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'It's good what we're doing and it's scary what we're facing': young people's care-ful environmental action in the UK

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we argue for greater recognition of young people's contributions to environmental action through social and environmental justice. It draws on findings from research based on eleven organisations in the UK exploring young people's connection with environment-related collective action and activism in the UK landscape. Building on theoretical arguments of ethics of care and implicit activism and capturing a range of practices of young people, the paper explores young people's multiple framing (s) of activisms – towards the environment and each other.

Drawing on the experiences of young people and facilitators within these organisations, we unpack the experiences and representation of minoritised groups in the climate movement and other forms of environmental engagement. The findings demonstrate thoughtful and effective approaches towards inclusion within the UK context and in terms of global climate justice but also highlight a need for more intersectional approaches and awareness of enduring barriers often relating to racialised identities.

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Introduction

The climate and biodiversity crisis is everyone's business. But this incremental decades-scale disaster is unequal in its impacts, looming larger and for longer in the lives of the planet's younger residents, and those living more precarious lives and in more precarious places. By implication, young people are centred both as victims and as agents for change. In the Global North, this is exemplified by two dominating narratives, the 'eco-warrior' and the 'eco-worrier' (Bradley et al. 2021). Young people are alternatively characterised as confrontationally climate-striking, and/or emotionally immobilised by eco-anxiety (Harrabin 2021; McVeigh 2008). Given the local and global severity of environmental degradation these two 'states' are far from irrational, but we suggest they fail to capture the complexity and thoughtfulness of youth action.

With the focus on Greta Thunberg (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022) and the associated increase in media coverage of the youth climate movement in recent years, academic

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research has primarily attended to young people as climate protesters, strike action (Bowman 2019; Pickard, Bowman, and Arya 2020), and individual experiences of eco-anxiety (Ojala 2012). Less frequently documented is the wide range of collective practices of young people to take environmental action; for example, through awareness raising, care for local natural places or campaigning for policy change. But it is increasingly being recognised that young people's concerns and actions in relation to the climate are diverse, and demand nuanced and appropriate forms of engagement by the world (Bowman 2019; Davies and Hügel 2021). Widening the lens to a wider set of goals and experiences – the '*what?*' and the '*what else?*' – is a means of exploring collective concern underpinned by youth values and agency, of work and expertise, of voice and of being heard (or not) in an adult-shaped world.

In parallel to exploring a holistic framing of environment activism we also address the ongoing concerns of a 'too white' environment sector (Goldenberg 2014). This clearly is of significance in terms of applying an equality lens to the youth voice – the '*who*' and '*who else*' of acting, activism and actions. This extends beyond a concern for social inclusion, important though this is. In terms of environmental action, the challenge of social justice is fundamentally connected to climate justice (Arya, Bowman, and Pickard 2019). Sultana's work exposes the need to take global responsibility for the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss, especially on locations and people in the Global South, and how these are supported by colonial histories and ongoing inequalities of power and wealth (Sultana 2022). Bringing an intersectional approach is vital as a means of aligning with processes of de-colonisation in climate justice (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Sultana 2022). Rooted in black feminist thought, the lens of intersectionality (a term coined by Crenshaw 1989) helps address how characteristics including age, race, gender, disability and sexual orientation intersect to exacerbate discrimination and oppression. Utilising this conceptual approach, we explore nuances around how processes and structures which empower young people and counter age-marginalisation can also work as positive exemplars for inclusion and equity.

The third key area of concern is connections between the '*why*' and the '*how*'. An adult-centric lens of concern often situates young people as the future hope for the planet. By focusing on futurity rather than young people's immediate impact, such reactions and responses permit and praise activism while maintaining the status quo in terms of adult power and children's powerlessness (Hopkins 2023). A more intentional shift is needed to challenge these perspectives. In this paper, we attend to the present and explore how young people's agency is practiced through care and hope through the achievement of small actions (Horton and Kraftl 2009; Tronto 2013). We build on Horton and Kraftl's (2009) ideas of 'implicit action' and feminist ethics of care (Sevenhuijsen 1998; Tronto 2013). Implicit action is defined by Horton and Kraftl as 'small-scale, personal, quotidian and proceeding with little fanfare that has typically gone uncharted in the social-scientific understanding of "activism"' (2009, 14). With a feminist care ethics lens, we develop an argument that young people's environmental activism commonly makes connections between the political and ethical, with a commitment to non-hierarchical collaborations (Richardson et al. 2023).

Situating our work within youth activism approaches and terminology

Within debates around youth activism, we have found a useful steer in Bowman's observation that young people do not fit into binary definitions, 'their activism is ambiguous,

shifting and adaptive' (2019, 300), and this is also reflected in the range of organisations and groups included in our research. We have chosen to primarily use the term 'action' rather than 'activism', unless using young people's own descriptors, to reduce the perceived narrowness of the word activism.

Attention to justice is threaded through the paper, mostly with reference to environmental or climate justice, approaches that recognise and seek to right the disparate impact of climate change on vulnerable communities (Taylor 2011). We hope our research makes a small contribution to understanding the role of young people in working towards representation, inclusion and protection of the rights of those most affected by climate change (Sealey-Huggins 2018; Sultana 2022). As our fieldwork is located within the UK context and primarily in collaboration with the environmental sector, one emphasis that emerged as important was the meaningful representation of ethnically minoritised groups and how these link to global imperatives for change, attending throughout to intersectionality (Bowman 2020; Walker et al. 2022).

Young people are not a homogeneous group, and many factors can influence how individuals in different contexts engage with climate change and environmental action. Our research engaged with the 'engaged by choice', and invited young people involved with environmental actions to reflect on their position in relation to their peers who don't, or don't yet, give time and effort to these causes. As researchers, we are mindful of the temptation to recast our participants as a normative standard. While acknowledging this limitation, by focusing on 'young people who take collective action' we were able to understand more about choices and constraints, journeys into activism(s), how they practice resilience and their ideas for the future.

This paper addresses two research questions related to the youth environmental movement in the UK.

1. How are a range of collective actions taken by young people shaped by values and practices of care and hope?
2. How does their care-work and careful work support intersectional and justice-orientated environmental activism?

Paper structure

The following sections include a review of literature mapping young people's activism and environment movements outside of statutory educational settings, with a focus on inclusion of diversity and social and environmental justice. It discusses care as an analytical framework to explore young people's climate action. This is followed by a section on the methodology and context of the research highlighting the organisations selected and the criteria of selection. Our findings discuss young people's practices of care and hope within environment and climate action, and their careful and intersectional approaches towards global climate justice (Arya, Bowman, and Pickard 2019; Crenshaw 1989; Pulido 2017).

Young people acting within and alongside environmental movements

Climate change lays bare the ongoing colonial legacies that govern our lives (Sultana 2022) including within the environment movement and the environment sector. In this section, we summarise the recent history, current landscape and existing research

around young people's environmental movements. We frame this within broader debates on the connection between social justice and climate action, and the long process of decolonising the environment sector (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022) by centring voices that have traditionally been silenced and knowledge systems that have been ignored.

Recent youth-led environment movements

Young environmental activism is 'not monolithic and is oriented towards the environmental justice approach' (Bowman 2020, 3). Their activism has historical roots, complexities, tensions and the thickest root is environmental justice (Walker and Bowman 2022), an approach with a long history that can especially be traced in activisms of indigenous communities and people of colour (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022).

The opposition of youth to the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, USA, was a pivotal action in 2016 that resonated locally and globally (Estes and Dhillon 2019). 2018 is also perceived as a key moment in climate politics, as the action for climate by activist Greta Thunberg sparked the global Fridays for Future movement encouraging young people to take part in organized school strikes and walkouts for climate action. Youth-led climate movements have gained momentum since (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Pickard, Bowman, and Arya 2020). Research attending to these protests explores youth climate strikers' perspectives in the UK (Bowman 2020) and analysing the impact of the strikes through documents and social media (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, and Bimber 2020; Holmberg and Alvinius 2020). Pickard, Bowman, and Arya (2020) examine how young people themselves understand their activism. They found that young people are keen to take action for climate, and their action tends to be disruptive but rooted in non-violence and joy. In focusing on young people's attitudes to adult involvement in youth-led climate groups, Martiskainen et al. (2020) and Elsen and Ord (2021) found that concern for the environment and government inaction motivated young people to become climate activists. Cattell (2021) unpacks ways in which young people's involvement in climate activism shapes their imagined futures.

The Youth Strike for Climate has been referred to as an emergent movement, but it needs to be placed within longstanding environmental struggles. Neas, Ward, and Bowman (2022) argue that a hyper focus on Greta Thunberg can serve to marginalise the roots of climate activism in historical and contemporary activism especially by young people from non-white, global south, working class and racialised minority groups. Moving past an intensive interest in individual activists, in our research we interact with a broad range of UK organisations that connect young people and their action for the environment. We acknowledge and recognise that youth activism is more heterogeneous in nature than the act of striking and has deeper historical roots and precedents (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022), and these are closely linked with the shared work of decolonising the sector to address embedded injustices and silencing (Mbah and Ezegwu 2024).

Social inequalities and marginalisation within the environmental movement

The climate crisis is the greatest social justice issue that humanity faces (Tutu 2010). Even when attending to Global North contexts, communities, families and individuals who are marginalised for a range of reasons (including but not exclusively ethnicity, low-income,

disability and migrant histories) are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis and fossil fuel extraction, despite contributing to lower greenhouse gas emissions (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014; Routledge, Cumbers, and Derickson 2018). Children who live in these contexts are further vulnerable (Börner et al. 2021; Davies et al. 2020). Inequalities and marginalisation present in society extend to the environment sector and related movements and are reflected by the demographics of engagement. A study in the United States indicates that the participants in the climate strikes in the United States are predominately White, female, and from well-educated families (Fisher and Nasrin 2021a, 2021b). In the UK the environmental sector ranks as the second least diverse (Policy Exchange 2017), with leadership, employment, volunteering and activism significantly failing to reflect population demographics in nearly all contexts. The call to decolonise collective environment understandings and engagements is urgent and needs to include both intersectional dimensions (for example between class and racial identities) and the connection between social and environmental justice (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Kaijser and Kronsell 2014).

Young people's activism often demonstrates justice-oriented understanding of climate change, as indicated in research by Piispa and Kiilakoski (2022) and Terren and Soler-i-Marti (2021). Pickard, Bowman, and Arya (2020) suggest that young people view climate change as an urgent crisis, and which requires radical rebuilding of society. Holmberg and Alvinius (2020) and Pickard, Bowman, and Arya (2020) found that youth activists situated climate change as the outcome of capitalist structures and are committed to put the needs of the environment above those of the economy (Emilsson, Johansson, and Wennerhag 2020). Youth activism as a form of environmental justice activism can challenge mainstream concepts of environmentalist activism because young people frequently address environmental issues at their intersection with the enduring damage of colonial regimes, economic exploitation, the fight for land rights and outdoor spaces, everyday health and safety, and structural racism (Bowman 2020).

Youth activism and ethics of care

Feminist ethics of care connect individual actions with structural change. Tronto (2013) explores the nuances of enacting care by calling attention to 'caring *with*' where 'care needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom for all' (Tronto 2013, 23). In this paper, we focus on care to relationally explore young people's care *with* others through collective action.

Horton and Kraftl (2009) and Richardson et al. (2023) have developed a focus on care within children and young people's activism. Beyond the dichotomy of care for the environment and not-caring for the environment there is a need to capture the complexity of in-betweenness (Bowman 2019), of young people's range of practices towards activism and forms of care. Within this paper, we suggest that viewing activism through a lens of care is one way of guarding against romanticism of certain radical forms of activism and is particularly appropriate in giving due attention to the range of actions that are accessible to young people.

These key contexts and theoretical groundings of our research – histories of youth activism, social justice within environmental actions and modes of 'caring with' – give a useful

framework for exploring youth activism as an ethical caring action experienced across multiple scales and relationships.

Methodology and methods

This paper is based on a research project 'Young People Act: nature/climate' that focuses on young people's nature connections and environment activism in the UK.[1] The aim was to map and evaluate the ethos, activities, structure and impact of environmental and climate action organisations in the UK that lead by or meaningfully engage young people, with a focus on inclusion of young people from commonly marginalised backgrounds.

The research included a wider data set of 24 organisations. The aim, ethos and format of engagement of these organisations varied widely, including conservation, junior ranger programs, climate activism, youth boards and networks. We included representation across the age range of young people (between 12–25 years), size of the organisation, the location, and the local or nationwide scale of the activity. Some were entirely led by people, but mostly involved some adult facilitation, and some were 'youth initiatives' within an established environmental organisation.

The first stage of the research fieldwork included online remote interviews with organisation heads or project coordinators. The aim was to understand personal journeys, organisation history, vision of the project, programs, challenges, experiences of working with young people, young people's perceptions of future environments and their part in shaping these. These allowed us to map the development of the project in relation to engagement with young people, successes and limitations. Some of the interviews were with young people who had positions of peer facilitators or leaders, and most of them were with older adults in an organisational lead role (often with a personal history of youth activism).

The second stage was a more in-depth engagement with four of the organisations from stage one. These were chosen to represent the diversity in the range of organisations that had been interviewed, with priority given to those particularly focussing on the inclusion of young people from diverse and ethnic minority backgrounds. We select these methods taking Bowman's (2019) recommendation seriously that 'exploring young people's climate action requires a more open, more participatory approach to research' (302). These were either online or in person, fitting in with whatever was the normal practice for that group. Fieldwork included observation of sessions, conversations and group discussions with young people to understand their motivation, perceptions, experiences and interaction with the organisations, and connection to the environment in the UK.

For this paper, there is a particular focus on a subset of eleven of these organisations, the selection is based on the ones that are youth-led or with a particular focus on young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

These organisations include:

- three youth activist organisations that advocate for policy change related to biodiversity loss and/or climate change at either a national or a local scale
- two organisations with a focus on facilitating environmental engagement for children and young people from commonly underrepresented groups

- three youth boards – focusing on supporting young people's voice within established environmental organisations
- two organisations with a focus on upskilling young people from diverse and minoritised groups to engage in the environment sector
- one organisation that took a networking approach to connecting different cross-sector organisations, including a youth focus.

Practices of care and hope shaping environmental activism

> It's good what we're doing and it's scary what we're facing. And I think every time I join a meeting like this, I feel a little bit less scared.
>
> Youth member, protest group

The young people interviewed in the research understood the magnitude of climate change, and the timescales of effort needed. Though often focused on short-term actions, this 'long term perspective' informs a shared need for emotional and physical resilience, that caring for the environment demands a parallel care for self. Collective attention to this is core to the work of many of the groups and takes many intentional and practical forms. Horton and Kraftl's consideration of 'implicit' activism, emerging from individuals' emotional encounters with the world (2009, 14), allows us to recognise these seemingly small gestures and acts of care that further feed into their activism. Through kindness and care for each other, young people build a community that helps them keep going, deal with their anxiety and work towards a common goal of climate action and justice.

Organising hope through care

Young people face multiple practical challenges to self-organisation, including the frequent changes to life situations from teenagers into young adulthood, finance and transport constraints. The impact of Covid lockdowns was still being felt on volunteering rates at the time of the fieldwork. All the young people we spoke to were acting in a volunteer capacity, and the ability to find the time for this was a pressing and ongoing concern as they balanced work, study, family and other commitments. The threat of 'burnout' was ever present, and a regular part of discussions was how to achieve actions in a way that was sustainable to them and their group. One group discussed how they have learned the hard way that they cannot do an action every month, and have gained the wisdom and confidence to postpone or say no.

For more established groups, care was taken to craft processes of engagement at all stages.

> We spend time talking about things, seeing different options. The group works with consensus decision making which by the nature of it reduces conflict, as no one is left behind or feeling upset about something.
>
> Youth member, Protest Group

There is a wide range of caring practices embedded into the work of the group that go beyond face-to-face kindness. Checking in sessions, allotting a wellbeing person in the team, focussing on talking to each other about how they are feeling, taking breaks,

spending time together in nature, slowing down and having the option to change roles if a task becomes too onerous.

> We start each meeting with well-being check-in. If someone is feeling particularly low, then we try to talk and find out more and support each other. We have a designated Wellbeing Officer who runs training on what burnout is, how to recognise signs, how to deal with it, and share resources. These roles are rotated.
>
> Youth member, National Campaigning group

All young people are mindful of the impact of age-marginalisation on their voice in mainstream contexts and apply this within their own groups too. Within the age nominally described as 'young people', from around 12 with an upper limit of 25, there are significant differences in life experience, skills and ability to act independently. Groups that span teenagers and young adults need to pay careful attention to both enabling the younger participants and safeguarding them. This is represented by intentional and practical procedures: a cautious approach to adding new members to WhatsApp groups, avoiding meeting in pubs, not expecting that members can travel to other cities and ensuring that younger members speak first in meetings. Though some of the groups we engaged with were entirely peer-led, the majority had some adult facilitation, usually paid roles.

> They [adult facilitators] have helped us set up things for [name of project] but it was very much led by us. We made all the decisions in that, but them saying, 'we have this much funding', that was helpful. They are the enablers.

> When we are having discussions [name and name] will plant the seed and take a step back and let us take care of the growing.

> What I found personally good was they got us prepared for presenting, very quickly and very well. Doing presentations to 100s of National Park officials [details] which I wouldn't have imagined before.
>
> Members, Youth Board

People in these facilitating positions (many originally from youthwork backgrounds) talked about the need to ensure that their presence is primarily to provide support for smooth functioning, and not to make decisions on behalf of the group. Their accounts of their role also commonly used a 'caring' framing, of understanding the pressures that teenagers and young adults are under, managing expectations (both within the group and of young people by established or mainstream organisations) and making sure that practical arrangements are affordable, realistic and meaningful. Young people in groups with some adult facilitation (e.g. youth boards) valued their role, perceiving them as enabling, inspiring and supporting.

Role of emotions

Emotions play an important role in shaping people's environmental action and (in)action (Halstead et al. 2021). Young people working on any form of environmental protest, campaigning or advocacy perceived the biggest barrier to broader 'buy-in' being apathy. In talking about their less/not involved friends, they recognise that inaction can stem from climate change or biodiversity loss being perceived as being too big an issue to

solve, too complex to understand, and too difficult to know what to do, and that this can lead to disengagement.

> Some ask me about it, but not much. I think it's sometimes a matter of understanding. It's hard to explain these things to other people.
>
> When you talk to other people at home you suddenly realise that all people don't think the same way.
>
> Members, Youth Board

Horton and Kraftl (2009) argue that there is no linear, intentional, inevitable progression from everyday lives and emotions to activism. Within activist contexts, a focus on addressing their own emotional needs is vital. The young people we interviewed recognised and made time for experiencing varied emotions; these ranged from eco-anxiety, feeling a sense of accomplishment after a strike, anger towards tokenistic behaviours by adults and the joy of being with each other. Conversations and meetings with each other also helped them process feelings of eco-anxiety.

> It's nice to think that you're protecting not just your own future but all the people around you.
>
> Youth Member, protest group

Hope, a sense of a more positive future enacted in present actions, is fundamental to the working practice of the groups, and their intention to engage with a broader community beyond committed activists.

> The idea is to move towards a positive hopeful understanding of the climate. It was not to worry people but to make them aware and encourage them to see that change is taking place.
>
> Youth Member, protest group

Our findings suggest that the agency of young people in the sphere of climate and nature advocacy and activism is an intentional and practically crafted integration of hope and 'care with'. The relational qualities of their 'care with' actions enable their achievements whether immediate or incremental. Though the primary collaboration is within their own peer group, their work is often situated within broader networks and often alongside or with nuanced support of more experienced adults.

Careful actions towards global environment justice

Han and Ahn (2020) argue that young people's collective action has succeeded in problematizing global climate inaction by giving a justice framing to climate change. Many of the youth participants discussed the entangled nature of social and environmental issues and the inequalities embedded in them. They had a keen ethical position that actions needed to be local *and* global *and* intersectional. Broad awareness of the interrelated scales of the climate and biodiversity crisis was underpinned by purposeful actions taken within the young people's groups to support intersectional understandings and work towards climate justice.

Making present and imaginative links

Crate (2017) suggests that 'no matter where people live, they are moved by stories that resonate with their sense of place and mode of being on the planet' (66). Climate

organisations use storytelling as a powerful tool to understand each other's views and to build solidarity (Walker et al. 2022). A climate activist shared his experience of deep meaningful connections:

> During COP we were a group of UK youth and there was a group from the Philippines. There was a story telling session and we all spoke about our experiences of climate change in our cities. It was probably an hour long but at the end of it you came about feeling more connected to each other, understood each other better. Its these small moments and interactions that have an impact.
>
> Youth member, UK wide protest group

Often near and far are talked about in binary terms (e.g. 'think global, act local') of protecting the local nature 'here' and doing climate justice 'over there'. Stories help build an alternate narrative disrupting this binary and helping understandings of complexity. Young people felt that listening to others' experiences that may be different from their own and allowing for spaces to talk and share their experiences of climate change was a powerful act of caring and building a sense of shared community. Supporting White et al. (2022), we found that the collective process of sharing stories about the impacts of climate change also supported working through eco-anxiety.

While the use of digital channels and occasional opportunities to step into international discussion spaces can allow for real-time connections across the world, the global connections that exist within the majority of communities in the UK are a vital enabler of translocal understanding.

> We'll talk about environmental issues in their different countries of ethnicity. If you got some kids and their families originally from Jamaica, then we might talk about climate and issues in Jamaica or in the Caribbean and what's happening, what's projected to be happening and how it's going to impact any family they still have there. We talk to them about colonialism and how actually it's the Global North that's created this problem. We tailor it to the age group.
>
> Adult Facilitator, Nature Camps

Organisations with a focus on including and being led by young people from ethnically diverse backgrounds, with kinship connections with different parts of the world, often engaged in discussions about global inequalities and the impact of colonialism. Supporting understanding of how climate change impacts different areas unequally happens alongside making connections with their own family backgrounds. Facilitators from a range of groups suggested that when young people had family and community histories in other countries, especially countries currently most adversely impacted by climate change, they had a better understanding of the issues and were highly motivated to work towards climate justice (see also Curnow and Gross 2016).

'Pass the mic': advocating for justice

A key aspect that sustains climate justice and activism is an ethic of care for humans and non-humans, both near and more distant, who are impacted first and worst by the changing climate. While traditional media pays attention to youth activism in Europe and the United States, the Global South activists struggle against a lack of media representation and restrictions to mobilisation (Buhre 2023).

> For COP26 we had representatives from Brazil and other small island states. We gave them our accreditations so that they can have a voice in the negotiations as well. We have no say in what they do, just trust them. It's the core of climate justice, if they are the ones most affected then it's their voices that need to be heard.
>
> Youth leader, UK-wide protest group

Through sharing the mic with their Global South counterparts, young people extended their care for the environment and people globally. Sharing a session at a high-profile international policy conference is a practical act of recognition of the UK group's relative privilege.

Representation of intersectional identities

The youth climate movements interviewed focused on the importance of an intersectional approach to climate justice through race, gender and class, and often talked about environment justice as highly entwinned with social justice. For some youth climate activists, their involvement in climate action stemmed from their need for action towards human rights. For others, becoming involved in climate initiatives meant they gained a better understanding of the connection with social justice. However, the composition of many of the groups reflected the current situation of being predominantly comprised of White and middle-class participants. Many were acutely aware that they were 'not there yet'. While there can be a lot of vague talk about the lack of diversity in the environmental movement, youth-led groups were both reflective and exploring practical steps to both diversify their group and ally with other people and organisation in meaningful ways.

> Our group is not very diverse, and we've talked about it a lot because the climate movement itself isn't very diverse. But we've all strived to work towards more intersectionality and to be better allies. I think that's the only way we can really encourage diversity without leaning towards tokenism. We work with these other groups, and we support them where we can.
>
> Youth member, protest group

Young people's climate action is not isolated from other justice protests on both national and global scales, just in the last decade encompassing Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and political liberation movements. Though all distinctively initiated, the lessons are shared: linking actions to drive systemic change, connecting digital and physical presence, the need for intersectional approaches and creatively moving away from the 'should' of what activism entails. Some who are more engaged in direct action are also mindful of the various privileges of who can 'stick their neck out' and the implications of this.

> We are a youth group and have younger people and it's not always an accessible thing to go to an event and get arrested. And it's providing a space for younger people or more vulnerable people … this could include mental health, physical health, financial vulnerability, your workload. People who don't have the ability to do more full-on things can join and they're still making a difference. We want everyone to have a say to be involved and so when we're working, we try to focus on the inclusivity behind that.
>
> Youth member, protest group

In discussions across a wide range of contexts, we found an overlap between thoughtfulness, care for each other, and supporting wider participation. Understanding the barriers to involvement, how they vary and the specific form they might take, is a key starting

point to designing and sustaining activism that is doable by the many, not the few. Being mindful of intersectionality is also important when working from 'top-down' positions to support equality of access to youth programs. Some of our interviewees were from organisations that designed and ran leadership training courses specifically aimed at diversifying the environmental sector.

> Typically, our [non-environmentally focused] programs have a diversity rate of 65-70%. When we started the environmental leadership program we were quite complacent, advertised in the same places, doing the same things and were expecting a diverse cohort. But it dropped down to under 50% and we were very shocked. […]
>
> We had to really think about our recruitment strategy, learn about intersectionality between class, race and the environment. […] We did a lot of outreach, talking to community groups and organisations about relevance; how issues like climate change and climate refugees, air pollution disproportionately affect those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who tend to be from more diverse backgrounds.[…] In the last two years we also focused on increasing employability in the green economy and thinking about how we can get young people from diverse backgrounds into those careers, where they are then making decisions on behalf of the community and representing them.
>
> Adult Facilitator, UK-wide training organisation

Across a range of contexts, there was a widespread understanding that uninvolved or seemingly uninterested potential participants were often dealing with a range of priorities and were often upfront that the environment isn't something they have the time or luxury to be concerned about. However, whether offering a training program or a part in an environmental action, being able to meet people at their initial points of interest and motivation and articulate wider benefits of involvement, can lead to commitment and personal development.

While it's encouraging to see progress in young people's activism, there are reservations from both participants and facilitators about isolating experiences of being racialised at workplaces. One long-standing campaigner for decolonisation in the sector felt conflicted, devoting her life to sharing positive experiences of nature with children from under-represented groups, but also being extremely worried about their mental health in terms of working in contexts where they are likely to experience racism. Her concerns are echoed by two graduates of an environmental training organisation.

> The program itself was diverse but I think the moment you come outside of that and look into actually pursuing it, not so much. […] I'm looking at the team page. It's mainly white people, I'll see one black or brown token, maybe three if you're lucky. The people who are doing the hiring are hiring people who look like them.
>
> It's not a diverse sector, […] I think it is unfortunate. Because it's really important to have diverse people, because diverse people have diverse opinions and perspectives and valuable insights that could bring a lot of value.
>
> Graduates of an environmental leadership program

Young adults often have a heightened awareness of social dynamics and inequalities, often from their own life experiences. While our interviewees were all chosen because of their involvement in environmental causes, there was a broad commitment to working through the connection between social and climate justice. The care structures around their activism practices and environmental actions were often intentionally

designed to support diverse ways of participating. But their work is also situated within unequal social and political contexts and reflects the imperfect progress of the world around them.

Concluding discussion

Through discussions with young people from diverse groups engaged in environment and climate action this paper responds to Bowman's (2019, 295) call for more

> empirical work around youth activism in both local and international levels concerning youth climate activism that recognises the often complex, liminal nature of young political agency and the diverse, intersecting motives that lead young people to demonstrate for action on climate change.

In stepping back from the research findings, we situate our work within discussions of 'caring with', hope and intersectional climate justice (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Crenshaw 1989; Tronto 2013). Intersectionality, care, hope and climate justice are important conceptual approaches and practical practices, and through this paper, we aim to bring these together to strengthen the understanding around youth-led climate action.

Activism as 'caring with' and 'hopeful action'

Young people's varied forms of caring and careful actions(s) towards the climate and environment, including being part of youth boards, involved in local community action, or staging a protest, often reflect Richardson et al.'s (2023) re-conceptualisation of activism through ethics of care. Across different contexts, young people model ways of caring and careful action that destabilise fixed, often binary ways of understanding activism and help value all forms of youth engagement within climate action.

Our research findings confirm the vital relational dimension of young people's environmental actions. Across the organisations and groups we studied, young people were keenly attentive to and cared about unjust power imbalances in climate engagement. Caring is not perceived as an individual effort, but a process by which agency is enabled through collective action, taken towards and along *with* other people and the environment. Many group facilitators and members emphasise acting with others as opposed to advocating for others in non-hierarchical and non-linear ways. While peer-led models require less compromise in terms of youth voice and agency, this model is not always possible (or possible 'yet'), and in the majority of contexts where there is some 'older adult' facilitation this is often valued and also expressive of 'care with' approaches. Positioning care as centred on young people's environmental actions not only defines some of the characteristics of activism for these groups but can also challenge the nature and status of 'care' that is often essentialised, gendered, understood as forms of labour (Rosen 2019). Further, working with care as an organising principle helped do justice to all care capacities and practices of young people in their diverse configurations or account for contradictions or ambivalence (The Care Collective 2020).

While foregrounding 'care' in this paper, the research findings also surface how hope is embedded in young people's actions, and the interaction between the two is important to note. The field excerpts highlight the complexity and depth of young people's emotions towards the environment and their own actions, a mix of anger, joy, sadness,

despair, anxiety, and hope, breaking out from stereotypes of 'eco worrier' or 'eco-warrior'. Young people's hope is embodied and, in their practices (Hicks 2018). Similar to Kraftl's (2008) observation hope is rarely articulated as a 'spectacular' future-oriented form commonly attributed to young people by adults, but a more 'modest' articulation intrinsic to incremental and focused actions towards environmental care.

Storytelling is one tool that generates both hope and solidarity. Stories of known places and times, told by and for young people (Anas, Nguyễn, and Nunn 2022), had the power to shift perceptions in a number of ways that support decolonising of environmental knowledge. By situating lived experiences of environmental changes within a broader historical, socio-political and cultural context, young people made global connections that bridged here/there and local/global binaries (Author anon). Being imaginative and intentional about the process of storytelling and hearing also shifted collective dynamics. Stories of hope are more than imaginings (Marks et al. 2023), and offer new visions of socio-economic and political changes (Bowman 2019), ultimately enabling a social justice lens. Sharing eco-emotions and collective engagement also connects back to acts of care, reducing despair and building more active forms of hope, often called constructive hope (Hickman 2020; Ojala 2012; Ojala 2017).

Making connections between care and hope can highlight the importance of young people's environmental action, and one that offers leadership for activism more broadly. In particular, this needs to be underpinned by a recognition of agency, from focusing on educating young people to listening to young people's voices in shaping strategies for nature and climate action. By attending to intersectionality, this paper contributes towards uniting fragmented discussions around young people's care, hope and climate activism that centres on environmental justice, connecting minoritised groups in the UK with those in the Global South.

Care-ful and intersectional action towards environmental justice

The discussions in this paper highlight the complexities and entangled nature of social and environmental issues and the associated inequalities. The shift towards a more diverse environmental sector is slow, especially with respect to the voice and representation of people from different ethnic groups and with less secure financial backgrounds. There are admirable programs addressing this, often at the local scale, but change needs to be intrinsic to all ways of working, at all scales and long term, and this requires a systemic approach. The peer-led approaches of young people are care-ful and intersectional and give hope for the future. Young people are already asking difficult questions, seeking answers from institutions, and taking responsible collective action supporting environmental and climate justice.

Environmental concerns among young people tend to be framed 'within the context of other existential (economic and social) challenges' including economic precarity (Sloam, Pickard, and Henn 2022, 2). It is relevant and important to note that young people based within these organisations and networks perceive environmental concerns to be closely linked to marginalisation due to ethnicity and economic hardship. They also link these to geographical vulnerability, while referring to the unequal impact of the climate crisis on their Global South counterparts. There is a recognition and acknowledgement among the young people that the environment movement is still very 'White middle

class' and being involved requires forms of privilege. But they also exemplified their commitment and discussed ways they propose to make these movements more intersectional – either through working with other groups or using their privilege to amplify the voices of those who may not be heard. Intersectionality in young people's climate activism helps strengthen critical and transformative engagement in climate scholarship, contributing to what Sultana (2021) refers to as 'critical climate justice'.

Learnings from the experiences of young people from diverse backgrounds in the UK engaged in environmental action confirms Sealey-Huggins (2018) argument that 'the climate crisis is a racist crisis'. Young people from commonly marginalised backgrounds can provide important perspectives for the environmental sector which has urgent equality and diversity challenges. Our findings show that young people are nuanced, well informed and committed to connecting social and environmental justice and have approaches that can help the sector more broadly in rethinking and reframing beyond a Global North lens. An acknowledgement that there is inequality in resource distribution and representation is a good starting debate towards decolonising the environment sector and needs to start with how young people, and which young people are engaged, supported and heard.

Note

1. This was part of a wider UKRI-NERC study 'Voices of the Future: Collaborating with Children and Young People to reimagine Treescapes'.

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