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Mahatma Gandhi Institute of
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TAG  ^e

Pointers Action

Climate Change Anxiety Among
the Youth and How It Can
Be Tackled through Social
Emotional Learning



कालाती क्ररमात काल एव फलम् पबिती

**‘When the right thing is not done at the right
time, then the time itself destroys the essence.’**

~ Acharya Chanakya (Kauṭilya or Viṣṇugupta)



About UNESCO MGIEP & Talking Across Generations on Education (TAG^e)

The UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) is UNESCO's Category 1 Research Institute, that focuses on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 towards education for building peaceful and sustainable societies worldwide. In line with its vision of 'Transforming Education for Humanity' and 'Building Kinder Brains', the Institute employs the whole-brain approach to education with programmes that are designed to mainstream Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in education systems, innovate digital pedagogies and put youth as global citizens at the center of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development. Given the target of UNESCO MGIEP to put youth as global agents of change at the center of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development, the institute created a unique advocacy tool/platform for youth - Talking Across Generations on Education (TAG^e). This platform is gaining popularity among youth internationally and consists of a non-restrictive and non-hierarchical dialogue between two generations of youth (from disadvantaged backgrounds, representatives of indigenous people; minorities) on one hand and policymakers on the other hand. This opportunity encourages youth to participate actively in public life, having a greater say in policymaking that will impact their futures.

In the first 2024 edition of TAG^e (Talking Across Generation on Education), UNESCO MGIEP teamed up with the Y20 Secretariat of Brazil to empower youth to drive positive change. UNESCO MGIEP, in collaboration with the Y20 Secretariat of G20 Brazil, conducted TAG^e (Talking Across Generations on Education) event on 18 June 2024 in Belém, Brazil, this significant gathering focused on the theme: "Climate Change Anxiety Among Youth and How it Can Be Tackled through SEL."

Correlation between TAG^e and Pointers of Action

Pointers of action is a brief document produced by the youth who participated in TAG^e, providing an overview of a crucial issue for youth, highlighting the important elements addressed during the inter-generational dialog in addition to offering key recommendations to decision-makers, to their respective communities and to the entire world. This document aims to provide an overview of the TAG^e topic- Climate Change Anxiety Among Youth and How it Can Be Tackled through SEL, synthesize the TAG^e discussions and finding from the social media engagement and live event by linking them to the available literature, case studies and concrete examples and, finally, provide actionable key recommendations to decision makers, to their respective communities and to the entire world.

Introduction

Climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss form what is known as the ‘triple planetary crisis’ (UNFCCC, 2023); it poses a profound threat to human survival and the stability of human civilization as we know it. Among these challenges, climate change is the most significant, acting as a ‘threat multiplier’ (UN, 2024a), accelerating other security risks, with both direct and indirect multidimensional impacts. This creates a domino effect of multiple-order negative consequences that can have cascading effects highlighting the urgency of addressing climate change and its interconnected crisis. (Kumar, 2024)

Climate anxiety is an impact of climate change that, despite its negative connotation, is often ignored because of a lack of awareness and its invisible nature. ‘Climate anxiety,’ according to Dodds, is ‘heightened emotional, mental or somatic distress in response to dangerous changes in the climate system’ (2021). It puts vulnerable communities, including children, youth, women, elderly, and persons with disabilities at heightened risk of climate vulnerability (IPCC, 2022) because of their greater exposure and higher sensitivity.

Since a decade now, the advent of social media and technological advancements have triggered a spillover effect, resulting in greater climate literacy and heightened awareness about the climate change crisis. This has led to a surge in mental health issues because of climate anxiety (Kumar, 2024), which causes conditions of helplessness, a sense of uncertainty, and the feeling of a lack of decision-making power.

This document explores the intersectionality of the youth, climate, and emotions, with a specific focus on climate change anxiety among youth from the perspective of social emotional learning (SEL). It integrates the voices of youth and promotes effective climate education among them – especially those from marginalized and vulnerable communities.



1. PROCESS

1.1. The nature of climate change anxiety among the youth

The growing prevalence of mental health challenges, especially among the youth, is deeply concerning (WHO, 2022). Anxiety is one of the most prevalent emotions that young people experience today. With the pressures of academic success, societal expectations, and the constant influx of information through technology and social media, it is not surprising that anxiety and other mental health conditions are on the rise.

The lack of awareness and resources on mental and physical well-being only exacerbates the problem. Mental health issues often go unnoticed or untreated, partly due to the stigma that surrounds them, making it harder for individuals to seek help. Combined with the modern-day pressures of life, this can result in long-term consequences for both individuals and society as a whole.

Anxiety and stress are proportional to the way we express ourselves in our work, education, and other spheres of life. The greater the experience of mental health degradation, the greater the decline in quality of work and education (WHO, 2022). This can cause various socio-economic issues in a nation, such as reduced life expectancy and unemployment. In contexts marked by pre-existing issues – such as gender-based violence, crime, and poverty – especially in the Global South, where there is less economic freedom and general well-being, anxiety may cause new interconnected issues while amplifying others.

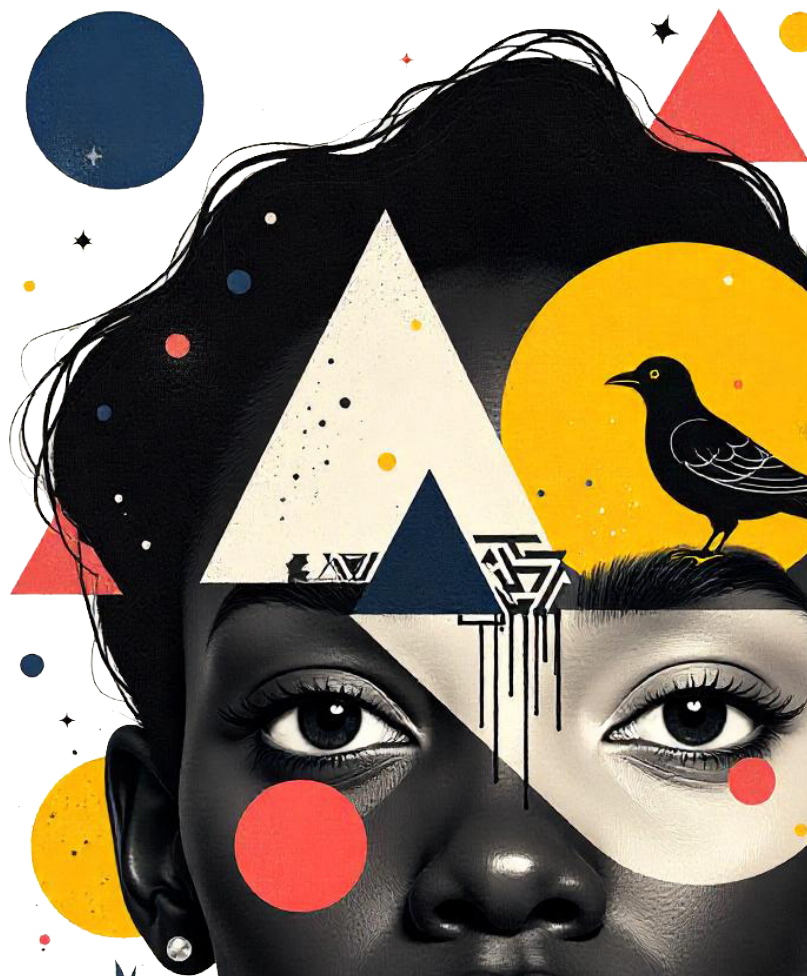
Climate change has adverse effects on one's mental and physical well-being. Many experience eco-anxiety as they feel helpless in the process of advocating for solutions to the environmental crisis (Pearson, 2024). In particular, those who are directly affected by climate disasters or the consequences of pollution experience frustration, stress, grief, and loss. Many lack basic necessities, such as water and electricity, and do not find a respectable livelihood that aligns with the principles of climate activism.

Today's youth are increasingly becoming climate activists as they experience anxiety about their future (Schiffman, 2022). They also face daily frustrations due to the increase in environmental damage and lack of accountability. The activism stems from an awareness

of the atrocities that vulnerable communities and individuals experience directly.

For demonstrations to be effective and avoid legal consequences of sanctions from law enforcement, they need to be well-planned and organized. However, anxiety or impulsive behaviours can sometimes take over. Thus, it is important for social movements to be mobilized in a way that prevents governments from labelling them as riots, which could be used as an excuse to break them up or suppress their message. Without proper structure, the risk of losing control and undermining the cause increases.

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1.2 The extent of climate change anxiety among youth

The rapid rate of environmental decline and increasing effects of global warming are having widespread impacts on all aspects of life (NASA, 2024). Along with the issues of resource depletion and the potential challenges of supporting a growing global population, along with this, there are large corporations and industry leaders that have significant influence over the planet's future. These companies – which are responsible for a substantial portion of carbon emissions, which are comparable to the emissions of an entire continent (Watts, 2023) – plan to increase their carbon emissions further in pursuit of economic growth. These practices are especially destructive in the Global South, where resource extraction, waste disposal, pollution, and labour conditions are already major issues.

These issues affect current and future generations. Countless youth are afraid for their future and feel hopeless. Youth across the globe experience fear, anxiety, stress, grief, and loss because of the evident threat to humanity and life on earth and the lack of accountability (Hickman et al., 202).

This is a result of dealing with the negative emotions that emerge with growing climate change awareness and the new perspective on life that it brings. To continue fighting for change and uphold the principles of climate activism, serious lifestyle choices must be made.

In most situations, this is strenuous, as education systems lack climate change awareness, and corporations and other stakeholders engage in greenwashing and propaganda (Shah, 2024). Global awareness about climate destruction is masked by greenwashing. The emphasis on consumerism, capitalism, and mass consumption is much stronger than the focus on education about the environment and the importance of preserving it.

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1.3 The urgency of climate change anxiety among youth

The youth and future generations represent our best hope for a safer, more sustainable, and livable planet. Unfortunately, those in positions of power often fail to take accountability for their actions, leaving both current and future populations to bear the consequences. However, the situation demands that sustainable development goals be prioritized without delay.

It is unjust that young people inherit a world with such significant environmental and social challenges. They should not be forced to confront escalating climate-related disasters and growing uncertainty about their future. Yet, they are left to navigate these challenges with the hope of finding solutions.

Many young people are already deeply engaged in climate activism, advocating through various channels, such as activism, peaceful protests, global governance, and public awareness campaigns (Rosane, 2021). However, without access to appropriate tools and strategies, their efforts may be inadequate to achieve their intended outcomes.

The mental and physical health risks associated with climate stress and anxiety are becoming increasingly apparent (Whitmarsh et al., 2022). The burden of pollution, heatwaves, natural disasters, and socio-economic instability, combined with the psychological toll of climate anxiety, can detract from long-term goals and undermine the resilience needed to face these challenges.

The potential outcomes of this crisis are reduced life expectancy, worsening mental health, barriers to employment and economic stability, and a pervasive sense of helplessness (UNICEF, 2020; WHO, 2022). These are just a few of the risks that young people may face if no action is taken.

Although this issue is critical, many individuals – including the youth – may not fully recognize its scale or have access to the resources and support needed to address it. Raising awareness is the first step (Bebout, 2024). Only by recognizing the challenges at hand and seeking out tools for change can we hope to foster a more structured, resilient, and sustainable future.

1.4 Social and emotional learning (SEL)

Climate anxiety stems from the perception that one is unable to control the overwhelming, complex issue of climate change. SEL offers a strategy to mitigate these feelings by reshaping the cognitive framework that fuels this anxiety.

By promoting more flexible thinking, SEL programmes can help individuals replace rigid, ‘all-or-nothing’ beliefs with more adaptive, nuanced ways of interpreting the situation. This approach not only reduces negative emotions, like anxiety, but also enhances cognitive resilience, giving the youth the tools needed to engage with climate issues in more constructive and rational ways (Clark, 2013).

The idea that cognitive restructuring can positively impact both emotional well-being and cognitive function is well supported in the literature (Tandon, A. and Bertram, R. (2024). By shifting from absolutist language (‘must’, ‘only’, ‘no other way’) to more open-ended, preferential language (‘prefer’, ‘would like’,

‘wish for’), young people can begin to see themselves as agents creating solutions rather than victims of circumstances beyond their control. This shift can inspire pro-environmental action and a sense of empowerment, which is essential for long-term engagement in climate advocacy.

It is also encouraging to see UNESCO and other organizations already implementing SEL programmes in the context of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (Mogren et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2024). The integration of SEL into broader educational frameworks is a positive move, as it acknowledges the emotional complexity of global challenges – such as climate change – and equips students with the tools they need to manage these challenges in a healthy, proactive way.

The next steps involve expanding these SEL initiatives to schools worldwide and ensuring that they are tailored to address the specific anxieties that different communities face in relation to climate change. Empowering the youth through emotional intelligence and rational, adaptive thinking can raise a generation that not only understands these problems but feels capable of addressing them.

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2. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the context laid out in the previous section, this section focuses on specific, realistic, relevant, and attainable next steps to tackle climate change anxiety among the youth.

2.1. Cultivate mindfulness and hone youths' ability to manage emotions

Embedding mindfulness practices and stress-reduction techniques into daily routines can help balance climate awareness and personal well-being. By being mindful, young people can recognize how climate news and information affect their emotions and thoughts – which is the first step to managing them. Just like many other interpersonal skills, self-regulation and emotional management are skills that can be iteratively honed by youth (Murray and Rosanbalm, 2017). For example, by repetitively coaching (van der Weiden et al., 2020) themselves to focus on aspects of the climate crisis within their control (such as recycling, taking public transportation, and shopping locally), this new way of thinking can become second nature and reduce their overall climate anxiety over time. However, conducive policies and civil society attitudes are crucial for providing the youth with the space and resources to cultivate mindfulness and practice these coping skills (see sections 2.2 and 2.3).

2.2. Engage in peer support networks

Peer support networks (Collier, 2022) provide spaces for sharing experiences and mutual support, which are crucial for developing collective strategies to manage climate anxiety. Engaging in structured climate advocacy – such as joining youth climate organizations, participating in peaceful protests, and contributing to policy dialogues – empowers young individuals and channels their anxiety into constructive actions. However, careful management is required to avoid exacerbating stress (see section 2.1.1). Combining personal resilience with proactive climate involvement allows youth to navigate the complexities of climate anxiety effectively (Hickman et al., 2021).

2.3. Integrate SEL into climate education in schools and colleges

Policymakers play a pivotal role in shaping frameworks that support emotional well-being and climate education. Integrating SEL programs into school curricula can help students manage their emotions and build resilience. As Hickman et al. (2021) highlight, 'large numbers of young people globally regard governments as failing to acknowledge or act on the crisis in a coherent, urgent way', which underscores the need for supportive educational environments. These environments should allow students to discuss climate concerns constructively and hone the relevant self-regulation skills (see 2.1.1). It is crucial that policymakers advocate for policies that mandate SEL in school curricula and support initiatives that equip educators with the necessary resources to teach climate change effectively.

Integrating SEL into climate education in colleges can help foster deeper engagement, empathy, and personal responsibility, which are crucial for addressing climate change effectively. SEL can also empower students to build resilience and collaborate meaningfully in the face of environmental challenges. By focusing on self-awareness, empathy, collaboration, and responsible action, colleges can nurture a generation of students who are not only knowledgeable about the climate crisis but also prepared to lead with compassion and determination.





2.4. Fund and support youth-led climate action

Funding and support from policymakers are pivotal for providing youth with the space and communities needed to abate climate anxiety (see sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2). These would also enable SEL techniques to reach more youth and even target those who are structurally disadvantaged due to their socio-economic backgrounds or place of domiciles (Rashid, 2023). Additionally, involving young people in the policymaking process to address their needs and perspectives would demystify climate policy, changing the perception that it is an area over which they have no control (Shirley, 2023).

2.5. Demonstrate awareness and empathy for climate anxiety

Alarmingly, in a 2021 survey, nearly 40% of young people worldwide said their concerns about climate change have been ignored or dismissed (Pearson, 2024). Given historical perceptions of mental health issues, it is important for wider society not to shun, stigmatize, or discourage climate anxiety, as this will only suppress the issue. Instead, it would be more useful for civil society to demonstrate awareness and empathy for climate anxiety, acknowledging that it is a manageable externality stemming from current climate issues.

2.6. Facilitate cross-cutting open discussions and initiatives

Facilitating community engagement initiatives is also vital (Leknoi et al., 2022). Bringing youth, mental health professionals, and climate activists together in collaborative settings can help all stakeholders develop collective strategies to manage climate anxiety. Community-based initiatives, such as local sustainability projects and green infrastructure development, also provide tangible ways for individuals to contribute to climate solutions.

Schools and youth organizations could develop collaborative programmes to provide continued support and education (Hickman et al., 2021). Conducting research on the impacts of climate anxiety and using the findings to advocate for better mental health and climate policies will also contribute to a more informed crisis response. Public awareness campaigns emphasizing the importance of climate action will further support these efforts by encouraging positive and proactive engagement.

3. CONCLUSION

Although many people recognize the importance of addressing climate change and promoting sustainability, only a few individuals who engage in high-greenhouse-gas-emitting behaviours take sufficient action to reduce their impact. While structural barriers – such as climate-resistant infrastructure – play a role, psychological obstacles also hinder people from making the behavioral changes necessary to mitigate environmental damage. While some people have taken steps to address these issues, most are hindered by psychological barriers or ‘dragons of inaction’ (Gifford 2011): limited understanding of the problem, ideological views that oppose pro-environmental attitudes, social comparisons, sunk costs and behavioral momentum, skepticism toward experts and authorities, fear of change, and positive but insufficient efforts. While removing structural barriers is important, it is unlikely to be enough. Psychologists, in collaboration with other experts and policymakers, must work to help individuals overcome these psychological hurdles.

Climate change affects us all, but historically, it has impacted excluded, under-resourced communities disproportionately despite their having contributed the least to the crisis. These communities often live without access to basic necessities, such as food, clean water, and sanitation. The United Nations has warned that climate change will push 120 million people into poverty by 2030, intensifying the panic and fear many already face around the world (Srinivasan, 2021). While climate risks threaten us all, climate solutions will benefit the most vulnerable communities the most.

In this context, SEL plays a critical role. Traditionally, SEL refers to the essential skills and competencies needed for success in life, and schools have increasingly prioritized SEL to support the well-being of both staff and students. While this focus on well-being is essential, it is also important to recognize that SEL is not just a temporary fix or ‘band-aid’ (Srinivasan, 2021). Instead, it offers a powerful framework for the deep inner work required to transform both schools and society as a whole.

Over the past decade, mindfulness has become a key component of SEL programming, helping individuals engage in this inner work. However, for SEL to be truly transformative, it must go beyond routine practices and prompt deeper reflection on how our actions impact the world. For example, we need to ask ourselves: ‘What kind of ancestor do I want to be?’ This question invites us to consider our role in shaping a more compassionate, just, and sustainable future.

Academic institutions are essential units of change in this larger transformation. They have the power to cultivate an ‘inter-being’ consciousness, helping individuals recognize our shared responsibility to one another and to the planet. By incorporating this consciousness into SEL, we can create the conditions needed for the paradigm shift our world desperately needs.

Hope is one end of a spectrum when we think about how to meet the challenges of the present and envision our future; at the other end is despair (Srinivasan, 2021). But hope is possible when we take action together to alter the climate path and create a more sustainable future for all. Let us seize this moment to bring SEL into alignment with the urgent climate action needed, so that we can evolve and ensure a better world for generations to come.



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