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Growing love for the world: COP26 and finding your superpower

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ABSTRACT

This short reflective piece charts my own experiences of working with young people (aged 5–11 years) during COP26 and offers some tentative reflections on the role of hope in emplaced geographical education. Through detailing the experiences of a community garden workshop in Drumchapel, Glasgow, this paper highlights the ways in which hope for the future in the face of climate adversity was both felt and seen by young people during COP26. In doing so, it briefly reflects upon why their hopes and imaginations matter in our discussions of the legacy of climate events such as COP26.

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Hope

Conversations regarding hope and hopefulness have gained a great deal of critical traction in a range of academic and public domains in recent times (Raynor, 2021; Verlie, 2019). Often deeply connected to issues of climate change and social justice, hope, in its various formations, is frequently ushered into the scene as a world-changing resource, becoming a toolkit of possibilities for surviving the most difficult of situations and (re)creating new futures (Gillespie, 2020). The very foundations of the COP enterprise are built on aspects of hope: a belief that through collective political action a liveable climate can be preserved and the whole of humanity saved. Yet hope, similarly to justice, is a fragile thing (Delaney, 2016), something often felt but rarely seen. This short reflective piece charts my own experiences of working with young people (aged 5–11 years) during COP26 and offers some tentative reflections on the role of hope in emplaced geographical education. Through detailing the experiences of a community garden workshop in Drumchapel, Glasgow, I wish to highlight the ways in which hope for the future in the face of climate adversity was both felt and seen by young people during COP26, and to briefly reflect upon why their hopes and imaginations matter in our discussions of the legacy of such climate events.

In my research with school gardens as part of the International Green Academy, I have been continually inspired by the work of communities to create new learning

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opportunities for young people and their faith in the power of garden spaces. Gardens are repeatedly shown throughout the literature to be spaces of hope, social cohesion and empowerment (Cumbers et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2015). For several years I have collaborated in garden work with communities within Drumchapel, a district situated in the north-east of Glasgow and widely considered to be an area of multiple deprivation. Known locally as ‘The Drum’ it is absent from the official COP26 programme, and on the day of my visit during this event it felt far removed from the hustle of COP activities taking place only a few miles away in the City Centre of Glasgow.

As part of a local community initiative to engage young people with COP26, I was invited to run an outdoor workshop at the Growchapel site in Drumchapel. Built on derelict land, Growchapel Community Allotment Gardens is an example of community building through growing initiatives (Growchapel Community Allotment Gardens, 2022). The space encompasses a number of large community growing plots and has become a place of coming togetherness which supports and promotes human and non-human wellbeing. The event entitled ‘Plotting Healthier Futures’ was designed to encourage young people to voice their thoughts on climate change in the wake of COP26, and over 100 pupils from the local primary school attended. A range of stalls were set up across the site to run activities and develop participation, including plant pot-making, soil analysis, and art making with natural materials.

My stall had been inspired by debates relating to ecological anxiety: the existential fear, hopelessness and despair of environmental doom (Wray, 2022). COP26, and the build up to the event, had reignited conversations around eco-anxiety and its impacts on young people with the media reporting the multiple experiences of concern and anger from protesters and attendees across Glasgow (Milman, 2021). Influenced by Sarah Jaquette Ray’s *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety* (2020) and her discussions about the illusion of powerlessness, I sought to create an exercise that enabled young people to believe in their efficacy. To help mitigate the problem of ‘pseudoinefficacy’, Ray suggests asking her students to construct a manifesto that charts ‘why you care about the planet, why you care about suffering, and what you personally are uniquely positioned by skill or passion to do in the world’ (Ray, 2020, p. 77). Adapting this suggestion to my younger school audiences, I decided to run sessions that focussed on drawing out their skill and passion for challenging climate change through the figure of the superhero (Figure 1).

Superheroes

Each group arriving at the stall were introduced to the session through a series of questions which everyone was encouraged to answer:

What is climate change?

Why do we care about climate change?

Answers moved frantically from factual explanations of planetary warming through to magical imaginings of animals in danger. The young people relayed, in animated ways, their worries about the future: ‘ice caps are melting’, ‘forests are on fire’, ‘animals are losing their homes and food’, ‘governments won’t stop polluting’, all of which signalled their various understandings about the negative influence of climate change on their own lives and the planet. In line with Ray’s belief that ‘climate justice needs all kind of help’ (Ray, 2020, p. 78), participants were then asked to think about their own superpowers for



Figure 1. Examples of the superhero artwork produced at the event. (Source: author's own).

enacting change in relation to climate change and were encouraged to decorate their own paper superhero. Many referred to their own familial worlds of home and school, charting their abilities to recycle and reuse plastics while others drew inspiration from the Growchapel environment noting the importance of planting trees and growing their own food (Figure 2). Some used their imagination to conjure themselves as superheroes

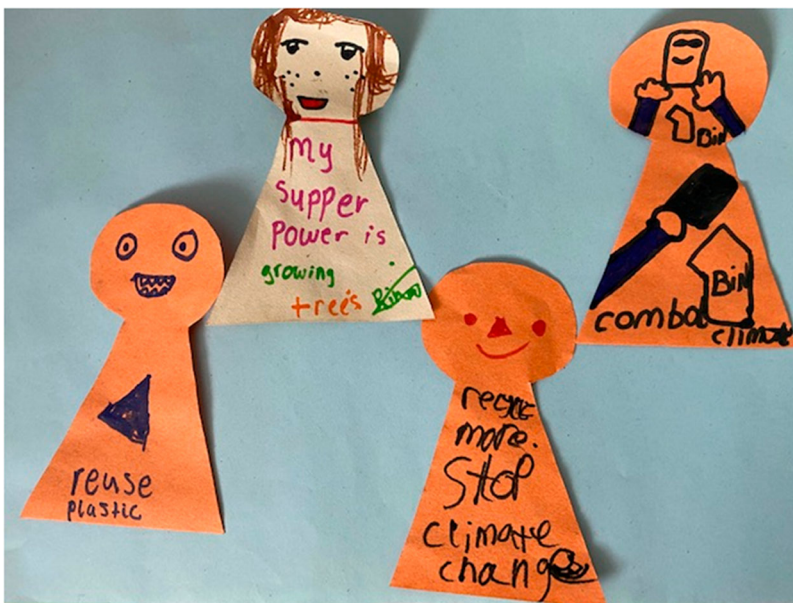


Figure 2. Examples of superheroes produced during the workshop. (Source: author's own).

and devised themselves a superpower that they felt would be helpful to solving planetary problems. One student noted that they would have the power of 'super speed' in order to fix all climate problems by quickly travelling around the world. While another stated that they would have 'cooling' powers as this would enable them to cool the earth and stop climate change (Figure 3). As these students drew their superheroes they acted out their superpowers, jumping, spinning and running around the site.

The students' optimism and enthusiasm for combatting climate change during the exercise was palpable and in contrast to broader public opinion on the hopelessness of young people in the face of climate crisis. Yet, it was only when they were encouraged to voice and imagine their own superpower that their negative feelings about climate change were replaced with an embodied positivity about their abilities to make positive change. Providing a space to create and be heard within the context of COP26 revealed the students' belief in their own worth to the world and highlighted the importance and power of their imaginations. This space for creativity was arguably enhanced through its emplacement in the garden context. Recent scholarship into community and school gardens has further explored what gardens can actually *do*, demonstrating how affective and playful labour can foster 'progressive ecologies' between human and non-human worlds (Moore et al., 2015). Gray et al. (2019) highlight the ways in which garden spaces and 'going outside' in the educational context produces a process of 'becoming' where empathy and a sense of care is produced. Gardens become 'doing places' where education is visceral, experiential and embodied, and, therefore, transgressing and subverting traditional forms of learning through such spaces and processes offers possibilities for young people to imagine their liveable futures and explore hopeful worlds, particularly in the face of climate crisis Figure 4.

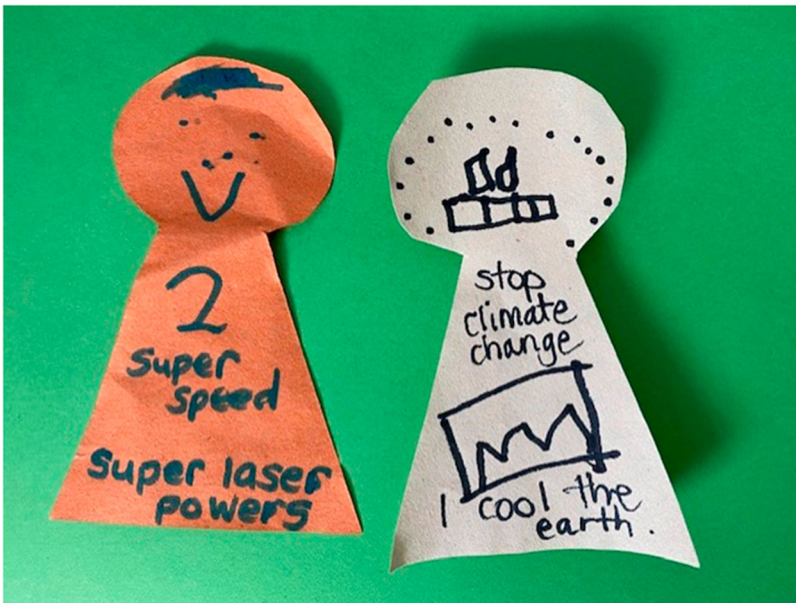


Figure 3. Examples of superheroes showing imaginative superpowers. (Source: author's own).

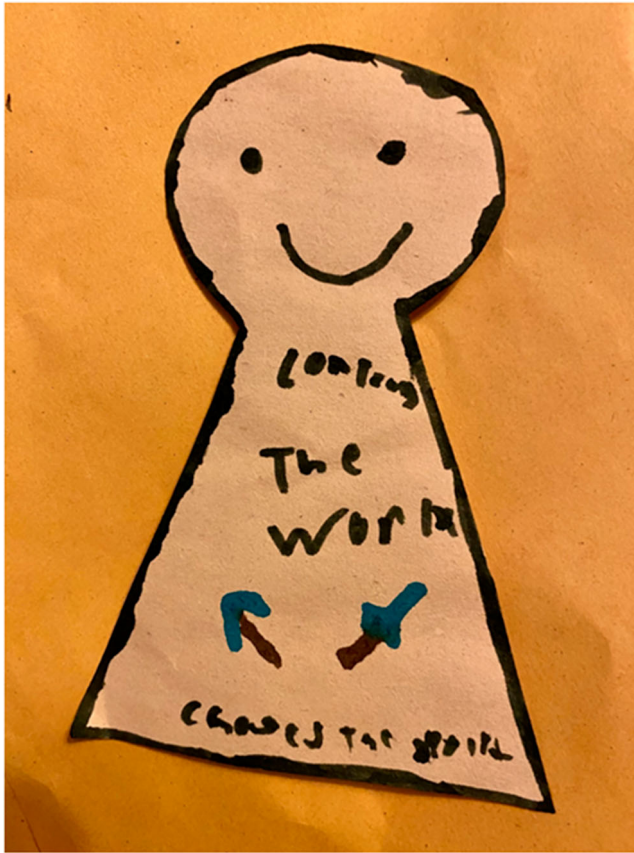


Figure 4. An example of student work produced during the garden exercise.

Lertzman (2012) argues that the key to engaging people with climate change is creativity. Allowing people to participate and engage through creative practice, such as creating superheroes and imagining superpowers, arguably pushes back against feelings of loss and anxiety and instead encourages pride, joy, and a sense of empowerment (Thiel, 2015). The method of drawing was selected due to its alignment with conceptualising young people as powerful social agents and effective cultural producers (Cameron et al., 2020). Vygotsky (1999) highlights drawing as a form of ‘graphic speech’, becoming a purposeful tool for communicating experiences and understandings of the world. A key purpose of the exercise was to allow young people to voice in their own ways their beliefs, hopes and concerns about climate change and visual methods offered an important way to hear their experiences. Interestingly, no student refused to take part and all appeared confident and enthusiastic about drawing their superhero. A number of participants drew love hearts and globes on their superheroes, signalling the importance of loving the world in order to save it (Figure 5). In her discussion of Arendt’s notion of *Amor Mundi*, Rose Hill (2017) recognises the significance of being engaged, thinking citizens, stressing that ‘loving the world offers us a way of being in the world that plants our feet firmly in reality, so that we can see what is before us.’ The exercise in Growchapel showcases this recognition in miniature as, through placing young people in the centre of a



Figure 5. Examples of superheroes showing student engagement with love for the world. (Source: author's own).

community growing space and encouraging their voices on climate change, they were able to think critically and creatively about the world and its future. Crucially, for these communities on the margins, they were able to find their own place within these conversations.

Care

This brief reflection has sought to illuminate one way in which issues of hope and efficacy are revealed through emplaced climate education. Whilst the limits of hope are increasingly being discussed within the literature (Pihkala, 2018; Ray, 2020; Raynor, 2021), its critical place within climate education remains strongly felt and seen (Herbert, 2021; Nairn, 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). Yet, recent calls to go 'beyond hope' (Ray, 2020) chime with educational debates within the humanities that see climate change education, in ways described in this piece, as a push towards 'the social practice of caring.' Siperstein et al. (2017, p. 9) write that, whilst not identical to hope, the social practice of caring embeds our teaching within relationships with other humans and non-humans, fostering 'relationships that compel us to place questions of justice and of collective survival at the

forefront of our thinking.’ Considering care as an ‘ethic’ (Middleton & Samanani, 2021) in this way, allows exercises such as these to be viewed as activities that promote and inspire young people to view their bodies, selves and environments as entangled. In doing so, caring relationships are strengthened as attentiveness to the needs of others and the world are heightened and further understood.

Paying attention to the young peoples’ articulations of their own superpowers in the face of the climate crisis allows an important avenue of insight into the role of hope, and its manifestations of caring, in emplaced geographical education. To love the world is to care for it, and care is therefore vital reparative work. Glimpsing into the imaginations of these young people in Drumchapel provides an important opportunity to see where hope resides and offers initial potential for developing new ways to teach a love for the world that is rooted within community spaces. Whilst the emplaced nature of the teaching in the Growchapel site offered a significant component to the learning that occurred, the wider emplacement of the session within the orbit of COP26 provided a unique teaching opportunity. COP26 acted as a catalyst for the generation of a community event and its echoes were felt by all who were involved, as one student noted as we packed away our stalls: ‘If Barack Obama can come all the way here, to where I live, to try and sort out these problems, then I think we should give it a try too.’

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