

# Nurturing Identity, Shaping Communities, and Forging New Pathways: Racially Minoritized Youth Climate Justice Activists' Perspectives

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## Abstract

This study explores the experiences of racially minoritized youth activists involved in the climate justice movement. From July to October of 2023, I conducted semi-structured narrative interviews with 15 Black, Indigenous, and youth of colour in Ontario, aged 18 to 29, who had been affiliated with a climate justice organization for at least six months. Through timeline mapping and semi-structured interviews, participants highlighted pivotal life events that shaped their justice-oriented values. Three overarching themes emerged: nurturing identity, shaping communities and schools, and forging new pathways for racially minoritized youth leaders. The findings underscore the empowerment youth experience through local action and community engagement. With a grounding in relational solidarity and ethical relationality, this study emphasizes the imperative for Canadian education systems to integrate robust climate justice pedagogies as well as interdiscipli-

nary, action-oriented climate justice learning that fosters student efficacy and leadership. The study also aims to highlight the ways educators, policy makers, and stakeholders can engage with climate justice, informed by racially minoritized activists.

*Keywords:* climate justice education, climate justice movement, racially minoritized youth activists, intersectional environmentalism, youth empowerment, relational solidarity, ethical relationality

## Résumé

Cette étude explore les expériences de jeunes activistes racialisés impliqués dans le mouvement pour la justice climatique. De juillet à octobre 2023, j'ai mené des entrevues narratives semi-structurées avec 15 jeunes Noirs, Autochtones et non-Blancs en Ontario, âgés de 18 à 29 ans, affiliés à une organisation de justice climatique depuis au moins six mois. À travers la cartographie temporelle et les entrevues semi-structurées, les participants et participantes ont mis en lumière les événements marquants de leur vie ayant façonné leurs valeurs orientées vers la justice. Trois thèmes principaux ont émergé : le développement de l'identité, l'influence des communautés et des écoles, ainsi que la création de nouvelles voies pour le leadership des jeunes racialisés. Les résultats soulignent l'autonomisation que ressentent les jeunes grâce à l'action locale et à l'engagement communautaire. Ancrée dans la solidarité relationnelle et l'éthique relationnelle, cette étude met en avant la nécessité pour les systèmes d'éducation canadiens d'intégrer des pédagogies solides en matière de justice climatique, ainsi qu'un apprentissage interdisciplinaire et orienté vers l'action, afin de renforcer l'efficacité et le leadership des élèves. Elle vise à améliorer les façons dont les éducateurs, les décideurs politiques et les parties prenantes peuvent s'engager en faveur de la justice climatique, en s'inspirant des activistes racialisés.

*Mots clés :* mouvement pour la justice climatique, jeunes militant[e]s racialisé[e]s, éducation à la justice climatique, environnementalisme intersectionnel, résilience des jeunes, solidarité relationnelle, éthique relationnelle

## Introduction

Climate justice demands that we recognize the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalized communities, while those most responsible tend to be the world's wealthiest (Stapleton, 2019). Predictably, though, the voices of climate activists from marginalized communities are less prominent in media coverage than White Western activists (Lammy, 2020). Greta Thunberg galvanized student climate strikes worldwide (Han & Ahn, 2020; Wynes & Nicholas, 2019) and deserved media attention, but equally important voices of racially minoritized youth activists, such as Isra Hirsi, Vanessa Nakate, and Autumn Peltier, are often left out (Burton, 2019; McFadden, 2020; Rafaely & Barnes, 2020). For instance, the Associated Press cropped Nakate out of a picture where she posed with four White youth activists and later justified the decision by saying the original photo was not "aesthetically" pleasing (Malowa et al., 2020). In spite of ongoing criticism of that cropping, racially minoritized activists are still often ignored (Dahir, 2021; Evelyn, 2020), illustrating how climate injustices intersect with racial injustices.

While research on the climate justice movement (CJM) and youth activism as a whole is growing, much remains unexplored, both in terms of how youth activists can inform climate justice education policies, and the experiences of racially minoritized youth within the movement (Gray, 2023; Grosse, 2019; Neas, 2023; Vamvalis, 2023). This study highlights the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and youth of colour activists aged 18–29 in the CJM in Ontario, Canada. Grounded in relational solidarity and ethical relationality, this research emphasizes the significance of meaningful, reciprocal relationships in understanding the activism of racially minoritized youth. These frameworks guide the analysis by situating youth activism within broader systemic inequalities while highlighting the ethical responsibilities that come with being in relation to one another. Two research questions guided this study: (1) What are the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and racially minoritized youth activists in the climate justice movement? and (2) What influence do these activists believe they have on their communities and schools?

## Youth Activists in the Climate Justice Movement

The CJM has arguably become the most well-known environmental social movement in history (Han & Ahn, 2020). Although there is common messaging within the climate

justice movement for 100% clean energy, keeping fossil fuels in the ground, and holding industrialized countries accountable, the experiences of youth climate activists are *not* homogenous (Bowman, 2020). It is evident from the limited scholarly and grey literature that the voices and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and racially minoritized youth are not given the attention they deserve. Walker (2020) emphasizes the importance of attending to youth responses to climate change within their everyday contexts, particularly outside the Global North, where media coverage and political attention remain limited compared to the high-profile activism of figures such as Greta Thunberg. Walker (2020) also highlights the uneven distribution of global climate strikes, as young people in more affluent and less directly impacted regions often advocate on behalf of those in more vulnerable areas, whose activism is frequently underrecognized. While it is crucial to focus on activists' perspectives from the Global South, the current study specifically addresses the voices of youth of colour *within* predominantly White and Western settings, such as Canada, where their experiences of racism and marginalization still remain critically understudied.

Biswas and Mattheis (2021) argued that climate strikes have been a powerful counterweight to formal education by allowing youth to self-educate and build agency. By analyzing Thunberg's speeches, Holmberg and Alvinus (2020) demonstrated how youth mobilize and perform progressive resistance to demand action. MacKay et al. (2020) interviewed First Nations and Inuvialuit youth from Canada who attended COP24 (also known as the 24th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) and found their participation gave rise to personal growth and the confidence to share their feelings and the impacts of climate change on their communities. Participation in events such as a Conference of the Parties (COP) can be liberating for marginalized youth. Learning occurring within the CJM's numerous organizations for racially minoritized youth is often fundamentally transgressive, allowing these youth to unpack injustices and oppressions while negotiating complex emotions (Grewal et al., 2022). There is, though, a growing concern about the short- and long-term emotional and psychological tolls on young activists—tolls caused by inadequate responses to the climate crisis by those in positions of power, and a lack of education and curricula that help youth understand the climate crisis from a critical lens. As Vamvalis (2023) describes, “not addressing [youth] calls for radical changes to existing systems continues a pattern of fore-closed possibilities that profoundly affect their well-being” (p. 90).

Emotions are deeply tied to structures of power and race, as they emerge from and contribute to the histories and dynamics of oppression and resistance (Ahmed, 2004).

The book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed, 2004) highlights how emotions are not merely personal experiences, but are shaped by social structures and power relations, offering a framework to understand how marginalized communities navigate and resist systemic inequalities. This idea resonates with the ways emotions like rage, hope, guilt, fear, and sorrow are mobilized by, and can help motivate, youth in response to climate injustices (Bright & Eames, 2021; Fine et al., 2023; Klassen & Galway, 2023; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Martiskainen et al., 2020). Climate essayist Mary Heglar asserted that when speaking of capitalism, racism, colonialism, and climate change, experiencing rage and anger should be seen as a normal response (as cited in Burton, 2020). She also problematizes the word “hope” as “such a white concept” (para. 30), one that can function to overwrite the actions of people of colour as they respond to climate injustices out of rage or sorrow. In a similar manner, Ray (2021) argued that climate anxiety is an overwhelmingly White phenomenon, in which there is a tendency for White people to safeguard longstanding privileges before fully acknowledging the impacts of climate change on historically marginalized communities. Karsgaard and Davidson (2023) suggest that by using a decolonial lens, youth can begin to question their responses to climate change and how they may or may not attend to marginalized perspectives. Structures of capitalism, racism, and colonialism shape affective responses to climate change and therefore complicate the positioning of racially marginalized youth in relation to the White mainstream climate movements in the Global North.

Social movements are sites where participants undertake various forms of informal learning. Using the framework of social movement learning and decolonization, Lowan-Trudeau (2017) interviewed 10 Indigenous and allied activists across Canada and revealed complex relationships between and within activist organizations. A critical finding was the importance of looking inward to revitalize Indigenous traditions, highlighting the dual responsibilities of racially minoritized activists who must do the inner work of overcoming internalized oppression while also advocating for their own and their community's rights (Lowan-Trudeau, 2017). While social movements are places where people learn, climate organizations *still* remain overwhelmingly White (Stapleton, 2020), and much of what we know about learning in social movements is viewed through a White lens. Spotting the voices of racially minoritized youth climate justice activists is needed (Stapleton, 2020).

## Climate Justice Education

In recent years youth have been mobilizing, motivated by the injustices in the causes and impacts of climate change. Unfortunately, “education systems lag behind, preoccupied with the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of climate change, rather than engaging it as a social issue in which students themselves are implicated” (Karsgaard & Davidson, 2023, p. 1). Climate change education needs to go beyond the science classroom, shifting toward climate *justice* education (Karsgaard & Davidson, 2023; Monroe et al., 2017; Stapleton, 2019; Trott, 2024a).

The field of climate *justice* education is growing (Bigelow & Dankbar, 2016; Borgerding et al., 2024; Kanbur, 2018; McGregor et al., 2018; Neas, 2023; Trott, 2024a), with many arguing the vital need to integrate climate justice education into K–12 curricula and classrooms (Field et al., 2019; Lowan-Trudeau, 2017; McGregor & Christie, 2021; Reid, 2019; Stapleton, 2019; Trott et al., 2023; Waldron et al., 2019). Wynes and Nicholas (2019) analyzed climate science curricula used in secondary schools across Canada, finding a focus on climate change knowledge with few learning objectives related to the scientific consensus on or solutions to climate change. Field et al. (2023) found uneven and shallow inclusion of climate change topics within Canadian Grade 7–12 curricula, with most instances of inclusion occurring in elective senior secondary courses. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that most Canadians—including educators—lack even *basic* knowledge about climate change (Field et al., 2019; Learning for a Sustainable Future, 2022).

On the policy front, Bieler et al. (2017) looked at 90 climate change education policies across Canada, observing that energy efficiency upgrades for schools dominated. Climate policies often state that the education sector plays a significant role in combating climate change, yet “education policies do not seem to have taken up the challenge” (Bieler et al., 2017, p. 79). Field and Howlett (2023) confirm that policy change is slow. Many scholars contend that climate change education falls short in addressing the deep colonial and capitalist roots of the crisis because education structures rely on the same foundations (Karsgaard & Shultz, 2022).

Cutter-Mackenzie and Rousell (2019) argue that climate justice education can provide a remarkable platform, not only for amplifying racially minoritized youths’ voices, but as a space for the activation of youth political agency within their schools and in the public domain. There is a need for both top-down policy change and bottom-up cultural shifts that could come from valuing grassroots youth activism while recognizing the agency-limiting practices common in today’s formal educational settings (Trott et al., 2023).

Manni and Knehta (2020) found that most secondary students “expressed a lack of opportunities for real action” (p. 18). Action-oriented learning and interdisciplinary learning are needed (Cutter-Mackenzie & Rousell, 2019). There are, however, many challenges in implementing a transformative approach to climate change education. Singh (2021) argued that to centre justice in climate change pedagogy, four dimensions need to be addressed: the scientific-technological, the transdisciplinary, the epistemological, and the psycho-social. One of the first steps is to help students feel empowered by allowing them to be active participants, rather than merely passively regurgitating information (Chen & Liu, 2020; Neas, 2023).

There are clear gaps in the literature on climate activism and climate justice education, evidence of clearly missed opportunities to emphasize the voices of racially minoritized youth activists. The integration of these literatures into climate activism literature, from climate change education, social movement learning, climate-related emotions, and youth agency, suggests some of the inherent complexities of climate justice and youth activism. Understanding the impact of youth activism and how education can help further the cause of equity and decolonization provides us with a dynamic lens for considering what needs to happen in K–12 teaching.

### **Theoretical Framework: Relational Solidarity and Ethical Relationality**

In order to ground this study within a theoretical framework that aligns with the experiences of racially minoritized youth and climate justice, I draw on the concepts of relational solidarity and ethical relationality. I see solidarity as a practice rooted in social justice, and I emphasize both the moral underpinnings of solidarity and its application in dismantling systemic inequalities. It is a dynamic process that bridges ethical, political, and social dimensions to foster genuine engagement and change. Solidarity is frequently discussed in scholarship across various fields including philosophy and religion as a way of disrupting oppression, yet it is challenging to apply in educational contexts. Oto (2023) distinguishes between normative and descriptive aspects of solidarity to highlight a tension in how solidarity is understood and practiced. Normative solidarity refers to what should ideally happen—how people *ought* to support others, based on moral or ethical expectations (e.g., adults thinking how youth should be engaging in activism). In contrast, descriptive aspects of solidarity (e.g., observable features like a sense of identification,

unity, or a shared goal of overcoming adversity) deal with the lived realities and actual practices of solidarity, which are often shaped by systems of oppression and require genuine, risky action to disrupt the status quo (Clay & Turner, 2021; Liou & Literat, 2020). In educational settings, normative ideals can perpetuate power imbalances (e.g., adultism [Biswas & Mattheis, 2021; Trott, 2024c]), as they allow superficial engagement, like claiming allyship, without truly addressing structural oppression.

Gaztambide-Fernández's (2012) pedagogy of solidarity helps to demystify the complexities involved in this term. He emphasizes that both pedagogy and solidarity are relationally bound. Solidarity, at its very core, is relational, "in the sense that no one is in solidarity on their own and is always circumscribed by (1) a particular set of relationships, as well as (2) a specific set of intentions" (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2021, p. 311). In other words, being in solidarity requires intentional focus on the relationships and dynamic entanglements that produce similarities and differences, emphasizing a critical engagement with the conditions influencing our interactions. Solidarity is motivated by a transformative desire to challenge and change these conditions.

Relational solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012), thus, centres on the commitment to decolonization by recognizing and responding to the lived experiences of those who have been colonized and racialized. It allows us to recognize that racially minoritized youth are not only activists but also individuals navigating systems of oppression rooted in colonial histories. In comparison to its counterpart "allyship," which often gets evoked in social movements, solidarity is "more continuous, involved, risky, 'fierce,' and hands-on" (Oto, 2023, p. 535). Solidarity requires the involvement of multiple individuals and relationships as well as a critical interrogation of how systems have structured and shaped interactions between the oppressed and the beneficiaries of oppression (Liou & Literat, 2020; Serriere & Riley, 2024).

Ethical relationality complements and deepens the concept of solidarity by emphasizing the ethical responsibilities inherent in relationships shaped by historical and systemic power imbalances. Donald (2012a), informed by Cree and Blackfoot teachings, explains ethical relationality as "an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to understand more deeply how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other" (p. 103). He further emphasizes the ethical imperative of relationality that requires "attentiveness to the responsibilities that come with a declaration of being in relation" (Donald, 2012b, p. 535).

This involves understanding relationships not just as interactions between individuals, but as engagements deeply embedded within the context of colonial histories and ongoing power dynamics (Donald, 2012c). This theorization emphasizes the importance of relational and ethical obligations in education, highlighting the need for settler-colonial systems, including schools, to address their role in perpetuating inequalities. Guided by these theoretical perspectives, this study explores how racially minoritized youth in the CJM can inform pathways to develop more robust climate justice education, by also fostering solidarity across generations and racial divides. This framework informs the analysis of the findings and connects the participants' experiences to broader systemic issues in climate justice education.

### **Researcher Positionality**

It is essential for us to identify who we are and to situate ourselves within this study. I am Rupinder, a 28-year-old cisgender woman, Sikh, Punjabi, and a first-generation settler Canadian. My background as a science and humanities educator and youth worker influences my approach, as does learning from anti-racism, as well as culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Dei, 1996; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Paul is a 59-year-old cisgender man, White, settler Canadian, and an on-the-street climate change activist and associate professor. He supervised my master's work and helped write this article. Paul comes to climate change through reading and believes we need to move away from capitalism as we decarbonize—and that it cannot happen fast enough. Lakehead University's Thunder Bay campus, where I studied and Paul works, is located on Anishinaabe territory, Fort William First Nation, signatory to the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850.

In many ways, this research has been guided by the frameworks of relational solidarity and ethical relationality, by cultivating reciprocal respect and mutual accountability in the relationship between Paul and I, as well as the relationships between myself and the participants. These principles reflected Paul's effort to support my ideas, without imposing or influencing my direction while ensuring I still felt encouraged. This collaborative process created a space for Paul to learn from my work and experiences, as I simultaneously learned from his institutional knowledge. Maintaining connection through challenges was an integral part of our collaborative journey.

These frameworks also shaped the study's approach, centring dialogue and a recognition of the unique contributions and lived experiences of each participant. For me, the interviewing process was deeply transformative, offering a hopeful model of co-learning, shared agency, and, if you will, a way to *solidarize* (a term used by *Gaztambide-Fernández [2012]*) with one another and the communities I am involved in. As stated by *Gaztambide-Fernández (2012)*, "the pedagogy of solidarity must be taken, not as a solution, but as a mode through which to engage in decolonizing practices" (p. 60). Thus, this research study is an embodiment of solidarity for us.

## Methodology

This qualitative study is exploratory, given that there has been little research conducted previously on the topic. It is a critical narrative-informed inquiry (Pratt & Rosiek, 2021; Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). To understand the experience of racially minoritized youth in the CJM, I sought participants' *stories* about their significant life experiences related to participating in the CJM. This approach aligns with the theoretical framework, as relational solidarity demands recognizing "the complex and sometimes contradictory personal histories that bring us together into treaty relations based on a commitment to decolonization" (*Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 61*), while also acknowledging our participation in, and resistance to, processes of colonization, without making claims to innocence. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of asking *whose stories* get told and *who* listens to those stories. By actively engaging in listening to people's stories and being a member of this community, Rupinder was able to foster connections in a relational way that other research approaches could not facilitate.

## Participants

The call for participants was made on Facebook, Instagram, and via email by reaching out to local grassroots climate justice organizations. Snowball and convenience sampling were employed; I<sup>1</sup> interviewed the respondents who fit the criteria for the study (LeCompte &

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1 Here and going forward, the article is written in the first person through Rupinder's perspective, as she conducted the research under Paul's supervision.

Schensul, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria were: youth, specifically between the ages of 18–29; Black, Indigenous, or a person of colour (i.e., Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, South Asian, bi/multiracial, etc.); high school or post-secondary student; and an active member of a climate justice organization in Ontario, Canada for a minimum of six months. I asked early participants to refer me to other potential participants.

Table 1 provides demographic information for the 15 participants. Three were international students, and one was engaged in local climate activism but was primarily active with a foreign organization. Pseudonyms were used ( $n = 5$ ) unless participants wanted their real names to be used to receive credit for their knowledge.

**Table 1**

*Participant List: Demographic Information*

Name	Age	Gender Identity and Pronouns	Cultural Identity	Time with CJ Organization
Abhay	21	Man (he/him)	South Asian (Sikh)	> 5 years
Annalee	22	Woman (she/her)	Biracial (half Chinese and half White)	> 1 year
Atreyu	20	Indigenous or cultural gender minority (e.g., two-spirit) (he/they)	Indigenous (Anishinaabe Ojibwe) and Punjabi	> 1 year
Aliya	18	Genderfluid, non-binary (she/they)	Indian Canadian	> 1 year
Krissan	28	Man (he/him)	Tamil	6–12 months
Lita	19	Woman (she/her)	Kenyan	6–12 months
Imani	28	Woman (she/her)	Black (West African)	> 1 year
Simran	19	Woman (she/her)	South Asian (Indian)	> 1 year
Shadiya	29	Woman (she/her)	Somali	> 1 year
Jacob	23	Man (he/him)	Indigenous (First Nations)	> 1 year
Gwyneth	20	Non-binary (they/them)	East Asian/Pacific Islander	> 1 year
Malinali	29	Woman (she/her)	Mexican	> 1 year
Gabriela	29	Woman (she/her)	Latin American	> 1 year
Rajbalinder	23	Man (he/him)	South Asian (Sikh)	> 1 year
Farah	29	Non-binary (they/them)	South Asian	6–12 months

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

I used semi-structured interviews and timeline mapping to collect data. Interviews took place between July and October of 2023 via Zoom, and the average interview duration was 90 minutes. Timeline mapping is a visual data collection method that highlights a participant's life events chronologically, with an indication of the most important events (Berends, 2011; Patterson et al., 2012). Before the interview, I provided participants with the interview questions and an empty timeline, asking them to complete it with up to five significant events related to their choice to be active in climate justice, and to mark the year of each event, their age when it happened, and a short description of the event (Buttigieg & Pace, 2013). During the interviews, I asked participants to tell me about their timelines. Other open-ended questions asked during the interview included:

1. What have you learned about climate justice by working with the organization(s) you are a part of?
2. What, if any, challenges have you faced while trying to participate in, or take up leadership roles in, your climate justice work?
3. What kind of impacts do you think you are having in your own community and school?
4. What would you like to see happen in schools related to climate justice?

These questions encouraged youth to reflect on their activism, as well as retrospectively think about their educational experiences in a way that illuminated the systemic barriers and supports influencing their engagement. By exploring what they have learned, the challenges they have faced, and the impacts they aspire to create, the questions directly aligned with the broader research goal of understanding how racially minoritized youth in the CJM navigate and transform systems of oppression. Additionally, asking what they envision for schools allowed for insights into how their lived experiences could inform climate justice educational practices and foster intergenerational and cross-racial solidarity within movements.

The interviews were recorded on Zoom. I transcribed each interview, cleaned the transcriptions, and then sent them to participants to review. This member-checking increased confidence that the participants' intentions were respected and valued (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and gave them some power over their own narrative (Squire, 2008). Five participants made edits to their transcripts, five reviewed the transcripts and stated they were good as is, and five did not respond.

I used thematic content analysis to generate themes from the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by employing both a deductive approach and an inductive approach to create space for other themes to emerge. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo, using both open and axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I conducted open coding of all transcripts first and then merged the codes into a master list of codes derived from all 15 interview transcripts. Using the constant comparative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) I combined codes from the open coding into more comprehensive categories. This master list became the outline of key themes that cut across the data.

## **Findings**

I developed three main themes from the data that highlight the multifaceted experiences of the participants in the CJM: nurturing identity, shaping communities and schools, and forging new pathways for racially minoritized youth readers.

### **Nurturing Identity**

Participants emphasized that their participation in the CJM led to significant personal growth, sharing thoughts on their own identities and their climate-related emotions. Despite facing challenges such as exclusion and racism, their engagement has proven transformative and has cultivated a profound sense of confidence, resilience, and empowerment. Aliya said:

I'm still figuring out my own spirituality, my own connection to my culture. And engaging in the movement for me is what is helping me solve other pieces of my identity as well. So, it's empowering but also healing in a way. I feel like, at times, I've been warped to fit in an existing narrative. They just want a quote or somebody to portray a vision of a perfect activist or something. And so, it's been very frustrating, and that's why I like using social media on my own accounts because I have the freedom to portray myself as imperfectly, or as weirdly, or as confusingly as I want to.

Aliya's account of wanting agency over their own story connects with the way many participants felt about the word "activist" and their identity.

Instead of using the term “climate activist,” a majority of the participants said the term “intersectional environmentalist” (Thomas, 2022) felt more fitting. “Intersectional environmentalist” was the handle of an influential social media account (Instagram, @intersectionalenvironmentalist) at the time, which may have factored into participants’ thinking about how they see themselves and the work they do, as the account was referenced by some participants in the study. Scholarship has similarly identified tensions around the term, “activist”; Fisher (2016) avoided using the term during recruitment because “this is not a universally agreed upon term and because some people are reluctant to self-identify in this way” (p. 233). By contrast, intersectional frameworks have been evident “in the discourses of self-identification among protesters” (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 166), and Fridays for Future—an international, youth-led climate movement—consistently promotes intersectional awareness among its members and the public (Sorice & Dumitrica, 2021). Abhay talked eloquently about what being an intersectional environmentalist meant to him:

Ideally, if I’m an intersectional environmentalist, then I can create climate action in all the spaces of the identities that I’m connected to, right? I feel that I do in many spaces in my life. As an academic, I do. And someone in climate spaces, I do, and in mental health, I’m trying to. In education, I’m trying to. But in hockey, I’m not really doing anything, and I want to in the Sikh community. I think there’s different spaces where climate actions take place. And maybe intersectional environmentalism isn’t about doing everything. But it’s about doing things that are connected to you.

A big part of the participants’ climate justice journey also involves healing and understanding the ways in which emotions play a big role in trying to understand climate justice (Vamvalis, 2023). Malinali, who has been working on emotional tools for activists, talked about how emotional work needs to be done to be able to listen to other groups. She feels that White people in powerful positions on global platforms are often the ones not doing that work. She said:

When BIPoC<sup>2</sup> [meaning Black, Indigenous, or people of colour] groups are trying to tell them [meaning White people in powerful positions] we need something different, they get very defensive. And there needs to be a lot of healing and learning to listen to each other in a more authentic way instead of just going, like, “Oh, you’re attacking me!”

This resonates with Wong et al. (2024), who highlight how people of colour often encounter exclusionary practices and defensive reactions in both online and offline climate activism spaces, as their perspectives challenge dominant norms and power dynamics. Thus, not only is it on racially minoritized youth to do the internal work and build the capacity to sustain themselves for longevity in the CJM, but they must also deal with people who have not done that work themselves (see also Lowan-Trudeau, 2017). This highlights the critical role that education could play in fostering ethical relationality and solidarity by teaching people about structural injustices and the ways in which individuals and communities are unevenly bound by histories and systems of oppression, as Donald (2012a) describes. Moreover, educating about these injustices can create pathways for bridging that prioritize remediation and healing over defensiveness, equipping both privileged and marginalized groups to engage more authentically with climate justice.

There is a broad range of negative climate emotions that participants expressed while sharing stories about their participation in climate justice organizations and even in their educational careers, including anger, rage, and climate anxiety. They described feeling annoyed with the capitalist system, cynical about current politics and things not changing fast enough, guilty for not taking enough action, angry at universities for not teaching about climate justice, and unworthy when lacking knowledge.

Aliya talked about wanting to be angry at the state of the world but also recalled constantly censoring herself during an interview on a podcast so that she would not play into the stereotype of “the angry woman of colour.” While anger and rage can be impor-

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2 While the acronym “BIPoC” is used to emphasize intersectionality, it is important to acknowledge the critiques surrounding its usage. Ajele (2021) and other scholars argue that the term can sometimes obscure the unique experiences of Black and Indigenous peoples (McGuire, 2023). Although I use the term in this study sparingly, alongside the terms “racially minoritized” (see Black et al., 2023), “racialized,” and “youth of colour” to reflect the shared struggles of marginalized communities, I recognize the importance of disaggregating the experiences of different racialized groups. Future research should explore these distinctions in greater depth to provide a more nuanced understanding of how different communities experience climate injustices.

tant for instigating climate action, racially minoritized activists displaying their emotions risk being portrayed negatively by the media. This echoes the criticism Greta Thunberg has faced for being “angry” and emotional, with detractors suggesting she conform to the image of a “normal” teenager who relaxes and has fun (see Cillizza, 2019), highlighting a wider feminist critique of how emotions are weaponized to undermine women activists. Intersectionally, the experiences of racialized women like Aliya underscore how stereotypes such as the “angry woman of colour” compound these critiques, demanding conformity to both racialized and gendered expectations. They are pressured to conform to a predetermined image of who they should be. Such stereotyping is deeply rooted in the “white saviour complex and its legacy of erasure” (McFadden, 2020, p. 2).

Another emotion that some participants addressed was climate anxiety. Atreyu connected their climate anxiety to hearing about the “timeline”—the small number of years to fix things—which can feed into climate doom-ism. Gwyneth talked about anxieties growing up that related to capitalism: “I remember experiencing severe dread on the basis that I realized there’s no such thing as sustainable consumption.”

Kleres and Wettergren (2017) also found that for young climate activists, fear can lead to action. Negative climate emotions also stemmed from the types of barriers participants faced, some of which included money, stress, and managing multiple responsibilities. On top of experiences of racism and challenges faced on the systemic level, racially minoritized youth expressed being spread thinly when engaging in volunteer initiatives, especially when taking on leadership roles. Shadiya mentioned the importance of finding balance, saying “A lot of us are doing the best we can with what we have. But sometimes you feel despondent. Like, hey, what we’re doing, is it meaningful? Is anything actually happening?”

Some participants also doubted themselves sometimes, which Aliya captured:

I really struggle with taking leadership roles in areas of climate justice as I feel like I am not worthy of that role, that I am not deserving, knowledgeable, or experienced enough. There’s a lot of self-doubt that I have as a person but also as an activist of colour. There’s a lot of doubt placed on us. A lot of my struggles have been internal, but also, there have been White activists who haven’t agreed that I have the most experience—or have seen this [her taking on leadership roles] as a form of affirmative action, even if I earned that spot.

Similarly, scholars have begun to shed light on the different levels of racism that youth of colour experience within the CJM, individually and systemically (Barnes, 2022; Gray, 2023), and climate activists of colour have reported tension in fitting into climate activist groups (Wong et al., 2024).

Seven participants talked about recognizing their own privilege, including studying in the environmental and sustainability field, never having had to experience any exceptionally devastating climate conditions, and being able-bodied, and with enough spare time, to attend climate strikes and protests. Addressing issues of ableism and classism within climate justice education is essential, as systemic barriers related to disability and socio-economic status often limit access to participation in movements and climate action initiatives. Malinali articulated her positionality: “I’ve learned a lot around acknowledging how I can be both the oppressed and oppressor. And that’s something that we don’t usually talk about...you always have to be aware.” This is similar to Curnow and Helferty’s (2018) emphasis on remaining “unreconciled” as settlers in the Global North, which requires us to “reveal ourselves as vulnerable ‘not knowers’ who are willing to examine our dual positions as colonizer-perpetrators and colonizer-allies” (Regan, 2010, p. 28).

All 15 participants expressed many positive climate emotions associated with their activism, including feeling hopeful, empowered, and encouraged. Many talked about feeling more confident. Imani said, “I am learning to be more confident in myself, in my skills and my knowledge.” Having confidence feeds into feeling empowered. MacKay et al. (2020) found that the participation of Indigenous youth from so-called Canada<sup>3</sup> in COP24 led to personal growth and increased confidence.

Engagement in events like a Conference of the Parties can serve as a liberating experience for BIPoC youth who traditionally have had limited opportunities to participate in such global forums. Simran spoke of how seeing other youth engage pushed her to be more radical and intentional in the actions she takes, in spite of experiencing difficult emotions:

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3 “So-called Canada” is a phrase used in activist circles, academia, and social justice movements to challenge the legitimacy and colonial history of the country. It’s a way of acknowledging that Canada’s existence is a product of colonialism and that it doesn’t represent a natural or pre-existing entity. For more, please see: [https://www.waterwatchers.ca/what\\_s\\_up\\_with\\_so\\_called\\_canada#:~:text=Because%20this%20land%20was%20never,of%20Indigenous%20peoples%20who%20were](https://www.waterwatchers.ca/what_s_up_with_so_called_canada#:~:text=Because%20this%20land%20was%20never,of%20Indigenous%20peoples%20who%20were)

It's pretty easy to feel overwhelmed with the scale of it all. You're kinda like, well, I'm one person, and I'm not even an adult yet, what can I do? And sometimes it feels like you're somehow in the wrong because you're protesting against these big companies.... We have the right to be heard!

In examining the spectrum of climate emotions experienced by participants, it becomes clear that the ways in which mental health and climate justice intersect is an important field of study (Barnwell & Wood, 2022; Clayton, 2020; Hickman et al., 2021; Ojala et al., 2021; Vamvalis, 2023). For racially minoritized youth in this study, participation in the CJM elicited many emotions, prompted reflections on positionality, and ultimately fostered personal growth that influenced their self-perception and identity. Transitioning from a sense of doom to an awareness of their own privilege while gaining confidence in themselves helped them realize that the climate crisis is something that cannot be solved on their own but may be tackled by working together. Connection to others is especially important when engaging in work that feels isolating at times. Schools could become places that help foster this connection.

## **Shaping Communities and Schools**

This theme addresses how racially minoritized activists perceive their influence in their communities and schools. The perceived impacts participants shared included universities agreeing to divest from fossil fuels, initiatives for the Greenbelt that led to the reversal of the decision to use it for subdivisions (Draaisma, 2023), increasing awareness and knowledge leading to change within participants' families and communities, and the growth of school clubs.

Participants talked about having an influence in schools and being able to mentor other youth. Rajbalinder helped start an eco-club in his high school and reflected on what it has become:

This was our first student-led club which was environmentally focused. The first year, we had around 30 or 40 people applying to be a part of the club. The year after I graduated, they had over 200 students applying to be a part of it. Maybe just having this platform will ignite some interest. And actually, it has. I've seen some people who are a few years younger than me because

they got involved with this eco team at their high school, [and] they're now pursuing major volunteer opportunities in the environmental field. Some people are even turning that into their careers.

Similar to Trott's (2021) finding, actions of young people have the potential to generate a widespread ripple effect. This shows the agency of racially marginalized students, in contrast to deficit and victim perspectives which are, more often than not, seen throughout research and in the media.

At the post-secondary level, five participants talked about fossil fuel divestment protests, occupations, sit-ins, and pushing for the removal of RBC banking institutions from campuses, due to the bank's investment in fossil fuel projects and its lack of engagement with Indigenous communities. Lita described how her university divested from fossil fuels after their occupation: "That really did come as a shock that [the university] had divested, and it was just like, wow, they see us, they care, and our voices are being heard." Seeing changes being made leads to feeling more hopeful, which can fuel further action.

Another success participants addressed was the Greenbelt in Ontario. Six participants noted how the Ontario government reversing its decision to open the Greenbelt for development felt like a small win. Two participants had joined the Green Party to help raise awareness by getting people to sign petitions. Atreyu helped make a mini-documentary:

We filmed at different locations; Indigenous locations that had historical significance or were important environmental regions. I did voiceovers for it and talked about my experience and why the Greenbelt needs to be conserved.... Seeing myself on the screen like that, I'm really glad that I've been a part of certain organizations and do the work and pass along information.

All participants spoke about how one of the key takeaways from their climate justice journey has been about community-building and networking. Lita said, "I've gotten most of my friends and community from climate organizing." Many participants emphasized that finding the right group of people when engaging in climate justice work helped sustain them. Gwyneth captured the importance of community by stating, "I really do think that there is hope just as long as you cultivate the right people to ensure that hope has longevity."

Krissan reminds us why networking is a way to help amplify climate justice work: "By building small networks, whenever we need to advocate for a policy, we can,

instead of knocking on 500 doors, we can just talk to these five groups and have the same impact.” Networking has been one way that participants have cultivated strong support systems. As an antidote to negative experiences and associated emotions, working alongside other youth has helped participants to heal. MacKay et al. (2020) also found that engaging in climate activism provides marginalized youth with an opportunity to connect with networks and with their culture, potentially enhancing their well-being. Many participants in the current study also emphasized how crucial having support from adults, such as educators and professors, had been. Having that kind of support helps to validate their work while they control their own initiatives.

When it came to discussing what schools should be doing, given their experiences in the CJM, all 15 participants had much to say. Approximately half said they had learned about climate justice and cases of environmental racism in their post-secondary education, often in an elective course. Annalee said:

We have all this Western science take on environmentalism for three years, and then, now you're in fourth year, you have the right to have some electives. And now we finally have a couple of Indigenous professors in the department, and it's really important that students have the understanding from the beginning. Because there are a lot of students who actually want to learn about this stuff. They just don't have the opportunity to learn.

Despite evidence that possessing environmental knowledge does not automatically translate into environmental action (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Neas, 2023), many Canadian provinces fail to move beyond climate science in their curricula (Field et al., 2023). This diminishes the opportunity for students to learn about climate justice. From their experiences with different organizations and reflecting on their school and post-secondary experiences, participants in this study called for more inquiry projects, as well as land-based, experiential, and interdisciplinary learning. They also identified the need to decolonize the curriculum. When asked about the current state of schools, Farah said:

I don't think there's a lot of change curriculum-wise. I think whether it's Land Back or climate justice, whether you're talking about anti-racism stuff, we're not teaching them young enough, and we're not being radical enough in what we're teaching. It's grassroots organizations that are making a lot

of difference. Schools could have a big role to play if they were willing to push the boundaries and be radical enough to actually discuss it from a holistic Land Back perspective, if ever there was the push to have it actually included in regulated curriculums.

Numerous scholars in the field contend that there is a crucial need to incorporate climate justice education into K–12 curricula and classrooms (e.g., Field et al., 2023; Lowan-Trudeau, 2017; Reid, 2019; Stapleton, 2019; Waldron et al., 2019).

Most participants noted that change is not happening fast enough, or at the level required to help new generations gain the knowledge and critical thinking skills they need. This resonates with Karsgaard and Davidson (2023). Furthermore, many participants stressed the need for youth to learn outdoors through hands-on activities and inquiry projects. Atreyu explained the impact of inquiry projects while growing up: “The only time I really felt like I could learn and do impactful work in middle school would be through inquiry projects, because it was very community-oriented, and we educated parents as well as students.” This relates to Trott’s (2024b) finding of the dual roles that youth play as “learners of the movement” and “climate justice educators,” bringing awareness to both adult and youth audiences through workshops, school visits, teach-ins, curriculum development, interviews, and much more.

On implementing outdoor learning, Annalee reminds us that it is critical that schools are “ensuring that people have equitable access to the outdoors, and that people are creating those connections to the environment.” School boards should heed the directives of racially minoritized youth climate activists by incorporating climate justice education into curricula, with a focus on intersectionality and community-based approaches. This will be further explored in the Discussion section.

## **Forging New Pathways for Racially Minoritized Youth Leaders**

This theme explores the significance of youth taking on leadership roles and fostering more racially minoritized representation, founding climate justice organizations, and the need for systemic change. Participants described experiences with racism in the CJM and reflected on ways in which future generations of youth will have more opportunities. Imani talked about creating a workshop series through the climate justice organization she is working with in order to “help BIPoC youth get a foot in the door and reduce barriers for

them.” Creating opportunities for younger generations was a common topic, especially when thinking about creating a more equitable movement. While overcoming challenges, Aliya reflected on her positive experience beginning as an activist:

I saw on Instagram there’s a strike coming up in a couple of months. That’s something I’m passionate about. I should volunteer, even if it’s something small like passing out hand sanitizer. I ended up accidentally becoming one of the coordinators for it. It was a very nonchalant process. I think that’s what was so good. It should be easy for you to get involved. And that’s how it should be structured. It’s also empowering to see people from different places engage in the movement in all these different ways.

Participants stated the need for youth to be in spaces where they are valued. Relationships cannot be transactional; they must be based on authenticity (Donald, 2012a). Grosse (2019) argued that four key values—relationships, accessibility, intersectionality, and community—facilitate movement-building. These four values were apparent in the current study.

Participants explained some of the ways they are inspiring the next generations of young people by sharing their experiences with them. Atreyu talked about a specific moment when they felt like a leader, speaking at a teach-in:

[I was] stressing the urgency of the crisis, and why Indigenous voices need to be centred and just talking about my experience, and how I was pressured to conform to things and not talk about my Indigeneity. It was definitely very engaging for students as well.

Being able to talk openly about one’s experiences with the younger generation was mentioned by many participants. Rajbalinder acknowledged the need for youth to see people in places of leadership who look like themselves:

Connecting with youth is very important. And just having someone speak from the same background as you is very powerful. I recently spoke at the Khalsa school [a religious Sikh school] in Brampton about my environmental story and environmental careers that they can pursue. For them to see someone already in the environmental field will show them that this is something that they can do as well, right?

Regarding role modelling and leadership, five participants had founded their own climate justice organizations. Two decided to start their own organizations after working with political campaigns or their municipal government's environmental advisory board. They wanted the freedom to put more pressure on local governments to hold them accountable, compared to working within their restricted policies.

Krissan founded an organization in 2022, and cited wanting to:

Get non-political people who care about climate change involved, because they don't know who to trust, and building a group of people who would be more willing to look at the policies being pushed and engage with it. We can pressure politicians and do better advocacy for our communities.

Two other participants founded their organizations to focus on youth resources, specifically distributing those resources and providing safe spaces for youth to mobilize.

Starting climate justice organizations that are focused on bringing youth together, especially from underrepresented populations, was one of the most exciting parts of hearing participants' stories of overcoming challenges and leading the way for other racially minoritized youth. Abhay started his organization based on the word "connection":

[My organization] started when I came back from the Arctic. I was overwhelmed with a lot of emotion. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with all the experiences that I'd had, but I knew that word that I mentioned earlier, connection, was a word that I was holding on to from that experience. The framework that we sort of built was moving young people from a place of apathy to empathy to action. And so, it's been about six years now of building up, and it's cool to look back at the evolution of the organization. I started it as a project of connecting young people to talk about climate change and mental health.

Participants who started their own climate justice organizations—Abhay, Krissan, Malinalli, Atreyu, and Rajbalinder—are embodying inclusive activism by incorporating and amplifying underrepresented voices at the centre of their work. Their work relates to Kanbur's (2018) recommendation that climate justice education be intra- and inter-generatio-

nal and speaks to how the movement facilitates intergenerational solidarities (Lam & Trott, 2024). Krissan implores younger people to begin their own initiatives and organizations:

A lot of students could start their own initiatives and get a sense of leadership and build their own micro-communities, especially with things like the youth vote being so low. [I also encourage youth to] participate in local nature stewarding groups that already exist and get a sense of how local change works.

Four participants talked about the importance of knowing when to take a step back and listen instead of taking the lead. When asked about the kinds of roles they see themselves taking in terms of leadership and even being an ally, Farah said:

I would consider myself an aspiring accomplice. I think the word ally is actually an insult, and it's not for me to say whether I am an ally or an accomplice. It's up to other people to say that toward me; it's not a label that I could put on myself. I would say specifically since high school, I've been very aware of taking that back seat, not necessarily for Indigenous sovereignty reasons; it started as burnout and as an examination of my own leadership style and what kind of leader I want to be.

Whether in the back seat or leading from the driver's seat, it is important for racially minoritized youth to have spaces that are accessible and to have platforms that are centring diverse narratives. Taken together, participants called for systemic change and noted that things are not changing fast enough. For Atreyu, this is what climate justice means:

It really is about deconstructing the systems we live in and finding alternative ways, like radical futurism and really just creating the future, recreating the environments that we ancestrally grew up with, but also like the ways that we can just live and exist in society in a sustainable way, and a lot of people don't want to hear that.

Participants called for deconstructing systems and working within systems to make change from the inside out. As Krissan suggests,

One thing I tell people when I'm like, oh, you wanna fix the climate crisis? Well, we gotta fix our electoral system through proportional representation. Because we can't change the system if we keep electing people who only represent the 30% of people who aren't impacted by climate change.

Representation matters in all facets of our society, and participants in this study were very clear on that. For Malinali, systemic change means not only deconstructing systems or changing them from within, but also emphasizing degrowth:

I feel like the climate movement is still at a point where some people are still going for the idea that we can have a very technological and industrialized future without polluting and without making climate change worse. And there's the other perspective of frontline communities saying we don't need that much. Thank you. We need to degrow.

Participants, in many ways, are creating opportunities for others.

Taking the themes together, the intersectional activism of racially minoritized youth, the influence they are having in their communities and schools, and their work in facilitating pathways for others, one can conclude that they indeed lead multi-dimensional lives with justice being integral to their work.

## **Discussion**

### **Linking Pedagogy of Solidarity, Climate Justice Education, and Activism**

In recent years, the role of youth activism in addressing climate change has received growing attention. Scholars such as Neas (2023) emphasize the importance of understanding how formal climate education influences young activists, while others such as McGimpsey et al. (2023) explore the tensions youth face between activism and traditional educational structures. We set out to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and racially minoritized youth activists in the climate justice movement? and (2) What influence do these activists believe they have on their communities and schools?

Gaztambide-Fernández's (2012) pedagogy of solidarity and Donald's (2012c) ethical relationality emphasize decolonization efforts that recognize the interconnected but distinct positions people occupy in relation to colonial and racial structures, and suggest that these varying experiences can contribute to collective solidarity when understood relationally. For racially minoritized youth in the CJM, activism is not just about addressing environmental challenges—it is also about dismantling the systemic inequities that define their lives. This requires educational reforms that honour relational responsibility, focusing on cultivating inclusive spaces where people with diverse perspectives can collaborate without demanding sameness (Kerr & Adamov Ferguson, 2021).

Networks play a crucial role in fostering relational solidarity by bridging differences while pursuing shared goals. Participants' stories demonstrate how their connections with peers, mentors, and organizations sustain their activism and build collective agency. For example, networks not only amplify advocacy efforts, as mentioned by Krissan, but also foster a sense of belonging and hope amidst challenges, as illustrated by Gwyneth's reflections on cultivating "the right people to ensure that hope has longevity." These connections reflect Donald's (2012a) call for ethical relationality, which requires individuals to "be responsible in all of our relations" (Kerr & Adamov Ferguson, 2021, p. 708). This deliberate and thoughtful community-building strengthens and fosters solidarity.

Moreover, adult allies play an integral role in fostering and supporting these networks. At the same time, these relationships can highlight power imbalances, as adultism may manifest in the form of adults unintentionally dominating decision making or prioritizing their perspectives over youth voices. As participants noted, having educators, professors, and mentors validate their work and provide guidance enhances their ability to lead initiatives while controlling their own efforts. Though this tension exists, it is crucial for adults to remain cognizant of these power imbalances and to engage meaningfully by creating equitable partnerships that honour youth autonomy and leadership. Serriere and Riley (2024) describe diverse ways in which adults can show solidarity with youth, such as creating spaces for activism, sharing access to institutional resources, and maneuvering through systems that youth often find difficult to navigate. Ultimately, such partnerships and networks exemplify relational solidarity by weaving connections across differences—be they generational, cultural, or organizational—toward the shared goal of climate justice (Kanbur, 2018; Lam & Trott, 2024). This networking is not only a mechanism for advocacy, but also a pathway for healing and sustaining hope. It mirrors transitive and

creative dimensions of solidarity (see Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012), offering a model of working in responsible relationships that prioritizes well-being, mutual respect, and collective flourishing.

This theoretical lens invites and offers a pathway for educators to engage meaningfully with climate justice by centring Indigenous and racialized perspectives in their pedagogies, as well as perspectives from those marginalized by socio-economic status or disability. For instance, Atreyu's experience at the teach-in demonstrated how centring Indigenous voices in climate discussions creates a space where alternative ways of knowing and being can challenge dominant Eurocentric narratives (Karsgaard & Shultz, 2022). Such approaches foster respect for diverse worldviews and model what solidarity in climate justice education might look like—an education that is grounded in relational accountability, deep listening, and mutual recognition.

One of the main challenges facing racially minoritized youth leaders is the gap between their activism and the structures of formal education. While participants in the study demonstrated significant leadership in climate justice, their perspectives revealed a disconnect between educational institutions and the support systems needed to nurture them. For example, Imani's work with climate justice workshops aimed at reducing barriers for racially minoritized youth highlights the need for more accessible educational spaces that prioritize diversity and representation. This suggests that current educational policies are insufficient in addressing the unique needs of racially minoritized students and underscores the need for reform that aligns with these relational approaches.

By addressing this disconnect, educational institutions can foster solidarity that acknowledges the embodied experiences and lived realities of BIPoC students; amplifies the voices of those most marginalized; addresses intersecting social identities such as ability, class, and gender; and nurtures the collective well-being necessary for implementing climate justice education. This, in turn, creates an educational framework that fully embodies relational solidarity, ethical relationality, and fosters collective well-being that Sultana (2024) describes well here:

[Decolonial cultural praxis insists upon] bearing witness to harm and violence but accepting on their terms, the lived experiences and testimonials of self and family members, of kin and ancestors, among those subjected to coloniality. This process validates and gives agency to the enunciating, embo-

died, and knowing subjects whose lived experiences, praxis, and cosmologies matter. It involves deep listening through the roars, whispers, and silences that exist. Through such processes, ethics of care, care networks, and prioritizing collective well-being instead of only individual well-being become more clarified. This accounts for embodied, ecological, economic, cultural, and political safety from harm and fosters flourishing. Healing the colonial wound through transgressive love and solidarity becomes possible. (p. 11)

### **Recommendations for Educational Systems and Policy Makers**

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for educational policy and practice. There is a need for climate justice education that goes beyond scientific knowledge and incorporates intersectional, systemic analysis of climate justice issues (Leite, 2024; Stein, 2024; Trott, 2024a; Vamvalis, 2023), and, as our findings suggest, that is grounded in ethical relationality and relational solidarity. Schools must create spaces where racialized youth feel empowered to lead and share their unique perspectives. One way to achieve this is through curricula that not only include racially minoritized voices but also centre their lived experiences in discussions about climate justice. Neas (2023) emphasizes that in order to re-imagine climate education, it must be “focused on meaning-making and building critical consciousness” (p. 1844). Schools should provide professional development for educators on anti-racist and decolonial pedagogies that allow them to engage with the complexities of race, identity, and climate justice. This includes teaching about the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism, capitalism, and environmental racism on climate injustices (Sloan Morgan et al., 2023).

Schools should adopt project-based learning models that allow students to engage directly with climate activism. This includes creating participatory learning environments where students are encouraged to engage in activism as a legitimate form of learning and where youth leadership is recognized as an essential part of the educational process (Trott, 2024b). Participants such as Abhay described how his educational experience did not adequately prepare him for the complexities of climate leadership. Schools can provide more hands-on opportunities for students, allowing them to apply their knowledge to real-world challenges. This experiential learning approach could foster the next generation of climate leaders by providing students with the skills and networks needed to

initiate systemic change. Project-based and land-based learning connect to ethical relationality and solidarity by grounding education in collaborative, place-based experiences that foster mutual responsibility, deepen relationships across differences, and promote collective care for both communities and the environment.

### **The Importance of Youth-Led Climate Justice Organizations**

The experiences of participants who founded their own climate justice organizations demonstrate the transformative potential of youth leadership. For Abhay, starting an organization allowed him to channel his emotions into meaningful action, moving from a place of apathy to empathy and, ultimately, to leadership. This shift from passive learning to active engagement is critical in fostering a sense of agency among racially minoritized youth. By creating spaces where young people can come together to address climate issues, these organizations not only provide valuable resources and support but also challenge the status quo of the CJM.

The work of these youth-led organizations embodies inclusive activism, where the voices of marginalized communities are amplified and centred, leading to the kinds of solidarities that Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) describes. Schools can offer mentorship programs, seed funding for student projects, and partnerships with local organizations to help students build their own climate justice networks. Policy makers could promote partnerships between schools and BIPoC-centred organizations to foster stronger community ties and create opportunities for experiential learning outside the classroom. These partnerships can help bridge the gap between activism and formal education, ensuring that students' experiences in climate justice are recognized and validated.

### **Future Directions and Limitations**

Future research can explore the specific calls for action and systemic change, especially for educational institutions, made by racially minoritized youth. Within settler colonial settings such as Canada, colonialism, capitalism, and inequitable forms of violence are interdependent, reinforcing each other to sustain climate injustices. Youth may be more cognizant of these complex connections, yet they continue to face discouragement when trying to engage in climate spaces (Sloan Morgan et al., 2023).

Research gaps persist when it comes to centring the voices of racially minoritized youth. An examination of racialized youth voices across different geographic locations (including Northern communities) and different gender identities is needed to introduce additional perspectives to an issue that is saturated with Western, White, colonial viewpoints. While Canadian youths' climate emotions have been surveyed (Galway & Field, 2023), there remains a considerable need for additional research in this domain, including specifically with racially minoritized youth climate activists. As well, the ways in which these youth are specifically finding and accessing different support systems needs further study. Longitudinal studies of racially minoritized climate activists examining whether their career choices are in professional activism or transforming the economy would be another fascinating inquiry.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and the geographical boundary of Ontario, which limits the generalizability of the work. Participant responses were also recorded at one fixed point in time, and while climate journeys continue to evolve over time, participants may also change their opinions with more experience and with engagement with more organizations, especially newer ones that centre racialized voices.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study highlights the need for systemic changes in educational policies to support and learn from the leadership and activism of racially minoritized youth in the CJM. Drawing on the concepts of relational solidarity and ethical relationality, this study emphasizes the importance of creating educational spaces that are inclusive and actively engage with the colonial histories that underpin climate injustices. By centring the voices of racially minoritized youth, schools can foster a more equitable and effective climate justice education.

Beyond just climate strikes, racially minoritized youth are actively involved in community-building, policy advocacy, and education, intentionally participating in spaces where they can effectively utilize their diverse positionalities in their activism. While experiencing a range of climate emotions, youth of colour gain empowerment through their work by way of local actions and building networks. Their commitment to both internal reflexivity and external "activism," including community and school engagement and the establishment of their own organizations, underscores the robust steps they are taking toward a progressive and livable future.

Life trajectories via timeline mapping as a data collection technique allowed participants to reflect on their early start, choosing and attending specific post-secondary programs, and engaging in community work while also maintaining a job, attending climate strikes, doing the internal work of reflecting and healing, and educating others. This study helps to demystify the challenges BIPoC youth face in the CJM and the layers of intersections that these youth live within in their daily lives. We can no longer ignore the constant, pervasive injustices occurring around us. Racially minoritized youth climate activists are pushing back and working for justice. It is time we listened to them.

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