

Jac Clayton – Aronson Fellowship Deliverables

The climate crisis is scary.

My first time learning about what I now known as climate change was in elementary school. I remember sitting in the back corner of the classroom “library” flipping through one of the kids’ national geographic magazines. I chose that particular one because I liked the photo of the polar bear on the front. Flipping through pictures of arctic animal falling into ice, I read about how the world is getting warmer and the colder habitats are slowly vanishing. This made me sad because I wanted the polar bears to have a home, but at that age I was not able to make the connection that the same warming that is affecting the polar bears would come to affect me too.

Obviously, my perception of climate change in elementary school was very remedial and situational, but the point still holds true, I don’t remember when the world wasn’t dying. I think most people in my generation feel this way and it’s even more obvious to the generations coming after us. “Climate anxiety” and “eco-depression” are terms coined by Glen Albrecht circa 2011 and are defined as “a debilitating worry associated with climate change and uncertainty about the unprecedented risks to humans and other species”(Albrecht2011). As a generation, we had no control over the decisions to rely so heavily on fossil fuels, we did not place infrastructure that trapped our communities in an infinite cycle of car reliance, we did not instill this deep need to consume and consume faster into our larger culture, but we have no choice but to deal with the issues that all of those things have created. The anxiety in our inability to quickly fix all of those issues often leads to an intense burn out and incredible apathy in young people who don’t feel as if they have the skills or audience to make an impactful change. Some adults are seeing eco-depression in young people and thinking that the solution is to “protect” them by not teaching

about it, removing it from curriculums, and discouraging young people to talk about our fears and their failures. Because of this I have experienced a number of people in my generation not even seeing the point in creating solutions since these issues seem inevitable.

I began my research project with a continuous, series of thoughts and experiences and all I have at the current moment that led into a list of questions that I am nowhere near qualified to answer:

- What do we do?
- How do we make any significant steps toward change when much of the “solutions” are focused on individual actions like recycling or creating new products for consumption like buying hybrid cars?
- How do we make significant change when the money that drives our political forces is coming from industries who make their income harming the planet?
- How do we teach young people to work towards mitigating these harms without hurting themselves in the process?
- How do we mitigate the harms that it will do on young people’s stamina and mental health because of the increased access that we have to information and news?
- How do we use this access to our advantage in creating change?
- How do we not allow the perceived “access” that the internet gives us to limit in person action and tangible change?
- What is actually in our hands and not the hands of the people in charge - government officials, CEOs of corporations etc?

I read a quote back when I first started this project from Gus Speth who is an environmental lawyer and co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council, he said, “I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought with 30 years of good science we could address those problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists don’t know how to do that.”(Speth2013) My mother is a teacher, the thing you will hear about from all teacher’s kids is that a lot of us feel like teaching is a big genetic. We grew up in and around the classroom and it just sort of comes to us through osmosis or something, Being a teacher’s kid taught me one thing is true without a shadow of a doubt - Education can be transformative; collaboration can make you feel part of something bigger than yourself. At the root of solution making is education. When young people are given the freedom, the opportunity, the trust, and the encouragement to do cool things, they will do cool things. At the end of the day - the climate crisis is one of humanities greatest challenges, but through education, collaboration, and unwavering determination, we can create a generation of people who are creative problem solvers, are interested in working together, who have a better understanding of the cyclical nature of learning, and that is my hope for the future.

Know to Grow is a program that gives students the opportunity to ideate, build, and execute large scale functional arts and science projects that combat the climate crisis in public space. This student led curriculum teaches about collaborative decision making, leadership, critical thinking, and problem solving through tangible project execution. It is built on the core values of “things you must know to continue to grow” which are as follows: critical thinking, mindfulness, compassion, creative problem solving, humility, and confidence. Acquiring and

strengthening these qualities in every one of our youths is truly what will empower them to transform the future. Thematically the initiatives are focused on healthy and productive conversations and tangible action in environmental issues. This program serves as a platform for mutual aid, fostering dialogue around pressing environmental topics while actively engaging with design thinking, problem solving, and social justice on a local level. By placing students at the forefront of these initiatives, we aim to cultivate confidence in sharing their stories and the desire to enact meaningful change in their own communities. Rooted in public spaces such as sidewalks, parks and transit stations, this program prioritizes accessibility and functionality. It also provides opportunities for students to be the educators, engaging their families and communities in important conversations. This approach embodies the idea of “ground up education”.

Ground up education is a revolutionary concept that attempts to disrupt the hierarchical structures and limited knowledge channels in traditional education. Drawing inspiration from grassroots movements who thrive on self-organization and community driven action, ground up education seeks to foster a culture of shared learning, responsibility and collective knowledge creation. In contrast to conventional teacher-student transmission models, ground up education champions a decentralized approach where learning flows not lonely from teachers but also peer to peer and through self-discovery. In this program teachers assume the role of facilitators guiding and nurturing student led exploration and exchange of ideas. This excites children to the idea of being a teacher and encourages them to take their learning home to their parents families and communities introducing new ideas and perspectives into the lives of the adults around them. Children are the best teachers of their parents, they understand the language, cultural context, and personality that will assist in the exchange of new ideas and children and young people have

the capability to influence their communities on a much grander scale than they are given credit for.

The curriculum is built on a framework that references scaffolding infrastructure, where it encourages facilitators to build a specific curriculum around the core values of the program as well as the specific needs of the students and their community. This type of program is not one size fits all, so building a framework allows for intentional customization while still prioritizing the integrity of the student outcomes. The program is structured to be very collaborative with local environmentalists, teachers, scientists, engineers, government organizations, and businesses rooting the project in the current work and expertise in the local area. Through scheduled teach ins, workshops, and check-ins throughout the program students are immersed in the knowledge of local professionals. Success in this program looks like a tangible intervention that addresses pressing environmental problems in the community, real experience for students, not only working with peers, but in Environmental Studies, Math, Engineering, Architecture, Design Principles, and Leadership. Success is evident in the level of community engagement and involvement generated by the project and by the individual students. Throughout the program students are able to reflect on their personal growth and understanding key areas. Success extends beyond the duration of the project as students continue to be actively involved in environmental advocacy and community work. Ultimately Know to Grow represents an innovative model for education and action, inspiring students to envision a sustainable future and equipping them with the skills to bring that vision to life.

Throughout my Parsons thesis this past year, I have been focused on honing the actual idea and creating systems around it, while next year during my Lang thesis I hope to continue to work on this project and create some sort of trial workshop or condensed course that can act as a

case study for this type of program positioning me to possibly move forward with this project post grad.

Works Cited -

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