Australia, focus is on the Australian context.

Climate change

Although the complexity of this issue means that uncertainty exists around some of the details of climate change, there is near-unanimous agreement that the global climate is already changing and that this is largely a result of human behaviour (Henson, 2011). Environmental indicators, which includes; fossil fuel emissions, global temperatures, ocean acidification and loss of tropical forests and biodiversity, all reveal that in the last fifty years there has been an accelerating pace of deterioration of planetary conditions (Henson, 2011; Graham., 2017). Rising global temperatures are of particular concern, with the last four years being recorded as the hottest on record, and the international threshold of a maximum increase of two degrees to avoid dangerous outcomes, being set to be breached by 2050 (Graham, et al., 2017; UN, 2019b).

Many individuals are already being impacted by the changes made to the environment (UN, 2019b). An increase in the number and severity of natural disasters, heatwaves and air pollution, as well as rising sea levels are having life-threatening impacts on people's health, and food and water security is becoming an increasing issue (UN, 2019b; UNICEF, 2020a; Scannell, Cox, Fletcher & Heykoop, 2016). Damage and destruction to individuals' homes and communities is also having negative impacts on people's mental health (Han & Ahn, 2020; Majeed & Lee, 2017; Scannell, et al., 2016). Studies have found increasing rates of 'climate concern', as well as increasing rates of 'climate-related despair' or 'eco-anxiety', which

includes feelings of helplessness, fear and fatalism around the issue of climate change (Stevenson & Peterson, 2015). Not all individuals and countries are feeling the effects of climate change equally (Renton & Butcher, 2010). Around the world, between countries and within them, 'environmental inequalities' exist (Renton & Butcher, 2010). This means there is an imbalance between good quality environments, environmental resources, services and opportunities to take action (Renton & Butcher, 2010). Large divisions exist between the rich and poor, and although wealthy individuals and countries are still impacted by climate change, poorer countries are more likely to have 'limited adaptive capacity', meaning they are not as equipped to adapt to and mediate impacts (Seitz & Krutka, 2020). Climate change therefore is a social justice issue which exacerbates structural inequalities through its impact on marginalised populations, especially those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage (Dominelli, 2013).

An added injustice of this is that the developed nations have caused the most damage to the planet but the developing countries are now the worst affected. As Grauer (2016) states – “the iron law of climate change is this: the less you did to cause it, the more you feel its effects” (p. 43).

Grauer's (2016) statement also applies to another population group. Children and young people are two age cohorts that, along with future generations, will be and already are, disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change (Renton & Butcher, 2010; O'Brien, Selboe & Hayward, 2018). It is argued that already irreversible damage has been done, and that future generations as well as the children and young people of today, will bear the brunt of this damage in the future (UN, 2019b). Children and some young people are already at a higher risk of injury or death from climate change and extreme weather because of their developmental stage, smaller size and reliance on adults for survival (Plan International Australia (PIA), 2015). It therefore makes sense that many children and young people have joined the fight for our planet.

The global youth climate movement

Around the globe there has been and continues to be growing interest, involvement and activism by children and young people on climate change (Seitz & Krutka, 2020; Cherisch, et al., 2019; Renton & Butcher, 2010). This has morphed into a global youth movement, where a shared collective identity centred around combating climate change exists among varying individuals, groups and organisations (Han & Ahn, 2020). Although conceptualised as a global youth movement, its form, style and presence vary depending on the context (Han & Ahn, 2020). Involvement ranges from individual, local and global initiatives, and symbolic actions to political mobilisation (O'Brien, et al., 2018). Children and young people around the world have mobilised, mostly through informal types of activism, including school strikes, street protests and online activism, which increased to unprecedented levels in the years 2018 and 2019 (Han & Ahn, 2020).

In August 2018, sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg, now a global icon for the movement, began a school strike for climate when she sat outside the Swedish Parliament demanding urgent action (FridaysForFuture, 2020). Although beginning this on her own, she was soon joined by others, and it eventually turned into Fridays for Future, a global youth movement that involves students going on strike and walking out of school, with adults also invited (FridaysForFuture, 2020). This movement is demanding government action, with a prioritisation on the drastic reduction of fossil fuels (Han & Ahn, 2020). Multiple strikes have since taken place around the world and each time attendance has increased (Boulianne, et al., 2020). The strikes that took place in September 2019 involved six million people globally, many of whom were children and young people (Greenleft2019; Boulianne, et al., 2020). This number demonstrates the enormity of this movement, and why collective action has become identified as its key feature (Boulianne, et al., 2020).

Social media has played an enormous role in the development and growth of this movement, enabling a collective identity to emerge which stretches across the globe (Boulianne, et al., 2020; Jung, et al., 2020). Children and young people are often critiqued for their use of social media as a forum for political expression and activism (Boulianne, et al., 2020). It is trivialised and disregarded, but as the phenomenon has become increasingly researched and understood this has been counteracted with arguments that it is a creative and important aspect of modern-day activism (Dennis, 2019 in Boulianne, et al., 2020; Earl, Maher, & Elliot, 2016). Social media has assisted with information distribution and global connectivity; and studies have also found a correlation between online and offline activism (Boulianne, et al., 2020; Moore, Gegieckas, Marval, McCauley, Haley & Peloquin, 2011; Jung, et al., 2020).

More children and young people have become involved in addressing climate change through joining existing environment organisations, as well as through creating their own, including local and international organisations (Cherisch, Scorgie, Wright, Mullick, Mathee & Hess, 2019). For example, in 2006 the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) was established, and has grown since, so that it has become Australia's largest youth-run organisation (AYCC, 2020). Its mission is to "build a movement of young people leading solutions to the climate crisis" and is focused on utilising the creativeness, passion and innovation of young people to lead a social change movement (AYCC, 2020).

The United Nations (UN) identifies children and young people as key stakeholders which have a unique contribution to make to this issue (Buttigieg & Pace, 2013). Children and young people's involvement and interaction with the UN is an example of activism through more formal channels (Han & Ahn, 2020). Over time the UN has enabled more children and young people to become involved in their addressment of this issue. An example is the UN Youth Climate Summit, which occurred in 2019 and was the first of its kind (UN, 2019). This provided sixteen to twenty-nine-year old's a platform to showcase their solutions as well as engage with decision makers (UN, 2019). Other UN initiatives are inclusive of younger ages (UN, 2019).

Reasons for the rise

This section looks at some of the other factors which are theorised to have accelerated the growth of this global youth movement. Children and young people have lower rates of climate change scepticism, and are also more likely to accept human behaviour as the main cause of climate change (Gabrys, 2016 in Rousell & Cutter-MacKenzie-Knowles, 2020; Boulianne, Lalancette & Ilkiw, 2020; Bergmann & Ossewarde, 2020). It is argued that this is partially due to climate change becoming an embedded topic in formal primary and secondary education curriculums in most countries around the globe, including in Australia (Rousell & Cutter-MacKenzie-Knowles, 2020; Tinkler & Bousfield, 2019).

Although no significant correlation has been found between knowledge and activism on climate change, correlation has been found between knowledge and attitudes and between attitudes and activism (Buttigieg & Pace, 2013; Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020). This leads some to argue that the education system is changing children's attitudes in such a way to increase interest in and encourage activism on climate change (Tinkler & Bousfield, 2019). In Australia, numerous students who participated in the school strikes claimed that their activism was a direct result of their learning in school (West, 2019 in Tinkler & Bousfield, 2019). Frustration comes from the disconnect between what students are learning and the inaction of governments on climate change (Tinkler & Bousfield, 2019; Okolisie, et al., 2016).

Government inaction is theorised to be another major contributor to the rise of this movement. The current plans and actions of governments around the world have been assessed as inadequate in stopping global warming reaching exceedingly dangerous levels (UN, 2019b; Seitz & Krutka, 2020). Some countries and governments are addressing climate change more than others, however most countries actions have been assessed as inadequate, including Australia's (UN, 2019b; AASW, 2019). Australia is continually dropping in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals global ranking, currently ranking 37 in the world, and is not on track to meet its international commitments (AASW, 2019). In a study done on Australian adolescents, 91% were found to believe the Australian government wasn't doing enough to address climate change (PIA, 2015).

Children and young people also report higher rates of concern and anxiety about climate change and the future of the planet (Renton & Butcher, 2010; Rousell & Cutter-MacKenzie-Knowles, 2020). A study done on Australian adolescents in 2006 found 27% believed the world was going to end in their life time (Tucci, Mitchell & Goddard, 2007 in Rousell & Cutter-MacKenzie-Knowles, 2020) and another global study done in 2008 found only 9% of children and young people thought the world would act quickly enough to address climate change (GlobalScan Survey, 2008 in UN, 2019c). Climate concern, if not turned despair, has been linked to climate change activism and therefore increasing rates of climate concern could be a contributing factor to the growth of the movement (Dodgen, et al., 2016 in Grauer, 2016; Stevenson & Peterson, 2015).

Voting is considered to be a form of political power, however, with most people only being able to vote at eighteen-years-old, many children and young people are excluded from it (Graham, Bland, Cookson, Kanaan & White, 2017). Democratic governments are expected to represent those who vote them into power, and therefore the wishes of children and young people are often sidelined (Graham, et al., 2017). Studies have found that children and young people around the world are often excluded from formal discussions and decision-making on many issues, including climate change, and that they feel especially excluded from formal political processes (PIA, 2015; Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2010). Children and young peoples oppressed political power and exclusion has resulted in creative thinking about how they can be heard and involved in combating climate change, and can therefore be seen as a contributing factor to the increase in informal forms of civic engagement associated with the movement (Rousell & Cutter-MacKenzie-Knowles, 2020).

Negative responses

The responses to the growth of the movement, especially to the school strikes, were divisive, a reflection of the divisiveness this issue incites as a whole (Tinkler & Bousfield, 2019; Jung, Petkanic, Nan & Kim, 2020). For some, the movements size and activities were applauded and led to a supportive response (Tinkler & Bousfield, 2019). However, others responded with ageism and paternalism (Bergmann & Osseward, 2020).

In Australia, the school strikes invoked a variety of responses, including ageist and paternalistic responses from conservative media outlets, and from some individuals in power, including the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison (Bergmann & Osseward, 2020). Children and young people were scolded by political leaders about their absences from school, rather than praised for their enactment of a constructive form of civic engagement (Bergmann & Osseward, 2020). The activists were ‘othered’ and their youthfulness and lack of a complete education was emphasised in an attempt to discredit their actions, knowledge and demands (Bergmann & Osseward, 2020; Tinkler & Bousfield, 2019). Negative discourse surrounding the strikes constructed the protests not as a legitimate form of civic engagement, but as an act of truancy, which Bergmann and Osseward (2020) argue was done to divert focus from the issue (Tinkler & Bousfield, 2019). In Australia, schools and teachers’ responses existed along a continuum between encouragement and punishment (Tinkler & Bousfield, 2019).

Positive impact

The movement, and especially the strikes, were successful in gaining media attention from all around the world and were effective in raising awareness about the seriousness of climate change and the need for urgent action (Han & Ahn, 2020). It is argued that the movement has increased feelings of hope and optimism and reduced feelings of despair and helplessness for children, young people and adults around the issue of climate change (Ojala, 2018; Buttigieg & Pace, 2013; Han & Ahn, 2020). It has done this through creating a community, demonstrating the commitment of millions of individuals and providing children and young

Cloughton: Global Youth Activism on Climate Change

people a pathway for involvement in combating climate change.

The movement has also helped to change the discourse and divert focus to the structural and systemic causes of climate change and consequently to the root causes (O'Brien, et al., 2018; Han & Ahn, 2020). It has put pressure on governments and big businesses by labelling them as responsible and accountable to the harm being done to the planet (O'Brien, et al., 2018). The movement was also successful in connecting a variety of organisations and groups, including; environmental groups, faith groups, health groups, professional groups and unions, and consequently in increasing the environmental movement as a whole (Han & Ahn, 2020).

Role of social work

One of the main ways social workers can support the children and young people involved in this movement is by turning their attention and efforts towards this issue. Generally, and globally, the social work profession has been critiqued as being slow and limited in its involvement in the climate crisis at a policy, research and practice level (Dominelli, 2014 in Bhuyan, et al., 2019; Nesmith & Smyth, 2015). However, more recently it has become recognised as a social justice issue which requires urgent action from social workers (IFSW, 2020). In Australia, the professions growing recognition of climate change can be demonstrated by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) declaring a climate emergency in 2019 and referring to climate change as the greatest challenge social workers are and will face (AASW, 2019).

Social workers can and are addressing climate change at a micro (e.g. crisis intervention), mezzo (e.g. sustainable community development) and macro level (e.g. social action and advocacy) (Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2012). Gray and colleagues (2012) argue that social work involvement and practice is often reactive, such as responding to natural disasters, rather than proactive, and that proactive practice needs to increase. Adopting an eco-social work framework of practice could facilitate this.

Eco-social work is an important framework that is growing in use and needs to be more integrated into the education, training and practice of social workers. This framework endorses an emancipatory and ecological approach which is focused on social and economic equality, human rights (including the right to a sustainable environment), human dignity, ecological sustainability and collective well-being (Dominelli, 2013; Schusler, Krings & Hernandezet, 2019). Addressing climate change and minimising its impact is identified as a key priority under this framework (Gray, et al., 2012). Multiple studies have found that social workers feel unprepared to address environmental justice issues, despite being frequently confronted with them by a broad client population group (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015; Gray, et al., 2012). This is a consequence of eco-social work not being adequately addressed in undergraduate social work degrees in many parts of the world, including in Australia (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015; Gray, et al., 2012).

Instead of acting as protectors, social workers need to act as allies to youth activists and need

Cloughton: Global Youth Activism on Climate Change

to engage in collaboration, partnership and power-sharing. The skills and knowledge of youth activists need to be acknowledged and can be learnt from as social workers become more engaged with this issue (Schusler, et al., 2019). Social workers need to reflect on their position of power and privilege and utilise their position to help support the movement. Advocacy is a crucial role that social workers can do and advocating for the participation and involvement of children and young people in discussions and decision-making around this issue is very important (IFSW, 2020).

An emancipatory approach draws attention to the human rights aspect of this issue and supports the need for increased involvement, collaboration and partnership with children and young people from governments, businesses and NGOs. From a strengths-based perspective children and young people have an array of views, capabilities, resources and creativity which needs to be recognised, harnessed and utilised in the fight against climate change (Albright, Hurd & Hussain, 2017; Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020). The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “every person under the age of 18 has the right to participate in the decision-making processes that impact them. This includes a forum to express their views, and support them to do it” as well as “right to freedom and association and to freedom of peaceful assembly” (UNICEF, 2020).

Australia is one of the many countries that has ratified this convention but is not upholding it, by not providing formal opportunities for children and young people to engage politically and hold decision-making power (UNICEF, 2020; PIA, 2015; Rousell & Cutter-MacKenzie-Knowles, 2020). Instead the participation more frequently made available to children and young people is tokenistic whereby no decision-making authority is shared (Schusler, et al., 2019). Through a critical lens this lack of participation can be identified as a form of oppression and ageism. Ageist beliefs and a ‘youth-deficit’ model have become dominant and have constructed children and young people as lacking capacity and competency to participate (Schusler, et al., 2019; Earl, et al., 2016). Australia and other countries can look to the UN for examples of meaningful participation and collaboration with children and young people (PIA, 2015).

This movement has diverted focus to the structural and systemic causes of climate change. Social workers can play an important role by maintaining this focus and challenging these social, political and economic structures and processes (Peeter, 2012). Critical theory and radical social work identify neoliberalism as a root cause of climate change because of its unsustainable models of development, unequal power dynamics and unequal distribution of resources (Dominelli, 2013; Peeters, 2012; Grey, et al., 2012). Neoliberalism is dominant in western countries and many other countries around the world, including in Australia, and without adopting this critical and macro lens climate change cannot be adequately addressed (Cutter-Mackenzie & Rousell, 2019).

Conclusion

This literature review explored the recent exponential growth of a global youth movement focused on addressing climate change. It examined some of the causal factors for the rise which includes; the reality that children, young people and future generations will be the ones most impacted by climate change; formal education on the topic; increased rates of climate concern; government inaction; social media as a form of civic engagement; the acts of prominent and now iconic youth activists and children and young people's exclusion from formal political processes and decision-making. Following from this, it then applied a critical lens to examine the ageist and paternalistic responses to youth climate activism. The positive impacts of the movement were explored and identified as; providing hope and a sense of unity, connecting people, groups and organisations around the world, and diverting focus to systematic and structural causes of climate change which put pressure on governments and big business. Overall, it found that this movement rebukes the argument that children and young people are disengaged and/or incapable of engaging with political and social issues. Rather, despite barriers including ageism and exclusion, children and young people have found effective ways to engage with the issue of climate change.

This essay concludes by outlining the need and responsibility of social workers to address this social justice issue. It emphasised how social workers need to work alongside and in solidarity with children and young people and advocate for their participation and involvement in formal discussions and decision-making regarding this issue. Climate change is a serious and highly complicated issue which requires a range responses, interventions, strategies and approaches. Addressing this issue is not simple or easy and children and young people's dedication and commitment to this cause should be applauded and supported.

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