



**RYAN CHO**

## **Climate Justice in the Classroom**

### It connects everything together

**W**hen I was a younger, I didn't call myself an environmentalist; I still don't really. Don't get me wrong; I've always cared about environmental issues. I recycle, carpool when I can, use my re-useable grocery bags, but was I an environmentalist? Nah — that label wasn't for me, nor was the responsibility and expectation that came with it.

For a long time, I had the same kind of ambivalent relationship with the topic of climate change. I knew that it was happening, I knew what it was doing to our planet and to life on it, and like the vast majority of scientists and researchers, I knew that we humans were the cause. However, the subject wasn't something I focused on; it was something that I chose to engage with sometimes, and chose to ignore other times. Its effects seemed far away, its causes seemed overwhelming and the distress of thinking about it seemed to outweigh the benefits.

The call to try to "save the environment" or "save the planet" that was at the core of the global warming and environmental movements when I was growing up in the 1990s also didn't connect with me. I was not really stirred by Lorax-themed messages about saving trees or preserving nature's splendor for people to enjoy. I was more affected by calls to ensure the health and well-being of animals, many of whom I could put a face to or imagine a friendly, somewhat me-centred story

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for in my young mind, but even that wasn't enough for me to make any longstanding, significant commitment to try to improve things for the better. At the end of the day, I cared more about people than I did the planet or its other inhabitants.

And I did care about people — quite a lot. I was a second generation Canadian, but it sometimes felt like I grew up in an immigrant family. Both sets of my grandparents came to Canada from China, and both of my parents grew up in poverty. On my mom's side, my grandmother and grandfather worked kitchen jobs to support my her and my uncle, accepting a salary that was much less than what a white worker would have been paid during that time. My mother as the older child basically raised her younger brother. On my dad's side, he was one of eight children; his father owned a corner store and sold packets of gum, comic books, and groceries to try to make ends meet for his large family as my grandmother, who still does not really speak English today, took on the responsibility of caring for and raising my dad and his seven siblings at home.

Although they grew up in different cities, both my parents say the same thing about their parents and their reasons for coming to Canada; they left their families and the only life they ever knew in China, to try to *make life better for themselves and their children* (who were still years away from even being conceived when they left). Once they arrived in North America, they faced many challenges; although Canada offered the potential of a better life, nothing was guaranteed. It was far from easy, but they worked and struggled for that dream knowing that for them, they might not ever see the full fruits of their labour, but their children, or grandchildren might.

Today, people still come to Canada and risk and sacrifice what little they have for a similar dream. Others experience the darker side of Canada's history and feel the affects of its colonial past and present, but are similarly working as hard as they can to make sure their children don't have to go through what they experience, or experienced.

That ethos, ambition, and willingness to fight for a better future for people you care about is something that my grandparents passed on to me today. It is partly because of them and those values they instilled in me that years later, I, a "non-environmentalist", found myself working as a Curriculum Developer for something called the "Climate Justice Project".

My ambivalence with the topic of climate change changed when I discovered the movement for climate justice. More than just saving trees, protecting (often the cutest) animals, and enjoying and experiencing nature, climate justice recognized climate change was a social equity issue, and a moral one. It named that the people suffering the most from the consequences of burning fossil fuels were the ones who contributed to, and benefited from them the least. It recognized that social equity, racial justice, historical responsibility, and functioning democracies all need to be a part of any viable plan to address our changing climate, and that all those things are worth focusing on and fighting for. More than that though, it saw that actions that reduce our carbon emissions and better adapt our communities to climate change are our best change to ensure our long-term economic security and improve the lives of the poor and marginalized people of the world. The environmental movement of the 1990s was dominated by white leaders and white faces; as a Chinese Canadian, I had trouble imagining myself really in it.

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Today, the climate justice movement is being led more and more by frontline communities, grassroots groups, and people of colour directly impacted by natural disasters and climate shifts. It is a movement I can imagine people like me, and my grandparents being a part of.

Over the last year and a half I've been lucky enough to work with the BC CCPA to develop a new climate justice resource for teachers to use in their classrooms. The climate justice curriculum package includes eight highly interactive lessons designed for secondary (and adaptable for upper elementary) that explore climate change in the context of British Columbia's communities, history, economy, and ecology. Looking at the issues through the lenses of fairness and equity, each lesson explores how BC may chart a course forward in the face the world's climate challenges, and how that work can improve the lives

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of people throughout the province. It is a free resource and is available both online and in print at <http://www.teachclimatejustice.ca>.

This resource was created as a joint project between the CCPA and the British Columbia Teachers' Federation. Lessons connect with topics and learning outcomes already in BC curricula and provide frameworks to unpack modern social and environmental issues such as our industrial food system, consumerism/waste, the potential in a green economy, and provincial fossil fuel development. It's a project that I've felt really proud to work on, and it offers things to teachers and students that are different from the other resources out there.

**Climate Justice in BC**  
LESSONS FOR TRANSFORMATION



**First, all of the lessons in the package focus on system change, and not personal choice approaches to tackling social and environmental problems.** This is a major departure from education materials and environmental/social justice campaigns of the past, which focus mostly on encouraging people to buy green products, or a person's ability to make individual lifestyle changes such as switching to reusable grocery bags or recycling. Although small personal changes do help people to engage with an issue, those approaches often do not make impacts big enough to change our direction as a whole. Such strategies also privilege with the financial ability to buy into the solutions, while are less accessible to people who are poorer or have low income.

When I was in Grade 4, I was a part of the environment club at my elementary school. Most of our projects we undertook to save the environment involved turning off light switches in empty rooms and recycling plastic bottles. I drove my mother crazy walking into empty rooms and pestering her constantly about lit lights and glowing electronics. I know now that turning off all the light switches in the world isn't enough to adequately address problems with waste and carbon emissions. What we need is a radical transformation in how we generate electricity and the systems that surround and influence us.

**All of the statistics, graphs and examples in the Climate Justice Curriculum Package are pulled from local studies and stories in British Columbia.** Too often we think of the negative affects of climate change as something that happens to poor people “over there” in the global south whilst all of us lucky people in Canada are insulated from its impacts and the other true inequities of the world. There is some truth to this narrative, but overall, this story of the privileged west and the downtrodden south blinds us to injustices and opportunities for change in our own backyard. It allows us to ignore the facts that BC has the highest child poverty rate of all of the Canadian provinces, and that Canada is one of the worst nations in the world for carbon emissions per capita. It allows us to overlook that if food or transportation prices go up because of climate disruptions, poor people in Victoria, Surrey, and Cranbrook also have their food security threatened. It also allows us to forget that proposals for new or expanded oil pipelines transporting bitumen from the Alberta tar sands, and proposed fracking and liquefied natural gas industries would release more carbon into the air than scientists say is safe for our continued existence on the planet. By focusing on BC content and contexts, the lessons make climate justice meaningful and real to people here in our province.



**Students at Churchill Secondary School in Vancouver implementing a Youth4Tap Campaign at their school to promote tap water and plastic water bottles from their campus.**

**The lessons focus on solutions and use local schools and communities as examples where students can plan actions or redesign systems.** The focus on projects in students' local contexts is a very deliberate choice we made for our materials. Today, many schools are embracing a cross curricular and holistic approach to education and are actively searching for resources and projects that draw connections between different curriculum areas and classes. The Climate Justice Curriculum Package is full of resources that allow teachers to discuss an issue in Social Studies, write about it in English, explore its physical characteristics and systems in Science, and do a school project around it in Leadership.

Today, climate justice topics are real and alive for British Columbians (and other Canadians), even if they don't quite have the vocabulary to say how. Oil pipeline projects and expansion, and debate about the ethics and viability of pursuing liquefied natural gas and fracking as economic policy are major parts of the local news cycle. Kinder Morgan drilling on Burnaby Mountain sparked mass protests, over 100 arrests, and formal ire and legal action from the Mayor and City Council. On the other side of the country, talk of the Energy East Pipeline and fracking projects are stirring up similar feelings. The controversies over the health, environmental, and justice concerns from the Alberta tar sands continue to be a major debate amongst people in our country as well as for people around the world.

**Over the last year, I have become more and more convinced that now is the right time to be exploring the work and topics of climate justice, both for me as a curriculum developer, and for teachers in their classrooms.** Many people name climate change as the moral issue of our time, however, the general public's fluency on the subject of climate justice is still developing. In August, I presented a workshop on the Climate Justice Lesson Package to all of the teacher social justice contacts in the province. I asked them, "Who is familiar with and feels confident explaining what climate change is if they were asked to do so?" All of the hundred-plus teachers raised their hands. Next I asked, "Who feels familiar with, and comfortable explaining what climate justice is?" The numbers fell to less than ten. These are all teachers engaged and activated around social justice issues. It is

not that they didn't want to explore climate justice in their classrooms, they just didn't quite know how yet.

At the same time, more and more people are recognizing how important this topic is, and the movement to address it is growing.



This September, the People's Climate March in New York City brought about 311,000 people into the streets to demand action on climate justice. This was amplified by 2,546 solidarity events in 162 countries all over the world. The weekend matched, and possibly even surpassed, the number of people estimated to have joined Martin Luther King's Million Man March on Washington in the 1960s, an event that we now consider to be a defining moment in one of most powerful mass movements of the last century.

These events accompany growing calls and multiplying campaigns asking for public divestment from fossil fuels, and recognition of the economic and quality of life benefits of investing in the green economy. This winter, the amount of people working in Canadian renewable energy sector surpassed those working in the Alberta tar sands.

With such a dramatic shift in public consciousness, now is the time for teachers to explore these themes and this kind of work with

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their students. At the time of MLK's Million Man March, only 23% of Americans supported him. Today in BC, about 86% of people support pursuing climate action policies, and believe they would be good for both people and the province. Today there is an opportunity for young people as well as all people to engage with these topics and become a part of a something that has the real potential to succeed in changing things for the better.

At the same time, corporate fossil fuel lobbies are actively working to dismiss concerns about climate change and climate justice and are trying to influence content and curriculum in our schools. "Canada's largest oil and gas lobby group, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), [has] partnered with the Royal Canadian Geographic Society to create 'Energy IQ' — an in-class learning curriculum designed to 'teach Canadians about growing demand, the energy mix, emerging technologies, regulatory requirements and much more.'"



Oil and LNG companies are also sponsoring education conferences and professional development events in BC and many teachers are expressing frustration and concern about corporate money being used to promote viewpoints that benefit private interests while disregarding climate science and issues around safety and long-term sustainability. It is partly because of these concerns from educators that the Climate Justice Curriculum Package was born. Teachers, especially those in smaller towns on the front lines of BC fossil fuel projects, were calling out for more balanced resources that acknowledged the scientific fact that human made climate change is real.

The response to the Climate Justice Curriculum Package has been amazing; feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and as a result I've received invitations to present on climate justice topics at four province-wide teacher conferences in addition to four district-sponsored ones. Along the way multiple teachers have approached me and offered to translate the lessons into French free of charge so teachers at French Immersion schools can also take advantage of the resource.

In our past, masses of people have taken the wheel of history and turned it. We have a responsibility to rise to our historical moment.”

~ Naomi Klein

Together, teachers can help young people to connect the dots and build a bridge between the world we want, and the world that is possible. All of our students, whether they be future doctors, lawyers, engineers, entrepreneurs, carpenters, or construction workers, or stay-at-home parents, can be a part of the movement to remake our world for the better if they recognize the potential in a greener, fairer, more climate just future. As teachers, it is through exploring these themes with our classes that we can share the gifts we have and find our own role in the movement to recreate our future for the better.

Today, thousands of people are working with the movement for climate justice, pursuing the same dream that my grandparents strove for when they came to this country. The hope of a better life and the dream of a more just world are attainable, and worth fighting for, and teaching towards.

Will you join us?

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The Climate Justice Curriculum Package, including 8 modules with embedded videos, downloadable graphics, Power Points, print-friendly PDFs, and additional resources is available free to use and adapt at <http://www.teachclimatejustice.ca>.