

THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH SECTOR IN ADDRESSING YOUNG PEOPLE'S CLIMATE EMOTIONS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper demonstrates that young people are profoundly concerned about the future of our planet, with many experiencing a spectrum of emotions such as anxiety, grief, solastalgia and hope. In particular, eco-anxiety, which pertains to the chronic worry about environmental doom, is increasingly prevalent among young people. This paper finds that these climate emotions significantly affect the mental health and daily lives of young people.

The paper underscores the critical role of the youth sector, which includes youth workers and youth organisations, in supporting young people in dealing with climate emotions. The youth sector can strive to provide safe spaces for young people to express their feelings, engage in climate actions and develop resilience.

However, several challenges remain. Youth workers require more training and resources to support young people effectively, while young people frequently feel that their voices are not adequately heard in climate policy discussions. This has been suggested to exacerbate their feelings of helplessness and frustration.

To address these challenges, the paper recommends several actions. Firstly, comprehensive training programmes for youth workers on how to manage climate emotions and foster resilience should be developed and implemented. Secondly, safe spaces within youth organisations should be established where young people can share their concerns and take collective action. Youth policies need to explicitly address climate emotions, including integrating climate change education into school curriculums and supporting youth-led initiatives.

Collaboration among mental health professionals, educators, policy makers and youth organisations is crucial to creating a robust support network for young people. Increasing opportunities for young people to participate in climate policy development is also essential to ensure their voices are heard. Additionally, further research is necessary to understand the impact of climate emotions and to evaluate the effectiveness of various support strategies.

In summary, the paper advocates for a holistic approach to addressing the emotional challenges young people face due to climate change.

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INTRODUCTION

Climate crisis is one of the key challenges our societies are facing. Young people are particularly affected by it, as climate change will have a disproportionate effect on their lives and their children. With the increasing coverage and public recognition of climate change, it is impossible to shield young people from the negativity often associated with the future of our planet (European Science – Media Hub 2022a). Research shows that young people across the world are really worried about climate change (Coffey et al. 2021). A systematic scoping review on eco-anxiety has also demonstrated the potential negative effects that climate change has on their well-being (Coffey et al. 2021). Having endured the Covid-19 pandemic, which significantly increased the mental health burden on young people and youth workers, there is now an increasing additional burden of distress related to climate change and other global crises.

Climate emotions have thus been gaining increased recognition in youth research. This research presents different ways in which young people cope with eco-anxiety. While some young people transform eco-anxiety towards climate action, others suffer negative effects, such as worsening mental health (Hickman et al. 2021). There has been a call for “further investigation of factors that may shape the way climate anxiety affects people’s wellbeing in different societies and social groups” (Ogunbode et al. 2022:11). This paper aims to respond by providing an increased understanding of how climate emotions affect young people and how the youth sector can support them in managing these emotions.

BACKGROUND

Climate change poses a significant threat to humanity and, unsurprisingly, many young people experience a range of emotions when contemplating its potential effects on their future. In 2017, the American Psychological Association (APA) published a report discussing how climate change affects mental health. The report explained that “gradual, long-term changes in climate can also surface a number of different emotions, including fear, anger, feelings of powerlessness, or exhaustion” (Clayton et al. 2017:27).

The APA has recognised the various acute and chronic effects of climate change, including experiences of direct and indirect consequences. Eco-anxiety, in particular, has gained greater visibility since late 2018, when Greta Thunberg began openly talking about her personal experiences with eco-anxiety (Vaughan 2019). Google searches for “climate anxiety” have hit a record high, showing that global searches for “climate anxiety” or “eco-anxiety” surged by 4.59% from 2018 to 2023. The most frequently asked questions on Google were “What is eco-anxiety?” and “How to deal with climate anxiety?” (Moench 2023).

In 2022, the World Health Organization stated that the climate crisis could cause psychological distress, emphasising the need for improved psychosocial and mental health support (World Health Organization 2022). Research on climate emotions is still relatively new, and there is an ongoing debate about how to define and measure these emotions and their exact impact on young people. However, studies show that young people, children, women and residents of the Global South are more at risk of experiencing climate distress (Hickman et al. 2021; Patrick et al. 2022). There is also strong evidence demonstrating that direct experiences with natural disasters significantly harm the mental health of those affected, particularly young people. For example, studies demonstrate that extreme weather can lead to anxiety, stress, worry and anxiety about the future, particularly in young people and children. In an American study, Thompson (2021) discovered high levels of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression in her examination of the mental health of young people who were directly affected by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Gustav. Emotional behavioural issues with children were reported by 41% of Louisiana parents and 49% of Mississippi parents four years after the disaster (Thompson 2021).

It is worth noting that young people with pre-existing mental illnesses may be particularly vulnerable to negative climate emotions as they are significantly more likely to develop serious psychological disorders after witnessing the effects of traumatic weather events. This is especially concerning since 75% of mental illnesses are thought to begin before the age of 18 (Lawrance et al. 2022). With an increasing number of countries expected to be directly affected by climate change, it is crucial to develop strategies

that bolster young people's resilience and support them in adapting to these inevitable changes.

While this research can provide some valuable insights into the climate emotions of young people, a gap in European research on this topic remains, with even less literature exploring the role of the youth sector in addressing young people's climate emotions. This paper therefore seeks to explore the climate emotions young people experience and the challenges and opportunities for addressing them in the youth sector.

AIMS OF RESEARCH

This paper aims to:

- ▷ provide a brief overview of current research on young people's climate emotions, including the concept of eco-anxiety;
- ▷ explore how the youth sector helps young people constructively cope with their climate emotions;
- ▷ outline good practice examples of youth work and youth policy responses to meeting young people's climate emotions.

While this topic is linked to mental health, this paper focuses exclusively on the role of the youth sector, not on the work of mental health professionals. Additionally, it does not cover broader aspects of climate activism or other climate change issues affecting young people.

METHODOLOGY

This research primarily drew from desk review, examining literature from different areas, including climate and the environment, psychology, philosophy, psychiatry, youth studies, and policy documents and reports from international institutions and organisations. An expert consultation was also conducted in June 2024 with an expert who is a member of the drafting group for the draft recommendation of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers to member states on young people and climate action (Council of Europe, 2024a). This has been referred to as an expert interview in the paper. Data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify the main themes relevant to the topic.

It should be noted that, due to time and resource constraints, there was a lack of interaction with young people and youth workers and, therefore, this paper may overlook certain contextual nuances and unique perspectives. Resultingly, it is recommended that an in-depth study of climate emotions be conducted which gathers data on youth workers and young people across Europe. It is recommended that those with lived experience of this issue across different cultural contexts engage directly with the research.

STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

Following the introduction and methodological framework, part 2 of the paper outlines young people's experiences of climate emotions and the "Climate Emotions Wheel". It then explains the relevance of the topic to the youth sector and explores several key challenges for the youth sector. The next section discusses opportunities and responses for the youth sector. Five key areas are outlined here, namely fostering resilience, creating supportive spaces for climate emotions, balancing individual and collective action, promoting planetary health and engaging with nature. Finally, the paper offers recommendations for future studies and identifies key recommendations for the youth sector.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND CLIMATE EMOTIONS

1.1. EXPERIENCES OF CLIMATE EMOTIONS

Recent studies have provided strong evidence of the significant impact of climate change on the emotional well-being of populations across the globe. The psychological and emotional toll of climate change falls disproportionately on young people, who are increasingly recognised as a particularly vulnerable group in this context and are among the most affected by climate anxiety (Coffey et al. 2021). For example, in 2021, a survey of 10 000 young people (aged 16-25) from 10 countries demonstrated their feelings about climate change (Hickman et al. 2021). They found that 75% of young people expressed fear for the future; 84% expressed moderate worry; 59% described feeling very worried; and at least 45% reported that their feelings related to climate change harmed their day-to-day functioning.

In recent years, researchers have focused on understanding young people's experiences with climate change and examining their various climate-related emotions (Marczak et al. 2023; Ágoston et al. 2022).



As it is difficult to capture the experience of climate change in a single emotion, ongoing research explores the diverse emotional responses people have in different countries through several concepts, including the Climate Emotions Wheel, eco- and climate anxiety, solastalgia and climate grief (Patrick et al. 2022;

Wullenkord et al. 2021). Psychology research shows that young people experience both “positive” and “negative” climate emotions, with negative feelings found to influence everyday functioning, overall well-being and social life, potentially diminishing quality of life (Pihkala 2022; Hogg et al. 2021; Clayton and Karazsia 2020).

Pihkala's (2022) comprehensive Climate Emotions Wheel demonstrates the broad range of climate-related emotional experiences to include feelings of grief, sadness, anger, frustration, guilt and shame.

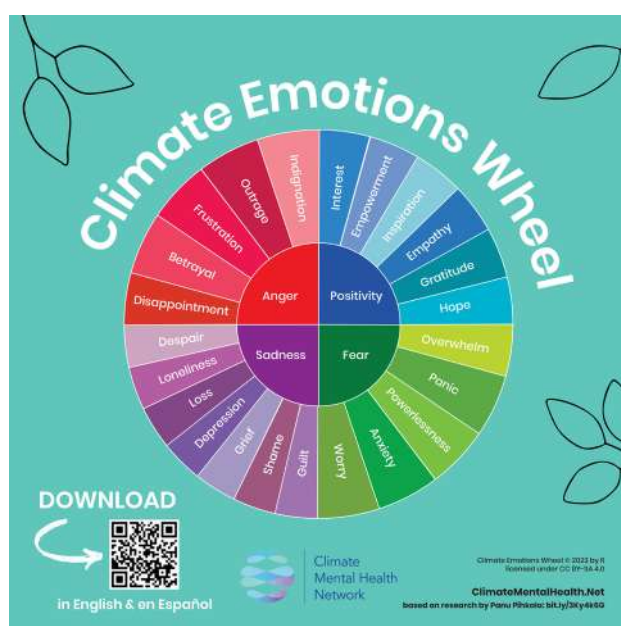
Terms such as eco-anxiety and climate anxiety have gained significant recognition in both popular media and academic research (Helm 2021). Eco-anxiety is defined as a “chronic fear of environmental doom” (Clayton et al. 2017:68), and climate anxiety can be defined as “anxiety which is significantly related to the ecological crisis” (Pihkala 2020:3). Both terms are often used simultaneously and as synonyms for the broader concept of climate emotions. However, there are also extensive studies on related terms such as climate depression, climate distress, climate guilt and climate worry, to name just a few, all aimed at describing the range of human emotions related to climate change. Climate grief, for instance, can be described as “the mourning of the loss of ecosystems, landscapes, species and ways of life” and is expected to become more frequently experienced across the world (Comtesse et al. 2021:2). Climate grief was at the forefront of establishing the **Good Grief Network** organisation, which works around creating safe spaces within a **youth resilience programme** to process difficult climate emotions, including grief (Good Grief Network 2024).

Existing terminology often falls short of capturing the full experience of climate change and this has led to the introduction of new terms. For example, “solastalgia” was introduced to describe people's distress when environmental changes affect their home environment (Albrecht et al. 2007:1). The term blends “solace”, reflecting the peace that nature often provides – a nod to humans' innate connection to the outdoors – and “algia”, a Greek root indicating suffering from emotional or existential distress. This concept also echoes the sentimentality of “nostalgia” where one longs for past experiences no longer accessible in the present (Albrecht et al. 2007:1). Solastalgia is used in academic circles and more broadly in fields like clinical psychology and health policy in Australia. Additionally, researchers in the United States of America use the term to study the effects of California wildfires (Kenyon 2022). Researchers anticipate that solastalgia will become increasingly relevant as climate change intensifies (Breth-Petersen et al. 2023). Solastalgia is also a term that young people can relate to, evidenced by many articles on their experiences of solastalgia (Garrioch 2021; Maddrell n.d.). The term has also been drawn from in the development of youth actions. For

example, a Vancouver-based youth group created a digital zine “solastalgia”, which aims to normalise eco-anxiety and the large spectrum of emotions that youth feel resulting from climate change (Rise Vancouver C10 2022).

However, while many understandings of climate emotions focus on more negative emotions, it is worth noting, as described in the Climate Emotions Wheel that young people can also experience “positive” climate emotions such as hope, inspiration and empowerment (Schneider et al. 2021). These emotions are not considered to come directly from experiencing climate change but stem from the experience of collective and individual action when supported by the community (Schneider et al. 2021).

Figure 1. Climate Emotions Wheel



Source: Climate Barometer (2022).

1.2. IMPACT OF CLIMATE EMOTIONS ON YOUNG PEOPLE

While it is difficult to concretely measure the impact of climate change on young people, several tools have been developed to better understand the emotional burden of climate change and guide interventions to address these feelings. For example, researchers have developed various scales to measure the impact of climate emotions, such as the climate anxiety scale (Clayton and Karazsia 2020) and the eco-anxiety scale (Hogg et al. 2021). These scales include questions about how individuals feel about environmental changes, their concerns about the current, and future, effects of climate change, and the emotional distress they currently experience. Climate anxiety scale measures have demonstrated that people can experience sleep disturbances, disordered eating patterns, constant thoughts about climate change,

and difficulty focusing and keeping up with social interactions (Clayton and Karazsia 2020).

Although climate emotions have the potential to negatively affect well-being, some scholars and practitioners argue that intense emotional reactions are justified given the magnitude and urgency of the situation (Bhullar et al. 2022). Certain researchers refer to climate anxiety and eco-anxiety as “practical anxieties” since experiencing this emotion can serve as a beneficial emotional reaction to threats like climate change. Practical eco-anxiety can show good moral character and benefit both individuals and the planet (Kurth and Pihkala 2022).

Treating climate anxiety and eco-anxiety as mental illness risks implying that the threat of climate change is not real, thereby undermining the legitimacy of a person’s concerns (Lawton 2019). The Climate Psychology Alliance, for instance, states that it “does not view eco-anxiety as a clinical condition, but an inevitable and even healthy response to the ecological threats we are facing” (Climate Psychology Alliance, n.d.). Nonetheless, climate anxiety can cause considerable distress and disrupt daily functioning for many young people, and constantly experiencing distress is neither desirable nor sustainable. Therefore, reducing the climate anxiety of young people should be a key objective for both scientists and practitioners (Van Valkengoed et al. 2023).

Climate emotions are frequently studied to determine which emotions most effectively motivate climate action. Researchers aim to identify the emotional responses that can drive individuals and communities to take meaningful steps in addressing climate change. For example, emotions such as hope and empowerment have been found to encourage proactive behaviours, like participating in environmental activism or adopting sustainable practices and, in turn, engaging in climate action can also foster feelings of hope and empowerment (Ojala 2023). Not only can these actions provide a space to positively cope with their climate emotions, they can also create real possibilities for change. For example, comparative research with 64 climate protestors across Europe (UK, Norway), the USA and Canada demonstrates young people harnessing climate emotions for the political participation of young climate defenders where they built a consensus for change in climate and environmental policies (Martiskainen et al. 2020). Youth-led environmental activism, for example Fridays for Future and global climate strikes, provide further examples which demonstrate ways that young people can harness such emotions to make a positive impact.

On the other hand, feelings like despair and overwhelmingness can lead to inaction or withdrawal, as individuals may feel that the situation is hopeless or beyond their control (Gregersen et al. 2023). The

global nature of climate change has also resulted in many young people feeling overwhelmed by the gravity of the problem. These findings are particularly concerning as young people frequently report that their concerns about climate change go unheard by political leaders, teachers, parents, mental health professionals and peers (Hickman et al. 2021). This has left many feeling misunderstood, betrayed, lonely, abandoned and isolated in their care about the environment (Hickman et al. 2021).

Despite increasing recognition of this issue, due to the complex nature of climate emotions and different beliefs about climate change, there is a lack of comprehensive mental health support available for young people, even from mental health professionals. While mental health professionals are considered important for supporting young people, Koder, Dunk and Rhodes (2023) have noted that young people have abstained from talking about climate emotions in therapy, feeling that their therapists lacked sufficient knowledge on the topic and feared that discussing it in depth would emotionally burden the therapist. The same study reported that when therapists question the legitimacy of climate anxiety, it can result in feelings of painful isolation and weaken the therapeutic relationship (Koder et al. 2023).

Understanding and addressing climate emotions is important to foster proactive climate action and improve overall well-being. While emotions, like hope and empowerment, can drive positive environmental behaviours, it is crucial to manage the distress caused by eco-anxiety to prevent it from influencing day-to-day living. By balancing these emotional responses, we can better support both individual mental health and collective efforts to combat climate change.



THE YOUTH SECTOR AND CLIMATE EMOTIONS

2.1. THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH SECTOR

The previous section has demonstrated young people's vulnerability to a range of climate emotions, including those related to eco-anxiety, "solastalgia" and climate grief (Zurba et al. 2024). Nevertheless, the section also outlined that there are risks in the recognition of these emotions, such as eco-anxiety, as diagnosable conditions. Instead, other interventions have been recommended to address climate emotions, such as ensuring access to information on how to contribute to climate action for those suffering from eco-anxiety, connecting with and having the support of other like-minded people, contributing to more environmentally friendly choices, participating in nature-based activities and nature therapies, and spending time in nature (European Science – Media Hub 2022b). Therefore, arguably actors outside of mainstream mental health services can play an important role in delivering such interventions to young people to assist them in coping with climate emotions.

2.2. RELEVANCE OF YOUTH POLICIES IN ADDRESSING YOUTH CLIMATE EMOTIONS

Research has stressed the complex intersections of emotions, politics, knowledge and advocacy for young people, calling for increased policy and policy-based solutions to the climate crisis and environmental degradation (Zummo et al. 2020).

The Council of Europe and the European Union have demonstrated their growing recognition of the important role of youth policy in addressing the climate emotions of young people. For example, they have both developed measures and initiatives which relate to and can assist in addressing the climate emotions of young people. A draft Council of Europe recommendation on young people and climate action was agreed on by the Joint Council on Youth in April 2024, and the text will be examined by the Rapporteur Group on Education, Culture, Sport, Youth and Environment (GR-C) in September 2024. The recommendation aims to address challenges faced by all young people, especially young environmental defenders, as they advocate for a healthy, clean

and sustainable environment. The drafting of this recommendation developed out of recognising the threat posed to young people's human rights by the climate crisis, with the Advisory Council on Youth seeking to ensure the voices of climate activists can be heard without unwarranted repercussions (expert interview 2024). It has, however, been expanded further to tackle other issues related to youth climate action, including climate emotions, where it encourages member states to take meaningful action in ensuring access to healthcare, with "feelings of eco-anxiety" specifically mentioned:

ENSURING ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE AND TARGETED YOUTH SERVICES: [A]DDRESS SHORTCOMINGS IN THE PROVISION OF YOUTH-FRIENDLY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES, ESPECIALLY THE LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ON THE PHENOMENON OF ECO-ANXIETY

(Manning 2023).

Links between well-being, the youth sector and the environment were also included in the Reykjavik Declaration, which emerged from the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in May 2023 (Council of Europe 2023a). Appendix V "The Council of Europe and the environment" specifically notes the important public interest role of "the landscape" as a "key element of individual and social well-being", linking human rights to the environment but also noting the appreciation for the youth sector "to strengthen the protection of human rights linked to the protection of the environment" (Council of Europe 2023a:20).

The European Union has also acknowledged climate emotions in different measures introduced in recent years. Improving mental and physical health and wellbeing is among the fastest growing priorities for young people in the EU. For instance, the Commission's Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health from June 2023 was a first and major step to ensure a new cross-sectoral approach to mental health (European Commission 2023). One of the key policy areas of the **2022 European Year of Youth**, for example, was to boost young people's personal, social, and professional development, including a special focus on mental health. It is undeniable that the triple planetary crisis (climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution) is worsening. Young people are also strongly preoccupied by climate change and biodiversity loss. A recent survey concluded that 75% of children and young respondents saw their future as "frightening". At the same time, the study revealed that climate anxiety and distress were correlated with perceived inadequate government response and associated feelings of betrayal (Hickman et al 2021). The EU's commitments to reaching climate neutrality

by 2050 and to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework are therefore also important for our children's mental health.

Building on the achievements of the European Year of Youth, the 2024 **Communication on the legacy of the Year** deepens the youth dimension of EU policies with 60 actions in policy areas deemed to be of particular relevance for young people – including in the area of health and wellbeing.

In June 2022 the Council of the EU also adopted a recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development (Council of the European Union 2022). This recommendation specifically acknowledges the importance of tackling eco-anxiety. It calls on member states to support “educators in developing their knowledge and skills to teach about the climate crisis and sustainability, including dealing with eco-anxiety among their students” to ensure that they are better equipped to deal with eco-anxiety and eco-pessimism and to help them to engage with climate and environmental issues (European Commission n.d.). The recommendation also recognises the important role of non-formal education and youth work in providing opportunities for young people to learn about the climate crisis and sustainability. Similarly, other key European Union policies, including, for example, the European Green Deal and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, point to the crucial role of education and training in empowering and engaging people for environmental sustainability. Furthermore, the staff working document accompanying the proposal for the Council of the European Union recommendation underlines the importance of multidimensional approaches that can foster creativity, critical reflection and problem solving; recognition of multiple world views, values and cultural traditions; ethically informed relationships between humans across the globe and between generations, and non-human species and natural elements (European Commission n.d.).

Across Europe, a range of initiatives have also been developed to address climate emotions in the youth sector. These initiatives aim to empower young people to cope with the psychological effects of climate change, an issue which is increasingly recognised as important within the sector. Key focuses of these initiatives have included fostering resilience, providing mental health support and empowering young people to channel their climate anxiety into activism. DG CLIMA, for example, has initiatives involving young people, such as the **Climate Pact Ambassador** who seek to inform, inspire and support climate policy and action in their communities and networks (European Climate Pact, 2024). Additionally, through Erasmus+, there are many projects addressing environmental issues under KA153 Mobility of Youth Workers (339 in

the Erasmus+ project results platform). Some of these projects address eco-anxiety including:

- ▷ **Peace on Earth: empowering women for peace within, with others and for nature** (Erasmus+, 2024) which trained youth workers in key skills for building peace on the personal, interpersonal and environmental levels. During the training participants gained emotional awareness and practice emotional resilience, practiced to communicate personal boundaries and how to engage in compassionate dialog with oneself, identified self-care strategies, learned about the environmental dimension of peacebuilding and tools to share environmental concerns.
- ▷ **Reducing Eco-Anxiety Through Nature Connection** (Erasmus+, 2024a) training course which aimed to would immerse participants in the knowledge and experience of understanding, recognising and coping with eco-anxiety. As a result of this activity, 32 youth workers will be trained to be able to professionally support young people struggling with eco-anxiety and co-create a tangible product on how to support young people with eco-anxiety as a youth worker.

The European Solidarity Corps has funded a number of projects have also addressed eco-anxiety. For example, **Waterfront Culture For Resilience Against Climate Change & Eco-Anxiety** aims to enhance the capacity of young artists and emerging cultural organisations in Gothenburg (Sweden), Lesvos (Greece) and Zadar (Hungary), to produce solutions that address the environmental challenges and the eco-anxiety they cause to the communities of these 3 diverse European waterfronts (European Commission, 2024).

Other examples of European initiatives include the UK Youth Climate Coalition (UKYCC) is a group of 18-29 year olds who volunteer and collaborate towards a “vision of a just, sustainable world in which current and future generations enjoy and protect a healthy environment” (UKYCC n.d.). They ran the “Power Shift” conference in 2023, which aimed to bring young people together to connect, share ideas and reflect on what the youth climate movement has achieved and where it will go in the future. A key theme running through the panels and workshops was eco-anxiety. A final example of youth work initiatives to address the climate emotions of young people is the **Motivating Youth into Climate Action** course (Salto n.d.). The course is run by **Boodaville**, a Spanish youth organisation who have previously developed youth trainings on sustainable living and youth exchanges (Boodavillepermaculture n.d.). They developed the course which is grounded in Joanna Macy's Work that Reconnects methodology and seeks to empower young people to navigate the challenges of the climate crisis by addressing

the climate crisis emotionally, fostering resilience and countering disinformation (Salto, n.d.).

Despite the work currently being done in the youth sector, there remains much to do to tackle the many challenges related to climate emotions. The following section explores challenges for the youth sector.

2.3. CHALLENGES FOR THE YOUTH SECTOR

Given the youth sector's experience and competences in working with and supporting young people in such areas, including in developing climate actions, providing spaces to foster social connections with their peers and delivering non-formal/ informal education, they are arguably well placed to support young people in addressing their climate emotions. Youth organisations all have a core centred on the personal development and empowerment of young people (Dunne et al. 2014), which can be useful in supporting young people in such actions in expressing and processing these emotions (Zurba et al. 2024). These organisations also play a crucial role in helping young people to develop their human capital, build and strengthen their social capital, and change particular behaviour (Dunne et al. 2014), all of which can assist young people in coping with and harnessing difficult climate emotions.

The youth work sector is continuously evolving, adapting to the changing needs and contexts of young people, with a growing emphasis on areas such as an increased focus on intervention-based youth work which targets the specific issues facing young people (Dunne et al. 2014). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that there has been an increasing recognition of the youth sector's role in addressing climate emotions among young people.

The youth sector has thus an arguably important role in supporting young people in engaging with and addressing their climate emotions. However, equipping youth workers with the necessary training to support young people who experience climate emotions remains challenging. There is also a need to acknowledge and address the difficulties that youth workers may encounter in dealing with their own climate emotions, as well as the potential impact of this on their ability to engage with young people on climate issues (expert interview 2024). Although climate emotions have been the fuel for the youth climate movement, some youth workers can be overwhelmed by their own climate emotions while also needing to support young people without the right training or knowledge (expert interview 2024). While not unique to climate activism, it is worth noting that this is particularly challenging for youth workers working with marginalised young people as there is increased complexity in addressing this issue (expert interview 2024).

There is no doubt that there is increasing recognition of young people's climate emotions. However, this may not be evident across all the youth sector, or among all groups of young people. For example, climate emotions are generally recognised and discussed among those who are engaged in the climate movement. However, those who are outside the movement may not have the same capacities to recognise the effects of climate change on their well-being and mental health. Youth work must therefore face the increased challenge of finding ways to address the different needs of these diverse groups of young people.



The gravity of climate change, combined with the belief that individual actions have little impact, creates additional challenges for youth participation and engagement in the climate movement. While there have been active engagement and discussions on the importance of installing hope for young people in making a difference, given the climate change predictions, some young activists have responded that being hopeful feels like disengaging from reality.

A growing body of research has highlighted the importance of fostering hope for combating climate change (Geiger et al. 2019; Ojala 2012). Nevertheless, the youth sector faces the challenge of keeping a balance between acknowledging more positive climate emotions, such as feelings of hope and optimism, as well as more negative emotions which stem from the stark realities of climate change. To address climate emotions it is necessary to have personal growth, develop a sense of belonging with nature and respect for the interconnectedness of all life (Maiteny 2009). However, according to Vanessa, Kałwak and Weihgold (2022) focusing solely on individualistic approaches in both climate action and mental health support is insufficient, as it overlooks the power and necessity of collective action. They advocate for prioritising community resilience over personal resilience, emphasising that no individual can address a global problem that affects all of humanity (Vanessa et al. 2022). This perspective is especially relevant in youth work, where the sector can seek to foster collective efforts and community-based strategies to effectively address the climate emotions faced by young people.

The shrinking of democratic and civic spaces for young people across Europe (Council of Europe 2024b) and

the polarisation of societies have posed further risks to some young people's climate emotions. Turner and Bailey (2021:110), for instance, described the emerging concept of "ecobordering" which demonstrates how climate emotions are influenced not just by the environmental crisis itself but also by the social and political responses to it. The idea of "ecobordering" links immigrants to national environmental problems using colonial and racialised views of nature. Ecobordering aims to justify stricter border controls and protect what is seen as "native" care for the environment. This approach hides the real causes of the ecological crisis, which are the consumption and production practices of wealthy countries, and instead blames migration from poorer regions where environmental damage is severe. For young migrants, who may have already experienced the effects of climate crises in their home countries, facing prejudice and discrimination linked to environmental issues can harm their mental health and well-being. It is important that the youth sector also takes such issues into account to better support young people in identifying root causes for and navigating these complex emotions.

Marginalised young people may face the additional issue of a lack of recognition of, or space to share, their perspectives (expert interview 2024; UNDP 2022). Marginalised young people may also face other barriers to their involvement in climate action (De Graeve et al. 2019). These may, for example, stem from confronting other immediate challenges so they may not have the capacity to "worry about the climate issues in the same way as young people who face fewer difficulties" (expert interview, June 2024). Removing obstacles for the meaningful participation of minority and marginalised groups and addressing intersectionality in climate action is thus considered key moving forward. Furthermore, marginalised youth activists may already be engaged in other issues but find themselves "being pulled all over" to give input to another area, despite often not having the opportunities to explore the topic in detail or gain training/knowledge on the topic (expert interview June 2024). Their involvement may therefore be counterproductive and risk their disempowerment.



RESPONSES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH WORK

While the previous section provided examples of the current work of the youth sector on climate emotions, it is worth noting that there is a lack of information on what youth work is doing in the field. It is acknowledged that there may be a significant number of youth work initiatives already underway at local and national levels. However, information on these is difficult to access, suspected to be due to a lack of dissemination of these activities to the wider public or in multiple languages.

There is a need for interdisciplinary collaboration among mental health professionals, municipal leaders, government agencies, policy makers, educators, youth organisations and youth workers, and others regularly interacting with young people's realities to address the climate emotions of young people (De Graeve et al. 2019). Support provided to young people should not only focus on minimising distress but also aim to enhance their strengths and coping strategies. By fostering future-oriented coping skills, this support can help them navigate the gradual effects of climate change and take effective climate actions. Young people should be at the forefront of all measures, with their valued and taken-into-account perspectives in meaningful ways (De Graeve et al. 2019). It is crucial to recognise and amplify the essential role of young people and youth workers in this process. Their involvement and leadership are vital for successfully addressing climate emotions. Here, the youth work sector undoubtedly has a key role in supporting young people, with the expertise in supporting young people to develop and participate in actions that can enhance both the impact and well-being of young people. Youth work can also provide spaces in supporting young people's positive climate emotions by listening to them and allowing space to normalise their feelings and experiences about climate change.

3.1. FOSTERING RESILIENCE, SELF-EFFICIENCY AND WELL-BEING

Youth workers may meet young people who feel overwhelmed and perceive their climate activism actions as insignificant, thus it is important to acknowledge their efforts and provide guidance to help them undertake actions that align with their capacities and abilities, fostering self-efficacy and resilience.

Resilience has been a frequently used term in youth work and climate action. The American Psychological Association has also addressed resilience as one of the main competences to be supported by parents and teachers when tackling climate change and young people's mental health (Clayton et al. 2023). Resilience can be supported in youth work by fostering young people's emotional intelligence, self-regulation, finding meaning, developing coping strategies and preparing for potential disasters. Other actions can include incentives, balancing the responsibility between self-reliance and a focus on the whole community's well-being, engaging in community incentives (Clayton et al. 2023). Although developing young people's individual resilience skills is important, some researchers criticise an overfocus on individual resilience in psychological research that seeks to "fix" the climate emotions (Vanessa et al. 2022). They instead see individual resilience as a neoliberal idea, emphasising personal responsibility, free markets and minimal government intervention, and which can sometimes overlook the need for broader social and systemic support. This way all responsibility to change and adaptation is put on young people, instead of expecting the system to make necessary changes.

There are several initiatives in Europe that seek to address both individual and community resilience. Below are some examples.

- ▶ "The resilience project" runs resilience circles and circle facilitator training, where young people come together to explore resilience strategies to avoid burnout and address eco-anxiety, among other issues. The organisation emphasises peer-to-peer support in organising and running circles as important. The organisation also offers specific workshops on resilience for other NGOs and companies (The Resilience Project n.d.)
- ▶ The transition movement has been at the forefront of developing climate-related actions, which centre both on building resilient towns and resilient individuals, developing skills in leadership, facilitation and resilience of individuals that they call "inner transition". The transition movement has created tools to help individuals self-reflect, become more self-aware and caring in group settings and address conflicts (Transition Network n.d.).
- ▶ The Mindfulness Initiative, although not a youth organisation, can inspire youth work as it started discussions on building resilience-related skills like mindfulness into youth climate activism. They recently initiated the Climate Youth Resilience project and released a report on how environmental organisations support activists' resilience worldwide. This report is titled "Weaving communities of inner-led change" (The Mindfulness Initiative n.d.).

In addition to resilience, fostering young people's self-efficacy is important. Self-efficacy refers to believing in your ability to do the things needed to achieve your goals (Bandura 1977). Previous studies with students have demonstrated that they experience the strongest climate anxiety in situations where they feel a lack of self-efficacy (Hill-Harding et al. 2024). This supports the idea proposed by Van Valkengoed, Steg and De Jonge (2023) that climate anxiety increases when a person perceives climate change as catastrophic, uncontrollable and unexpected, and when they feel incapable of addressing it. This suggests the importance of supporting young people to believe in their power to make a difference, while also creating awareness that solving global problems is a collective effort and not just up to them alone. According to Vanessa et al. (2022), individualistic approaches to understanding and expressing climate emotions risk harming both people's well-being and the fight against climate change. They thus promote personal responsibility and a constant feeling of not doing enough, which can lead to cynicism or burnout.

In order to promote young people's well-being through youth work, there is a need to shift the focus from individual resilience to community support and collective action. Therefore, co-operative, youth-led climate action supported by youth workers may help young people to develop self-efficacy and, in turn, also assist them in coping with difficult climate emotions. Depending on the circumstances and the specific needs of young individuals within local communities, the potential interventions could be diverse. These may include implementing youth-led community initiatives, establishing peer-support groups or organising informal activities based on the interests of the young people.



Youth organisations should also promote self-care and well-being as essential components of their programmes, both on an individual and an organisational level. Environmental groups such as Extinction Rebellion are leading the way by emphasising regenerative cultures which prioritise well-being and self-care alongside activism. By adopting these practices, youth work can help young people maintain their well-being while effectively advocating for important causes.

3.2. CREATING SPACES FOR COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR CLIMATE EMOTIONS

A qualitative study of American and Finnish young people demonstrated that young people wish to have more spaces to discuss their climate emotions and experiences (Coppola and Pihkala 2023). Engaging in conversations with others about climate change and climate emotions was found to offer important social support even if these discussions do not necessarily lead to solutions or action plans. Furthermore, promoting well-being, sharing and expressing emotions collectively can lead to a better understanding of stressful and problematic situations (Stanton and Low 2012). The creation of platforms and safe spaces for meeting with others who have similar perspectives, collaborating, connecting and sharing ideas provide opportunities to support young people to share their experiences regarding climate emotions but also to take collective action.

An increasing number of NGOs provide non-judgmental and safe environments for young people to gather, express and address their emotions related to the climate crisis. Examples of these include the following.

- Established **climate cafés**, for instance, aim to create and hold spaces for emotional expression. They provide a simple, hospitable and empathetic environment where individuals can safely share their fears and uncertainties regarding the climate crisis, without the intention of offering or receiving advice (Nestor 2020).
- The **Good Grief Network** developed a 10-step programme for individuals to gather and discuss their experiences of caring for the planet and witnessing ecological collapse. This programme includes 10 meetings designed to support emotional awareness, self-care and reflection on sustainable ways to contribute and remain active (Good Grief Network n.d.a).
- **Eco-anxious stories** can help alleviate the sensation of isolation by employing the persuasive power of narratives. They use storytelling approaches in the digital space to provide a welcoming and tranquil online environment for individuals who are experiencing climate-related anxiety with a sense of isolation (Eco-Anxious Stories n.d.).
- Resources have also been developed for youth workers. For example **“The Carbon Conversations guide to living with the climate crisis”** was developed by the Climate Psychology Alliance. This guide is a step-by-step manual targeting youth workers to facilitate group discussions and interventions related to climate emotions (Randall et al. 2023).

3.3. PLANETARY HEALTH AND NATURE ENGAGEMENT

Planetary health is an emerging field and social movement that focuses on finding solutions and working across disciplines to analyse and address how human activities disrupting earth's natural systems affect the health of humans and all life on our planet (Planetary Health Alliance 2024). The concept of planetary health recognises that people's well-being goes hand in hand with the well-being of the planet in the context of climate emotions and youth work. This approach can be particularly useful to young people who feel urgency about the future and demand action. Planetary health is relevant to young people's climate emotions as it underlines the need to provide multisector, interdisciplinary solutions to protect our planet and our health (United Nations Climate Change n.d.). It has also been commended for taking the lead on meaningful youth participation and the inclusion of young people into all tiers of its agenda.

By using planetary health and nature therapy to address and explore climate emotions, youth work can create experiences which reunite humanity as an integral part of ecosystems and nature. Working with young people involves addressing their inner, emotional and "psycho-ecology" to overcome crises in meaning, poor well-being and other issues (Maiteny 2009). Through such approaches, it is recognised that, although intellectual, informational, legislative and policy-oriented approaches may raise awareness of issues, they are not enough to generate behaviour changes for improved well-being (Maiteny 2009). Central to this is supporting young people to reflect on their own lives (including their motivations, meanings, feelings and priorities) and to understand the relationships between themselves and wider social and ecological systems. Youth work can arguably play a key role here. By developing the sense of being situated within this context, young people can find a purpose and meaning which can contribute to personal and ecological well-being (Maiteny 2009). Through this process, they can be supported in enacting concrete actions (Maiteny 2009). Here, first-hand experience of nature is considered essential, where young people are taken beyond intellectual understandings of climate crises, towards emotional understanding where people can gain a sense of themselves as part of ecological processes. Moving beyond negative climate emotions towards a positive emotional connection with the environment and ecology can not only develop young people's well-being but also foster commitment, conviction, meaning and value, and long-term, self-sustaining change (Maiteny 2009).

There are several examples of youth work related to planetary health and nature-related programmes

available. Two measures found in the Irish context can be highlighted as examples.

- ▶ **Active Connections CLG**, a not-for-profit company working with young people with behavioural difficulties, has developed a range of nature-centred, adventure programmes to support participants' self-awareness and identify development, while also enhancing their understanding of the fragile nature of wild areas, and to increase their sense of responsibility for the care and preservation of such amenities (Active Connections 2019).
- ▶ The National Youth Council of Ireland has recognised the challenges facing youth workers in addressing climate emotions and has developed a range of measures for youth workers and youth organisations on the steps that can be taken to support planetary health. For example, they have developed a **video** for this purpose (National Youth Council of Ireland n.d.). They also ran an **immersive summer school** to provide space for participants to reflect critically on climate justice, explore their own creativity, share experiences with peers and integrate their learning into their own work with young people (National Youth Council of Ireland 2024). There were also sessions which were "grounded within nature" (expert interview 2024).

It is also worth noting the potential role of youth research in supporting climate emotions of young people and planetary health, for instance.

In Finland, the Planetary Health Youth Research Centre can be considered a good practice. This is because it recognises the important role of youth studies in planetary health research and the relevance of youth research in the process of challenging current intergenerational inequalities. The centre focuses on "planetary youth research" using an engaged, applied ethical framework to youth studies to provide solutions to address the complex challenges of sustainable development and the well-being of all living beings (Finnish Youth Research Society n.d.). The Network for Planetary Youth Research linked to the research centre also runs regular events, including the Nordic Youth Research Symposiums (NYRIS) 2024 – Youth in a Just and Fair World and the working group "Planetary youth research and young people's climate emotions".

While not based in Europe, funded by York University, the **Partnership for Youth and Planetary Wellbeing** can be considered a second good practice example of an educational research project that harnesses, supports and foregrounds youth-centred work in Canada, Chile, Costa Rica and Belize (Young Lives Research Lab n.d.). The project is youth led and uses largely non-formal education approaches to data

collection (for example films, stories). The research project aims to analyse the work of young people for planetary health, share data and co-develop new educational tools with young people and their local communities to support life at intersections of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The outcomes of the project include training and engaging more than 1 000 young people in interdisciplinary research processes (youth, planetary health and education) about individual and planetary well-being. It also supported the development of improved quality education for “action and advocacy” to local, national and global audiences. For example, through the Youth Climate Report, Planetary Health Film Lab, Wekimün School curriculum, and Rooted and Rising Youth Climate Action Programme.





CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is limited research on the climate emotions of young people and the role of the youth sector in Europe. This paper aims to fill this gap and shed light on the complex landscape of climate emotions among young people. It demonstrates that young people experience many positive and negative emotions related to climate change, which can affect their daily functioning, overall well-being and social life. However, despite the increasing recognition of these emotions, there remains limited clarity on supporting young people in coping with climate emotions in practice, including in the youth sector. The paper outlines several challenges in addressing the climate emotions of young people in the youth sector, including the need for youth workers to find ways to cope with their own climate emotions, how to address the different needs of different groups of young people, barriers to youth participation in the climate movement and addressing particular issues that marginalised young people face. Nonetheless, the important role of the youth sector in addressing these emotions and helping young individuals adapt to a rapidly changing climate is stressed. It is, however, evident that comprehensive change requires a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to climate action, where young people are supported in meaningfully participating in these actions.

While this study highlights the importance of youth empowerment, youth spaces and collaboration, it also emphasises the need for practical measures and resources within the youth sector. Youth workers must be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively navigate the nuanced emotional responses triggered by climate change.

Moving forward, there is a need for increased recognition of the role of youth work in addressing climate emotions to fill the current gap in research, policy and youth work initiatives. There is also a pressing need for proactive engagement at all levels of society to support young people in confronting their climate emotions. This involves not only listening to their concerns but also empowering them to become active participants in building a sustainable future. By integrating climate education, mental health support and community resilience-building initiatives, we can foster a generation of resilient young climate defenders capable of addressing the challenges posed by climate change.

In closing, this paper advocates for a holistic approach that recognises the interconnection between emotional well-being, environmental stewardship and societal resilience. By harnessing the collective efforts of youth research, youth policy, youth work and broader community initiatives, a supportive environment can be fostered where young people are equipped to navigate and mitigate the emotional effects of climate change effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS



YOUTH WORK

Youth work can play a crucial role in supporting young people's climate emotions, and there are several recommendations in this regard.

Extend existing frameworks to support the development of safe spaces where young individuals can engage in climate-related activities together is important. Ideally, when developing safe spaces, youth organisations should also strive to include opportunities for young people to engage with nature and the environment.

- ▶ Youth organisations can serve as role models and mentors where they take direct climate action within their structures, for example promoting sustainability and good practices.
- ▶ To better support young people and youth workers in navigating and addressing climate emotions, capacity building for youth workers is essential.
- ▶ Non-formal education should address the interlinking aspects of youth participation, climate change, mental health, planetary well-being and intersectionality, particularly about marginalised groups.
- ▶ Youth work can also provide support in creating awareness among young people of their climate emotions.
- ▶ Celebrating progress and empowering young people to channel their climate emotions into meaningful action should be central to youth work activities.
- ▶ Collaboration between youth organisations, national, regional and local authorities, institutions and civil society is important to ensure a holistic response to this issue and enhance emotional support for those who experience difficult climate emotions.



YOUTH POLICY

Young people experience particularly powerful climate emotions and therefore there is a clear role of youth policy in addressing this issue. Recommendations for youth policy are as follows.

- ▶ Governments must prioritise environmental and ecological concerns in their agendas, as well as young people's vulnerabilities to a range of negative climate emotions, and recognise the threat posed to young people's human rights.
- ▶ Acknowledging the positive role of youth work in this regard within existing well-being policies and identifying and supporting young people who are experiencing climate grief should be recognised in the policy as essential steps toward meaningful climate action.
- ▶ Targeted measures are necessary to support youth workers who are dealing with climate emotions, with, for example, the inclusion of youth work within legislation on the climate crisis and environmental degradation.
- ▶ Young people's active, meaningful participation in these measures and decision making on the climate and environment should also be ensured.
- ▶ Additionally, supporting and promoting the Council of Europe's recommendation on young people and climate action is essential, as well as introducing concrete measures for its implementation.
- ▶ Youth climate emotions should be included as priorities in the implementation of the European Green Deal and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, as well as a priority under Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes.

- ▶ EU Member States should implement EU initiatives and Council documents for instance, **Green education initiatives** (European Commission n.d.a) .
- ▶ States must recognise youth participation as a precondition for successful climate action and ensure deliberate efforts focus on including marginalised young people in related decision-making processes.
- ▶ Implementing the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, which emphasise youth involvement in all policy aspects, can enhance these efforts.
- ▶ Aligning youth policies with other areas (such as education, employment and health) is vital to ensure that youth policies and climate policies support and contribute to young people's mental health and well-being.
- ▶ Acknowledging, supporting and funding non-formal education on climate emotions is critical.
- ▶ It is also important to address challenges arising from societal polarisation – where climate change issues may be suppressed or leveraged for prejudice – through deliberate, concrete, youth-centred action.
- ▶ States should aim to foster intergenerational dialogue to bridge generational divides and unlock the profound experiences of climate distress among families, communities and policy makers. By cultivating a deeper comprehension of the immediate effects of climate emotions, both emotional and cognitive awareness of the challenges presented by climate change can be enhanced.

YOUTH POLICY



YOUTH RESEARCH

Youth research is important for providing a knowledge base to ensure evidence-based youth policy development in the field and to enable youth workers to better support young people in harnessing their climate emotions in positive, productive ways. There are several recommendations for youth research.

- ▶ Research that includes a youth worker or youth perspective is lacking, highlighting the need to raise awareness about climate emotions. A focus on understanding young people's lived experiences of climate emotions and their perspectives on the future and climate actions for change is key. To address this gap, increased research and funding on climate emotions is necessary and youth-led research should be prioritised.
- ▶ Research should aim to better understand the challenges and barriers confronted by youth workers in implementing activities on climate emotions and climate actions, with participatory research with youth organisations prioritised.
- ▶ Through youth-centred, participatory approaches to research, such as photovoice, youth research can also provide opportunities to support young people in expressing their climate emotions and sharing their experiences (Zurba et al. 2024).
- ▶ Acknowledging that eco-anxiety, solastalgia, climate grief and other climate emotions may affect some young people can be a starting point for addressing their well-being. Nevertheless, while these are useful terms, there is a need for caution and clarity in applying such concepts (Galway et al. 2019). Therefore, further research is recommended to better understand the practical implications of these various concepts on young people.

► While Pihkala's Climate Emotions Wheel does not specifically centre on young people, his research draws from several studies which examine young people's climate emotions and can be a useful tool for supporting young people in recognising and processing their feelings. Through a better understanding of their emotions, it could be argued that young people can improve their coping strategies and become better equipped to channel their feelings into positive action, where anger and frustration, for instance, may motivate activism and hope may drive efforts towards sustainable solutions. The Climate Emotions Wheel should be explored as a tool for youth workers when seeking to incorporate emotional literacy into education on climate change and climate justice.

YOUTH RESEARCH



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