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How to empower teachers and help students prepare for a sustainable future

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Education about climate change and sustainability is a vital part of responding to a rapidly changing world, including the negative effects of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

Teachers, including in Brazil and England, help young people live with futures shaped by local and global environmental challenges. However, despite expressing overwhelming concern about issues related to climate change and sustainability, many teachers do not feel equipped to teach it in schools.

Urgent action from policymakers is needed to support them.

Teachers shape how young people understand and respond to environmental crises. Without proper support, students risk leaving school unprepared for some of the most urgent challenges of our time: this is a societal risk, not just an educational issue.

Despite public demand for action in response to climate change, schools often lack the expertise and resources to realise this. Empowering teachers means building stronger communities: when well-equipped teachers foster agency and action, not just knowledge and skills.

Young people can bring ideas home, influence families and drive local change. So climate change and sustainability education becomes a catalyst for resilience and transformation, essential for preparing the next generation to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Leaders from across the world are coming together in Brazil to discuss progress and negotiate actions in response to climate change as part of an annual UN climate summit (Cop30). This provides a vital opportunity to underline for global leaders the support that teachers and schools need.

Over the last few years, we have worked with hundreds of teachers in both England and Brazil to explore their experiences of teaching climate change and sustainability. Teachers have shared with us the barriers they experience related to climate change and sustainability education and the support they need to overcome them. While there is diversity in terms of geographical context, there are many commonalities.

Barriers

Education systems which have a rigid national curriculum with an emphasis on high-stakes examinations create barriers for teachers in both England and Brazil. Existing systems require teachers to prioritise examination content which frequently has limited focus on climate change and sustainability topics.

Teachers in both countries reported challenges in teaching climate change and sustainability in ways that underlined the real-world relevance to the lives of the young people they teach.

Another limitation is the lack of opportunities for professional learning that support teachers in integrating climate change and sustainability into their teaching. This gap exists throughout their careers, such that they frequently share they have insufficient or insecure knowledge and understanding of climate change and sustainability issues. This lowers teachers' confidence and limits their classroom practices.



Teachers in Brazil and England face similar limitations when it comes to delivering climate change education. J.P. Junior Pereira/Shutterstock

Boosts

Governments can better support teachers by ensuring that climate change and sustainability is explicitly recognised and valued in local, regional and national policies that govern schools. This could include national curricula, professional standards for teachers and school leaders and school-inspection frameworks.

Teachers in both England and Brazil recognise how important it is to have school leaders who value climate change and sustainability and how – when school leaders provide a culture of support across the school community – this is transformational for climate change and sustainability education.

All teachers can benefit from high-quality professional learning focused on climate change and sustainability education from the beginning of their careers and throughout their professional lives. When teachers have the time and support to co-design learning – with each other and with their students – which draws on different ways of understanding climate change and sustainability issues, this builds teacher confidence and provides richer learning experiences for children and young people.

Read more: [Three ways for schools to make climate education inclusive for all children](#)

Climate change and sustainability education is essential for preparing young people to navigate and shape a rapidly changing world, but teachers cannot carry this responsibility alone.

By embedding climate change and sustainability in curricula and supporting career-long professional learning for teachers, classrooms can be transformed into sites of agency and local action. This can amplify young people's influence in their communities and reduce a wider societal risk of leaving a generation unprepared.

Cop30 offers a timely moment for leaders to commit to support for teachers so that policy matches public concern and evidence-based practice translates into real-world resilience.



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