

Climate policy, youth voice and intergenerational justice: Learning from Nottingham

Youth Climate Assembly

Abstract

In this paper, we examine how youth voice and meaningful action that emerge from deliberative practices are shaped, legitimised, and constrained by national and international policy landscapes. Our paper situates itself within the policy nexus of the UK Government's *Sustainability Strategy in England* (2022), and at the international level, the *Berlin Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development* (2021), where principles of participation, engagement, intergenerational justice, and learning are paramount. We explore the ground level challenges for youth-led and community action centred on intergenerational justice, in local partnerships and in national and international policy. Our paper examines the first Nottingham Youth Climate Assembly, and outlines the interventions implemented by the authors and the community groups that we worked alongside. We then consider the successes and challenges in conducting local-level deliberative democratic processes, before discussing the role of youth voices within action for climate change. Finally, we offer suggestions for improving future interventions.

Introduction

Amongst Global Minority Community researchers, intergenerationality has very recently become central to debates around climate justice, with young people disproportionately experiencing the consequences of the climate crisis now and in the future). We recognise that Indigenous philosophies have long platformed intergenerational justice claims. Learning from such established sites of knowledge (Watene, 2022), we understand that young people will disproportionately experience the consequences of the climate crisis now and in the future. Actions

taken now to address the impacts of the climate crisis will determine the rest of their lives, highlighting the enormous stake that young people have in planning for the future. However, young people in the UK are continually marginalised within climate decision making processes (Kosciulek, 2020; Karsgaard and Shultz, 2022; Sloam et al., 2023). The standard ‘climate engagement’ offer available to all young people via schooling is in terms of didactic knowledge within subject disciplines (such as Geography), rather than with a focus on tangible youth-led, community-based action and policy-shaping. Their climate engagement experience is therefore characterised by under-resourcing and low prioritising within the ensemble of school-based policy (Dunlop & Rushton, 2022). This draws attention to the intergenerational and procedural injustices faced by young people across the UK and indeed globally. Citizens’ assemblies and other inclusive, participatory and deliberative governance processes can be utilised to address climate change challenges to ensure a just and equitable future for all. This paper explores issues of climate policy, youth voice and intergenerational justice through learning from ‘our intervention’ - the Nottingham Youth Climate Assembly 2022. Whilst the concept of youth is contested (Pickard, 2019), for the purposes of this project, young people were aged 14-25.

Stewards for the future: Youth action and barriers faced

Young people are increasingly seen as stewards *for the future* (Han and Ahn, 2020), with international agreements such as the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) listing them as one of the nine groups central to achieving sustainable futures (UNEP, n.d). Whilst young people have been heralded as change makers by elite institutions like the UN (Thew et al., 2022), they are also limited in how far they can influence global climate policymaking. Walker (2020) concludes that such intergenerational relationships in climate action can result in ‘uneven

solidarities' *intergenerationally* and *intragenerationally*. Simultaneously, Children's Geographies researchers recognize the legitimacy of children and young people as change-makers (Worth, 2016), and highlight the importance of engaging in scholarship on intergenerational and relational tensions that shape such activities (Wright et al., 2024; Skillington, 2019; Walker, 2017).

Despite exclusion from official decision-making fora, young people are increasingly engaging in broad repertoires of environmental action. Notably, the 2018 '*Fridays for Future*' (FFF) school strikes rapidly spread globally (Sloam, et al., 2022), aiming to encourage adults and politicians to consider alternatives outside of 'business as usual' scenarios to adhere to the Paris Agreement. Since its conception, FFF's climate strikes have harnessed over 7.6 million participants in 185 countries (de Moor et al., 2020), with chief architect Greta Thunberg stating, 'Everybody is welcome. Everybody is needed' (Champions of the Earth, 2019).

It is key that the voices of *all* young people are amplified to achieve a just future - therefore provision of localised spaces where such inclusivity can happen is essential. However, voice and participation inequalities persist *intragenerationally* and *intergenerationally* in young people's political lives. Arya and Henn (2023) found that socio-economic status, education, race, disability, and gender intersectionally influence young people's environmental political participation. Education can both feed and address inequalities, as well as limit or provide space for political knowledge production and political agency (Body et al., 2023). Concurrent with COP26, policy documents were released highlighting the role education systems play in climate justice. Internationally, UNESCO's *Berlin Declaration* (2021) highlights the role of education as crucial both for empowering young people as sustainability change agents and for achieving intergenerational justice.

In the UK, the Department for Education's (DfE) *Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy* (DfE, 2022) frames the problem of climate change for education as addressing knowledge around climate change through qualifications and teacher training; and economic and resource issues in relation to green skills and jobs. Dunlop and Rushton's analysis of the document (2022) concluded that the strategy had a depoliticising effect. They highlighted its 'placebo' nature, providing an opportunity for the government to appear to address the problem of climate change and education without committing to tackling root causes, and without enabling a climate justice focused policy environment. This lack of structural provision for empowering young people is further revealed in our 'intervention'.

Intervention: The Nottingham Youth Climate Assembly 2022

Pathways to procedural justice

Deliberative democratic practices are critical for the dismantling of the problematic rhetoric that climate politics and action present for many sections of society (Wang et al., 2020). The principles of deliberative democracy recognise the importance of bringing together people with a diversity of opinions, lived experiences and backgrounds to co-produce solutions to societal problems (Willis et al., 2022). Participants do not act in self-interest, instead committing to mutual understanding, upholding the principles of equity and inclusivity (Harris, 2021).

An increasingly popular deliberative method within the environmental sphere is citizens' assemblies. However, concerns centre on unequal participation, with some citizens whose access to deliberative spaces may be limited subsequently experiencing greater disadvantage (Talukder and Pilet, 2021). How intersectionally marginalised young citizens are empowered to access deliberative activities like citizens' assemblies, therefore requires attention.

Scale and local context

Such citizens' assemblies and other deliberative processes have taken place at varying scales globally (Bryant and Stone, 2020). While these processes are generally 'representative' amongst older groups, under 18s are far less involved, with only four 16-18 year olds being included in the UK's Climate Citizens Assembly¹. In Scotland, children had their own assembly, but were not part of the main assembly. Such exclusionary outcomes from democratic processes limit youth voice and highlight issues of intergenerational injustice. Children's Geographies literature emphasises that age is a crucial marker of analysis when exploring young people's political agency (Worth, 2016). Liou and Literat (2020, 4666) examined *intergenerational* activism in the US, concluding that age-based power dynamics shape political spaces for young people who "*exist in and between*" multiple intersections of control.

While global and national level interventions are important in tackling climate change, local-place based research and interventions have also been evidenced as aiding transformative and just change (Horlings et al., 2020), going beyond a standard 'one-size-fits-all' approach. This context is important to our Nottingham-based Youth Climate Assembly 'intervention'. Regarding environmental initiatives, the city has set the ambitious target to reach carbon neutrality by 2028 (CN2028)². This aim is complicated, as Nottingham ranks 11th worst out of 317 districts in England in terms of poverty and inequality (Nottingham Insight, 2019). Additionally, Nottingham has a higher proportion of younger people than the national average and is also very ethnically diverse

¹ Sortition UK do not provide a full breakdown of age groups present at the UK Assembly – instead, grouping all participants aged 16-29. Therefore this statistic was provided by one of the paper authors that undertook ethnographic observation at the event. The fact that this information is not formally recorded is testament to the tokenistic inclusion of young people under 18 in deliberative processes.

² The details of the 'Charter' are available at: [nottinghams-2028-carbon-neutral-charter.pdf](https://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/media/123456/nottinghams-2028-carbon-neutral-charter.pdf) ([nottinghamcity.gov.uk](https://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk)).

(Sloam et al., 2023), further highlighting the importance of having inclusive, democratic processes locally.

The Nottingham intervention also took place in the context of interesting geographical and political divides. Nottingham City is a unitary authority and a Labour stronghold, yet Nottinghamshire County has a Conservative majority and is relatively more rural and affluent compared to the city. Environmental issues span across these geo-political borders - and so too must the solutions - yet this local political context may provide a barrier to meaningful change. Opportunities to participate in deliberative democratic processes become even more integral in such contested settings to prevent widening inequalities (Anguelovski et al., 2016).

The remainder of the paper examines Nottingham's first Youth Climate Assembly as an intervention, its successes and problems, and the lessons offered for future interventions regarding intergenerationality and intragenerationality. As authors, we are focused on ensuring that intersectional social and environmental justice are at the heart of environmental transitions (Mikulewicz et al. 2023).

Nottingham Youth Climate Assembly

Nottingham Youth Climate Assembly (NYCA) aligning with the *Berlin Declaration* (UNESCO, 2023) and the DfE Sustainability Strategy (2022), aimed to 'empower young people as change agents' (UNESCO, 2021, p10), and to offer 'not just truth, but also hope' (DfE, 2022), as the pilot for future climate assemblies in Nottingham. Whilst our intention was to empower and support Nottingham youth to engage in meaningful climate activities as legitimate knowledge producers, we continually reflect on the tensions that exist in this context. Walker (2017) examines the way

in which children and young people are targets of climate education interventions by older groups due to their generational position. Initiatives like climate assemblies and climate education designed by older people must be reflected on to prevent shifting responsibility and guardianship for the future onto young people, further perpetuating intergenerational injustice.

Children's Geographies researchers have critiqued single generation approaches to climate action research advocating for more relational and intergenerational methodologies that recognise the power systems that exist between younger and older generations (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). NYCA followed an intergenerational planning approach by enlisting a youth panel in programme design and selecting adult collaborators. Despite these efforts, challenges still persisted. Skillington's (2019) research on *intergenerational justice* emphasises that researchers must "*account for the inequalities that are neither wholly present nor absent from the current timeframe*" (2019, 27). In this context, young people, who will bear the brunt of future climate and environmental disasters (especially those who are disproportionately marginalised), also have limited access in the present to political decision-making that could avert such disasters in the future (Skillington, 2019). Acknowledging these tensions, NYCA aimed to:

- connect Nottingham young people with local decision-makers and policymakers via genuine collaboration on planning for tackling the climate crisis;
- enable young people to identify important central themes relevant to climate policy and to their own lives - and to set objectives against these;
- provide outputs to influence and shape local climate-related policymaking (including a Nottingham Youth Climate manifesto).

Genuine collaboration required avoiding tokenism through committing time and resources to the work of youth participants. Whilst the project was not initiated by young people, the organising

team and local policy actors involved sought to consult and enable young people to take leadership as the project advanced, making it theirs - designing materials, sessions, leading as facilitators, and directing agendas.

Youth participation in the NYCA was voluntary and the 25 young participants (aged 14-25) who contributed to the NYCA decision-making were motivated to do so by their prior interest. Unfortunately, practical, and financial constraints were such that a ‘sortition’³ process was not possible, in tension with our aim to include diverse and minoritised young voices. NYCA participants came from a range of backgrounds distributed across the target neighbourhoods, underpinning the importance of the free hosting of the event and the connections to other trusted youth leaders in enabling them to participate. Yet this cannot equate to a systematic process for engaging a demographically representative set of young people - and remains a major drawback of the project. A commitment towards intragenerational justice in climate policymaking and engagement requires the serious backing of resources and policy (Dunlop & Rushton, 2022); yet such work remains marginal, and progress towards widescale youth engagement slow. Recognising the urgency of climate justice action, we argue that the NYCA remained vital in terms of learning from the creation of youth space for action and policy-making in local communities - whilst also acknowledging the serious limitation that grassroots approaches struggle to obtain the structural support to reach the full community. This tension is illustrated in Figure 1.

³ Sortition is a process of representative selection of participants used for citizens' assemblies and juries that deliberate key issues such as the climate crisis (see <https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/>)

Figure 1. Local level challenges to intergenerational and intragenerational justice

	Intergenerational	Intragenerational
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diminished resourcing/structures for long-term youth engagement in decision-making/political process • Particular barriers between secondary schools/colleges and local authorities/civic groups. • Local level activities characterised by volunteer-led efforts; small community-based organisations with precarious funding. • Grassroots project lacked clear route through which to build wide-scale connections with youth structures/school Trusts (each of which operated in isolation from neighbouring Trusts). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of sortition/representative engagement from across neighbourhoods/ethnicities/socio-economic contexts • NYCA drew upon a model that was coordinated by a large-scale youth unit across an entire region.⁴ Nottinghamshire’s youth provision was less extensive/active, and problematised by county/city divide and post-pandemic moment.
Other Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At outset of this project, local authority programmes still re-establishing post-pandemic. • Significant benefits to knowledge and connections of hyper-local youth provision partnered in programme, to reach communities and mobilise young people. • Once NYCA was established, young people engaged with a wider adult audience, particularly local policymakers and businesses via wider networks and invitations to adult-focused events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work to establish strong communications and relationships with schools/colleges (key to ensuring a broad and representative engagement with young people) fragmented and time-consuming. • A minority of schools/colleges/organisations were committed with clear key contacts for community outreach established. • NYCA members worked to engage a wider youth audience; led to individual young people starting their own projects, such as a <i>Fridays for Future</i> group.

⁴ See <https://yorksandhumberclimate.org.uk/news/green-youth-deal-launched-yorkshire-and-humber>

‘Young people as change agents’

After the NYCA, youth participants on the project highlighted their sense of hope and optimism. They also emphasised their greater understanding of the solutions to climate change that were being enacted around them – but remained cognizant of the challenges posed by the climate crisis. Youth participants wanted their voices heard on climate issues. While Taft and Gordon (2013) appreciate that voice is not always the same as influence, the discussions with young people at the NYCA revealed that they appreciated having: ‘a space where (they) could come together’ (Youth Participant, 22), and deliberate on an even level with the support of adults, on such key areas as nature, transport, planning and consumption.

Marshall (2022) reminds us that young people involved in such practices of deliberative democracy can find hope in such spaces. Simultaneously, Marshall claims that young people are also cognizant of the intergenerational and relational power systems that they have to negotiate to make change – that it is not easy and requires processes that involve powerholders like governments. Indeed, Trott et al. (2023, 18) state that:

“meaningful, people-powered action aimed at addressing the multi-faceted injustices of climate change is by nature a collective project not done alone, and one that takes many forms in many places united by a shared ethos of confronting and dismantling the systemic roots of humanity’s gravest challenges”.

The NYCA participated with Nottingham Citizens’⁵ *Youth Listening* campaign, while the NYCA manifesto⁶ was given visibility when presented to local political candidates during the 2023

⁵ <https://www.citizensuk.org/chapters/nottingham/>.

⁶ Available at: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/policy-and-engagement/documents/youth-manifesto.pdf>.

Nottingham City Council election campaign. Further strands of work to promote the NYCA manifesto were ongoing at the time of writing. The project also led to support from Nottingham businesses and the City Council for a full scale, fully funded climate assembly scheduled for the coming two years⁷.

Challenges for intergenerational and multi-sectoral collaboration

Despite the project's successes, the NYCA project highlighted issues in how sustained and meaningful youth and community engagement is handled to support civic participation. Reflecting on Children's Geographies literature that encourages engagement with ideas of relationality, these challenges take into consideration the *intergenerational* solidarities, tensions, and cross-alliances between political groups and spaces that young people participate in (Hopkins and Pain, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2010; Walker, 2020). Indeed, taking a broad perspective, this project was initiated by older people and engaged youth into an organisation which appears official, but which had limited power to implement the NYCA decisions. This is important to reflect on, because when young people are involved in *extra-institutional* activism - which is more typical of youth climate action – this is often perceived as radically dissenting from status-quo climate policymaking.

Conclusion

Deliberative processes have the capacity to achieve 'social justice and legitimacy for transformative action in low carbon transitions' (Ross et al. 2021, p.1526). To achieve such social justice, however, we must understand and address the numerous inequalities that influence ability to participate. Experiences from the NYCA project reveal that empowering young people to

⁷ More about the planning process for this assembly can be seen here: <https://www.nottinghamclimateassembly.co.uk/city-assembly> - members of the NYCA sit on the oversight panel for the City Assembly, meaning they are actively participating in the decision making processes

participate in deliberative democratic practices has had demonstrable ‘social justice’ benefits, particularly intergenerationally. At the same time, lessons from the NYCA highlight the need for greater intersectional and intergenerational radical community development with young people to enable methods like citizens’ assemblies to have transformative capacity (Batsleer et al. 2022; Trott et al., 2023), and that these require adequate resourcing. How experiences of intergenerational tensions in young people’s climate action shape the repertoires of political participation, matters - and requires further research, given that much of the research into intergenerationality in climate activism is theoretical in nature (Roy and Ayalon, 2023).

Despite imperfections, this NYCA project has revealed the potential offered by generating learning sites for young people to connect *intergenerationally* and *intragenerationally*. It offers insights into how to both access settings of power and catalyse a broader engagement between young people and older adults in the community who can learn from each other. Such methods can enable youth as ‘change agents’ (UNESCO, 2021); however, these same methods unveil the reality that the resources and coordination required for meaningful intragenerational youth engagement should not be underestimated. Resources or no, it remains critical to the project of climate justice that this work is done - imperfect and challenging as the process may be.

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