

Introduction

The Young Voices Approach to Teaching Climate Change

Educators, academicians, scientists, and the scientifically and environmentally aware public agree that it is essential for students to have an understanding of Earth systems and climate change science. Global climate change is upon us, and it will play a huge part in the future of youth worldwide.

But teaching about climate change has proven challenging because students often turn off and shut down when they begin to understand its dire consequences. Learning about climate change can easily engender fear leading to denial or apathy. It is often easier to deny the science than to embrace the reality of a planetary emergency.

So it is essential that we go beyond science content when teaching climate change. Thus this book pairs scientific content with the *Young Voices for the Planet* films. These films showcase stories of youth solutions to the climate crisis, providing real models of positive pathways to change. As Shannon McComb (age thirteen) says in one *Young Voices* film, “If you adults won’t do something about global climate change, then we kids are going to take the reins.” Kids absolutely can take effective action against climate change, and they are doing it now all over the world. Moreover, their empowered responses are helping these youth feel *less* defeated by the climate crisis and *better* about themselves.

The *Young Voices for the Planet* films are changing the face of climate change education by replacing fear with action. The dynamic youth portrayed in the films exhibit many qualities that foster success. For example, these youth know how to work collaboratively with peers, teachers, school administrators, government and businesses officials, and others. They show that it’s possible to address climate change by identifying win-win solutions for all stakeholders.

The *Young Voices* educational approach rests on solid research and observation. For a decade, scientists and educators assumed that if people

understood the seriousness of the climate crisis, they would act. But, in fact, the more scientific information people heard, the stronger was their denial. Various studies have shed light on why people avoid accepting the facts about climate change: psychologically, they just cannot handle the disturbing truth. Instead of motivating them to learn more and act, learning about frightening natural hazards generally motivates people to *avoid* learning more science! In 2012, a study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* named this response to frightening facts “motivated avoidance.”¹

A study by Professor Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, revealed similar findings. Leiserowitz found that climate-related images invoking fear produced a strong negative affect and actually impeded people from accepting climate change science.² These studies and others make it clear that factual information alone cannot be the basis of climate change education.

But ignoring the problem is no way to calm students’ fears either. Research shows that children who are not allowed to discuss and process fears are actually more fearful than children who have the opportunity to express their thoughts and fears.

So we must rethink how to teach climate change. The approach used in the *Young Voices for the Planet* films and in this teaching guide is gaining currency among educators who had, in the past, unwittingly scared students into “motivated avoidance.” Our approach encompasses the key strategies described below.

ELEMENTS OF *YOUNG VOICES* CLIMATE CHANGE EDUCATION

Storytelling

Everyone is captivated by a good story, and each *Young Voices for the Planet* film tells an inspiring one. Even better, these stories are true! Each film profiles real-life characters and presents moving tales of challenge and success. The films are nonfictional but are told in an entertaining narrative style. After all, they are produced by Lynne Cherry, acclaimed children’s book author and storyteller. (See the note from Lynne about the origin of the *Young Voices for the Planet* films on page 10.)