Movement from the margins to global recognition: climate change activism by young people and in particular indigenous youth

Jenny Ritchie

Published online: 01 Dec 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

Check for updates

Movement from the margins to global recognition: climate change activism by young people and in particular indigenous youth

Jenny Ritchie

Te Puna Akopai, School of Education, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the recent global youth climate change movement in relation to theoretical considerations of Indigeneity, post-Anthropocentricism and decolonial practices. It then highlights the perspectives of several young climate activists, before considering a range of factors ('elephants in the room') that lurk behind the incapacity of our current practices to create spaces that provide opportunities for full expression of young people, particularly Indigenous young people, to articulate their political analyses and collectively advocate for ways of being in the world that will honour their values and aspirations.

Introduction

Indigenous people have long struggled against their exclusion from decision-making within majoritarian colonialist societies and the consequent impacts on their wellbeing and that of their environments due to histories of colonisation and the underlying assumptions of white superiority (Smith, 1999/2012; Walker, 2004). Further, globalised western technologies of power have failed to honour Indigenous peoples' deep interconnectedness within their environments. The resulting damage to our planet's biosphere has been exacerbated in recent decades of escalating neoliberal multinational exploitation of both people and planet. This othering of both Indigenous peoples and the lands which they have long protected is now being recognised as a factor within the current climate crisis as young people around the world have in their multitudes joined Indigenous peoples to protest the ongoing debilitating impacts on the planet which are now jeopardising not just the world's biodiversity, but humanity itself (Almond et al., 2020; Grooten & Almond, 2018).

CONTACT Jenny Ritchie ✉ jenny.ritchie@vuw.ac.nz

Paper for submission to *International Studies in Sociology of Education* (ISSE) special issue on Environmental Justice and Education.

Children and younger adults in western societies have similarly suffered from exclusion from political decision-making, due to a range of attitudes, that can be described as 'adultism', that position them as innocent and/or incompetent (Phillips et al., 2020) and which have failed to recognise or validate diverse ways that children and young people serve their communities (Phillips, Ritchie, Dynevor et al., 2019; Wood & Black, 2018). This can be viewed as another form of western subordination of those who are hierarchically 'othered', in this case via adultism (Cannella & Viruru, 2004).

This paper analyses a range of internet sourced material that expresses the views of young people and in particular young Indigenous climate activists, in order to canvass convergences between the youth global climate crisis activism, and Indigenous resistance to the despoliation of our planet. The analysis draws upon Burman's (2019) 'child as method' approach, which focusses on the intersection 'between the political economy of childhood and geopolitical dynamics, alongside how such local and global relations must figure as part of a postcolonial, antipatriarchal, anti-capitalist project' (p. 6), to consider young Indigenous people's recent global climate crisis activism in relation to its transformative planet-saving potential. Following the decolonial theorising of De Castro (2020), who recognises that 'the study of the global child cannot be embraced naively, or apolitically' (p. 58), this paper argues for the potential of activism by young people for producing transformations towards greater social, cultural, environmental and economic justice.

Climate change activism

Whilst there has been ongoing international recognition of the science that demonstrates the imminent threat of climate change, attempts to address this at national and international levels have focussed on neoliberal market-oriented models that have so far been ineffective in delivering the drastic remedies required (Moon, 2013; Suša, 2019). Climate justice paradigms have emerged to address this failure and young activists have been prominent leaders of such movements, despite limited pedagogical input into such modes of citizenship in many educational contexts. Indigenous communities, however, provide a model of both intergenerational knowledge transmission and activism that includes even young children. This is seen, for example, in Aotearoa New Zealand in the longstanding and ongoing struggles to reclaim lands, language and wellbeing that have been undermined by colonisation, whereby young children, inspired by their ancestors and elders, accompany their extended families and tribal community in many different resistance activities (Hayward, 2012; Walker, 2004). More widely, the legacy of the political force of resistance to white supremacist

hegemonies continues to sustain hopes for democracy and justice for people and planet (Winant, 2015).

Today's children face an uncertain future due to the cumulative and escalating impacts of not only climate change, but ecological degradation, war, migration, pervasive inequalities, and predatory commercial practices (Clark et al., 2020). Children are keenly aware of ways in which their environmental and political conditions impact on their lives (Clark et al., 2020; Hayward, 2012). In recent years, highly effective youth-led movements have influenced social and environmental policies. It is now increasingly acknowledged that children, having historically been ignored in Western political discourse, must be recognised as 'powerful forces for change' (Clark et al., 2020, p. 605). Children's leadership in climate change activism influences both families, communities and public policy, and is thus 'an effective strategy that can contribute to limiting global warming and spur adaptation' (Samantha & Mauger, 2018, p. 99).

Indigenous inter-relationality wisdom

Whilst Indigenous people are often disproportionately negatively affected by the impacts of climate change, it is estimated that despite comprising less than 5% of the world's population, Indigenous people protect 80% of global biodiversity (Raygorodetsky, 2018). Their connection to what many Indigenous peoples view as their Earth Mother, precludes the exploitation of the source, of life, of nurture, and of wellbeing. Māori cosmologies, for example, position humans as kin to other life forms, the trees, birds, insects, fish and so on. It is now increasingly recognised that the modernist project grounded in the presumption of dominance sourced in the Doctrine of Discovery (Miller et al., 2010) has failed to uphold Indigenous wisdoms of living with care and concern for the lands, forests, rivers, wetlands, and oceans and that there is much to be learnt from such time honoured sources (Sherraden, 2019). Furthermore, Indigenous peoples are drawing upon this wisdom as contemporary innovators in the arena of sustainable energy technologies offering critical leadership and collectivist, democratic models of energy production (LaDuke, 2005).

Despite the ongoing onslaughts of colonisation and globalisation, Indigenous peoples continue to uphold their responsibilities to care for Mother Earth, with a spiritual commitment that pervades daily rhythms and routines as expressed by Dr Henrietta Mann, a Northern Cheyenne woman:

> We have our own respected versions of how we came to be. These origin stories – that we emerged or fell from the sky or were brought forth – connect us to this land and establish our realities, our belief systems. We have spiritual responsibilities to renew

the Earth and we do this through our ceremonies so that our Mother, the Earth, can continue to support us. Mutuality and respect are part of our tradition – give and take. Somewhere along the way, I hope people will learn that you can't just take, that you have to give back to the land. (Mann, 2002, as cited in LaDuke, 2005, p. 15)

The importance of spiritual rituals and ceremonies are manifest in current Indigenous youth resistance movements such as that of the Canadian 'Idle No More'. Flash mob protest round dances are described, from a Cree perspective, as being 'couched in an epistemological schema that situates Cree people in conjoined ways within an all-embracing galaxy of interdependent relations – inclusive of land, animals, plants; past, present and future generations; and other people and communities' which serve to 'unite the generations, as youth protests often do, in the process reuniting people in the defence of places-as-relationship' connected to long histories of asserting rights and fulfilling responsibilities according to precolonial onto-epistemologies (Friedel, 2015, p. 886).

Te Ao Māori – Māori worldviews

In te ao Māori, humans are similarly positioned as genealogically connected with other living creatures and to geographical features:

> Māori worldviews generally acknowledged the natural order of living things and the kaitiakitanga (stewardship) relationship to one another and to the environment. The overarching principle of balance underpinned all aspects of life and each person was an essential part of the collective. Māori worldviews are therefore ones of holism and physical and metaphysical realities where the past, the present and the future are forever interacting. The maintenance of the worldviews of life are dependent upon the maintenance of the culture and its many traditions, practices and rituals. (Joseph et al., 2019, p. 9)

Māori cosmology explains all living creatures as descended from the original parents, Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) and Ranginui (Sky Father). Emanating from this cosmology of inter-relatedness and interdependence are a range of te ao Māori values that underpin the collectivist ethic of reciprocity and enable both wellbeing and ultimately, survival. Spiritual forces such as the life force of mauri and the spiritual interconnectedness of wairuatanga underpin these relationships and the wellbeing that they serve. Values of obligation and reciprocity to human and more-than-human include manaakitanga (the nurturing of relationships) and kaitiakitanga (environmental guardianship) (Bargh, 2019; Mead, 2003). Collectivist core values include whanaungatanga, kotahitanga, and aroha. Whanaungatanga expresses the interconnectedness between immediate family and wider kin. Kotahitanga requires unity and solidarity within the collective. Aroha has been explained as the commitment of people related through common ancestry; loyalty; obligation; an inbuilt support system; stability; self-

sufficiency; and spiritual protection (Pere, 1982/1994, p. 23). The maintenance of spiritual balances is upheld via values of reciprocity which include utu (recompense, rebalancing), tapu (spiritually charged, restricted) and noa (free from restriction). Kaitiakitanga connects the above obligations as it serves to ensure the provision of wellbeing for the tribal collective and for the lands, rivers, and oceans and the co-habitants of these spaces through upholding spiritual interconnections and balances (Kawharu, 2000; Penetito, 2009). The capacity to exercise the obligation of kaitiakitanga is at the forefront of the concerns of Māori, including young climate activists, as outlined in a later section of this paper.

Post-anthropocentricism in the epoch of the anthropocene

Indigenous relationalities are in contrast to the humanistic hubris that has pitched our planet into the unprecedented epoch of the Anthropocene. Braidotti's call for a posthuman critical theory poses for the West the challenge that: 'Disidentification from established patterns of thought is crucial for an ethics and politics of inquiry that demands respect for the complexities of the real-life world we are living in' (Braidotti, 2016, p. 16). Her alternative ethics include recognition of our relationality within a network of nonhuman (animal, vegetable, viral, technological) relations, the principle of non-profit, and emphasis on the collective, including one's territorial or environmental interconnections. There are many resonances here with Indigenous onto-epistemologies. As I write this in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is interesting to note Braidotti's inclusion of 'viral' in our inter-relationalities, and her interpretation of both Foucault and Deleuze's analyses of 'crisis' as 'an injection of lucidity, a dose of sobering wisdom about our real-life conditions, that resonates with us and we with it' (Braidotti, 2016, p. 29). She highlights the recognition 'of our interconnection with both human and non-human[1] others' as a source of realisation, a repositioning of becoming human 'amidst the painful contradictions of the Anthropocene moment, when the waves of world history may be about to erase from the sandy shores of this planet the face of a species that will have been our own' (Braidotti, 2016, p. 29).

Method as decolonial practice

Recognition of the role of research in perpetuating colonialist agendas requires the radical response of repositioning of voices traditionally othered and often excluded by dominant practices (Smith, 1999/2012). Children and Indigenous peoples (and thus amplified for Indigenous children) have long been victims of exclusion and domination. Burman points out that under the current dominant regime of neoliberal late capitalism, 'the child is

discoursed in policy as the site for the production of compliant but active and economically self-sufficient citizens' (Burman, 2019, p. 12). Instead, Burman posits 'child as method' as 'a research analytic promoting postcolonially sensitive and innovative inquiries for, about, and with children' (Burman, 2019, p. 13). She aligns her 'child as method' with Chen's 'Asia as method' approach, as being calls 'to activist critical engagement informed by political commitments' (Burman, 2019, p. 16), whereby 'our research and discursive practices can become critical forces pushing the incomplete project of decolonization forward (Chen, 2010, p. 113, as cited in Burman, 2019, p. 16). 'Child as method' provides a frame for examining from the point of view of 'child' (and young people) as a key nodal point for 'reading transnational cultural-political practices' in this case with regard to youth climate change activism (Burman, 2019, p. 17). It involves not only resisting hegemonic discourses and the reaffirmation of indigenous values and practices, but also exploring ways in which the interplay of such decolonial approaches might resist, challenge, and reframe the dominance of local, national and international forces of globalisation and neo-colonisation (Burman, 2019, p. 19).

Young indigenous activist articulations from aotearoa

In Aotearoa young people, as in many other nations, are predominately excluded from decision-making at many levels, including within the education system, local and national government. A recent survey of those on the New Zealand electoral roll found that support for children and youth having opportunity to influence government decision-making showed stronger support from Māori, and others 'committed to social justice and grass roots democracy' with 63.5% of New Zealanders surveyed supporting 15–18 year-olds' having opportunities to influence government decisions (Phillips, Ritchie, Perales et al., 2019, p. 478). This finding, along with ongoing and widespread international youth climate activism, provides a 'strong counter-narrative to the myth that youth are perceived as being politically disengaged' (Phillips, Ritchie, Perales et al., 2019).

In 2019 a youth-led climate change protest movement culminated in world-wide climate strikes, whereby students joined protests during school-time. Not only was this a clear result of phenomenal organisation skills, but young activists have demonstrated sophisticated political analyses and innovative use of technologies that include critiques of adultist assumptions that patronise their agendas and position their work in token ways (Gordon & Taft, 2011; Mersinoglu, 2020). The teenage girls in Taft's (2011) study emphasised their 'roles as history makers and agents of social change' (p. 68). Young climate activists in Aotearoa have recently made significant contributions to public discourse via traditional mechanisms

such as providing feedback on a local government climate action framework (Niall, 2020), successfully spearheading cross-party legislation to commit the nation to reducing its carbon emissions (Coatham, 2019) and in forming delegations to campaign at United Nations meetings. Adults, including educators and climate activists, can learn much from respectfully listening to and supporting the leadership and activism of children and young people by, for example, providing spaces and resources for their work (Taft, 2011).

There is little published research available on Indigenous youth climate activism (MacKay et al., 2020). This section instead draws from a wide range of internet sources that highlight narratives of young Māori and Pacific Islands climate activists from Aotearoa New Zealand. A comprehensive search was undertaken to identify recent online sources in which these young people articulate their positionings, conceptualisations, rationales, and political analyses.

There are a number of Māori and Pacific Island youth climate activist groups, the fore-runner of which is the longstanding collective, the Pacific Climate Warriors. They describe themselves as 'a network of courageous young Pacific Islanders', from 15 different Pacific Island nations, formed under the umbrella of the global climate change movement 350.org (350 Pacific, n.d.). The Warriors have in recent years undertaken a major campaign against fossil fuel extraction in Australia. This section however draws primarily from the perspectives of members of Te Ara Whatu, a Māori and Pacific Islands rangatahi (youth) collective based in Aotearoa who are working for both climate action and indigenous sovereignty. Material has been selected with the intention of honouring the expression of these activist youth in articulating their understandings of te ao Māori, and their commitment to collectivist action sourced in an obligation to uphold their genealogical interconnection with the earth and more-than-human co-habitants. They also offer insightful analysis of the intersectionality of critical issues generated by histories of colonisation and globalisation, and their strategic advocacy in service of the wellbeing of the planet.

Māori youth climate activists situate their positionality as acting in solidarity as Pacific Islands peoples in resisting the impacts of climate change which are severely impacting many low-lying islands and atolls, and in service of revitalising Indigenous cultures:

> Māori and Pasifika communities are at the frontlines of climate change. Our tuakana [older siblings] across Te Moana Nui a Kiwa [the Pacific Ocean] have been experiencing the impacts of the climate crisis for decades. As rangatahi [youth] we have to face these challenges head on and hold those responsible to account. We do this to ensure that our culture, grounded in our whenua [lands], our whakapapa [genealogical interconnectedness] and our whānau [extended families] is protected in global solutions to climate change.

> We step up in solidarity with indigenous communities from around the world. We see our mahi [work] as part of a bigger kaupapa [philosophical platform] of resistance and re-indigenisation. (Te Ara Whatu, n.d.b, paras. 3–4)

On their website, Te Ara Whatu outline their deep connection to Māori cosmology which recognises that humans are related to other life, through the original ancestral parents.

> As indigenous people, we know that the whenua [land] we live on is not just water and soil. We understand our relationship as whakapapa [genealogical interconnectedness], where our place in the world is guided by the taiao [environment] as our tuakana [older sibling] and Papatūānuku and Ranginui [Earth Mother and Sky Father] as our ancestors. Thus, our fight is not just for a place to live, but rather the whenua is central to an indigenous worldview.
>
> In working for climate action and indigenous sovereignty, we look to create relationships from a place of whakapapa [genealogical interconnection] and shared values. On a domestic, national, and international level. (Te Ara Whatu, n.d.a, paras. 1–2)

Te Ara Whatu members locate their activism for climate justice alongside other oppressive forces that disproportionately impact Māori and other Indigenous peoples:

> Climate justice recognises the oppressive power structures that have contributed to the causes of climate change and their intersectional relationship with other challenges that our communities face: gender violence, food sovereignty, cultural integrity and land threats. (Te Ara Whatu, n.d.b, para. 6)

Nevada Huaki-Foote, a member of Te Ara Whatu, was inspired in her activism by witnessing the effects of climate change on her home marae (tribal village meeting-place): 'My marae is experiencing more frequent weather events, specifically severe droughts and flooding. From an early age, I have fond memories of our whenua [land], and witnessing these weather events more frequently has been disheartening for our communities' (as cited in Polley, 2018, para. 9).

In 2017 Te Ara Whatu were the first Māori youth delegation to attend a United Nations conference as they advocated for Indigenous rights at the COP23 Climate Negotiations in Bonn, Germany. The leaders of Te Ara Whatu recognise that this international advocacy is only one strand of the kaupapa [project] that they are weaving. Kera Sherwood-O'Regan, a member of the tribe Kāi Tahu, was an Aotearoa Youth Leadership Institute delegate to COP23. She reported on the activism of the Te Ara Whatu delegation in overcoming the challenges of the hierarchical and cumbersome United Nations' infrastructure which excludes Indigenous peoples from being full parties to international negotiations. Despite this, she considered that:

Te Ara Whatu's advocacy highlighted the disproportionate burden of climate change on indigenous peoples, and contributed to the historic inclusion of the Indigenous Peoples Caucus (IPC) in direct negotiations, as well as the inclusion of all IPC principles the UNCOP decision on an Indigenous Peoples' Platform. (Sherwood-O'Regan, 2018, para. 7)

At COP23 the Māori youth delegates led a session which involved an impromptu calling out of the silencing of Indigenous voices, by recruiting non-Indigenous allies to tape over their mouths whilst the microphone was passed around the Indigenous youth present, allowing them the space to express their perspectives. Sherwood-O'Regan reported that:

Many organisers and allies alike were moved to tears as we heard how various members of our group had experienced racism, exclusion, and a struggle with their indigenous identity as a direct result of the past, and ongoing colonisation of our whenua [lands] (Sherwood-O'Regan, 2017, para. 11).

As a result of their advocacy at COP23 Te Ara Whatu were able to secure accreditation to COP24 in Katowice, Poland, where they aimed to elicit further commitments from the UN. The leadership of Te Ara Whatu are working on multiple fronts, realising that activism at the national level is as important as their international advocacy which can optimise Indigenous solidarity. India Logan-Riley explains that:

It is when indigenous peoples come together that powerful things happen ... Through building relationships and sharing ideas, we can start to gather under the rafters of our own whare [house] to bring to light our own dreams, rather than just coming together when our governments or the UN wants us to. (India Logan-Riley, as cited in Sherwood-O'Regan, 2018, para. 3)

At a 2019 'breakfast' meeting in Auckland, New Zealand, with the UN Secretary General António Guterres and New Zealand Minister for Climate Change and Green Party co-leader James Shaw, Te Ara Whatu activists challenged Shaw and Guterres to take clear steps to support 'a truly just transition' that puts the climate advocacy of Indigenous, people with disabilities and people of colour to the 'front and centre' of future work for climate justice (Sherwood-O'Regan, 2019). Te Ara Whatu member Pania Newton, who has led the campaign for sovereignty over her ancestral lands at Ihummātao stated that:

A commitment to climate change requires a commitment to ensuring the survival and wellbeing of indigenous peoples who have a strong concern for this issue and play a huge kaitiaki [custodial] role that draws attention to humanity's reliance on Papatūānuku [Earth Mother] and the need to make decisions that do not take her for granted ... Indigenous people here and elsewhere around the world, emphasise decision making with the seventh generation in mind ... Governments need to start making decisions with the seventh generation in mind.

> The burial grounds where my father lays has eroded from the stormwater discharge from a nearby factory discharging into our ancestral creek and of course the threat of sea levels rising …

> We have to put other values, our indigenous values on the table as paramount concern for making decisions for our future. (Newton, as cited in Sherwood-O'Regan, 2019, paras. 9–11)

At COP25 in Madrid, Spain, in 2019, Te Ara Whatu aimed to 'disrupt, learn and connect', according to Nakia Randle, one of the eight Te Ara Whatu representatives attending (as cited in Huffadine, 2019, para. 4). Randle explained that:

> We show up so that there's an indigenous and in particular, indigenous youth, presence in the space because climate change impacts us, our communities, the first and the hardest, a lot of the time.

> And also indigenous thinking and knowledge holds a lot of solutions about how we should be interacting with our environment.

> It's kind of that idea of 'nothing about us without us' - and all this climate change decision making is a lot about us. But the process excludes us essentially. (Randle, as cited in Huffadine, 2019, paras. 5–7)

Frustration at their exclusion from the UN processes that operate at the state party level, was compounded by the attention given to the Swedish youth climate activist Greta Thunberg:

> We would hold a press conference, our people would show up to listen, but it's not a full room. And then when there's a Greta (Thunberg) press conference, that's like, half of it flowing out into the main other area. So as far as who people want to listen to, there's a massive distinction there … (Randle, as cited in Huffadine, 2019, para. 17)

Sensitive to this injustice, Greta Thunberg has proactively created space for Indigenous youth. Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, a poet from the Marshall Islands, who's been campaigning for climate justice for over a decade explained that:

> There's an understandable level of resentment about the fact that what we've been saying has been ignored until someone who is frankly white and European is heard.

> But … it's still welcome, because we still need it to be heard and I think that Greta has been very, very good about being conscious of her positionality and her privilege. (Tahana, 2019, paras. 12–13)

In addition to their international focus at the three (2017–2019) UN COP meetings, Te Ara Whatu have been active in lobbying the New Zealand government to include Māori perspectives in climate change legislation and policies, referencing the 1840 treaty whereby Māori allowed British settlement, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, as a source of Māori rights to rangatiratanga and

mana motuhake, self-determination and autonomy. Convenor of Te Ara Whatu, India Logan-Riley, has pointed out that

> Previous and current governments have a lot of improvement to do when it comes to partnering with Māori effectively at both hapū, iwi [sub-tribe, tribe] and community level. There is a lot of best practice recommendations that Māori have given to the government that they haven't actually listened to or used to inform their practice. (as cited in Dunlop, 2019, para. 16)

Logan-Riley believes it is imperative that Māori are included in government decision-making regarding 'what climate action looks like for our communities' including considerations of resources, land and Māori aspirations for mana motuhake (autonomy) (Dunlop, 2019, paras. 17–18).

Te Ara Whatu activist Haylee Koroi articulates the understanding that the climate crisis is a perpetuation of the historical and ongoing effects of colonisation that have severely impacted Māori for generations (as cited in Hura, 2019). She highlights the importance of decolonisation in addressing the climate crisis:

> Ultimately there is going to have to be a lot of letting go of power, even within climate movements, in order for us to come to a real solution. The solution needs to firstly (not secondly) focus on decolonisation. That looks like decolonising farming processes and restoring animal ecosystems. That looks like returning land to indigenous peoples. That looks like food sovereignty. That looks like honouring Te Tiriti. Anything less will not suffice. (Koroi, as cited in Hura, 2019, para. 21)

He Kūaka Mārangaranga is another Maori rangatahi (youth) collective who have been exercising their rangatiratanga (self-determination) by lobbying within the United Nations, via the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues, having prepared a charter that advocates for visionary change to uphold the rights and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples (Sherwood-O'Regan, 2018, para. 7). According to Sherwood-O'Regan:

> They know that unless they accept the wero [challenge], they will be the generation to see their marae and wāhi tapu [villages and sacred sites] claimed by Tangaroa [the Atua or Spiritual Guardian of the Oceans]; they will be the ones to inherit prisons and hospitals filled with our own people; and they will receive the bequest of a societal model where indigenous knowledge and ways of being are seen as inferior to the ways of the West. (Sherwood-O'Regan, 2018, para. 15)

Whilst Māori and Pacific Island youth have been at the forefront of international youth climate activism, back at home in Aotearoa there has been critique that Māori and Pacific youth have not been sufficiently represented in some advocacy training opportunities. Kaeden Watts, a senior leader in Te Ara Whatu, explains that the leaders of the #schoolstrikes4climate movement

> are trying to be better … But in terms of who is leading that group, it's Pākehā -not Māori, not Pasifika, not the people who are being impacted most, whose urupā [burial

grounds] are being swallowed, whose rivers are being polluted by high intensity agriculture. The ones who are seeing the effects aren't getting to lead the discussion (Watts, as cited in McKenzie, 2020, para. 11)

There have been some demonstrations of solidarity and support from Pākehā (European ancestry) colleagues in Aotearoa, such as Mia Sutherland, a 17-year-old guest editor for the New Zealand online newspaper Stuff. She recently explained that:

> The unholy marriage of capitalism and colonial imperialism has not only triggered the disastrous climate crisis in the Pacific, but it has also ensured that the voices of indigenous climate activists are not heard. It is easy to be convinced that care for the earth is a Western concept, however, that's hardly true – what Pākehā climate leaders call activism is survival for indigenous people. (Sutherland, as cited in Sutherland & Lal, 2020, para. 4)

The exclusion experienced by Samoan climate activist Aigagalefili 'Fili' Fepulea'i-Tapua'i is powerfully expressed in her performance of 'Waiting for Water' (as cited in Langstone, 2020). Her anger at the insensitivity and ignorance of Pākehā climate activists and leaders in excluding or dismissing Pacific Islands' peoples and their specific concerns led Fili to establish 4 Tha Kulture (4TK), a group of young Pacific Islands climate activists who organised for wider participation of young Pacific Islands people in the school strikes for climate in Auckland.

There have also been examples of the exclusion of Indigenous youth in the international arena. In January 2020, Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate was cropped from the photo accompanying a report on a joint press conference at Davos in which she had been photographed alongside Greta Thunberg, Loukina Tille, Luisa Neubauer and Isabelle Axelsson (Evelyn, 2019). Furthermore, Nakate had been left off the list of participants and none of her comments from the press conference had been reported. Jamie Margolin, a 17 year old Colombian American student, author, activist and co-founder of the youth climate action organization Zero Hour, highlighted the insidiousness of the racism underlying this situation of exclusion of activists of colour, aligning this with a 'culture of silencing marginalized communities disproportionately affected by the climate crisis' (as cited in Evelyn, 2019, para. 12). Margolin observes that 'Racism, classism and the erasure of marginalized voices isn't new ... A photo crop-out is an easy way to describe it but it's really a metaphorical crop-out from the narrative of climate science in general' (as cited in Evelyn, 2019, para. 13).

Discussion – a herd of 'elephants', and some implications

This final section considers young people's climate activism, as illustrated above, with regard to implications for young people's citizenship, and for

their education. A set of particular 'elephants in the room' are considered. The first relates to the challenge of translating the aspirations of the generic set of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into transformational action on the ground with regard to youth climate activism. Secondly, the SDGs can be critiqued for their failure to directly address the urgent severity of the consequences of sea-level rise already facing Pacific islands and atolls, or the ongoing despoliation of the earth's wild spaces and biodiversity (Albert et al., 2016; Almond et al., 2020).

The United Nations (UN) 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of aspirational objectives to be achieved by 2030 whereby nations will be measured against achievement expectations (United Nations, n.d.a). SDG 4 focuses on education and is viewed as a potential lever by which to address all the other goals. The aspiration of SDG 4. 7 is that:

> all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (UNESCO, 2017, p. 8)

Education for sustainable development pedagogies aim to develop competencies and dispositions that enable transformation towards sustainable futures (UNESCO, 2017). SDG 13 focuses on climate change. Sub-goal 13.2 requires nations to 'Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning', whilst sub-goal 13.3 expects that nations 'Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning' (United Nations, n.d.b). It is noteworthy that governments across the world facilitated urgent and, in many cases, comprehensive responses to the Covid-19 threat, yet struggle to act with similar immediacy to the increasingly life-threatening perils of climate change.

Such UN frameworks, in attempting to be applicable across the spectrum of the planet's nations, can be viewed as problematic due to their generic nature. They share a fundamental inability to address the 'elephant in the room' of the oxymoronic notion of unlimited 'development' within the resource constraints of a finite planet, and reluctance to directly challenge neoliberalist economics that ignore social, cultural, economic and environmental justice issues (Kopnina, 2020).

A second 'elephant in the room' is the legacy of the anthropocentricism underpinning the UN ambitions (Kopnina, 2016), which privilege human wellbeing above the planetary environment, ignoring the fundamental primacy of (Mother) Earth as the source of sustenance for all life, as recognised by Indigenous peoples. As our environmental crisis has become so dire, it is

timely to consider post-Anthropocentric possibilities that de-centre people and profit from policy priorities.

As highlighted by the impassioned plea of Aigagalefili 'Fili' Fepulea'i-Tapua'i (as cited in Langstone, 2020) and as the powerful worldwide youth climate activism attests, young people have huge concerns about the failure of the world's leaders to urgently address the imminent threat that jeopardises their futures. A recent New Zealand survey of 7,721 school students adds further weight to the widespread nature of young people's anxieties in this regard (Menzies et al., 2020). The 'existential fear of climate change' was ranked third in the list of concerns, after 'social media and technology', and 'bleak futures' (Menzies et al., 2020, p. 4). The report also highlights disparities in mental health. For example, 38% of Māori and 37% of Pacific Island young women reported symptoms of depression compared to 24% for Pākehā [European ancestry] (Menzies et al., 2020). The report writers noted the complex interplay of contextual determinants, including sociocultural and historic factors, as well as individual characteristics and circumstances:

> Unfortunately, these determinants, which are highly fluid and not well understood, become increasingly complex when intergenerational trauma, marginalisation and disadvantage is at play in the lives of Indigenous and other minority groups, as is the case for many Māori and Pasifika youth. (Menzies et al., 2020, p. 4)

There are similar disparities in rates of youth suicide for Māori and Pacific youth (Ministry of Social Development, 2016). This youth mental health situation is extremely concerning and highlights the need for greater support for young people, and in particular culturally responsive provision as being a further 'elephant in the room'.

A 2020 UNICEF report ranked New Zealand near the bottom, at 35 out of 38 'rich countries', with regard to measurable outcomes for children in the areas of mental wellbeing, physical health and skills (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020). Data were gathered pre-Covid-19, and the impacts of the pandemic have considerably worsened the situations of many families and children in Aotearoa with Māori and Pacific Islands families over-represented in the lower socio-economic strata. These yet-to-be-researched Covid-19 impacts constitute a further 'elephant in the room'.

Yet another 'elephant' to be visibilised in this discussion is that of racism, underpinned by the assumption of human (white) superiority as exemplified in the 'Great Chain of Being' (Salmond, 2017). As the Māori legal scholar, Moana Jackson has written: 'Wherever indigenous peoples have been dispossessed, in Africa or Australia or the Americas and Aotearoa, racism has been the constant presence through which the colonisers compounded other ancient prejudices such as sexism and classism' (Jackson, 2018). 'Racism remains formidable, entrenched as a structuring feature of both US and global society and politics' according to Winant (2015, p. 319).

The assumption of white supremacy renders invisible the entrenched institutional racism of western systems. As Cannella and Viruru have pointed out, 'in one way or another all Western knowledge is a form of colonial discourse, whether past, present, modern or postmodern' and the unquestioned dominance of such discourse merely reinforces longstanding relations of power and dominance' (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 118). Māori educational scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains the intransigence of educational inequity thus:

> **The elephant in the room** is not the things we don't want to discuss, but what we often can't discuss because they have become such common sense we don't see them, such as the system logic, or the dissonances between what is claimed to work and social reality or the moral justifications for school suspensions or the discourses around success and failure and why individuals 'deserve' their success or failure. (Smith, 2018, para. 9)

The authors of recent U.S. research (Starck et al., 2020) say their findings resonate with the studies of social reproduction by sociologists Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) in recognising that 'schools are best understood as microcosms of society rather than as antidotes to inequality' in that the degree of racism reflected in the teaching profession mirrors that of the wider society (Starck et al., 2020, p. 9).

Decolonising, anti-racism education that includes local histories of colonisation and local Indigenous knowledge systems, values and beliefs should therefore be at the forefront of teacher pre- and in-service education as well as entrenched in all early childhood education and school programmes. Eco-pedagogies based in Freirean critical conscientisation offer opportunities for student-led problem-posing and praxis (Kahn, 2010; Misiaszek, 2020). Such approaches, informed by knowledges from local Indigenous elders and communities, can enable children and young people to feel a sense of hope and empowerment in taking action both locally and globally in service of Earth. Recent research has indicated that such leadership by young people can offer cascading benefits through ripple effects amongst other youth and within their local communities (MacKay et al., 2020).

The last 'elephant' to be addressed in this discussion is that of adultism in relation to children as citizens. It is now over 30 years since the U.N Convention on the Rights of the Child was promulgated and ratified, eventually by all countries bar the USA. Yet opportunities for children and young people to influence community, national and international policies remain scant, and resisted by the majority of adults (Phillips, Ritchie, Perales et al., 2019). Understandings of children and youth citizenship can therefore be reconceptualised beyond adult-determined notions of patriotism and token exercises of 'participation' and 'democracy' to recognise and welcome diverse expressions of citizenship that include advocacy

skills in relation to concerns articulated by children and young people, and reflecting their capacity for postcolonial, anti-patriarchal, and anti-capitalist analysis as the source of transformation towards sustainable futures (Burman, 2019).

Note

1. Many scholars prefer to use, rather than 'non-human', the term 'more-than-human' for its rejection of anthropocentrism, as used for example, by Abram (1996) and Plumwood (2002).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Dr Jenny Ritchie is an Associate Professor in Te Puna Akopai, the School of Education, at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her research and teaching focus on social, cultural, and ecological justice in early childhood care and education. A recently completed Spencer funded project resulted in the book *Young children's community building in action: Embodied, emplaced and relational citizenship*. She has also codirected the New Zealand iteration of an international UNESCO project exploring ways in which local Indigenous perspectives can inform pedagogies for sustainability.

ORCID

Jenny Ritchie   http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2934-6358

References

350 Pacific. (n.d.). https://350pacific.org/pacific-climate-warriors/

Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous. Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Vintage Books.

Albert, S., Grinham, A., Gibbes, B., Leon, J., & Church, J. (2016). *Sea-level rise has claimed five whole islands in the Pacific: First scientific evidence*. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/sea-level-rise-has-claimed-five-whole-islands-in-the-pacific-first-scientific-evidence-58511.

Almond, R. E. A., Grooten, M., & Petersen, T. (Eds.). (2020). *Living planet report 2020 - Bending the curve of biodiversity loss*. WWF & Institute of Zoology (Zoological Society of London). https://c402277.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/publications/1371/files/original/ENGLISH-FULL.pdf?1599693362

Bargh, M. (2019). A tika transition. In D. Hall (Ed.), *A careful revolution. Towards a low-emissions future* (pp. 36–51). Bridget Williams Books.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. Sage.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Braidotti, R. (2016). Posthuman critical theory. In D. Banerji & M. R. Paranjape (Eds.), *Critical posthumanism and planetary futures* (pp. 13–32). Springer.

Burman, E. (2019). Child as method: Implications for decolonising educational research. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *28*(1), 4–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2017.1412266

Cannella, G. S., & Viruru, R. (2004). *Childhood and postcolonization. Power, education and contemporary practice*. RoutledgeFalmer.

Clark, H., Coll-Seck, A. M., Banerjee, A., Peterson, S., Dalglish, S. L., Ameratunga, S., ... Costello, A. (2020). A future for the world's children? A WHO-UNICEF-Lancet commission. *The Lancet*, *395*(10224), 605–658. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)32540-1

Coatham, J. (2019). *The young climate activists who broke through to the halls of power*: The Spinoff. https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/12-11-2019/how-a-group-of-young-climate-activists-broke-through-to-the-halls-of-power/.

de Castro, L. R. (2020). Why global? Children and childhood from a decolonial perspective. *Childhood*, *27*(1), 48–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568219885379

Dunlop, M. (2019). *Māori seek direct input into govt's climate change policy*. https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/388797/maori-seek-direct-input-into-govt-s-climate-change-policy

Evelyn, K. (2019). *'Like I wasn't there': Climate activist Vanessa Nakate on being erased from a movement*. Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/29/vanessa-nakate-interview-climate-activism-cropped-photo-davos.

Friedel, T. L. (2015). Understanding the nature of Indigenous youth activism in Canada: Idle no more as resumptive pedagogy. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, *114*(4), 878–891. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3157402

Gordon, H. R., & Taft, J. K. (2011). Rethinking youth political socialization: Teenage activists talk back. *Youth & Society*, *43*(4), 1499–1527. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x10386087

Grooten, M., & Almond, R. E. A. (Eds.). (2018). *Living planet report 2018: Aiming higher*. World Wildlife Fund, Institute of Zoology (Zoological Society of London). https://c402277.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/publications/1187/files/original/LPR2018_Full_Report_Spreads.pdf

Hayward, B. (2012). *Children, citizenship and environment. Nurturing a democratic imagination in a changing world*. Routledge.

Huffadine, L. (2019). *A youth perspective on climate talks: Time for indigenous leadership*. https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/406000/a-youth-perspective-on-climate-talks-time-for-indigenous-leadership

Hura, N. A. (2019). *How to centre indigenous people in climate conversations*. https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/01-11-2019/how-to-centre-indigenous-people-in-climate-conversations/

Jackson, M. (2018). *Understanding racism in this country*. E-Tangata. https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/moana-jackson-understanding-racism-in-this-country/.

Joseph, R., Rakena, M., Jones, M. T. K., Sterling, R. A. C., & Rakena, C. (2019). *The treaty, tikanga Māori, ecosystem-based management, mainstream law and power sharing for environmental integrity in Aotearoa New Zealand – Possible ways forward: Te Mata Hautū Taketake – The Māori and Indigenous Governance Centre*. Te Piringa-Faculty of Law, University of Waikato. https://www.sustainableseaschallenge.co.nz/news-and-events/news/empowering-maori-to-improve-ecosystem-management-in-aotearoa/

Kahn, R. (2010). *Critical pedagogy, ecoliteracy, and planetary crisis. The ecopedagogy movement*. Peter Lang.

Kawharu, M. (2000). Kaitiakitanga: A Maori anthropological perspective of the Maori socio-environmental ethic of resource management. *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, *109*(4), 349–370. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20706951

Kopnina, H. (2016). The victims of unsustainability: A challenge to sustainable development goals. *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*, *23*(2), 113–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504509.2015.1111269

Kopnina, H. (2020). Education for the future? Critical evaluation of education for sustainable development goals. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, *51*(4), 280–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2019.1710444

LaDuke, W. (2005). *Recovering the Sacred. The power of naming and claiming*. South End Press.

Langstone, M. (2020). *Angry, eloquent and 17, Fili has something to say to you*: The Spinoff. https://thespinoff.co.nz/auckland/12-09-2020/angry-eloquent-and-17-fili-has-something-to-say-to-you/.

MacKay, M., Parlee, B., & Karsgaard, C. (2020). Youth engagement in climate change action: Case study on indigenous youth at COP24. *Sustainability*, *12*(16), 6299. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12166299

McKenzie, P. (2020). *Activist boot camps need brown voices* https://www.newsroom.co.nz/activist-boot-camps-need-brown-voices

Mead, H. M. (2003). *Tikanga Māori. Living by Māori values*. Huia.

Menzies, R., Gluckman, P., & Poulton, R. (2020). *Youth mental health in New Zealand: Greater urgency required*. The Centre for Informed Futures, University of Auckland. https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/Youth-Mental-Health-in-Aotearoa-NZ.pdf.

Mersinoglu, Y. C. (2020). *Green teen memes: How TikTok could save the planet.* https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/aug/28/green-teen-memes-how-tiktok-could-save-the-planet-aoe

Miller, R. J., Ruru, J., Behrendt, L., & Lindberg, T. (2010). *Discovering indigenous lands. The Doctrine of discovery in the English colonies*. Oxford University Press.

Ministry of Social Development. (2016). *The social report*. MSD. http://socialreport.msd.govt.nz/.

Misiaszek, G. W. (2020). Ecopedagogy: teaching critical literacies of 'development', 'sustainability', and 'sustainable development'. Teaching in Higher Education, 25(5), 615–632. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1586668

Moon, E. (2013). *Neoliberalism, political action on climate change and the youth of Aotearoa New Zealand: A space for radical activism?* [Master of Environmental Studies]. Victoria University of Wellington. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/41338377.pdf

Niall, T. (2020). *Climate change: Young and diverse voices seize debate in Auckland.* https://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/119617262/climate-change-young-and-diverse-voices-seize-debate-in-auckland

Penetito, W. (2009). Place-based education: Catering for curriculum, culture and community. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, *18*, 5–29. DOI: 10.26686/nzaroe.v0i18.1544

Pere, R. R. (1982/1994). *Ako. Concepts and learning in the Maori tradition*. Department of Sociology, University of Waikato. Reprinted by Te Kohanga Reo National Trust Board.

Phillips, L. G., Ritchie, J., & Adair, J. K. (2020). Young children's citizenship membership and participation: comparing discourses in early childhood curricula of Australia, New

Zealand and the United States. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 50(4), 592–614. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2018.1543578

Phillips, L. G., Ritchie, J., Dynevor, L., Lambert, J., & Moroney, K. (2019). *Young children's community building in action: Embodied, emplaced and relational citizenship*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429428531

Phillips, L. G., Ritchie, J., & Perales, F. (2019). Surveying support for child and youth political participation in Australia and New Zealand. *Citizenship Studies*, *23*(5), 460–485. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2019.1620687

Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental culture. The ecological crisis of reason*. Routledge.

Polley, N. (2018). *Waikato woman represents Māori and Pasifika youth at United Nations conference in Poland*. https://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/108879635/waikato-woman-represents-mori-and-pasifika-youth-at-united-nations-conference-in-poland

Raygorodetsky, G. (2018). *Indigenous peoples defend Earth's biodiversity—but they're in danger. National Geographic*, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/2011/can-indigenous-land-stewardship-protect-biodiversity-/.

Salmond, A. (2017). *Tears of Rangi. Experiments across worlds*. Auckland University Press.

Samantha, C.-K., & Mauger, B. (2018). Children's leadership on climate change: What can we learn from child-led initiatives in the U.S. and the Pacific Islands? *Children, Youth and Environments*, *28*(1), 90–103. https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.28.1.0090

Sherraden, M. (2019). Foreword. In L. R. Mason & J. Rigg (Eds.), *People and climate change. Vulnerability, adaptation and social justice* (pp. vii–xi). Oxford University Press.

Sherwood-O'Regan, K. (2017). *Indigenous youth say 'pass the mic' to decolonise COP23 climate talks* https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/15-11-2017/indigenous-youth-say-pass-the-mic-to-decolonise-cop23-climate-talks/

Sherwood-O'Regan, K. (2018). *Rangatahi take the UN . . . again*. https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/11-07-2018/rangatahi-take-the-un-again/

Sherwood-O'Regan, K. (2019). *Breakfast with the secretary general: Māori activists press the UN on climate change*. https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/14-05-2019/breakfast-with-the-secretary-general-maori-activists-press-the-un-on-climate-change/

Smith, L. T. (1999/2012). *Decolonizing methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books Ltd and University of Otago Press.

Smith, L. T. (2018). *The education system and the not very good analogy of the farting elephant in the room*. Ipu Kēreru. https://nzareblog.wordpress.com/2018/10/30/education-system/.

Starck, J. G., Riddle, T., Sinclair, S., & Warikoo, N. (2020). Teachers are people too: Examining the racial bias of teachers compared to other American adults. *Educational Researcher*, *49*(4), 273–284. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x20912758

Suša, O. (2019). Global risks and conflicts: The social, environmental, and political consequences. *Critical Sociology*, *45*(6), 829–843. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920518792299

Sutherland, M., & Lal, S. (2020). *What Pākehā call climate activism is survival for indigenous people*. https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/119751558/what-pakeha-call-climate-activism-is-survival-for-indigenous-people

Taft, J. K. (2011). *Rebel girls. Youth activism and social change across the Americas*. NYU Press.

Tahana, J. (2019). *COP25: Calls for indigenous voices to be heard*. https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/405257/cop25-calls-for-indigenous-voices-to-be-heard

Te Ara Whatu. (n.d.a). https://tearawhatu.org/

Te Ara Whatu. (n.d.b). *Ko wai mātou? Who are we?* https://tearawhatu.org/who-are-we

UNESCO. (2017). *Education for sustainable development goals. Learning objectives*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444.

UNICEF Innocenti. (2020). *Worlds of influence. Understanding what shapes child well-being in rich countries. Innocenti report card 16*. UNICEF Office of Research. https://www.unicef-irc.org/child-well-being-report-card-16.

United Nations. (n.d.a). *Sustainable development goals*. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/.

United Nations. (n.d.b). *Sustainable development goals. Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/climate-change/.

Walker, R. (2004). *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou. Struggle without end* (revised ed.). Penguin.

Winant, H. (2015). The dark matter: Race and racism in the 21st century. *Critical Sociology*, *41*(2), 313–324. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920513501353

Wood, B. E., & Black, R. (2018). Globalisation, cosmopolitanism and diaspora: What are the implications for understanding citizenship? *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *27*(2–3), 184–199. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2017.1415161