

NAAEE webinar, 22 June 2021

Communities Grow Greener When Young People Have a Voice: Building Alliances for Place-Based Learning and Civic Action

Presented by Louise Chawla, Victoria Derr, Mara Mintzer and Kianni Ledezma

Concluding reflections – Louise Chawla

Thank you Mara, Tori and Kianni, for putting life on the bones of civic engagement principles.

When we began to plan this webinar, I reflected that the projects we are describing are in many ways similar to place-based initiatives in environmental education in the 1980s—such as the Issue Investigation and Action Training curriculum that Harold Hungerford and his colleagues developed in the 1980s. The curriculum encouraged teachers to involve their students in investigating local environmental issues and planning how they could take action. Students thought out and wrote down the steps they could take if they *were* to take action—but actually taking action was left optional, recognizing, as we have noted, that it can be very difficult for a single classroom teacher working alone to involve a class in collective action.

In other ways, our work is different, as we work in a new context.

Since the 1980s, threats to the life systems of our planet have intensified. Giving young people the experience of collective action is even more urgent now. Therefore the work we have shared today embeds community action into projects from the very start, which means building partnerships as a foundation for action.

We also work with a new emphasis on social justice and inclusion, and a commitment to the principle that *everyone* has a right to high quality green spaces and inclusive public spaces—whenever they are, wherever they live, whatever their age. This is a new sphere of action for environmental education.

This generation of young people is the bottleneck generation, in the words of the naturalist and conservationist E. O. Wilson.ⁱ Their lives will span this century of maximum pressure on the planet's resources and life-support systems, and they will be responsible for carrying society through. I have come to believe that supporting them as they face this challenge is one of our most important responsibilities as adults.

Last year I published an article that combined a review of research on young people's connection with nature with research on how to help young people cope with their fears and worries as they witness environmental losses.ⁱⁱ It brought together recommendations for how to help young people face the future with constructive hope—hope that looks risks in the face without falling into denial, paralyzing despair or apathy, and still commits to action. The review

showed that there are many specific things we can do to support young people, and that they coalesce around four principles:

1. Creating safe spaces where young people can share environmental ideas and emotions
2. Enabling young people to learn what they can do as individuals that can have an effective positive impact

But we can't stop there, because research shows that when young people face problems that are too big for them to solve by themselves, when they are taking action alone, they risk feeling futility. So two other contributions are critical:

3. Showing young people that they are not alone, that other people share their concerns and they are taking action too; and
4. Showing young people how we can take action together

All of the projects that we have shared in this webinar contain these four ingredients: safe spaces for sharing, learning what I can do, what others are doing, and what we can do together. These four ingredients are intrinsic to civic engagement. And it is not just young people who benefit. When they join us in collective civic action, they have so much insight, energy and creativity to bring—as you have seen in the examples we shared today.

With these reflections, I turn this webinar back to Judy Braus and Anne Umali for closing.

ⁱ E. O. Wilson. (2002). *The Future of Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

ⁱⁱ Louise Chawla. (2020). Childhood nature connection and constructive hope: A review of research on connecting with nature and coping with environmental loss. *People and Nature*, 2:619-642. DOI 10.1002/pan3.10128