

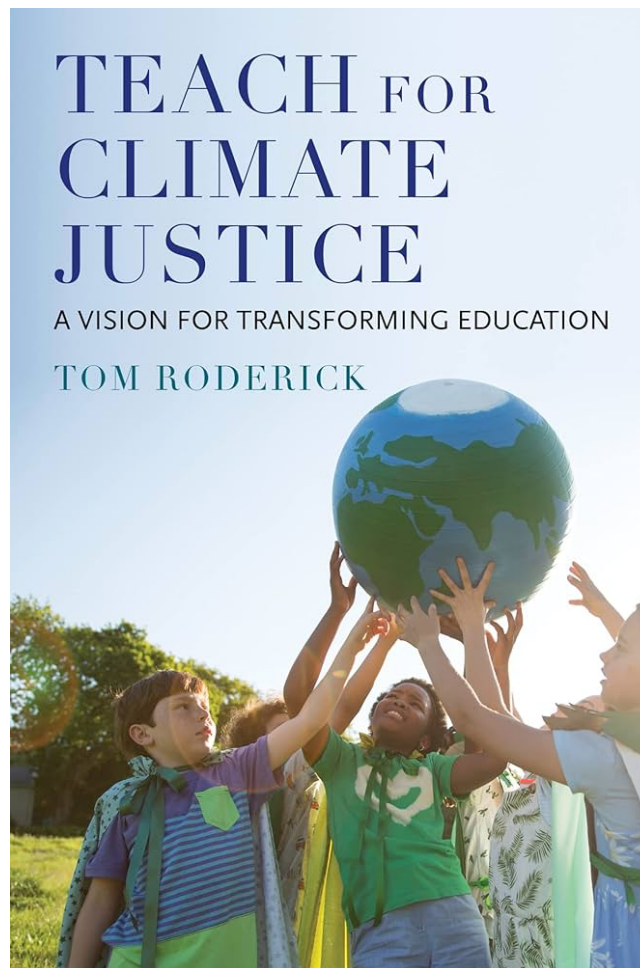
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

Teach for Climate Justice: A Vision for Transforming Education

by Paul Buhle



TEACH FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE: A VISION FOR TRANSFORMING EDUCATION. (2023). BY TOM RODERICK. HARVARD EDUCATION PRESS.

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How can we speak to young people about the ecological disaster and increasing inequality that will shape their lives without making them feel hopeless—or succumb ourselves to a deadening fatalism? How can we educate the next generation to find ways to make a difference, to see that a better future is possible?

Tom Roderick, a veteran teacher, writer, and education activist, spent 36 years before retirement at the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility in New York City. If anyone has the credentials for the task at hand, it's him—and he approaches the subject with a light touch, urging educators to teach for joy and justice.

The task is to move step by step, realistically taking up what children can make sense of on their own terms and at an age-appropriate level. Much of this, as Rachel Carson argued long ago, hinges on their being able to “feel” long before being able to “understand.” Through case studies and interviews with educators from a range of grade levels and types of schools, Roderick shows what is possible.

Young people want—or at least can be helped—to enjoy direct contact with nature in a wide variety of environments, from woods to water, to look and touch and perhaps do something as adventurous as taking a canoe ride or wading through shallow water while collecting samples, even in a city park. If a river (like the Bronx River) has been improved in recent times, the return of life opens a vision of what is possible in education, to teach others (to quote an elementary school teacher) “about the natural world even when it is being destroyed” (p.53).

What does this mean? It takes teaching children to go beyond passive acceptance and toward “trying to come up with ways to create social change” (p.66), to quote another teacher, this one a veteran of student participation during pre-pandemic youth climate marches in New York City.

It means identifying the most pressing problems, not only ones students can see in their own environment but also the dire conditions in the Global South. Various forms of habitat destruction—above all the harm to rainforests, the overuse of fertilizers, the damage or destruction of animal habitats, which has led to the massive spread of human diseases—have real causes that can be usefully discussed. Children who have experienced mega-storms know already, at a young age, that something is amiss. They can catch up with events and their causes through many available documentary films. They can connect what they see and what they experience with “climate justice,” that is, how dire events fall heaviest upon those least able to protect themselves. It is a truism that children respond to the harm caused to almost any animal species, and, through this empathy, they can make connections to the wider world and also to things humans have done that must not continue.

Many young people in classrooms today are themselves climate refugees, brought here or born here because their parents were forced from their homeland by economic or political turmoil brought on—at least in part—by climate change.

How to offer young people positive lessons? If there is potentially good news, it must be that climate movements are thriving and that rather than being left behind, young people are very often leading the charge, with Greta Thunberg as today's singular model world citizen. Alternative ways of feeding populations, like more “green” sources of energy, are abundant, if only politicians (Democrats as well as Republicans) can be impelled or compelled to take seriously the urgency of the moment.

At the heart of Roderick's vision of climate justice education is “active hope,” a concept he borrowed from Chris Johnstone and Johanna Macy in their book of the same name. Active hope is not a feeling; it's not something we have, but something we *do*. We envision the just and sustainable world we *hope for*, discern how we can best contribute, and then get to work—doing our part to accomplish what Johnstone and Macy call the “Great Turning.” This is science fiction of a sort—but of a potentially active sort. Finding ways to protect the oceans while “wilding” larger land masses, making cities more nature-friendly through rooftop gardens and reduced use of automobiles—these and other visions allow young people to think of what could be possible.

Perhaps the most controversial chapter of this book is “Teach for Civil Resistance: The Power of Grassroots Movements to Effect Transformational Change” because it demands action that the powerful will naturally wish to resist.

Students in one example view a powerful documentary film and discuss the Freedom Rides that the US Justice Department asked civil rights leaders to suspend for the sake of public order. The Movement chose to escalate non-violent action instead, compelling the Interstate Commerce Commission to enforce the laws against discrimination in interstate travel. As the teacher in the example concluded, political leaders had been the followers while activists themselves—overwhelmingly young—were the leaders through non-violent direct action. Civil rights came to be seen as the most crucial problem of the nation, and allies high in government took action.

Such experiences, taught in a wide variety of ways (Roderick recalls his own third-grade daughter in a school play about the Montgomery Bus Boycott campaign), lead logically to potential action on climate change. Students learn and discuss the wide range of non-violent direct actions that can be taken. The experiences are updated with students' role-playing and discussion of the recent campaign led by Indigenous people to stop the construction of Enbridge Energy's oil pipeline and its destructive and violent invasion of their tribal lands in Northern Minnesota.

The chapter also tells the story of the encampment, led by Indigenous young people, to stop the completion of the 1,200-mile Dakota Access pipeline, explaining how it

would endanger drinking water and tribal lands in the Standing Rock Native American Reservation in North Dakota. After months of nonviolent training and action that gained worldwide attention, the Obama administration denied the permit for the construction. Upon taking office soon after, President Donald Trump issued an executive order allowing the pipeline to go forward. Although a federal judge struck down a key federal permit, the pipeline was allowed to continue operating pending an environmental review. The ultimate outcome remains uncertain, while the oil continues to flow.

How can students learn to feel supported in action for climate justice? How can they feel capable of reversing the current drift toward catastrophe? Black Lives Matter events helped create mutual-aid and protest-support networks that students could understand, even as the COVID crisis shut down global Climate Marches. At a more granular level, students could borrow from a method developed in Scotland that involved learning about a river: visiting it intermittently over the school year, studying together what was flourishing and what was becoming endangered. Likewise, by engaging in activities connected with Indigenous food sources and developing their own recipes for uses of plants and seeds, students could study

the issues of food justice and injustice, waste, and scarcity.

So many examples can be found in these pages, so useful and adaptable, that no summary can do justice to the text. The author urges readers—educators, parents, and others—to make the struggle for public schools matter, to build a movement for climate justice. The teacher insurgency that swept through a variety of states during 2018-2019, sometimes well beyond the wishes of teacher-union leaderships, demonstrated that educators themselves are ready.

Paul Buhle has been active in social movements since his teen years, and most recently turned to editing nonfiction graphic novels. The latest is a history of the Jewish Bund, published by *Between the Lines*.



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