

## **Limiting Possibilities: The Imagined Futures of Social Studies Teachers**

This paper analyzes the imaginings of sustainable futures and possibilities for action towards these imaginings articulated by social studies teachers. I analyze the participant stories about a day in the life of an imagined future to theorize the ways these imaginings largely leave intact major systems and discourses including those which have actively contributed to problems they identify including climate change. I argue that weakened imaginations and aspirations of possibility function to increase toleration for the most traumatic ecological tragedies both impending and already unfolding. Importantly for the field of social studies education, this data illustrates that while teacher participants consistently articulated desires to include issues of climate crisis in their social studies classrooms, they did not demonstrate robust understandings of the possibilities for action in the face of complex environmental or climate justice challenges.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Imagination, Climate Change Education

Political action is a vital part of democracy and can lead to very real change, but in addition to thinking we always need to campaign and lobby harder, design bigger and more disruptive demonstrates and rally more people through online petitions, perhaps we need sometimes to stop, stare out the window and imagine a world in which things are better. (Hopkins, 2019, p. 8)

Our hopes for the future, manifesting through our aspirations, can be understood in two main ways. One version of hope is a passive stance waiting for things to be better.

Such a view of hope is found in such statements as, “I hope it’s nice out tomorrow so I can enjoy a walk”. The other version of hope insists on a more active notion. Hope is, as Rebecca Solnit wrote, “not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an ax you break down doors with, in an emergency” (2016, p. xix). The difference between these two conceptions of hope is that one is a belief that things will have positive result through wishing and the other is an action, a space of uncertainty in which agentive acts against oppression can exist, things might be different, be better- but only through our active intervention. Hope is collective work despite necessary insufficiency and uncertainty. Hope allows us to save one starfish even though we know we will not save them all and that even though such circumstances don’t always make us feel good.

Similar to Solnit’s theorization of hope as the space in which a belief that things might be different only if we enact it as a verb, Rob Hopkins hypothesized connections between notions of hope and imagination. He argues the seriousness of the existential crisis we face demands a “radical engagement with the future”, operationalizing the idea that hope functions as a space for the belief that things could be different. Wallace-Wells (2019) further argued that at the root of the climate crisis we suffer an incredible failure in imagination, both as we imagine that things might be different and imagine what that difference may be. In this way, hope might be expressed as imaginings of some otherwise different future. As teachers face contemporary complexities of teaching social studies and engage in a wide range of civic challenges, the national standards frameworks in social studies (including NCSS and C3) invite space for engagement in imagining and

acting towards more ecologically, socially, and environmentally justice communities. The discipline of social studies is a place where students might engage the world through “constructive, conceptual, inquiry-driven, deliberative, and action-oriented” thinking (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2014, p. xv). The widely used College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards asserts that students need the “intellectual power to recognize societal problems” (C3, p. 4). The issues of the climate crisis and environmental injustice fall within these definitions of social studies and the profoundly powerful purpose of educating “thinking, knowledgeable and active citizens” (C3, p.3).

In this article, I explore social studies teachers’ engagement with their imagined aspirational futures on the other side of a resolved climate crisis and the paths they imagine might help realize such a future. I analyze the participant stories about a day in the life of imagined futures. These imaginings leave intact major systems and discourses including those which have actively contributed to climate crisis. Attending to aspiration as it surfaces in conversations about climate crisis “can amplify our investigations, and ideally supplant a reductive tendency to focus on values alone as a key driver of behavior change” (Lertzman, 2019, p. 25). I theorize that weakened imaginations and aspirations of possibility function to increase toleration for the most unsettling climate tragedies both impending and already unfolding. Additionally, and of particular importance in social studies education, the data analyzed illustrates participants consistently articulated desires to include issues of climate crisis in their classrooms and to act in the face of climate injustice, but they do not demonstrate robust understandings of the possibilities for action in the face of complex environmental or climate justice challenges. To be clear, I am not

critiquing these participants for their inability to imagine robustly, but instead using their words illustrate our collective inability and inattention to this work of imagining otherwise shaped by both discourse and the defensive response to the difficulty of climate crisis.

### **Collecting Representations of Aspiration**

The data analyzed in this paper was collected in two parts from 19 social studies teachers, both pre-service and in service, enrolled in a graduate level course on sustainability in social studies education taught at a large land grant university in the southeastern United States. The first was a written assignment in which students wrote a two-page story about a day in the life of an imagined sustainable future. Students were prompted to focus on any component of sustainability that was important to them and their community. The readings for the week included a similar imagining extracted from the book *From What is to What could Be* (2019), in which Rob Hopkins imagines that capitalism has been replaced, rapid transit has been implemented, there are shortened work weeks, local food, closer relationships with neighbors, off-grid housing, composting toilets, and radically reimagined school spaces.<sup>1</sup> These stories were designed to elicit their wildest imaginings for what might be possible in a sustainable future in which climate crisis has been meaningfully and justly addressed.

The second set of data is related to the action steps teachers articulate as possible action moves on climate crisis. Students were asked to identify a person or group acting in response to a climate crisis and write 300 words about the action and then about how it might be useful in their classroom instruction. The prompt read

Find a person or community acting positively on climate crisis. Include in your post a brief summary of what they are doing, the issues they are concerned with, and how you might include this person/group as an example in your classroom.

(Post should be less than 300 words)

This component of the data collection was designed to collect information around the idea that most preservice teachers do not have very robust ideas about what sorts of actions may be done in the face of the climate crisis or environmental injustice (Alvey, 2020) and that the possible actions people most often describe beyond classrooms are individual and consumer-based (i.e., metal straws) (Leiserowitz, et al., 2020). The analysis of teacher articulations of possibility draws heavily on larger discursive availabilities regarding the prominence of neoliberal and individualized action and in a few glimmering moments more subversive examples focusing on more transformative and systemic political actions. This task was designed to elicit how teachers are making sense of the possible actions around climate crisis and what actions they might think appropriate to share with students.

### **Imagined Aspirational Futures**

In the following instances of educators describing their most ideal and sustainable future, a range of ideas presented in relationship to the structure of school, some suggesting deconstructing and interruptions of the existing structure, while most retained without interrogation the dominant social paradigms and structures. Each of these stories hopefully and aspiringly recognizes that things could be different than they are now. Some of the imaginings were lovely and robust, drawing on definitions of sustainability

and climate action which included social and economic justice, but most were limited in scope and drew heavily on many of the discourses and logics which have caused the problem including capitalism, neoliberalism, green consumerism, and ecological modernization. These stories of desire are indicators of aspirational futures. Hopkins (2019) notes that imagination, like other human capacity and creativity, has often been co-opted in the service of our own extinction and that is evidenced in the stories these participants dream up. Some of these examples serve as beautiful imaginings of meaningful transformation and possibility, but most responses serve as examples of the ways that our collective diminished capacity to imagine beyond the discourses which have caused climate crisis may be at least partially to blame for our tolerance of such tragedy.

### **Imaginings Challenging Current Conditions**

Some of the imaginings were more robust in their challenging of dominant discourse and systems than others. In one example of dreaming of possibility, a participant focused primarily on increased social equity related to issues of housing and labor. Addison wrote:

Due to publicly funded initiatives, there are several programs instituted to help the homeless population find housing and jobs. With fair wages policies, there are no longer minimum wage requirements as all employers are required to pay fairly, giving employees enough income to live off. Now that all citizens are entitled to basic healthcare, funded by the government, individuals don't have to worry about medical care as everyone has it.

While continuing to draw on ideas that can be found widely in the zeitgeist of political policy conversation, including Medicare For All, fair pay, and universal housing, Addison imagines a world in which the solutions to climate crisis attempt to address some of the underlying causes of the crisis is in relationship to vast inequity and profoundly impactful issues of resource distribution. This is evidenced by her references to fair wages and Medicare For All. Addison does implicitly recognize the need for some of the major structures of society to shift in significant ways. Such an imagining also acknowledges the ways that other social injustices like “basic healthcare” and “enough income to live off” are entangled in exacerbating issues of climate justice.

Eleanor, meanwhile, reflected on the possibility of material changes as they might manifest in her art classroom:

As a sustainable art educator ...I work with [students] to use only materials that can be composted or recycled. As artists in a sustainable world, we no longer use things like microplastics (glitter), tape, synthetic glues, or other materials that pose a threat to the environment. In fact, I hold multiple workshops within the community to teach people how to make natural dyes from food scraps and gouache and oil-based paints from pigments harvested from local soils and rocks.

Here, Eleanor imagines how her work would be transformed into an imagined sustainable future drawing on localized and more sustainable production systems that alter the material realities of their classroom work. She describes the elimination of certain materials like glitter and other plastics paired with an increase in the greater use of natural and local materials like “pigments harvested from local soils and rocks”. While the description here is at a classroom level, it

reflects an imagining of changed systems of production and distribution in relation to environmental catastrophe. These hopes for possibility recognize that climate crisis is inseparable from other issues of environmental, social, and economic justice. Such a recognition of the complex causes and consequences of climate is evidenced by an implicit recognition of the harms throughout production processes as materials are produced, used, and disposed of. While there is often a gap between imaginations built through the end goal and the development of conceptions about how to make such visions come to fruition, Eleanor gave an example for how this might be operationalized in her final project for the course. In this final project, she documented her collection of soils and processes for creating pigments that could be used to create art. In addition to a lesson plan created to guide students through such a process, she included a portfolio of her artistic creations using this method. Such an imagining of a material difference in her classroom and artistic practice represents how hope might create the possibility for imagination and subsequent action, however muddied, partial, and insufficient.

Eleanor and Addison described imaginings of the future that in some way challenged current systems of imagining production, consumption and the profit motifs that drive capitalism. Addison in imagining more just wealth distribution and Eleanor through material changes in her art classroom. These responses offer some window into the capacity to imagine different futures in ways that offer the possibility for a different world, As Hopkins (2019) wrote

We do have the capability to effect dramatic change, but we're failing because we've largely allowed our most critical tool to languish human imagination. As defined by social reformer John Dewey, imagination is the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise. The ability, that is, to ask What if? And if there was ever a time

when we needed that ability, it is now (p. 3)

Eleanor and Addison did respond to the question “What if?”, they imagined things could be otherwise. The material differences described and operationalized by Eleanor, as well as the social justice orientation to sustainability described by Addison, were unique among the participants as several other imaginings seemed to function to reify systems, logics, and discourses of harm and illustrate Hopkins’ reminder that imagination is often “co-opted in service to our own extinction”.

### **Imaginings Reifying the Status Quo**

Despite calls for robust reimagining that demonstrates the collective capacity for exciting possibilities across these reflections on future possibilities, most of the educators imagined that the basic structures of society, including economic systems and educational structures, remained constant in these imaginings. In this section I’ll present the participants’ imaginings that seem “stuck” in the extractive ontology of the western present. These function in ways that sustain rather than challenge the imaginations of capitalism, neoliberalism, and extractive futures. In one instance Jacob imagined:

Big companies such as Amazon struggled for a while to reduce their plastic use. Soon, they invested into what they called “Amazon Outposts” which spread throughout almost every major city in the US! Instead of receiving packages at home and wasting more plastic, packages would be sent to your local outpost and the plastic would immediately be recycled there. This created more local jobs and helped reduce plastic waste!

In this expression of imagination, Jacob conceptualizes that capitalism has been able to produce more jobs and more plastics to be recycled, while the very notion of capitalism remains unquestioned. In imagining the best possible outcome at the end of climate resilience, he can imagine only possibilities which include the continuation of Amazon as the world's largest corporation. A corporation with enduring ethical issues around each step of the production and distribution chain and which is unflinchingly anti-labor. The power of a discursive condition which make thinking beyond capitalism not only unspeakable, but also inconceivable, are certainly at play here. In addition to these social circumstances, I theorize that articulating that Amazon will need to make changes might be read as an example of the defense that Wallace-Wells gives nod to in writing that “the burden of responsibility is too great to be shouldered by a few, however comforting it is to think all that is needed is a few villains to fall” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 30).

We are all implicated in these systems and the discursive conditions which make them possible, and Jacob receives comfort, even excitement evidenced by repeated exclamation points, in articulating that just these “villains” need to change. In contrast, Brett imagined a world in which all “online shopping ceased” in favor of more localized economies, but in which our primary patterns of consumption remained both unchanged and unchallenged. This might be read as a manifestation of discourses of capitalism in which it is impossible to imagine anything other than the continuation of some version of our current cycles of purchasing. When thinking through psychoanalytic qualitative inquiry, this might also be read as a defense against the discomfort that is born in encountering the idea that each of our lives will need to profoundly change. Such moves to suggest that only others need to change, or that

our changes will not fundamentally alter our lives- like shopping locally rather than online, but not changing patterns of production or consumption- makes it more tolerable to continue to avoid the realities of the crisis. In this way, imagination might function as a defense against the pain of knowing and forwards the limits of particular kinds of education, investment, and desire. Other educators hoped for smaller changes and imagined possibilities in more personal ways. In an example of such personal possibility, Jacob noted in the future he would like to be able to ride a bike past a community garden on the way to work.

Concerning teaching and schooling in Brett's imagined sustainable utopia solar powered buildings, renewable energy fueling student devices, and bountiful school gardens. He articulates, "the building is completely solar-powered, so while the students use their devices during the day, the charging blocks gather power and students can leave devices to charge when they go home". Addison wished for schooling without standards and curriculum guides, she hoped to be able to teach at their own pace and have students engage in more outdoor learning. Jacob hoped that in the future students would spend "equal amounts inside the classroom as well as outdoors", the result of moving away from the "mandated curriculum". While these hopes do question the driving assumptions of most educational institutions in the United States, they are also in line with the widely available discourse around the possibility. Teachers' unions, along with progressive educational theorists, have long advocated against these contemporary standardization efforts and these ideas circulate widely. So, while Naomi Kline called for an imperative and collective hope manifesting as imagination towards sustainability in response to environmental injustice and catastrophe, in demanding that we must "dream big, out loud,

in public and together” (as cited in Aronoff, et al., 2019, p. 3), these instances of imagining do not stretch the limits of possibility even though they very well might be stretching the limits of possibility for these participants given the current hegemony of the our collective discursive condition.

In another instance of imagining a future in which environmental catastrophe has been addressed and education is working in service of sustainability, Diane theorized that schools should focus on literacy efforts as, “higher literacy rate in a country leads to a higher GDP for the country, and higher standard of living for its citizens”. Here, she is drawing upon notions of economic growth and progress which have been part of the very fabric of the problems we face. The articulation about higher literacy rates and an increased GDP leaves nothing challenged and adopts the dominant paradigms most widely available about the purpose of education in service to increase gross domestic product. In terms of traditional social studies education, these are the terms of engagement. There is not a language available to them to imagine an alternative future perhaps because of their defensiveness or the collective defense against risking the status quo. Again, drawing on ideas of economic logic, competition, and neoliberalism Diane goes on to hypothesize that each year schools at the state level

have a contest to see which school is being the most sustainable. The leading school in each state gets \$10,000 to use however they choose... I know this seems radical, but think of how much money we are spending on COVID right now

Diane is suggesting a competition and encouraging economic incentives to schools in the form of a 10,000-dollar strings free prize. She does not specify what sorts of metrics might

be used to determine the winner of the idealized competition but implied here is the notion that the desire to win a competition paired with a monetary prize will motivate schools and teachers to change their behavior to be more "sustainable". She imagines that carrot-like incentives will be the way forward, rather than stick-like regulations that demand and enforce more sustainable schools. This imagining of competition can be read as a reification of the dominant axiological assumptions that maximizing wealth is a priority worth the risks and costs (Field, 1997), that it can be ethical, and that the current structures of government, economics, and society are sufficient (Harper & Snowden, 2017).

In Diane's example, she is making sense of climate crisis, even imagining solutions, by reflecting, refining, producing, and reproducing larger discursive trends towards varying levels of deferral and avoidance. Furthermore, she understands her imagining of this articulated possible future to be "*radical*". She defends her idea of a competition with the clause, "I know this seems radical, but...". In this colloquial use, radical might be understood to align with the Merriam-Webster definition "favoring extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions". What seems remarkable here is that the expressed hopes are not radical and indicate Diane's construction of what she articulates radical change might look like.

In this section, I have examined the ways that the research participants' stories about an imagined aspirational futures illuminate the ways that hope functions in relation to imagination and hypothesize that such weakened imagination structures increase the capacity to defend against the difficulty of encountering climate crisis. In the next section, I will analyze the ways that teachers talk about action concerning building such futures.

## Action Towards Aspiration

Bad things are going to happen. What can you do as a person? You don't run around saying, 'We're fucked! We're fucked! We're fucked!' It doesn't—it doesn't incentivize anybody to *do* anything. (Schmidt in Richardson, 2018)

As suggested by NASA climate scientist Gavin Schmidt in the quote opening this section, the ways we engage and conceptualize climate crisis and the possibilities for a response have impacts on how we are thinking about what to *do* in the face of such a complex challenge. Perhaps unsurprisingly given that stories we learn of intervention and resistance cannot always be accommodated by our imaginative structures and that the stories described above lacked the language to begin to imagine alternative structures, many of the actions teachers suggested as possibilities were similarly in service to a continued status quo.

In the following examples, despite explicit instruction on a variety of examples of successful activism responding to climate and environmental injustice, students continue to draw on dominant discourses, demonstrating that simply exposing students to a larger range of options does not necessarily change how they think about action. I argue that this is the result of collective and individual inability to accommodate knowledge which disrupts these discourses.

As part of the data collection, each of the participants was asked to identify a group of people working on the climate crisis and describe how it could be useful in the classroom. Before this assignment, the coursework had students engage in ideas of

collective political activism over two weeks. All students in the course, including each of these participants, read 18 one-page summaries of organizations and people who were engaged in climate activism (Bigelow & Swinehart, 2014), a case study of teaching about the Dakota Access Pipeline protests (Hanes, 2019), and watched a 20-minute video titled *The Story of Solutions* on the importance of focusing on structural and collective actions to climate crisis (Leonard & Sachs, 2013). As participants identified actions and groups, they illuminated something about what they think is an innovative, effective, or important action in working towards an aspirational future. The groups identified and further theorized below include four profit-driven companies, two non-profits, and one in-school project in partnership with a company focusing on entrepreneurship skills. None of the participants engaged in ideas of direct political action, including lobbying efforts or direct actions like marching or protesting. Throughout the data collected in this project, teachers expressed an eagerness toward action and were conceptualizing their agency concerning this crisis in a variety of ways. The ways they conceptualized possible action ranged from ideas centering individual action focusing on green consumerism and drawing on neoliberal discourses to more transformative political and collective actions. Many participants expressed a new or renewed sense of urgency. After all, the only thing between a worst-case scenario climate catastrophe and “the world we live in now lies only the question of human response” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p.14).

As Wallace-Wells (2019) reminded us, we are all implicated in these systems and the discursive conditions which make them possible. This sort of discourse often becomes entangled with notions of green consumerism and can function to support the continued

dominant axiological assumptions that maximizing wealth is a priority worth the risks and costs (Field, 1997), that it can be ethical, and that the current structures of government, economics, and society are sufficient (Harper & Snowden, 2017). Such entanglements are further explored in this section. In the following discussion of systems of knowledge and power, another important tension emerges here: We must remain individually implicated in these problems *and* simultaneously see solutions as more than our individualized actions. I attend to the ways these educators pick up such tension by discussing idealizations.

I theorize data that serves as examples of idealization, demonstrates a discursive subject often unable to accommodate imaginings beyond dominant discourse, highlight moves to avoid action altogether, and finally analyze how participant understandings of political action have implications for social studies education.

### **Discursive Subject**

In many instances throughout this project, the heavy presence of neoliberal discourse became abundantly clear. Given the shared recognition of a discursively shaped subject by difficult knowledge and psychosocial methodologies, it is no surprise that an analysis of the ways teachers talk about what to do in the face of climate crisis would be saturated with such language and ideas. One example of the entanglements of action and neoliberal discourses can be found as Diane describes her imagining of possible action around a school garden saying that

It teaches them entrepreneurial skills and gets them involved in something much bigger than our small school garden. It shows then how the little things that they do

each day to take care of the garden and the things that they are learning, are being put to use in our community and everyone is able to benefit from it by eating their yummy food!

The use of the word “entrepreneurial” and the conception of the product being “put to use” employ terms and ideas that are associated with the economic logic of neoliberalism. Diane understands action in the face of climate from within the very structures and discourses of capitalism that have been largely responsible for the crisis. They see skills around entrepreneurship as what makes this project valuable, rather than any relation to the existential threat to the climate. In an even more direct entanglement of these discourses, particularly those around *green consumerism*, two participants listed companies selling products as the group working in the face of climate crisis. Brett identified a global company headquartered in Seoul, South Korea that makes solar panels, Q Cells. In talking about the classroom uses of this example, Brett identifies that students

could use the research that they did to ask questions to better understand the processes of Q Cells.... and come up with a way that we could pitch Q Cells to the community. Although prices may be high to install solar panels, students could come up with a sales pitch to encourage members of the community to use them in their homes and businesses.

Noteworthy about this understanding of action is the way it holds up individual action through the form of local community members making different consumer choices. This is markedly different than having students advocate for solar energy through a political campaign to increase subsidies, change regulation that mandates solar on new construction,

gives tax breaks to installers, or any other of the myriad of ways this idea may be moved towards more collective action. This also rests on assumptions that a technocratic solution will solve the crisis rather than a more fundamental questioning of the structures, both material and discursive, which continue to allow the conditions of climate collapse. The discourse of *ecological modernization* has served to legitimize capitalism and soothe our environmental anxieties resulting from capitalism's impact on our world by promising "green" capitalism that offers both continued economic development and environmental sustainability (Sharma & Alvey, 2020).

Another technocratic solution identified by a participant is a non-profit which has created a "giant ocean barrier to trap some of the floating plastic without disturbing the marine life below". The teacher goes on to describe the usefulness of this in the classroom, saying students "could write up proposals or advertisements for their environmental solutions. They could imagine things that utilize solar power, replace plastic bags, reduce carbon emissions, etc." The use of the word "advertisement" is an indicator of the circulation of green consumerism discourse. Jacob employed economic logic in describing possible solutions in articulating a business that has sprung up in response to a need for composting, noting that the business had successfully "rebranded" itself and that they provide subscribers with a paid service with a profit motive. Jacob is articulating privatization mechanisms employed through capitalism and neoliberal discourses to support the idea of composting. Alternatively, he could have framed the same issue without such discourse in describing a local farmers market that collects compost for a community cooperative or a classroom project in which students were engaged in reducing food waste

from their cafeteria. It is not the act of composting that is inherently entangled with these discourses, but how they have framed the participants thinking about this act. I want to reiterate that this is not meant to be a critique of these individual participants constructions of the possibilities for action, but instead indicative of our collective weakened imaginings about paths forward, shaped by both societal conditions and our individual subjectivities.

### **Idealization**

Another theme that emerged in this discussion of action is that of idealization. As evidenced in the examples below, “idealization can become an engagement of control that wards off the capacity to acknowledge the profound experience of loss and grief” (Britzman, 2000, p.34). In the example explored below, idealization is not separate from the types of discourses described above. In describing a profitable development company in South Florida, Kevin articulates a profit-driven organization that does not challenge many of the systems that have caused climate change and remains firmly unquestioning of patterns of production and consumption. In this way, he is able to avoid imagining the real losses at hand. While reimagining what might be possible, Kevin described that this included the “development of a K-8 charter school with a STEAM-based curriculum, a lakeside gastropub only serving locally-grown organic food” along with “plans to expand the pilot to an Uber-style on-demand service. Innovations in the house include Alexa controlled smart homes with 1-gigabit fiber internet and wiring for electric cars in every garage.” In this passage, Kevin describes what he sees as exciting possibilities for an imagined future. He dreams of “Alexa controlled smart homes” and in a subsequent passage, “clean natural gas piped to the kitchen”. There is idealization at work here of what

natural gas and Alexa-controlled homes may make possible and what they might interrupt. There is an idealization here suggesting that our lives will only get more comfortable and consumption filled as we address climate change. Additionally, this idealization connects imagination in service to the status quo as described in the previous section to these imaginings about action which leave unchallenged such a status quo. This collective weakened capacity to vision a different world is evidence that imagination, like other human capacity and creativity, has often been co-opted in the service of our extinction (Hopkins, 2019). Wallace-Wells (2019) further argued that at the root of the climate crisis we suffer an incredible failure in imagination, both as we imagine that things might be different and imagine what that difference may be. This stands to have implications for the teaching and learning of climate crisis.

In holding this up as an example that might be helpful for students, Kevin also idealizes what it is that middle schoolers might really be able to do. Here emerges the tension between both individualizing our implication in these challenges and understanding action in ways that are collective and political in scope. While construction development is beyond the field of influence of most middle schoolers, advocating for policy changes may not be. Moving to a sustainable housing development in South Florida is beyond the scope of most middle schoolers' realm of influence but understanding production and conception implications are within reach. Teachers might both want to help students see the actions and simultaneously recognize that the heavy lifting of remaking discursive, political, and material realities should not fall to children.

### **Instances of Inaction**

While some participants focused upon individual, idealized, and neoliberally saturated actions, some articulations removed them from action altogether. These happened in a variety of ways, all while each educator maintained that something must be done- just not by them. These function as psychoanalytic ambivalence as participants simultaneously removed their responsibility to act and articulated the need for urgent action. In theorizing ambivalence and action, it is important to note that “engagement or the lack thereof is not a straightforward expression or valuation of attitudinal positions” (Lertzman, 2015, p. 108). And that “the presence and process of ambivalence reflect the highly complicated nature of our deep investments in practices that are both life affirming and life-degrading” (Lertzman, 2015, p. 108). In one example, Addison articulates that

governments and large corporations across the world will establish limitations on greenhouse gas emissions and receive hefty fines for pollution. The world will be a better place when we can reduce our carbon footprint on large-scale operations as well as small-scale matters.

Here in imagining the possibilities, she articulates systemic action and that action is needed, but here it is “government” and “large corporations” that need to act. While perhaps true, this serves to abstract her from the action. It functions differently than articulating that people must put pressure on these entities.

Even when articulating the actions they take, participants announced their inconsistency and contradicting investments. Eleanor wrote “it’s okay that I don’t remove the label off of every glass item I use for the recycling center or to compost every food

scrap because I am tired. A little bit of inconsistency will not matter too much.” Diane articulated, “the story I tell myself is that it is okay for me to not always do my part because one little thing here or there doesn’t matter.” In a subsequent sentence, she argues that there is a need for students to be inspired to act continuously towards a common good. This is representative of a process of ambivalence in which the teacher wants students to be inspired to act in ways that are life-affirming and towards a common good and simultaneously holding on to investments in ways of life that have root causes in the systems and discourses that have caused the very harm they seek to elevate, including those of neoliberalism and capitalism.

### **Implementation Implications in Social Studies Education**

Although each of the teachers in this study articulated that they identify as civics educators and saw their work as closely connected to social studies education, political actions that I expected to see teachers talk about rarely emerged. While the vast majority of teacher’s articulations about action in the face of climate were individual, rooted in neoliberal logics, and impacted by the psychic experience of ambivalence, in a few instances educators alluded to more transformative and political possibilities for action. These conceptions seek to be “an insistence that students have access to the tools with which to negotiate and transform the world” (Ayres, et al., 2000, p. 2–3). While these teachers articulate circumstances of an outer world that requires transformative political action and systemic responses to global climate crisis, these articulations are steeped in the defenses against anxiety, competing investments, and attempts towards comfort evidenced by more directly ambivalent moments. Kevin mentioned that voting was an important contribution to

intervening in climate crisis and Eleanor noted the political causes of the problem, saying “this feels like a battle we are losing and that if people do not wake up, especially self serving politicians”. Of the story they want to tell students, another Emma wrote

There is always hope. You are important and your actions make a difference. You are the future leaders of the world. Here are the facts about what’s happening. Let’s write letters to politicians. Let’s make brochures to educate our community. Let’s recycle our paper and try not to waste food. If we all work together, we can make a difference.

The mention of writing letters to politicians or working to educate the wider community alongside more individual actions like reducing food waste and recycling can be read as a recognition of the need for more political actions, actions that move beyond discourses of green consumerism. In another example Addison articulated

The story I want to teach my students is that they are the future and their battle for our planet begins now through the small things that they are capable of doing as well as through the system in which they are raised. They can be those next advocates, lobbyists, politicians, and voters who act to effect change for our world so that they are the agents of change for the better.

This response is markedly different from most of the other actions articulated by participants as possibilities for young people. Here, the educator uses strong language about the “battle for our planet”. The analogy of a battle indicates a combative tone. The use of the word “our” indicates a collective investment in the outcome, rather than a more removed reference to “the” planet. The teacher mentions that students can become

“advocates, lobbyists, politicians, and voters”. They articulate actions that are systemic and political, these solutions are about transforming systems of power as they entangle with climate crisis. While anxiety and fear cannot be absent from either this teaching or the ways students engage with such knowledge, these conceptualizations of action provide students with some way to imagine a path forward that is more complex and complete than discourses of green consumerism and environmental technocratic salvation.

In considering the more political actions mentioned in this subsection and the pedagogical implications, it is important to note that the exposure of teachers to a wide range of stories about effective, political, collective, and more transformative actions did not seem to have much bearing on their ability to imagine such actions for themselves and their students. That is, through their coursework and the structure of the assignments they were exposed. When asked to identify actions, participants consistently named individual actions, particularly those entangled with capitalism and green consumerism. These findings demonstrate the need for classroom instruction on climate crisis, particularly in the field of social studies, to include attention to political and collective actions. This instruction might include more robust and complex instruction about the history of social movements and the tactics that have resulted in movement victories. Additionally, it might include direct instruction about the available options for action in the face of climate crisis. The limited selection of options called upon by participants highlights the need for greater sustained attention to this issue. Active participation in civic and political processes is a skill more than a disposition and without knowing the options for action, students and teachers are unlikely to act in meaningfully collective, political, or transformative ways.

The C3 Framework includes attention to such participation through its civics education standards. The introduction to the section addressing civics education calls for a broad definition of the purpose and functions of civics to include the demonstration of “engagement when they address public problems individually and collaboratively and when they maintain, strengthen, and improve communities and societies” (p.31).

However, the data presented in also demonstrates other substantive internal and discursive barriers which prevent people from acting. Learning about what to do in the face of climate action will take more than exposure to a larger rolodex of options. These participants articulate sentiments that corroborate scholarship which states that learning more does not necessarily make us think or act differently (Crocco et al., 2018). This complicates some conventional wisdom in social studies about how it is that we might prepare people for active and critical participation in civic life. More transformative civic engagement will require pedagogical engagements which invite us to robustly imagine as well as continued introduction to a wide range of possible ways to participate in civic processes.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have analyzed social studies teachers’ articulations of desired futures and their imagined agentive paths towards those desires. I theorize that our individual and collective inability to imagine robustly and beyond neoliberal discourses contributes to the capacity to bear the horrific realities of climate crisis. I also identify evidence of a discursively saturated subject and make note of the ways that idealization shapes how we understand possible action. I hypothesize that the hindered capacity to imagine an

alternative future beyond climate crisis and the systems which have enabled it, are at least partially to blame for toleration of such a condition. One possible response to this might be instructional spaces that intentionally support teachers and students towards more robust imagination. This invites questions about how it is that we might provide space and structure for radical imagining in the social studies classroom which provides an impetus for both hope and generative action in the face of such an existential crisis. This opens lines of inquiry worthy of our own robust imaginings both for the possibility of sustainable futures and also specifically in the work of social studies scholars investigating ecological issues. National civics standards, the informed action calls included in the C3 inquiry framework, and state level civics standards all invite classroom inclusion of community centered civic engagement in service to climate justice futures. Left un-pedagogically considered, encounters with climate injustice and ecological crisis could result in pessimism, including notions of resignation that there is nothing to be done or that our fate has been sealed. Developing robust imagination of what is possible might serve to combat such despair and support both teachers and students in making sense of climate change.

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