

'Standing back' or 'stepping up'? Exploring climate change education policy influence in England

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of climate change education-related policy influence in England at a time when public consciousness about the need to accelerate climate change action was heightened, and as the 2018 climate strikes gathered momentum around the world. Informed by Foucault's concept of 'governmentalities', and using data generated through 24 exploratory interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, we examine the extent to which influential individuals were advocating for policy change. We discuss the nature of policy influence with particular reference to the 'stances' that individuals adopted relative to climate change education policy influence and noting a common tendency exhibited amongst participants which was a tendency towards 'deference'. Coupling our insights with theorisations of dissent, we consider how 'infra-political dissent' could support key individuals to 'step up' and influence for more effective policy relative to climate change education, and to other areas of education or environment policy.

KEYWORDS

activism, climate change education, influence, infra-political dissent, policy

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Key insights

What is the main issue the paper addresses?

This paper explores the nature of climate change education-related policy influence in England and the extent to which influential individuals were advocating for policy change at a time of heightened public consciousness about the need to accelerate climate change action.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper identifies that, at the time of the research, 20 out of 24 position holders were 'standing back' from influencing climate change education policy, rather than 'stepping up'. It identifies a tendency towards deference amongst position holders' stances which, we argue, can work a potential lever for change through acts of in-frapolitical dissent.

INTRODUCTION

An effective response to the unfolding climate emergency and the broader environmental emergency will require significant change in all sectors of society, including education. In recent years, activists in England, and internationally, have demanded that governments step up and enact change. Arguably, such demands have been influential in England to the extent that an environmental and climate change emergency has been declared in prominent settings such as the UK Houses of Parliament (UK Parliament, 2019) and a new sustainability and climate change strategy for the education system has been launched (DfE, 2022). However, such declarations and launches do not necessarily constitute a material response. Ongoing work is needed to ensure that these high-profile statements and strategies are followed by policy that promotes systemic societal change. While all citizens have a part to play in responding to the environmental crisis, arguably, those working in roles that can influence policy are essential. However, it is not yet clear to what extent such individuals have actively sought to influence climate change education policy. This paper thus explores the nature of the contribution of policy influencers relative to climate change education in England.

In referring to policy, we follow an understanding of policy as text, discourse and enacted informed primarily by the work of Ball and colleagues (Ball, 1993; Maguire et al., 2015), and where policy texts do matter: they intervene in society and in practice in various ways and function as part of the 'governmental apparatus' (Foucault, 1991a, p. 96). In referring to policy influencers we mean those who work for organisations or institutions that have the ear of national or international officials and are in positions to contribute to the development of policy texts in the fields of education, environment and climate change, and thus, to influence climate change education. Our analysis, which draws from data that was generated as public calls for the need to accelerate climate change action were amplified, and as the 2018 climate strikes gathered momentum around the world, paints a concerning picture of climate change education policy influence in England at the time, while also enabling the development of new theorisations that could support change.

To establish a foundation and context for our research, we begin with a brief critical reflection on England's contemporary climate change education policy landscape. We then

introduce our study, first, by describing the Foucauldian concepts that guided our work, then by describing our qualitative, interpretive research methods. Our findings, which have been generated through a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), provide new insight into climate change education policy influence amongst potential influencers by identifying techniques that are used to influence policy, the extent to which individuals employ those techniques relative to climate change education, and their rationales for doing so. Building on this insight that illuminates the complexity of policy influence, our discussion explores how individuals in positions of influence could be supported to 'step up' and effect change by drawing on theorisations of activism and dissent (El Khoury, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2018). Specifically, we explore how 'infrapolitical dissent' could be a useful concept when considering how to further policy influence. The aim of this paper is not to pass judgement on individuals or their actions at a particular moment in time. Rather, it is to use findings from this instance to deepen insight into the complex nature of policy influence in ways that could inform and support individuals in positions of influence to contribute to much needed policy change, relative to climate change education, and to other areas of education or environment related policy.

A CLIMATE CHANGE EDUCATION POLICY SHORTFALL IN ENGLAND

In England's policy landscape,¹ climate change education has long had a low profile. Climate change education has not been recognised as essential, let alone important. Prior to the publication of the Department for Education's policy paper—'Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems' (2022)—and as we have discussed previously (Greer et al., 2023), there has been no standalone climate change education policy, nor a section within a policy that states a clear intention in relation to such education. Previous analysis of the National Curriculum for England, for example, has found that references to climate change are predominantly limited to geography and science curricula and to knowledge about climate change-related processes more so than to any need for action on the part of individuals (Glackin & King, 2020). Further, the science curriculum has been found to attend disproportionately to 'uncertainties' in evidence while overlooking the gravity of the climate and environmental problems being faced by society. Such curriculum deficiencies are not unique to England (e.g. Reid, 2019), with international analysis finding that cognitive learning dominates climate change education over any focus on social and emotional outcomes, or on behaviours or actions (UNESCO, 2019). Yet scholars report that an educational response to climate change requires a broad range of knowledge (Cutter-Mackenzie & Rousell, 2019; Kagawa & Selby, 2010; Lundholm, 2019), from knowledge *about* climate change such as that which tends to be found in geography and science curricula, through to emotional and spiritual knowledge (Jie Li & Monroe, 2017; Ojala, 2016; Pihkala, 2017; Selby & Kagawa, 2010; Swee-Hin & Cawagas, 2010). Others have described the need to support students to be agents of change, and collaborators rather than on-lookers in the climate crisis (Reid, 2019; Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020). In essence, England's policy offer has fallen short relative to scholarly views on what quality climate change education is or should be.

In recent years, a climate change education shortfall has also been recognised in the public domain. In 2018, the international scientific community reported that a 1.5°C warming of the Earth was likely (IPCC, 2018), resulting in catastrophic consequences. In an impassioned response, Swedish school student Greta Thunberg began the *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (School Strike for Climate), a protest that gathered attention in Sweden, then internationally, prompting youth and broader civil action. By March 2019, it was reported that the Global

Climate Strike was joined by more than 1 million students participating in 2000 protests in 125 countries (Glenza et al., 2019). Young people demanded that the government step back from the 'obsession' with exams and focus on 'students' lives' (UK Student Climate Network, 2020 no page). A series of noteworthy responses followed in the UK, including declarations of a climate emergency by the Scottish First Minister, the Welsh Government and, later, by the UK Parliament (2019). As a wave of climate activism travelled around the world and political statements followed, conditions were arguably primed for the development of new policies that would address the educational deficiency. In 2021, during the annual United Nations climate change conference (COP26, Glasgow), the UK Government announced a draft strategy, later published as the 'Sustainability and climate change strategy for schools and children's services' (DfE, 2022).

The new Department for Education strategy could be viewed as a welcome development. Where there had been a policy gap, a policy text now exists that can be interpreted and enacted in practice. Yet questions remain about the effect that this policy might have or, more specifically, the extent to which the policy text is likely to result in a meaningful educational response to climate change. Indeed, a critique by Dunlop and Rushton (2022) finds that the shortfalls that were identified in the policy landscape prior to the new strategy's release (see Greer et al., 2023) continue to reverberate. That is, the new strategy quietsens the crisis and is dominated by discourses prioritising economic growth over environmental protection and improvement, and the activities it promotes are positioned as optional or extracurricular. Aside from the inclusion of a new non-mandatory Natural History GCSE, the new strategy does not seek to challenge or change fundamental conditions that govern schooling in England, namely, the National Curriculum, exam specifications and inspection regimes. Thus, even with the addition of this strategy, in view of calls for a more comprehensive climate change education, England's current related policy offer continues to fall short. Given the role that policy plays in steering practice, climate change education practice in schools will thus remain constrained. England's climate change education policy problem is not simply a matter of a policy gap that needs to be filled, but rather of a gap that needs to be filled with policy that drives change across the education system.

To date, there has been a tendency for education-related policy studies to focus on analysis of policy texts more than investigating how those texts come about (Ball, 2015) or to examine discourses of individuals and organisations (Francis, 2015). Aikens et al.'s (2016) systematic review of methodological and thematic trends in sustainability education policy research literature (spanning four decades and 71 countries) identified an emphasis on non-empirical studies, descriptive reports of projects or programmes and discussions of policy discourse. They highlighted a particular research gap concerning empirical studies of 'climate change and education policy' (Aikens et al., 2016, p. 350) and of 'policy origins and development' (Aikens et al., 2016, p. 350). Instead of setting out to identify the 'best' policy solutions, this research aims to deepen understanding of 'the complex underlying factors that influence which policies may be developed, emulated, passed on, or passed over' (van Poeck & Lysgaard, 2016, p. 307). We do this by focusing on the views of individuals who are in positions to influence policy regarding climate change education, whether they acknowledge their own influence or not, and in understanding factors that impact influencers' choices to participate in policy development processes.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Our investigation into the nature of policy influence and origins of policy draws upon several concepts that originate in the philosophy of Michel Foucault and that have been developed theoretically and empirically by researchers in the fields of education and environmental

education policy sociology. Of central concern to our inquiry is *how* climate change education in England has come to be the way it is, which is distinct from an emphasis on *what* climate change education is, or *what works*. Ferreira (2009) explains that concentrating on *how* sheds new light on climate change education as a 'problem', such that we might be able to think differently about addressing it. Our broad interest lies in understanding factors that influence the formation of policy texts and, in this paper, we are centrally concerned with how and why policy influence is wielded, or not, by key stakeholders.

In Foucauldian terms, questions of *how* relate to concepts of 'governing' and 'governmentalities', or 'the rules of [policy] formation' (Foucault, 1972, p. 207) that make particular problems or solutions visible or sayable, while leaving others silenced. The Foucauldian notion of 'governmentalities' relates to the thoughts or 'mentalities' of individuals, as well as mentalities of bodies of knowledge, beliefs, and opinions that we are immersed in and that govern what can be known or understood to be true. To explore the governmentalities of climate change education we examine the perspectives of individuals, documenting what they are and considering how they have come to shape related policy. Thus, the research is part of a 'storying' (Gale, 2001, p. 384) of climate change education policy that explores and problematises how it has emerged by focusing on the 'conditions, assumptions, forces' (Scheurich, 1994, p. 300) that regulate the field and those within it.

Our research is also framed by a Foucauldian understanding of the role of the state. Foucault describes how, while the state plays a governing role, governing is not limited to the state, or to political forms of government. Rather than focusing on the state as a separate entity, Foucault conceives of a 'governmental apparatus' (Foucault, 1991a, p. 96) in which power circulates through a 'net-like organisation' (Foucault, 1980b, p. 98). He writes,

individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power ... in other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Foucault, 1980b, p. 98).

Foucault (1991a) describes a broad ensemble of individuals and institutions, as well as processes and reflections that allow complex forms of power to operate. The individuals in our study could thus be viewed as operating within and contributing to this ensemble of power associated with climate change education policy.

Finally, we were guided by Foucauldian methodological discussions of policy archaeology and interpretations thereof. Policy archaeology is a methodology that 'puts things in perspective' (Foucault, 1991a, p. 153). It is a method of establishing the rules that govern policy formation by 'excavating' (Gale, 2001, p. 388) and 'archiving' (Foucault, 1991a, p. 145) conditions and events that make some statements or views, events or actions possible over others. Scheurich (1994) explains that policy archaeology involves exploring how problems and corresponding solutions enter (or do not) the gaze of society by identifying how numerous, complex strands and traces become visible, such that something becomes labelled a social problem. It is a methodology to support examination of the rules that govern what is said at a particular time and how events or statements correlate with other previous or concurrent events. To paraphrase Foucault (1991b), policy archaeology explores what is sayable at a given period of time for a given society and is interested in both presences and absences that relate to how phenomena are positioned and understood across time. Gale's somewhat pragmatic synopsis of policy archaeology is useful here:

(1) why are some items on the policy agenda (and not others)?; (2) why are some policy actors involved in the production of policy (and not others)?; (3) what are the conditions that regulate the patterns of interaction of those involved? (Gale, 2001, p. 387)

Foucault describes his methodological ideas as 'instruments of analysis ... (enabling) ... a topological and geological survey of the battlefield' (1980a, p. 62), yet he does not stipulate how to operationalise them. He leaves that to 'those who do the fighting' (Gale, 2001). We use policy archaeology to explore the conditions within the policy landscape that make some views or actions related to climate change education possible over others. Our chosen methods are set out below.

METHODS

Our empirical investigation used qualitative, exploratory research methods to examine the perspectives of individuals working in positions that suggest they could play a role in influencing climate change education policy in England. The data was generated between November 2018 and March 2019, as climate change activism gained momentum in England and around the world. Scheurich (1994) describes such professionals, or in Foucauldian terms, 'governmental agents', as typically operating with the best of intentions, yet are

not conscious that they are proliferating a social regularity. Their individual actions are common-sensical given the grid of social regularities that is constituting social life. These individual agents do not have bad intentions; they are, instead, inscribed by and, in turn inscribing governmentality. (Scheurich, 1994, p. 307)

On this basis we were interested in understanding how policy influencers function within the 'governmental apparatus' with a focus on what they say—their 'vocality'—rather than critiquing their institutional 'authorship' (Gale, 2001). Thus, we did not set out to identify opposites or dichotomies, or judge one conception as better than others, but rather, our aim was to explore differences in perspectives and to decipher conditions or regularities governing their statements.

The sampling method aimed to capture complexity and similarities across a range of perspectives, rather than to achieve representativeness of policy influencer 'types' or saturation of ideas. We sought the participation of experts, inside and outside government, from across the ensemble of power using purposive sampling inspired by Ardoin et al.'s (2013) sampling of researchers and journal editors as experts on future trends in environmental education research, and Hoskins' (2012) recruitment of female professors as experts relative to her study of senior women academics in the UK. In our case, there was not an obvious network of experts to draw upon, arguably owing to factors such as the multi-faceted nature of climate change education, its dispersed governance, its low policy profile in England, and that individuals who might have a bearing on the field might not prioritise or recognise their role in doing so. Hence, we built a sample that included a spread of expertise by including individuals from a cross-section of relevant fields (science and geography education, environmental education, and climate change); they held senior positions within their organisations; they were perceived by others to be knowledgeable and (potentially) influential in their field; they could discuss issues relevant to the research topic; and, by virtue of their knowledge, position and field, they were potentially influential regarding climate change education policy in England. Our recruitment was informed by the approach to reputational snowball sampling adopted by Gillard (2016) in his study of UK climate change policy. This method adopts a notion of 'reputation' which assumes that influential individuals within given fields are interconnected through personal relationships or by reputation. Accordingly, at the end of each interview and in a follow-up email, interviewees were asked to recommend other potential participants. The incoming recommendations (of which there were few) were added to the master list, reviewed for relevance to the research, cross-checked against the typology and

incorporated into the evolving sample. Between each wave of interviews, we reflected on how the sample was taking shape and adjusted recruitment efforts accordingly.

Following Gillard, we organised our sample in terms of 'policy actors' (people involved in the design or elaboration of policy) and 'political actors' (people involved in policy delivery and endorsement or validation). As the limited engagement with climate change education policy influence that was underway at the time became more apparent, we added a category of 'thought leaders', that is, 'prominent non-state actors, and individuals with insightful positions' (Gillard, 2016, p. 29). The sample ($n=24$) is described in Table 1.

Data were generated through exploratory interviews, a method that supports generating ideas, developing theoretical propositions and investigating how participants feel about research topics, rather than seeking facts or statistics (Oppenheim, 2000). Exploratory interviews allow interviewees to engage deeply with the subject matter, and interviewers to respond reflexively to unanticipated turns in conversation, thereby allowing for deeper exploration of the research themes than might be achieved with structured or semi-structured interviews. This reflexivity carried through to our analysis which was guided by Braun and Clarke's descriptions of thematic and reflexive thematic analysis (2006, 2019). We iteratively identified themes through multiple rounds of data familiarisation, data coding and re-coding using NVivo qualitative analysis software, and writing was central to the analysis. Our analysis was also reflexive in that, having previously worked in roles similar to those of our participants, we were aware of and sympathetic to the challenges and complexities that are encountered in organisational contexts. We, too, have faced obstacles or felt stymied in our professional responses to the environmental and climate crises and have felt constrained in our own abilities to influence. Thus, we set out to illuminate complexity that might support potential policy influencers (including ourselves) to more effectively advocate for change given our real-world constraints. In so doing, and as Ferreira cautions, our analysis '(did) not provide glossy or easy answers' (2009, p. 611) but it provided insights that enable us to think differently about the persistent deficiencies in climate change education policy, and to conceptualise realistic pathways for progress.

As part of our reflexive approach, part way through the data generation phase it became apparent that characterising participants as 'policy influencers' relative to climate change education seemed inaccurate, as there was an evident lack of policy influencing underway (a realisation that was supported in our analysis and is discussed in the following section). Instead, we found Powell and colleagues' concept of 'position holders' a useful term to describe the participants, where position holders 'hold positions or capabilities to transform the situation at stake' (2017, p. 9). In our study, the participants occupied positions within their organisations or fields that could potentially influence climate change education. We found that referring to participants as 'position holders' in relation to climate change education policy helped us to move beyond judging the effectiveness of the influencing activities of individuals or categories of individuals and laying blame at their feet. Instead, it offered us a neutral characterisation of this broad group of individuals which afforded an impartial perspective for considering how they wielded influence and to develop an understanding of influence at a structural and conceptual level.

We recognise that since our data were generated there has been ongoing activism, and international and national policy development. Ideas and organisations are in constant states of change whereas our data reflect a particular period of time. It is possible that individual contributions and institutional priorities may have since shifted, and different ideas might have gained traction. The following analysis therefore offers insight into the variety of positions that can be held, providing insight into factors that govern key individuals' roles in climate change education policy development and that ultimately constrain its practice. In this way, it also provides a frame of reference for those who are considering the views of position holders in other settings.

TABLE 1 Typology of 'position holders' (adapted from Gillard, 2016) and the sample used in this study.

Organisation type	Role	Position holder fields
Policy actors		
Central government and civil service	Politicians, advisers and committee members relevant to climate change education (i.e. climate change, science education, geography education or environmental education); senior strategists and policy officials involved in international and domestic climate change education	PH4: ^a Climate Change; Engagement PH8: Environment; Engagement PH11: Climate Change Adaptation; Engagement PH22: Environment; Politics
Non-governmental and private sector organisations	Knowledge brokers, managers and leaders representing stakeholders relevant to climate change education with policy-related responsibilities	PH2: Geography; School Education PH3: Chemistry; School Education PH6: Science; School Education PH20: Science; Education
Political actors		
Non-governmental and private sector organisations	Knowledge brokers, managers and leaders representing stakeholders relevant to climate change education	PH1: Environment; Climate Change; Education PH5: Education; Research PH10: Environment; School Education PH17: Meteorology; School Education; Engagement PH18: Sustainability; School Education PH19: Energy; Engagement; School Education PH21: Sustainability; School Education PH23: STEM; School Education; Professional Development
Media	Senior editors and journalists covering climate change education	PH16: Climate Change; Energy
Think tanks	Senior advisers and knowledge brokers involved in or relevant to climate change education	PH7: Climate Change; Advocacy
Thought leaders		
Academia	Senior academics whose research and/or teaching relates to climate change education	PH9: Ethics; Climate Change; Policy PH12: Science; Higher Education; School Education PH13: Sustainability; School Education; Higher Education PH14: Global Development; Higher Education PH15: Geography; Teacher Education PH24: Sustainability; Higher Education

^aThe position holder numbers correspond with the order of the interviews.

FINDINGS

Our findings are presented as a multi-layered analysis of the views of position holders. They are a 'storying' of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Gale, 2001) that illuminates complexities of climate change education policy influence through an examination of: (i) perceptions of climate change education; (ii) tools and techniques of policy influence; (iii) stances relative to climate change education policy influence; and (iv) a tendency towards deference. This analysis enables the development of new theorisations that can support change.

Perceptions of climate change education

Fundamentally, we found that there was a shared perception that climate change was a matter of concern for society and that education had a role to play in relation to it; 23 out of 24 participants were clear in their views that school education should be part of society's response to climate change (the outlier was uncertain, rather than opposed). Beyond that near consensus, perspectives on what climate change education is or should entail, were diverse. Previously (Greer & Glackin, 2021) we have described position holders' views of what climate change education is or could be in terms of three categories ranging from more knowledge-oriented approaches centred on disciplinary curriculum (and dominated by geography and science education) through to more expansive conceptions that integrate formal education into society's response to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Such conceptual diversity illustrates the difficulty of agreeing a single definition of climate change education, a factor which is likely to contribute to its continued marginalisation in policy.

Digging deeper into this diversity, we found that when participants discussed what climate change education is or should be, they juxtaposed macro-level matters, such as the causes of climate change, and meso-level matters, such as policy and curriculum. For example, one position holder linked the causes of climate change with learning progression models as follows:

I always see climate change as part of systematic thinking ... And how do you disengage from the systematic process and look at it systemically? What is the cause of our knowledge that leads into that linear process? ... and what is the educational process that would help us adjust and adopt to, not being dependent on oil, gas but being more dependent on local sources of energy, local sustainability activity, local food and so on? ... And how does this intersect with how our mainstream schooling system is structured or learning is structured as systematic thinking? (PH13)

Others' responses involved consideration of their professional contexts and reflection on their own values. One position holder, for example, described a career evolution from geology to climate change-related education in higher education prompted by introspection about the role of educators:

a couple of years in, I started to be quite concerned about some of the things I was reading in student exam answers or essays ... and really starting to question what are we doing as educators? (PH24)

It was evident that complex factors intertwined to govern position holders' perceptions of climate change education and their propensity for influencing its policies. Recognising that such entanglements underpin individuals' decisions to act enabled our attention to shift away

from simplistic judgement of individuals actions (or lack of action) as right or wrong, better or worse, and towards consideration of the complex factors that underpin individuals' influencing decisions.

Key techniques of policy influence

Our second finding concerns *how* participants wielded influence, be that with respect to climate change education-related policy or to other policy fields. Our analysis identified four sub-themes amongst participants descriptions of policy influencing techniques, which are summarised in [Table 2](#) and explained thereafter.

The first sub-theme captures a range of *practical tools* that participants described using to influence policy. Participants described hosting meetings or seminars, and preparing papers, reports and other publications. For example, one position holder described a sequence of practical steps their organisation undertook to influence policy about an issue of concern. They funded a piece of research, produced a report, then:

we convened a meeting with the Secretary of State who came for a dinner, and we talked about it, so, yes, we'd see it (influencing) very much as part of our role. (PH5)

Another described hosting events, as follows:

If there is an issue that we think is important, we invite [key people] in. Whether it's for afternoon tea, for dinner, for a seminar, for a lunch, for a breakfast. You get the right mix of people together and we tend to get ... a good mix of people ... and that's helpful. (PH21)

Other tools were described in ways that connected to policy influence, albeit peripherally. For example, one position holder described stakeholder consultation processes, as follows:

to develop our position as an organisation of what do we think the curriculum should look like ... so that we've got ideas ready as and when reforms happen. (PH3)

The second sub-theme related to position holders' use of *evidence* to influence policy. Evidence was used to 'prove what works and why' (PH19) or provide 'route maps' for policy makers (PH23), or 'if we say something, and it's evidence-based, it matters' (PH20). There were descriptions of evidence being used to boost credibility by overcoming perceived bias

TABLE 2 Key techniques of policy influence.

Technique	Description
Using practical tools	Meetings, seminars, reports
Using evidence	Research outputs, project evaluations, self-reporting, financial accounting
Political participation	Written submissions to consultations, committee membership, communication with MPs
Using connections	Leading others, convening others, contributing to others' activities, enabling others, disseminating to others, or following others

in self-reporting or to justify their expenditure in a context where 'you can't say you failed at anything' (PH24). Another position holder, when discussing intra-organisation influencing, remarked that:

we have to make sure we've achieved visible milestones, otherwise I won't get the backing of the council here if they can't see progress. (PH20)

The third sub-theme, that encapsulates a range of influencing techniques, we termed as *political participation*. There were descriptions of participation in formal political processes, such as government consultations and government-led committees, as follows:

Westminster² is a bubble and it's a very isolated bubble. Penetrating that is inordinately difficult. ... At the moment, I think the Select Committee structure of inquiry is the only way that individuals and groups can get in. (PH13)

Others viewed political advocacy or lobbying as essential for policy change, as follows:

The only way to make the change is from doing that. Ministers, MPs and others will make the decision, if the public demand it. (PH4)

Elsewhere were descriptions of informal political participation, specifically using social media to lobby high-profile or influential individuals. For example, to pursue government support for their organisation, one position holder stated:

I'm going to be tagging as many influential people as possible on social media. (PH10)

The fourth sub-theme related to how position holders wielded influence, revolved around *using connections*. That is, 'influencing' was described in relation to others and it entailed using connections in different ways. Some position holders operated autonomously and/or assertively, for example:

The reason why we do all of this sustainability education work, is pretty much because I've been there pushing those buttons. (PH24)

Others described more collaborative approaches which involved positioning themselves or their organisations as part of broader community of stakeholders, whether as gatekeepers, contributors, or convenors. For instance:

So, if we can use our leadership, our convening power, or by partnering with someone, we will take [an issue] forward. (PH20)

We have what is known as convening power, meaning that if you think that something is important and interesting, and you say, look, this is an interesting field to work in, let's have a meeting about it, let's get people involved, let's fund some work in it, that has some influence. That convening power is one of the key resources that we have. (PH5)

Others were more reticent about wielding their influence, relying on others for change to occur, for example:

I'm intuitively, like, if I just tell enough people then they'll come up with a groundswell of action somehow. (PH9)

These instances illustrate that people influence in relation to others and that connections and networks matter. Additionally, they illustrate that position holders make choices about how they use those connections to fulfil their obligations to influence policy.

Identifying tools and techniques for influence that position holders employ offers valuable insight into how policy influence is wielded and how, in pragmatic terms, it could be enhanced to achieve climate change education progress. While evaluating the effectiveness of these techniques could make a useful focus for further study, what matters for the purposes of this paper is that, in most cases, participants described using these techniques to influence other areas of education or climate change policy (e.g. STEM education or climate change adaptation in the built environment). That is, at the time of the interviews, there was little evidence that position holders were actively using these techniques with the intention of influencing climate change education policy. This situation is unpacked further in the third finding below.

Climate change education policy influence stances and rationales

Our analysis identified that position holders adopted a range of stances relative to climate change education policy influence. As already indicated, and despite broad consensus amongst the participants that there was a need for action within climate change education practice, at the time of the interviews, most of the position holders were not using policy-influencing techniques for this purpose. As one position holder remarked:

[Climate change education] is a squalling baby. You know, everybody knows it matters, but 'Please, can you look after it because I don't want to'. (PH5)

Exploring further, we identified and conceptualised 'stances' that position holders adopted relative to climate change education policy influence, and a range of rationales for them. This analysis illuminates further complexity and more nuanced insight which can be used to theorise levers for change.

We identified two broad groups of policy influence amongst position holders' views and characterised them as 'stepping up' and 'standing back'. To provide a sense of the overall sample, only four position holders appeared more attuned to 'stepping up' while the views shared by 20 position holders were considered to reflect 'standing back' stances. The first category of stances—'stepping up'—captures views from individuals who were demonstrably, and to varying extents, seeking to influence policy by using the techniques set out above. This included political participation that used assertive, somewhat activist-style approaches which included, for example, untargeted broadcasting—'we need to shout out a lot more loudly'—alongside the previously mentioned targeted social media 'tagging' of influential individuals (PH10). Others engaged in government processes and systems, including formal consultations (PH7), pursued strategies to change acts of parliament (PH21) or participated in Select Committees (PH13). Elsewhere were descriptions of 'stepping up' that emphasised using connections, by initiating or participating in collective efforts. For instance, one position holder described establishing a network to help address the policy gap in England by enabling 'closer proximity between the practitioners and the governance structures' (PH13). Several techniques from the policy influence toolkit were evident in relation to climate change education; however, they were only being applied by a handful of position holders.

Aside from these limited examples of 'stepping up', most position holders could be viewed as 'standing back' from climate change education policy influence with various rationales for

inaction evident. These included that climate change education policy influence was not part of their organisation's role—'It's not our focus' (PH15, PH17) or 'It's not our job' (PH23)—despite their organisation's remit focusing on what are, arguably, related issues or fields (e.g. science education, education research). Others rationalised their lack of influencing on the basis that lobbying or campaigning would be inappropriate for their organisation:

We can't lobby because we then negate our research. (PH2)

No, we don't [influence] ... we have significant contracts with the government, there are anti-lobbying clauses in there. (PH23)

In some cases, responsibility for influence was redirected elsewhere, with position holders arguing that responsibility to act rested with other individuals or organisations:

The Department for Education has got its own curriculum and they do their own thing ... We don't interfere with that. (PH4)

Or by divesting responsibility for their inaction onto other organisations or individuals:

I think it just hasn't come up as a major priority. You know, none of the partners has said we must do [climate change related] stuff on schools. (PH11)

I'm not hearing teachers asking for more [climate change related education]. (PH23).

However, elsewhere, we identified more reactive perspectives that indicated a willingness to influence climate change education policy, albeit in the future, or when approached:

We've got ideas ready as and when reforms happen, or as and when we've got the opportunity to put the word in the right person's ear. (PH3)

I am open to being influenced and also to work in partnership with different groups to do something. (PH6)

A further rationale for standing back related to resource constraints, as expressed by one position holder who had 'stood back' after a previous instance of influencing, as follows:

there's a difference between a political process in which government is inviting an engagement and those in which government isn't and you're having to force your way into the conversation. That takes a lot more time and effort. (PH7)

Constraints on personal resources were also evident in relation to insufficient connections, capabilities, or experience, with one position holder ruminating as follows:

I guess I should think more about what else I could do ... but I feel that they won't listen to me. So that they will say 'who are you?' And I don't have the kind of people who could get me in. (PH9)

On several occasions, it was evident that the research had some facility to encourage action with several position holders commenting on the stimulus provided by the invitation to participate and in the interview, for example:

You've sparked me to think and now I'm going to ... try again and do something more on that. (PH11).

Such reflexivity amongst position holders could be viewed positively as indicative of the important contribution of this research, and all research that is aimed at exploring pressing questions with position holders: research (and researchers) can facilitate the 'stepping up' that we seek. More negatively, and more importantly, our analysis identified a predominance of standing back stances amongst individuals who arguably were influential because they had experience and resources to enact techniques of influence on issues of their choosing but who, for various reasons, were not electing to do so about climate change education. While it might be tempting to evaluate the tendencies of different types of position holders to 'stand back' or 'step up', and this might be worth future attention, of central importance here is that 'standing back' was dominant at the time our research, and that our intention was to explore the complex factors that informed those stances, rather than to focus on 'types'.

A tendency towards deference

Probing more deeply into the 'standing back' stances and rationales, we identified a particular tendency that could offer a lever for creating change. That is, we identified a tendency towards *deference* amongst position holders' descriptions of policy influencing and that participants' actions (or choices not to act) were underpinned by a sense of respect for others' expertise, or by turning to others to determine a course of action. As indicated in several extracts above, we observed position holders distancing themselves from climate change education policy influence by deferring to their organisations' focus or priorities, or to those of their patrons, and we identified notions of respect, compliance and, at times, submissiveness. One position holder rationalised their lack of ongoing influence by deferring to others' views, as follows:

When I talked to the [learned societies] about the new curriculum, they had said that they were satisfied that the new arrangements were sufficient. And I was happy too because they have more of an understanding. (PH7)

Despite describing climate change education as essential and requiring intervention at policy level, rationalisations for not intervening included an emphasis on carefully balancing relationships while managing organisational and individual reputations. Policy influence was described as a 'delicate question' (PH5), or that it required 'softening up the dialogue' (PH3). The following extract is illustrative of the strategy and sensitivity that one position holder suggested would be required *if* they intended to influence policymakers:

What we would be saying is 'you are thinking about climate change. Here are some things that can help you. We think you should be doing the following things, because they would help you'. (PH5)

While discussing how to cultivate their position of influence, one position holder remarked:

I think it looks like sustained engagement over a long period of time at a number of levels ... [and later] ... I self-moderate in a civil service kind of way. (PH20)

Such deferential strategies clearly have implications for policy influencing and contrast starkly with activists' catch-all calls for 'more!' climate change education. We contend that judgement

and prudence are crucial features of relationship management, and it is reasonable that organisations with specialist expertise are consulted. Furthermore, by acting in a deferential and cautious manner, in alignment with their organisations' values, individuals and organisations maintain their place in the system and remain in positions of influence. Therefore, rather than admonishing position holders for standing back, and hoping to overturn deferential tendencies such that they advocate more fervently for change, acknowledging deference as a common trait allows us—and them—to realise the value embedded within it and, as we discuss below, to explore how to exploit it as a powerful lever for change.

DISCUSSION: HARNESSING DEFERENCE AS A LEVER FOR CHANGE

Returning to our Foucauldian framing, the findings shine light on the current climate change education policy situation in England and *how* it has come to be. We can see that the predominance of 'standing back' stances, and the rationales for them, contribute to the governmentalities of climate change education policy such that a meaningful policy offer remains marginalised. Position holders' perceptions of climate change education, their propensity to employ various influencing techniques, their connections and how they mobilise them, and their rationales for acting (or not) can be construed as strands of the 'web of conditions' (Greer et al., 2023) that is governing climate change education policy. 'Stepping up' to influence will require position holders to use techniques of influence in relation to climate change education which might call upon position holders to be less deferential and more courageous, to challenge the norms of their organisations, their stakeholders, or to operate counter to policies and policy discourse. 'Stepping up' could mean choosing to use their role in their organisation to influence climate change education policy to become a priority even though doing so could introduce risks to individuals' position within that ensemble of power and losing their ability to influence more broadly. Indeed, it requires some people in positions of authority to take such risks. Given the overwhelming acknowledgement by position holders that climate change education is important, we conjectured the extent to which their deferential tendencies might be harnessed to become effective tools for nudging influence forward.

We found that O'Brien et al.'s (2018) study of youth climate change-related activism supported our critical reflection on the possibilities for position holder influencing behaviour. Their theorisations of dissent provided a basis for us to explain the observed deferential tendencies and understand their potential implications in ways that prompts new thinking about how to exploit them to promote change. They describe three types of dissent—dutiful, disruptive and dangerous—relative to prevailing power relationships. First is *dutiful dissent* which involves 'work(ing) within existing systems and power structures to effect policy change' (2018, p. 38). Arguably, many of the position holders could be envisaged as operating here, particularly those who have power or can access power by virtue of connections, and 'self-moderating in a civil service kind of way' (PH20) and 'softening up the dialogue' (PH5) could be construed as examples of dutiful dissent. According to O'Brien and colleagues, shortcomings of dutiful dissent include that it can allow the status quo to be firmly held in place. Yet we believe that this is an important step and should not be ignored, rather, it should be judiciously nurtured and 'stretched', with position holders actively seeking ways to influence internal strategies and norms, and tweak policy language, in order to prompt change.

O'Brien and colleagues' second form of dissent is *disruptive dissent*, which they describe as 'Contest(ing) prevailing social norms and policy practices to redirect policy and change outcomes' (2018, p. 38). This can describe some climate protestors' behaviour, and arguably

some of our 'stepping up' influencers who elected to 'tag' influential people and 'shout more loudly' (PH10), rather than connect over breakfast for discussion. Notably, the enactment of disruptive dissent and public actions of many individuals and organisations associated with the 2018–2019 climate strikes is uncomfortable and unlikely for many working within structures of power who must maintain their positions as part of long-term, multi-layered engagement strategies (e.g. PH20).

Third is *dangerous dissent*, which 'creates and (re-)generates new and alternative systems, subverting existing power structures by mobilizing citizens around new norms and values' (2018, p. 38). It is likely that dangerous dissent would be inconceivable to many position holders because it would require intentionally and overtly bypassing and undermining the systems they operate within.

Clearly, the types of dissent that O'Brien and colleagues describe are more suited to some individuals and the positions they occupy than others. Youth and adults are in different positions regarding dissent—they have different amounts to lose in the present and in the future. The individuals in our study were adults, rather than the young people who were the subjects of O'Brien and colleague's analysis, and they were included in our sample because they were working in potentially influential positions within systems of power. These position holders are enmeshed in their work culture and their acts of dissent, or influence, can be of a personal or of an organisational nature. In contrast, student activists are working as individuals who, in the present, have not so much to lose if we are to consider that they are not yet in positions of power. Indeed, the student activists are positioned largely outside of the structures of power. They can enact dissent regarding 'the cause', rather than in relation to their organisation, and they are arguably more readily able to dissent in a variety of ways than the position holders.

However, O'Brien and colleagues also discuss another form of dissent that we found useful, although they do not include it in their typology, which is infrapolitical or 'off the radar' dissent. We consider that this concept has particular pertinence for thinking about policy influence for climate change education amongst position holders because it can work alongside the identified tendency of deference and thus any conceptual development can accord with real-world contexts. They describe 'infrapolitics' as a way of expressing dissent through 'hidden, behind-the-scenes actions, that do not openly confront power' (2018, p. 3). Infrapolitical dissent can undermine the status quo as it works through the everyday and informal order. El Khoury writes that infrapolitics can 'dilute the reach of the dominant ideology' (2015, p. 108) without directly or openly challenging it, and it has the potential to be a powerful force for change, as follows:

Infrapolitical activities are often the unsung tide of actions that enable, and are the underpinnings of, a visible, public transcript-registering breakthrough. (2015, p. 105)

While infrapolitical actions are not necessarily duplicitous, they are often discreet and can be informal and understated. The power of infrapolitical dissent is that these practices can be 'excluded, ignored and/or marginalized' (El Khoury, 2015, p. 105) within public discourse, and thus they can be carried out 'off the radar'. Therefore, through these practices, alternative ideas that are marginalised or excluded from the mainstream discourse can 'incubate' (2015, p. 106). Conceptually, this supports the value of position holders working informally, in understated ways corresponding with cautious and strategic relationship management, to seed ideas as they utilise techniques of influence. Infrapolitical dissent would require an intention to 'step up' by those who want to maintain their place in and access to structures of power, but who also understand that direct challenges to political positions are unlikely to bring about (any) positive change. It would

involve those who are operating within and in accordance with the ensemble of power, to undertake infrapolitical action—or infrapolitical dissent—alongside and within deference. Our analysis indicated that there are some 'within' who would be well placed and willing to do so.

Practically speaking, infrapolitical dissent could encompass a wide range of activities, which could be the arts or media, satire or gossip, or activities, such as participation in social activities or informal community spaces, that might contrast with public-facing conforming behaviours or personas. We also suggest that infrapolitical dissent could take on forms familiar to position holders, particularly those who are in powerful positions and who feel unable to step up explicitly. Convening or turning up to meetings can change the dynamic at the table; engaging in casual conversations or political talk can seed ideas; fostering and prudently engaging with connections can swell the cohort of people who view themselves as responsible for and with capability to 'step up'. Infrapolitical dissent could enable different perspectives to prevail, impacting, in the first instance, on local discourses and ultimately, on the wider discourse. It amplifies the significance of a wider range of actions and individuals, highlights the influencing potential of informal actions undertaken by those individuals who operate from within the structures of power, and it can legitimise the covert and powerful work that position holders already do.

Recognising 'deference' as a strand of the web of conditions that is governing climate change education policy is an important insight from this archaeology and of understanding *how* things have come to be. Heeding Ferreira's (2009) caution, its illumination does not amount to an easy solution, but it enables us to take a fresh look at the problem of perpetual policy shortfalls and rather than simplistically criticising position holders for their lack of influencing or viewing the deferential tendencies as weaknesses that must be overturned, the theorisation enables us to view deference as a potential lever for change. We argue that 'infrapolitical dissent' can work within and alongside deference, forming a new strand in the web of conditions that allows different ideas to infiltrate the status quo. Working amongst the mentalities—the knowledge, beliefs and opinions—that govern climate change education policy infrapolitical dissent has the potential to quietly, incrementally, stimulate shifts in what can be known or understood to be true. It offers a conceptual tool to acknowledge the meaningful roles those of us in positions of potential policy influence can and do play and to think differently about how we govern ourselves and others (Ferreira, 2009) through our everyday practices of teaching, research and policy development, and our informal interactions within work environments, to leverage those activities towards change. It does not and cannot be left to work alone; however it is one strand of the web of conditions governing climate change education that can, and should, be cultivated by those of us in the position to do so while the need for policy change across the education system endures.

CONCLUSION

This research comes at a time of unrest that must be harnessed to make this a time of transformation. We set out to understand how policy influence was being wielded relative to climate change education using England as a case study. Our findings afford deeper understanding of policy influence which will have relevance in other fields that are tackling pressing, current issues, and that might be grappling with how to generate more influence amongst individuals in positions of power. Our specific contribution is the identification of stances and that 20 out of 24 position holders were 'standing back' from influencing climate change education policy. Despite the overwhelming recognition of the importance of education in society's response to climate change, few were 'stepping up' to influence for related policy change. Moreover, we identified the tendency towards deference which, we argue,

can be leveraged to generate more policy influencing, rather than viewed as a weakness. That is, deference can be exploited through acts of infrapolitical dissent within the complex real-world settings in which position holders operate.

Our research has also provided indications that position holders might be open to taking on the work of ongoing policy change related to climate change education; there were several signs of (latent) 'intent'. First, position holders expressed concern about climate change and were inclined to think that more needed to be done, including in education. Second, position holders' perspectives on what climate change education entails covered a wide range of components, but their perspectives featured differing emphases more so than strongly conflicting views. Third, position holders evaluated the system they worked within and reflected on the purpose of education, and several ruminated on their prior or potential roles to influence climate change education policy. Given the overwhelming consensus regarding the need for action, the divergent rather than incongruent conceptions of climate change education, and the evident reflexivity and open-ness to change, this research is indicative of a field ripe for change and the potential for infrapolitical dissent to be a powerful tool for emboldening position holders to do so.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted in accordance with the King's College London Research Ethics Committee 'Low Risk' research guidelines with ethical approval number LRS-18/19-6434.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The focus of this research was on England, rather than the UK as a whole, thereby acknowledging the devolved responsibility for education across the four countries of the UK. Some policies included in this study apply to the whole of the UK.

² 'Westminster' is an expression used to refer, variously, to the UK Houses of Parliament, a borough in Central London, or to encapsulate an amalgam of ministries and political activity that can occur in or around the borough and that is central to UK Government activity.

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