

Panu Pihkala

An example of environmental education with a focus on eco-anxiety:

A workshop about climate emotions in the Finnish "Hope and Action" -project, 2020

Background: The Project "Toivoa ja toimintaa" ("Hope and Action")

Starting in 2019, the educational project "Toivoa ja toimintaa" has developed resources for emotionally sensitive environmental education. Justice issues and globalization have been important themes, but special attention has been given to climate education. The project is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and run by Finnish Association of Biology and Geography Teachers (BMOL ry). The coordinator of the project is experienced climate educator Ms. Pinja Sipari. Two experts were hired part-time to develop materials and participate in facilitating workshops: Dr. Panu Pihkala and Ms. Eeva Kemppainen.

The project has been built on two aspects, which are partly reflected in its title. Ideas and methods for collective, participatory action have been offered to schools, but emotion work has been integrated into the whole approach. While hope is the emotion that appears in the title, the underlying main principle is the ability to find meaning in life, and all kinds of emotions are being encouraged to be encountered in the materials of the project. In other words, the project builds on meaning-focused coping, with aspects of both problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.

The project established a website with free resources for both emotion work and participatory action. Workshops have been offered to both teachers and students, but the main focus has been on teachers, so that they could implement similar methods in their own work. The main target group consists of teachers of upper levels of comprehensive school (students who are 13-15 years old) and high schools (students who are 16-18 years old). However, many of the materials and methods suit adults as well, and might be used among some 12-year-olds. Thus, this is a project of environmental education which operates on both a structural level and a practical level. Outdoor activities were not explicitly used, partly due to COVID-19 restrictions, but people were endorsed to use such methods and other embodied activities in their emotion work.

Below, an example is given of a workshop structure for teachers about eco-anxiety and climate emotions. The observations offered are based on three workshops that Dr. Pihkala attended as co-facilitator together with Ms. Sipari and Ms. Kemppainen. These consists of two live workshops in Winter 2019-200 and one workshop held online with video conferencing during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in May 2020.

A Workshop to Teachers about Eco-anxiety and Climate Emotions

Aims:

A foundational aim was to facilitate both well-being and action competence by increasing emotional resilience. Practical aims were:

- to help the teachers to better understand many climate emotions
- to give the teachers a safe opportunity to reflect on their own climate emotions
- to facilitate peer support and exchange of ideas and experiences
- to give the teachers tools (methods of encountering climate emotions) which they can use later on in their work

- to discuss together whether the teachers would be willing and ready to talk about climate emotions with their students/pupils

General outlines of the session:

- Warm-up
- Introduction: a short presentation about ecological emotions and eco-anxiety
- Assignment: a mind map of climate emotions
(can be found at <http://ecoanxietyandhope.blogspot.com/2020/07/mind-map-of-ecological-emotions.html>, accessed 24.11.2020)
- Peer group discussion
- Joint discussion with the whole group
- Discussion about possible future directions and an uplifting ending

Number of participants: ranging from 20 to 30

Number of facilitators: 2

Length: 70-90 minutes

Information about the methods:

A few key principles that were established with the participants:

- Confidentiality. It was emphasized that this is a safe space to discuss various views.
- Respectful discussion.
- Level of intimacy. It was highlighted that while this is a safe space, people are free to choose the level of personal intimacy that they wish to express as regards their own emotions.
- Nature of the session. It was expressed that this is not a therapeutic session, but a possibility to share insights, learn from others, and do some emotion work. The facilitators had information about what psychological support was available for those who might need it in their schools and organizations, and if need would arise, that information could be shared.

The mind map exercise helps participants to recognize both their own feelings and those of others. A short list of various emotion words was given to aid reflection, but it was emphasized that everyone could choose any emotion words they felt appropriate. In the middle of the mind map, “climate change” was written; one could also use “climate crisis” or other suitable term. More details about the mind map exercise are found in the link provided above.

It is safer to share observations about the mind map in a small peer group. Participants were instructed that they could either tell something about their mind map and about how it felt to do the exercise, but it was also mentioned that if people felt comfortable about showing their mind map to others, they could do so. The peer group discussion also helps participants to move from more intensive and personal emotion work into more discursive and cognitive processing.

After the peer group, it was stressed that participation into the joint discussion was completely voluntary, but that it would be very fruitful if many people would share their views about how it felt to do the exercise and what observations they made about climate emotions. There was a possibility to ask questions both about the content and the methods, and while it was emphasized that the facilitators did not know everything about all possible climate emotions, they could at least direct people to sources of more information.

At the end part of the session, the facilitators raised the issue of whether the participants felt like they could use a similar method or something like it with their students. Finally, it was also mentioned that a feedback form would be sent online to the participants, but it was also possible to give feedback directly in the session. Care was taken to ensure that the session ends with an uplifting tone.

Observations:

The most important observation was that the feedback from the sessions was very positive. We were not able to do any longitudinal research about long-term effects, but at least right after the sessions the participants were relieved and empowered. While naturally some participants were even more enthusiastic than others, the general feedback was that the session was held as important and rare. The feedback collected by the online forms and the feedback sent directly by the participants was very positive.

The supervisors of these teachers, the principals, were present in two of these sessions, which is naturally a very important factor. It shows in a holistic manner that the organization and its leadership support climate education and emotion work in relation to it. It also provides positive role modelling to the teachers. Because of the presence of the principals, we were able to collect feedback from them and ask about their observations of the group dynamics both in the session and in their schools. The principals confirmed our observations about the positive effects of these sessions. Regarding the impact of the workshop, the commitment of the principals is evidently a strong asset. With their support, it is much easier for the interested teachers to develop new practices in their schools.

The Finnish context naturally affects this kind of work in numerous ways. There are disputes about climate change, but the issue is not even nearly as polarized as in many other countries, such as the US. While there are social problems, the Nordic societies are rather well-functioning, and this is reflected in many ways in schools. In other words, it is probably easier to develop methods of emotion work in relation to climate emotions in Finland than in many other places, even though there are also some cultural disadvantages about such work in Finland. Finns tend to be quite restricted in their emotional expression and emotional literacy is not very high among adults. However, in the 2000s, children have been given, on average, much more training in emotional skills than before.

The nature of the participants and the character of the session – voluntary or compulsory – naturally also strongly affects the dynamics. The participants were voluntarily present, which means that they had at least some inclination towards exploring emotions. Still, practically all of them said that this was the first time that they had been given a social motivation and a safe chance to explore their climate emotions. They were interested both about cognitive information about climate anxiety and climate emotions, and about ways in which to encounter emotions with their bodyminds. If such a session would be held to an audience of teachers where everybody had to be present as part of their job, methods would have to be slightly changed, and more attention should be given to warm-up, motivation, and emotional security.

Numerous participants told that they had found many surprises about their own climate emotions. The mind map exercise helps people to write down emotion words intuitively, which often enables people to move past restrictions which are felt in everyday lives about recognition of emotions. People seemed uplifted by increased self-knowledge, and the fact that many others shared some similar emotions produced a sense of connection. For some, this helped them to feel less isolated or lonely as regards their climate emotions. Many participants reported that they gained more understanding about both their own climate emotions and of those that others have or share. Overall, the observations from these sessions were in line with the remarks by many scholars who have noted that when directly asked in a safe setting, people recognize many ecological emotions, but people often do not proactively engage these emotions.

The vast majority of the participants showed their mind maps to others in their peer groups, and the discussions in the peer groups were active and focused. In the joint discussion, participants were also eager to share their experiences. Many wished to discuss certain emotions more. The body language of many of the participants showed emotional arousal, which was to be expected, but there were no strong bursts of any emotion. Nobody was in any apparent need for serious psychological support. However, it was recommended by the facilitators that it would be good to do something physical after the session, for example by exercising or dancing in the evening, in order to let emotional energy flow.

The character of the produced mind maps had understandable variation. Some of the mind maps were highly nuanced. For example, one participant wished to explore her climate emotions from different social role positions. She insightfully observed that there's slightly different emotions in relation to various roles. For example, as a teacher, feelings of inadequacy are common in relation to teaching climate change and encountering the climate anxiety of students, because these are so difficult subjects. At the same time, the same person may or may not suffer heavily from similar feelings in relation to her private-life climate actions. This teacher and many others volunteered to have their mind maps photographed and anonymously published in the project website.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some mind maps were quite simple and some of their creators displayed a need for more work with emotional literacy. For example, some participants near age 50 pondered whether any Finns actually have feelings of rage in relation to climate change; they deemed that those strong feelings are perhaps felt in the US, not here. This displays limited skills of recognizing anger, since for example the climate rage of many young climate activists had been clearly visible in the Finnish society, at least for those with any sensitivity towards it. This dynamic was not altogether surprising, given the difficulties related to anger in the "cultural politics of emotion" in contemporary Finnish culture. I personally felt that these participants were projecting or splitting anger into others, both geographically and related to age. While this remains speculative, it seems that some middle-age people split climate anxiety, climate grief, and climate rage into young climate activists.

In the joint discussion, it was naturally an asset in these sessions to have a scholar of climate emotions (Pihkala) present, which helped to answer information-related questions. However, for other workshops, material was prepared for the facilitators (powerpoint slides, list of references about various emotions), so that they could use them to answer questions and to provide information to the participants. What is most important, in my view, is that sharing about lived experiences of climate change can be done by any skilled facilitator, as long as there is compassion and understanding; information is important but secondary.

Overall, we facilitators felt that the aims of the sessions were reached. Teachers said and manifested that they now understand many climate emotions better, based on productive discussions and the mind map exercise in a safe setting. Peer support was given and many ideas and experiences were shared. Teachers become familiar with tools that they can use in their own work, and at least some of them did use them later.

A poignant example of the impacts was one participant in the first session, a teacher somewhere in her thirties. She was very strongly relieved to find more tools to differentiate her climate feelings, and she asked advice about how to do a similar exercise with her 15-year-old students. We gave her recognition about her openness and validated her liberating experience. We recommended her to give some more time to her own process and then, when she felt ready, to use the method with her students. We asked her to organize a talk with her supervisor and a few likeminded colleagues after that planned session with her students, so that she could reflect on her experiences and observations. Later on, she did the exercise with her students, talked about it with her colleagues, and wrote a little blog about the experience to the website of the project. She told that the exercise went well, and while there was naturally different reactions among the students, they all respected the session, and many students did the exercise with great focus. Her emotional openness, combined with critical emotional awareness, had aroused respect and motivation in the students. While all the impacts of such sessions are very difficult to measure, they certainly seem to take people in the direction of increased emotional resilience.