

"They say, education is the practice of freedom":

an Overview of the Climate Commission-led Student Stakeholder Discussions for UNESCO's Futures of Education

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Thank you to student Climate Commissioners Amy Brazier, Marta Crispo and Manveer Gill for facilitating the discussion groups.

Thank you to the students who participated in these discussions, your insight is invaluable to ensuring a just and sustainable future:

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Summary

As the need for climate action becomes increasingly urgent, individuals of all ages look to identify and develop effective and just solutions to the climate emergency.

Education plays a key role in climate action. Current and future leaders, and communities in general, need education to understand the complex moving parts of climate crisis, whose consequences offer a myriad of social and environmental challenges. Fortunately, efforts are underway to reform education for a sustainable future, including UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative.

The following report summarises discussions amongst four groups of 38 UK university and college students on the future of education amid the climate crisis for UNESCO's Futures of Education Initiative. The groups were held, and discussions analysed by the Climate Commission for UK Higher and Further Education.

This overview is useful in understanding the personal and academic priorities' of students and in gauging next steps to reforming education amid the climate crisis, as laid out by students. This report been shared with UNESCO to feed into their upcoming report on global education policy.

The discussion was centred on three topics:

1. Students' hopes and concerns for the future
2. Students' ideas of the broad purposes of education in relation to concerns and hopes for the future
3. How students believe education should change to address these concerns, hopes and purposes

Various ideas were discussed by engaged and passionate students from a variety of cultural and academic backgrounds. In the discussions, education was understood as a broad term encompassing informal and formal learning, as well as learning for all ages. This report summarises the discussions - please see page 3 for a summary of topic.

Overall, the discussions illustrated the urgency for education to adequately preparing students for a changing world. The discussions also illuminated the enthusiasm, willingness and selflessness of students to work to ensure a sustainable and just future for all.

Summary of Topics

Topic 1

Leadership

Generational Gap
COVID-19

"We can't delay educating people in positions of power"

Changes in systems, societies and individuals

Systems Change vs. Individual Change
Social Movements

"My concern is personalisation of climate change - [that's] not going to work. We need big systems change."

Topic 2

Forward-Looking

Encourage Connectivity

Nature
Community

"In our core, we've forgotten that we're a part of this ecosystem"

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Empower Learners

Critical Thinking
Whole- Systems Thinking

"We're taught $1+1 = 2$, but we're not taught why."

Topic 3

What should we learn

Practical Skills
Interdisciplinary Curricula

"Education should be much more interdisciplinary and practical -we should learn how to grow food at all levels of education."

How should we learn

Accessible Learning
Collaborative Learning
Experiential Learning

"That link between education and real-life has been missing."

Where should we learn

Nature-Based Learning

We need to consider schools may not have space, so need to do a joined up approach, it can't just be well-off schools near green space that can benefit."

The Climate Commission for UK Higher and Further Education

The Climate Commission for UK Higher and Further Education is a unique partnership between Association of Colleges, EAUC - the Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education, GuildHE and Universities UK launched in November 2019. The Commission is working to coordinate a clear, cohesive and consistent response to the climate emergency for the further and higher education sector by COP26. Students across the UK are at the heart of this work, guiding the Commission in taking action and encouraging universities, colleges and sector bodies to make decisions that will support them in inheriting a more sustainable and adaptable world.

The Commission took part in UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative to provide a cross-country space for UK university and college students to informally discuss the future of education amid the climate crisis. Through these discussions, students are also given a powerful platform: they are contributing to UNESCO's upcoming report on global education policy and sharing their ideas, experiences, priorities and concerns with institutional leaders in the sector.

For more information on the Climate Commission for UK Higher and Further Education, please see www.eauc.org.uk/climate_commission.

Methodology

In July 2020, the Climate Commission for UK Higher and Further Education hosted four discussion groups for UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative. Each discussion group lasted one hour and had 8-10 student participants. In total, 38 students participated in the groups.

Participating students were found through promoting the discussion groups via newsletters and email lists.

The groups met on Zoom and each discussion was recorded for internal use. Each session was facilitated by a student Climate Commissioner or the Climate Commission Secretariat. The discussion loosely followed UNESCO's flexible guidelines for facilitating stakeholder focus groups for the Futures of Education initiative. A brief breakdown has been outlined below:

Introduction (15 minutes)

Topic 1: Concerns and Hopes for 2050 (15 minutes)

Topic 2: Broad Purposes of Education (15 minutes)

Topic 3: Implications for Education (15 minutes)

Conclusion (15 minutes)

Afterward, the Climate Commission Secretariat transcribed the discussions. The transcriptions were analysed using open-coding methods; patterns and themes were identified. An overview of the themes is available on page 3.

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Topic 1

Our Changing World: How do you view the future?

Students were asked: "When you think about 2050 what are you most hopeful about? What are you most concerned about?" These discussions were centred on the climate crisis.

Leadership

Generational Gap

Many students discussed a **generational gap** in both awareness of the climate crisis and climate action.

Students believe that younger generations are more aware of and concerned with the climate crisis than older generations. They also believe that younger generations practice more sustainable behaviours and/or engage in climate activism.

For some students this is a source of hope: they suggested that by 2050, the younger generation, who to them are practicing sustainable behaviours, will be in leadership roles and be more able to translate their beliefs into political action and practice.

For others, the generational gap in climate action is a cause for concern. Many students emphasised the urgency of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. One student said, "2050 seems to be the target for so many people... but by 2050 in my eyes, society will have collapsed. Stuff needs to be happening now, I genuinely think we have a year to two years to sort anything."

"I'm hopeful that the people most concerned by climate change are our generation - we can have new leaders with this mindset."

"We can't delay educating people in positions of power - maybe [we need] an emphasis on educating decision-makers now. It's putting a lot of pressure on young people to be the saviours."

Alongside the urgency of the climate crisis, students are also concerned that leaders have known about the climate crisis for decades, and yet are still not acting quickly enough. One student acknowledged the advancement and popularity of climate research, but pointed out the "discordance" between research and action. Another noted, "our leaders aren't acting like it's an emergency." To some students, waiting for the next generation of leaders to take action is harmful, particularly

as they note solutions will only become more complex as the climate crisis advances. Instead, they suggest educating current leaders to more deeply understand the impacts of the climate crisis and appropriate responses.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Governments' and individuals' responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic has been a cause of both hope and concern for the students.

In the responses to the global pandemic, many students see competent and coordinated national and local governments and communities able to act quickly in an emergency, offering hope that these skills and abilities can be transferred to tackle the climate crisis.

For others, reactions to the pandemic do not equate to appropriate climate action. One student commented that COVID-19 presented itself as an urgency, and "**like a fire, it needed to be put out,**" while the climate crisis can still be easily ignored or made invisible for some in the Global North. In fact, some students believe COVID-19 represents the uncertainty of the future and the instability of the world's political and environmental systems.

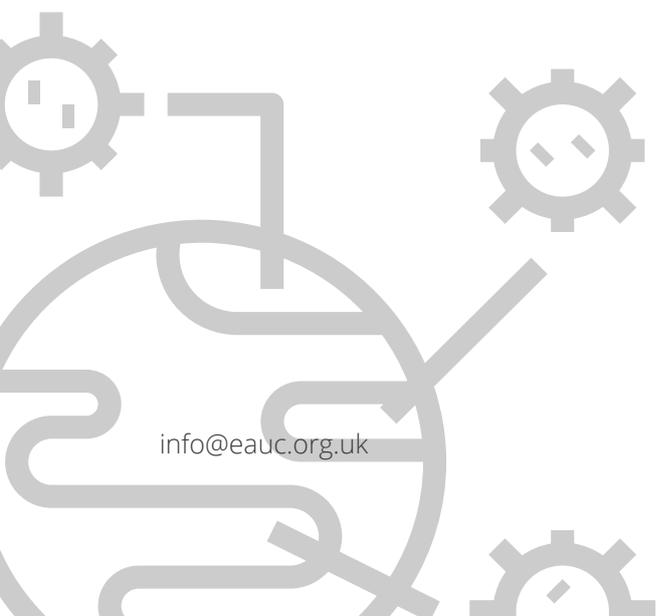


"COVID-19 shows how quickly political change can happen."

"After COVID-19, I feel a bit more hopeful that we can change our behaviour and help each other out."

"I see COVID-19 as a worryingly accurate trial-run of a future riddled with collapsing climate systems and a potential upsurge in more severe global pandemics."

"For me, the current pandemic is showing the uncertainty of where we're going ... it's really uncertain and that's related to any sector."



Sustainable changes in systems, societies and individuals

Systems Change vs. Individual Change

Students discussed the apparent dichotomy between systems (political, capitalist etc.) change and individual change in tackling the climate crisis.

Some students felt concerned by the responsibility placed on individuals from governments and corporations to curb climate change by 2050, or as one student framed it: **"the personalisation of climate change."** Many of these students saw this as unfair, or as an inadequate response and/or solution to the climate crisis.

One student also voiced frustration over the dishonesty, ineffectiveness and limitations of the personalisation of the climate crisis, saying, **"businesses [make it difficult to be sustainable], for example with starter-homes built in off-site locations where young people are trapped using cars. Businesses lure you into what you think are good decisions - it's a false sense of security."**

In general, these students feel a shift needs to occur where entire systems are re-structured to ensure sustainable futures.

Others felt that individual change was indeed important and found hope in a large-scale behavioural change amongst societies and individuals. One student mentioned that although the consequences of capitalism were a cause for concern, **"it's not realistic at this stage that we can re-write capitalism, so it's about adapting to its effects. We will always be reactive... rather than proactive and with education you can galvanise people to change their beliefs and actions."**

A student discussed that for businesses and governments, sustainability may be a **"corporate tick box"** but for individuals, it may contribute to a deeper, more long-lasting **"cultural change."**

Another student was hopeful that individuals could be incentivised to act more sustainably, perhaps financially or through other means. Similarly, one student noted how bureaucracy often slows down change amongst global institutions, explaining that she chose to study business as she believes entrepreneurial climate action is faster and more effective than government action and systems change.



Social Movements

Still, a few students lament about the presence and maintenance of systems and structures, like capitalism, racism and sexism in plans for the future amid the climate crisis. One student portrayed his dismay by reciting a quote, saying that for many, **"it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."**

Fortunately, acknowledging the impacts systems like capitalism, racism and sexism have on the climate and sustainability, some students feel hopeful about the power of social movements to spur change and support societies in dismantling systems and presenting alternate ways of living. For example, although existing since the devastating shooting of Trayvon Martin, and subsequent acquittal of shooter George Zimmerman in 2013, [Black Lives Matter](#) has recently gained more momentum. Some students feel this momentum and global support reflects a changing society and provides them with hope for a more equal, just and sustainable future.

However, some students fear that despite social movements to advance justice, there may also be more social movements that turn increasingly divisive due to the complexities and hardships brought on by the worsening climate crisis and potential future pandemics.

"We're at a juncture where we really need to re-imagine the way we live on this planet and the way we interact with the environment. Social movements embody radically alternative ways of living"

Topic 2

Broad Purposes of Education



Students were then asked, "Considering the visions of 2050 you just described, what should be the collective purposes of education in 2050?"

Forward-looking

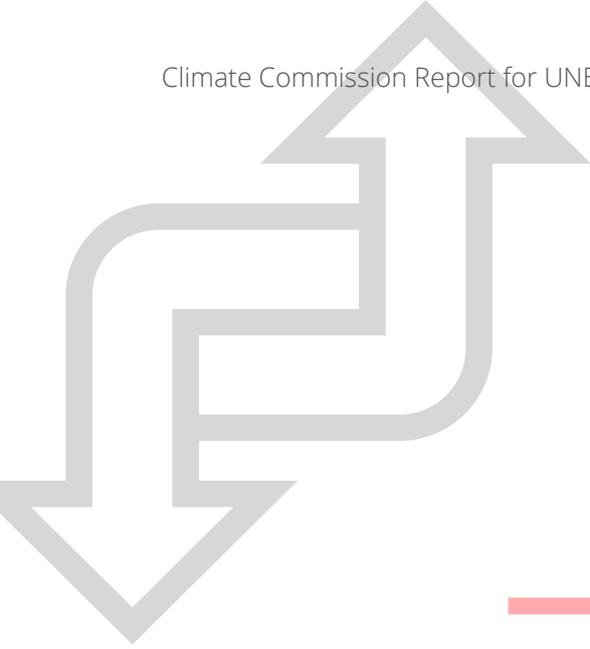
Many students believe the broad purpose of education should be to prepare individuals of all ages to cope, adapt and thrive in a changing world.

For children, one student said, "**education should be about preparing them for the world they are growing up in.**" Others mentioned that education should be about helping learners adapt to our changing planet and "**how to deal with the consequences**" of the climate crisis.

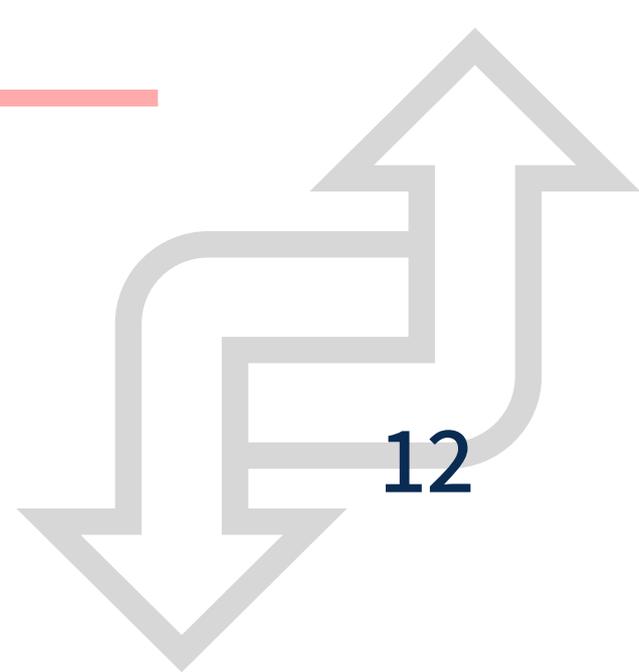
In the same vein, students emphasised that the purpose of education is to develop leaders who will have an impact on the world, and not just to "**hand out diplomas.**" One student argued that leaders of tomorrow need to have a deep understanding of how to use resources efficiently in their professional and personal lives.

In particular, students emphasised that education must not only advance awareness of the climate crisis, but provide solutions and support learners in developing solutions.

“By 2050, education should give young people the tools to engineer a better, more compassionate world. It's not enough to teach kids about climate change, you need to build on that and give them solutions to the problem.”



“The purpose of education is to prepare us for a new world. The world will unlikely be as it is now, so teaching in a status-quo, teaching as things have always been, about how the world has always been ... it’s just not viable. Let’s take economics, it’s taught in a way that focuses on infinite growth on a finite planet, it’s just not possible. Why is this still the dominant concept that is taught in economics?”



Encourage Connectivity

Students largely agree that education should foster and nurture various types of connections between learners and their social and natural worlds.

Nature

Many students emphasised that a broad purpose of education is to connect children, and learners of all ages, to nature. One student expressed concern that, “in our core, we’ve forgotten that we’re a part of this ecosystem.” Another shared concerns that, “[we've developed] a notion that we're separate from nature.” Students mentioned a greater need for facilitating connections to nature to advance feelings of belonging and responsibility to nature, particularly amid the climate crisis, as well as to support mental wellbeing.



"[The climate crisis should be] framed as something you carry with you"

Community

Students believe another broad purpose of education is to connect learners to one another, and to both local and global communities. The reasons for fostering connections are to have multiple sources and areas of study, to enhance and diversify learning and to develop a sense of responsibility by understanding that the climate crisis is local and relevant to learners to encourage them to make sustainable decisions.

For example, one student stated the purpose of education to **"broaden one's perspectives and views on the world"** and that learners should be supported to **"open [their minds], sit and listen to other people."**

One student explained the importance of learning and sharing information, values and skills informally amongst family and community members, highlighting the connectivity that education can and should support.

Overall, students believe the purpose of education is to support learners in understanding their place in the various ecosystems and social systems surrounding them.

"If there was any way of education [connecting us]. Rather than feeling like you're an individual going through a process to just get a job, [to instead feel like you are] a part of something bigger."

"[Education must support] an increased capacity in people to have a sense of compassion for others rather than [solely] building an individual sense of self"

Empower Learners

Most students believe the purpose of education is not solely to share information with learners but to empower students to be actors of change within their natural and social worlds and to lead fulfilling lives amid the climate crisis. Students noted two different, albeit related areas that can serve to empower students: encouraging critical thinking skills and more holistic, systems-focused teaching.

“Education should teach people the tools to learn how to think for themselves and to act against a system, rather than being stuck in a system that they think is the only way forward”

"[Education] should be about empowering people, teaching students that they actually can effect change, make [the climate crisis] more relatable and personal - make it seem they actually have the power to do something about it."

“The collective purpose of education is to live fulfilling lives. But this needs to be much broader, what can I do to educate others through my example?”

Critical Thinking

Most students were adamant that the purpose of education is to teach critical thinking skills from an early age and throughout the formal and lifelong informal education process. Students emphasised that this was important in developing leaders and activists who have the right skills and tools to tackle the climate crisis by questioning systems and behaviours that perpetuate the crisis.

Students want education to foster independent thought and teach learners to question material and think for themselves. One student used STEM subjects as an example, explaining that science is taught as an objective subject, when in fact, researcher bias can affect results or outcomes. If education focused on critical thinking and encouraged students to question teachings and results, biases can be better acknowledged and/or overcome.

Students also used the terms "self-awareness" and "consciousness" to describe the capacity (developed through education) to question teachings and to organise oneself to act against system and ideas with which they disagree.

Whole - Systems Thinking

Students emphasised that amid the climate crisis, the purpose of education should be to provide learners with a well-rounded and holistic understanding of any kind of subject matter. One student explained this as, "**not just looking at the facts, but looking at the processes.**" Students discussed the importance of sharing the political and historical contexts, like colonialism, of any subject area, including environmental science and sustainability, to empower students by providing deeper understanding of the matter at hand.

One student quoted, "**education is the practice of freedom.**" He expanded, "**we're taught $1+1 = 2$, but we're not taught why.**" Learning about processes allows one to understand the society to which they belong and the reason for why things are currently how they are, giving students the understanding to effect change and to be empowered in general and amid the climate crisis.

" To actually teach people to act, we need to enable them to understand what's really happening."

Topic 3

Implications for Learning

The last question students were asked was, "With the visions of 2050 and the collective purposes of education that you just described ... How should what we learn, how we learn and where we learn change in the future?" Students then provided tangible examples of how the future of education should look.

What we learn

Practical Skills

Students believe education should be more focused on practical skills. For example, many participants believe students, and all individuals, should learn how to grow food. They explained that it would be beneficial for learners to understand how to grow food as it would facilitate connections with local environments, empower learners by developing their capacity to understand food systems and how to act against harmful and unsustainable food systems and lastly, it would prepare them for a future should food security become precarious for them amid the climate crisis.

"In schools, there's a big [disconnect] between where your food comes from. To actually teach people to act, we need to enable them to understand what's really happening and [repair] that [disconnect]."

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Aside from food growing, students recommended a focus on other artisanal "hands-on" skills, like making clothes, carpentry and repairing items. This focus can support a circular economy, preparing students for the future and empowering them to act against a linear production system.

Lastly, one student recommended more emphasis on coding skills to prepare students for a more technologically-reliant future.

Interdisciplinary Curricula

Participants advocated for an end to siloed learning in formal education and a move toward interdisciplinary learning. Students particularly emphasised embedding sustainability in all subjects, beginning in nursery to higher education, to ensure students from all academic backgrounds are supported in understanding the climate crisis, its causes and the various solutions. Many believed this is important in order to "**depoliticise**" sustainability, and acknowledge it as the "**bedrock**" of learning and life.

Some students noted the importance of social sciences in facilitating deeper understanding of global issues, including the climate crisis. For example, one student stressed the crucial role colonialism and Empire has played in constructing social and racial inequalities in the modern world. As the climate crisis is a social issue affecting the world's most marginalised, it is important to understand the historical processes at play to develop effective and just solutions to the climate crisis and ensure a sustainable future.

How we learn

Accessible Learning

Students acknowledge the difficulty many face in accessing formal education, and particularly further and higher education.

To make education and learning more accessible, some students advocate for placing more value on informal learning and lifelong learning to dismantle the hierarchy of educational qualifications and include more voices and experiences in leadership roles.

Students urge formal education to "decolonise its curricula" by acknowledging Western education's roots in colonialism and how Western education can uphold oppressive hierarchies and limit understanding of politics, history and a plethora of other subjects. Students also want education to place value on different types of knowledge and ways of life, including non-Western and Indigenous perspectives, knowledge and methods of learning, and embedding this in curricula. This will allow students from all backgrounds the chance to relate to material by seeing themselves represented and provide all students with a diverse range of sources to ensure accuracy of, and deeper understanding of subject matter.

“We need to get rid of this idea that Western academia equals superiority and actually make [education] accessible on a global scale, breaking down language barriers and social conventions of how we learn”

As COVID-19 forces formal educational institutions to rely on technology more than ever, participants see an opportunity to increase accessibility to education. Students believe an increased use in technology, including remote meeting software and citizen science software and applications can bring more people into formal educational spheres and include more voices in responses to and discussions about the climate crisis.

Although students were enthusiastic about the opportunities technology can bring, many were quick to note that increased support for learners without access to technology and/or digital literacy skills was necessary to ensure true accessibility.

"Technology has to be used for the best. Before it was an option, now it has to be used to reach as many people as possible."

To improve access to education, and particularly education about sustainability, a few students mentioned the necessity of supporting communities and learners with accessing their basic needs, including food and shelter. This improves the capacity of learners to engage with material and learning.

"If you come in and say 'we want to talk about climate change' to a community struggling to get water to drink, you won't get the buy-in"

Collaborative Learning

Students emphasise the need for more collaborative learning and decision-making processes. Firstly, students encouraged more collaboration between the Global North and the Global South. Similar to the point above, this can mean including more voices from the Global South in educational institutions, as well as supporting one another to improve understanding and share best practice for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Students also mentioned the power of collaborative learning between children from different parts of the world in supporting them to engage with sustainability.

Participants would also like to see collaboration between generations. One student, after volunteering with elderly folks, suggested enacting compulsory volunteering for young students with older generations. She explained how this could support climate action, saying of her experience, **"It was great to have that bridge between generations. Often old people are seen as undynamic, it's just about giving them the power to act."**

Lastly, a few students also hope to see greater collaboration within formal educational institutions. One student expressed concern that it was difficult for students to have a say in formal educational structures due to rigid policies and operational structures. She recommended **"less bureaucracy and less hierarchy in institutional educational structures"** as it is **"so hard to make someone accountable and for students to be heard."** Transparency and accountability can improve the education process for students and staff and can contribute to an education that is relevant to the needs and priorities of current students.



Experiential Learning

“You remember the experiential stuff more than sitting in class”

The large majority of participating students want learners to undertake more experiential learning. Many students spoke about their own experiences with hands-on learning in formal and informal settings, often praising these experiences, referring to them as the most memorable, informational and formative lessons they have had. They praised the educational benefits of learning

how to solve real-world problems as opposed to theoretical concepts.

Students also noted that experiential learning should occur more locally as well, in order to facilitate learners' place-based connections which can be more engaging, support students in appreciating and understand the world around them and support community and local social systems and ecosystems. One student noted a school field trip involving flying to another country to learn about the environment; the student observed that the same field trip could have been experienced more locally, without changing the subject matter, benefitting the local environment and communities and avoiding the environmental impacts of air travel.

Where

As previously mentioned, students observed the emphasis society places on formal education, particularly further and higher education, and want to see more informal, and lifelong education recognised as valuable and important to develop.

"You should be able to move in and out of education"

Nature-Based Learning

Students believe that lots of learning must take place in the outdoors to facilitate connections with the environment and engage learners on sustainability issues. Students also noted that nature-based learning runs the risk of becoming inaccessible, particularly for learners from urban areas, or children from schools without access to outdoor spaces. Some students suggested a **"joined-up approach"** between schools and communities who have outdoor spaces, and those that do not, to ensure just access to nature-based learning.



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