



Climate Anxiety and Its Relationship With Environmental Education and Activism

Camille Andrew*, Program on the Environment, University of Washington

Site Supervisors: Kristen Attebery, University of Washington Bothell, Stephan Classen, Cascadia College

Faculty Advisor: Gary Handwerk, Program on the Environment



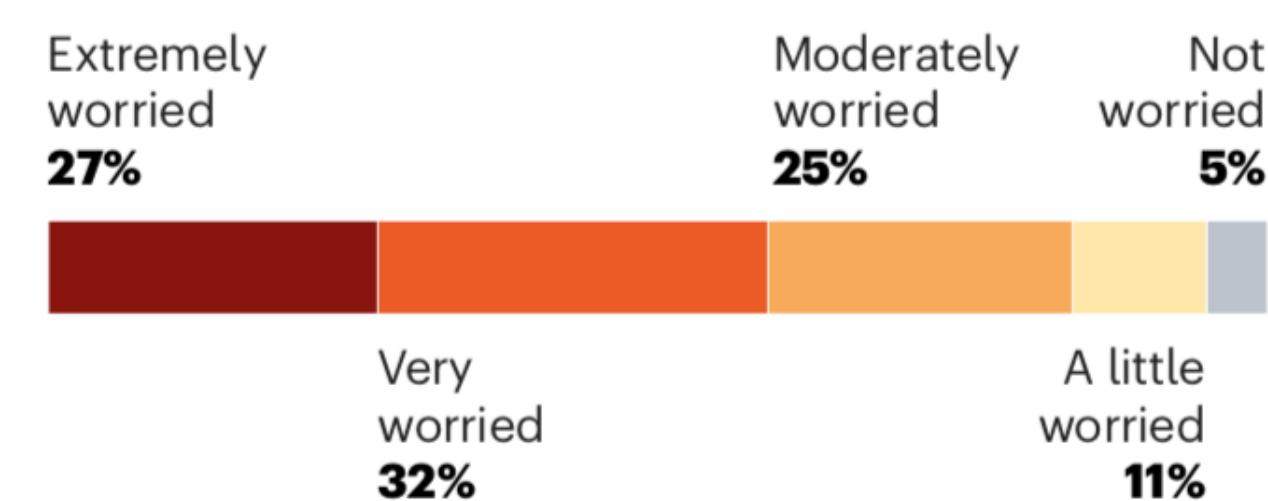
Context and Background

- Increasing climate action involvement is crucial since climate change impacts are being noticed around the world.
- To address this lack of involvement we need to consider changes in environmental education.

CLIMATE ANXIETY

A survey of 10,000 young people shows that negative feelings about climate change can cause psychological distress.

How worried are you about climate change?



- While increasing awareness is important in education systems, ensuring that it does not contribute to anxiety levels is critical. The millennial generation and Generation Z are the most environmentally oriented generations but they are experiencing climate anxiety at high levels (Figure 1).

Figure 1: This graph from Thompson (2021) shows the level of worry that global youth are facing. From "Young People's Voices on Climate Anxiety, Government Betrayal and Moral Injury: A Global Phenomenon" by Marks, E. et al. (2021).

- Thus my research explores how to educate children on the environment to increase levels of activism without increasing their climate anxiety.

Research Question

How can we improve environmental education to motivate students to engage in activism while limiting climate anxiety?

Internship and Methods

- Interned with UW Bothell/Cascadia College Sustainability Programs on their Common Caws for Sustainability Podcast.
- Created 6 Podcast Episodes exploring my research question with guests:
 - a UW Faculty & philosopher-in-residence at an elementary school
 - a founder of a climate activist group
 - a president of a village tribal council
 - a climate psychologist
- Created and edited all episodes using Audacity, shown in Image 2
- Conducted a literature review on eco-anxiety.

Results

To better teach environmental education curriculum:

- Reframe education style so that it creates spaces of inquiry for students to feel their emotions and ask questions
- Teachers should be transparent with answers, but deliver it in an age appropriate manner
- Implement generational thinking

To reduce levels of eco-anxiety:

- Find like-minded individuals that have similar feelings regarding climate change to talk with
- Focus on the bigger picture

"...the challenge becomes how to respond to the child in a language and emotional tone that matches the child's situation so that you're not overburdening them with information or one's own anxieties..."

"...our idea is to cultivate a community of philosophical inquiry where the students can think philosophically about the questions that are important to them ... we come in with prompts, the students ask the questions, and we facilitate a discussion."

"...we actually had already pioneered it, engineered it, figured it out ten thousand years ago and lived it so efficiently that you can't even tell we were there ... and [we] lived in a good balance for all those years and it's going to take that kind of knowledge to find balance again."

"...get publicly engaged. that is how I have satisfied anxiety. I go to sleep knowing that I'm doing everything I could possibly do to change this trend of climate catastrophe."

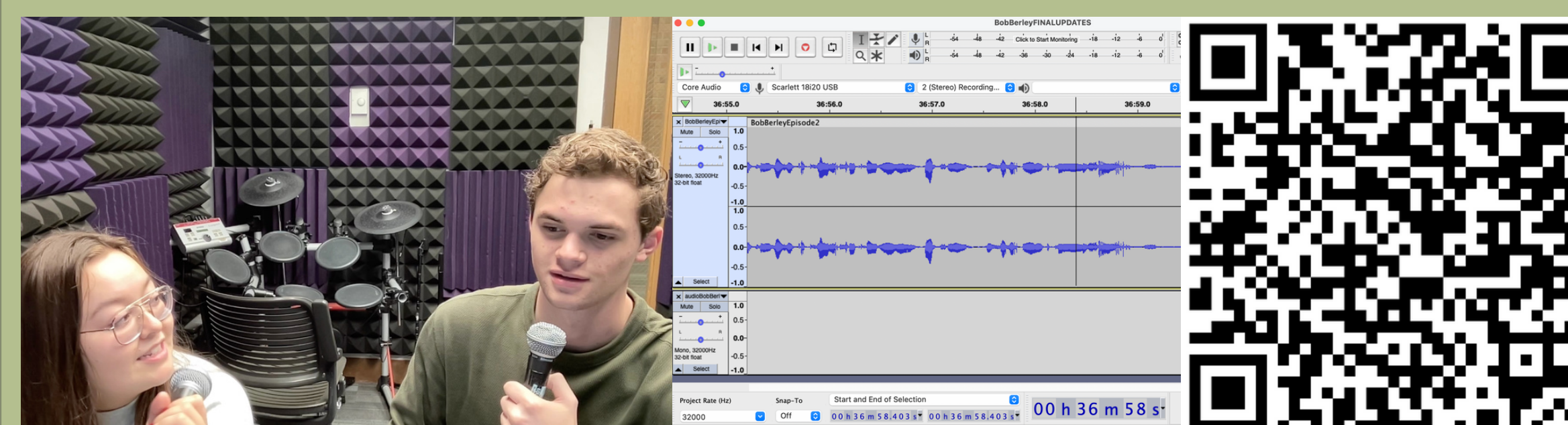


Image 1 (left): Image of my partner, Ben, and I recording an episode.
Image 2 (middle): Screenshot of episode editing in Audacity.
Image 3 (right): QR Code that leads to Common Caws Podcast for Sustainability.

Broader Significance

- Findings can be implemented in schools and at home to better support children
- Bettering our environmental education can increase participation in climate activism, potentially reducing climate change impacts
- Providing training for educators that explores how they can create spaces for students to discuss these feelings
- Further research should explore other eco-emotions (eco-depression, eco-anger, etc.) and their impacts on activism as well

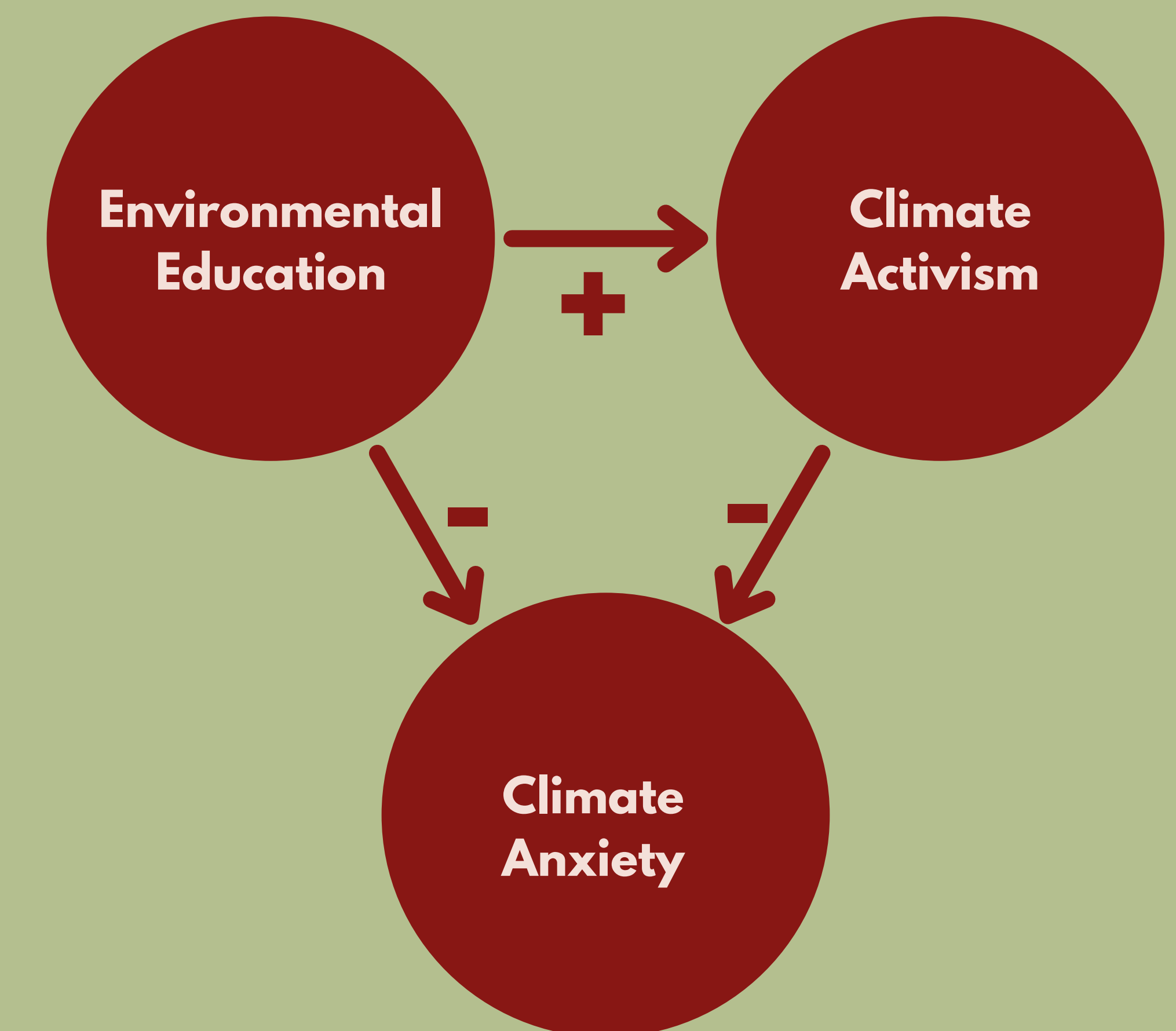


Figure 2: Diagram depicting ideal relationship between environmental education, climate activism, and climate anxiety. By implementing changes in curriculum and in interactions with children hopefully education will increase participation in activism without increasing anxiety.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Kristen Attebery, Stephan Classen, Gary Handwerk, Ben Hauge and all of my friends and family for their support and encouragement throughout my Capstone experience.