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# Intersectionality in youth climate activism as educational practice: political, pragmatic, and pedagogical dimensions

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Youth climate movements have increasingly adopted an intersectional approach to activism, highlighting how diverse social categories (inter alia, race, gender, social class, sexuality) intersect with power structures and systems of oppression. This article explores the educational value of practices of intersectionality as they unfold in activists' everyday lives, both within the climate movement and in its relationship with other movements. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic data from young climate activists belonging to the School Strike for Climate chapters in Portugal's two largest cities (Porto and Lisbon), we account for both private and public activist events—such as activists' meetings, school occupations, and protest actions—and the connections with other activist causes, including feminist, anti-fascist, pro-housing, and LGBTQI+ rights. We show that intersectionality in youth collective action translates into: (i) a political commitment to anchor the climate struggle in systemic injustices that affect minoritized groups and non-normative identities, and (ii) a pragmatic strategy to uphold the public relevance and reach of youth climate mobilization. Simultaneously, our data reveal how the intersectional framework in climate activism translates into informal educational experiences that are significant for political socialization and collective learning, challenging conventional pedagogical processes and hegemonic education systems. This article contributes to expanding traditional notions of education, emphasizing the importance of climate activism as localized political spheres that promote opportunities for participatory learning, aimed at co-constructing just, democratic, and inclusive futures.

## KEYWORDS

youth, climate activism, education, intersectionality, multi-sited ethnography

## 1 Introduction

The climate crisis is intertwined with multiple layers of social, economic, and political inequalities that extend far beyond the environment itself. Today's youth, particularly those within climate movements, are increasingly attuned with these intersections, navigating a socio-political context where environmental advocacy converges with broader socio-cultural and political issues (Chang, 2022; Mikulewicz et al., 2023; Trott, 2024). Grounded in an intersectional framework, young activists perceive climate change not as an isolated phenomenon but as both a symptom and a cause of larger systemic oppressions, linked to diverse struggles (Kajiser and Kronsell, 2014; Mazzucelli et al., 2021; Taylor, 2018; Trott, 2024).

The prominent role of climate activists in the current university occupations and the Palestine solidarity protests, spreading across Europe and the USA, serves as a paradigmatic illustration of how the climate movement connects climate justice with broader social issues—decolonization, human rights, defossilization and peace. Coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the concept of intersectionality comes as “a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects (...). It is not simply that there is a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things” (Crenshaw, 2017, p. 1). In this vein, achieving climate justice according to an intersectional orientation involves problematizing how identity and systemic dimensions of oppression intersect and are framed by dynamics of power, privilege, and exclusion that permeate both the impacts of and the responses to climate change. As argued by Mikulewicz et al. (2023, p. 1276), the definition of climate justice should, in fact, encompass a two-fold aim: “to identify and foreground the needs of individuals and groups most marginalized in face of climate change impacts as well as our responses to these impacts (i.e., mitigation and adaptation strategies), and to dismantle the individual and structural architectures of marginalization, exploitation and oppression toward these groups.”

Teaching intersectionality and adopting its conceptual tenets in pedagogy studies and educational practices has been emphasized over the years within the scope of schools’ mandate on citizenship education, toward the promotion of more inclusive and democratic societies (e.g., Tefera et al., 2018; Villa-Nicholas, 2018; de Vries, 2020; Velásquez Estrada, 2022; Díez-Bedmar, 2022). However, the role of informal and non-formal education contexts—such as community projects or street demonstrations—has been neglected as important arenas where young people develop their citizenship, particularly in times when they feel that formal institutions have been failing them. By incorporating an intersectional perspective in education, climate change can be addressed in its systemic and multifaceted nature, offering a transformative lens to view climate activism as a legitimate educational space. Against the backdrop of the scarce research on the pedagogical potential of collective political processes, our study responds to previous calls to recognize the educational potential of youth’s political agency (Biswas, 2021) and to explore how education can be reimagined in contexts of youth climate activism (Malafaia, 2022). Furthermore, we aim to address the research gap on intersectionality within climate activism, particularly the lack of inside knowledge deriving from (multi-sited) ethnographic approaches.

This article focuses on youth climate activism in Portugal, specifically examining its intersectional practices—including their underlying tensional features—, while shedding light on its pedagogic potentials. To be sure, it was throughout the ethnographic immersion in the field of climate activism that become clear the intertwining relationship between these movements and other social struggles and groups, which was made visible not only through symbolic acts (e.g., subscription of other collectives’ manifestos), but also through manifold actions and daily efforts made by young climate activists. Through a multi-sited ethnographic exploration within the School Strike for Climate (SSC) in Porto and Lisbon, our study unveils how the dynamics of intersectionality operate. Specifically, we examined how the youth climate struggle—and its modes of doing politics outside conventional and institutional arrangements—is forged within

the movement and with other movements, related to feminist, anti-racist, anti-fascist, pro-housing, and LGBTQI+ rights’ struggles. As will be shown, more than a strategic alliance, this confluence of activist struggles paves the way for informal, yet powerful, educational practices. We contend that these practices develop, on the ground, organically and intentionally: as both political commitments and pragmatic strategies.

Politically, intersectionality encapsulates the movement’s profound recognition of interlinked oppressions, from socio-economic and racial challenges to gendered disparities and environmental injustices (Collins and Bilge, 2020). As will be seen, throughout their activist practices, young activists in our study embraced intersectionality as an intentional political commitment: both as part of their identities, as young activists, and as a foundational principle for their actions, seeking to deconstruct conventional approaches to frame and address societal injustices. These findings underscore the educational value of intersectionality, as young activists not only become aware of the vast web of interconnected issues, but they also learn how to navigate and advocate for their causes within their complexities, positioning climate justice alongside broader societal imperatives. Pragmatically, the intentional intertwining of diverse social struggles with climate activism serves as an important strategy to keep the climate struggle relevant and topical. By contextualizing their climate advocacy within an expansive framework of societal challenges, young activists enhance their movement’s resonance, appeal, and mobilization potential. Simultaneously, this strategic alignment creates pedagogical spaces in which young activists engage in a continuous process of learning, driven by their encounters with multiple facets of injustice and their implications (Johnson and Morris, 2010).

The theoretical section of the article begins by discussing the role of intersectionality in contemporary youth climate activism, progressing toward a literature-based problematization addressing the relationship between intersectionality and activism from an educational perspective. Next, in the methods section, we present the multi-sited ethnographic design, which covers the School Strike for Climate in the two largest cities of Portugal, explaining the fieldwork and the analytical process. Afterwards, we present two empirical sections (4 and 5) focusing on (4) the practices of intersectionality and the interactions with diverse movements and groups, as forms of political commitment and pragmatic strategy, and (5) the activists’ initiatives and modes of protest that put forward intersectional approaches to the climate crisis while unfolding as pedagogical practices with educational implications. We conclude our article reflecting on the importance of including further spaces for activism and political participation within and beyond conventional education systems, in order to promote participatory and democratic learning practices that consider the world’s systemic complexities.

## 2 Youth climate activism: intersectionality and education

Literature on climate justice (e.g., Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014; Taylor, 2019; Holmes, 2021; Mikulewicz et al., 2023) emphasizes the need for an intersectional lens capable of recognizing and confronting the intrinsic interplay of race, class, gender, and other categories in tackling the multifaceted impacts of climate change as the environment is inseparable from social, political, and economic realms (Gutterman,

2020; Amorim-Maia et al., 2022). This is crucial for deconstructing monolithic environmental narratives and fostering a climate justice movement. In the sphere of youth climate activism, adopting an intersectional perspective is also a political stance grounded in recognizing the systemic oppressions behind the environmental crisis (Gutterman, 2020).

The research developed by Rios et al. (2019) on the Brazil's contemporary mobilizations, for instance, underscores the diversity of identities and experiences that shape activism. Similarly, De Tróí (2022) study on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality within the context of climate emergency, and Zanoli (2020) analysis of the interplay between various movements reveal the multifaceted nature of social justice efforts. When elaborating on the importance of intersectionality in advancing climate justice, Mikulewicz et al. (2023) call for a scholarship synergy among diverse theoretical and methodological approaches that may shed light on intersectionality practices contributing to the reconfiguration of dominant ontologies. In this vein, intersectionality may serve not only as a socio-political stance but also as an epistemological framework anchoring the learning processes occurring within activist contexts, bringing more complexity, diversity, and depth to the discussion and understanding of social issues (Crenshaw, 1989).

The pedagogical dimensions of intersectionality within youth activism are only recently—albeit parsimoniously—receiving attention. Mayo et al. (2023) argue that intersectionality, when integrated into educational settings, including youth activism, not only cultivates a nuanced understanding of complex social issues but also requires critical pedagogical perspectives to build a comprehensive social justice framework. In this sense, the education-intersectionality nexus becomes an emancipatory tool, fostering an environment where young activists are empowered to question, analyze, and respond to several forms of oppression and injustice. Such an environment is nurtured by the inclusion of diverse narratives, perspectives and experiences, integral to learning processes (Gillborn, 2015; Crenshaw, 2016; Mikulewicz et al., 2023). Moreover, the fluid and dynamic nature of intersectionality, as a relational practice, supports a co-constructed learning process, as knowledge is not static but is continuously and contingently reshaped by the individual and collective interactions of activists with broader social, political, and environmental contexts (Collins and Bilge, 2020).

The educational value of intersectionality has been emphasized, for instance, regarding the promotion of critical race perspectives (Gillborn, 2015), transnational approaches to gender equality (Canetto, 2019) and the development of democratic culture competences (Díez-Bedmar, 2022). In curricular studies, the integration of intersectional perspectives is discussed in terms of re-evaluating established notions of knowledge that perpetuate power and preparing children and young people to counteract marginalized social positions in their communities (Zhang and Gao, 2024). This perspective also advocates for hands-on and community-based approaches to citizenship education in schools, stressing the importance of offering young people opportunities to act and reflect on the world around them (Biesta et al., 2009; Menezes and Ferreira, 2014; Carrillo-Nieves et al., 2024). Approaching social issues from an intersectional perspective is well-aligned with premises of empowering and critical educational practices. Yet, on a practical level, there is still much to be known about how young people engage and mobilize in intersectional ways and what do they learn from it.

Activist arenas have proven fruitful grounds for young people to politicize their identities (Ginwright, 2007) and repurpose their social privileges (Malafaia, 2022) in favor of the construction of more just societies. An ethnography with youth climate activists shows how their experiences challenge the socio-political meanings of being young and a student in times of climate emergency, while educating each other in ways that directly contest the anachronic and individualist approaches of climate education conveyed by schools (Malafaia, 2022). In the present article, we draw on the understanding of education as a social process that extends beyond the school institution and is key to sustain democracies (Dewey, 1916). Consequently, a broad and political understanding of education includes the consideration that young people “learn at least as much about democracy and citizenship from their participation in the range of different practices that make up their lives, as they learn from which is officially prescribed and formally taught” (Biesta et al., 2009, p. 3). As such, activist spaces can be regarded as educational, as they potentially nurture forms of learning that are iterative, reflective, and rooted in real-world social complexities. As pointed out by Amorim-Maia et al. (2022), the relationship between various social and environmental injustices creates a complex learning matrix where knowledge is not just acquired but lived and experienced. Young activists, embedded in these struggles, develop a critical consciousness that transcends traditional educational boundaries, venturing into the realms of social, political, and emotional learning. Every campaign, protest, and demonstration become a learning event, each interaction a moment of knowledge exchange, and every challenge an opportunity for critical reflection (Ginwright, 2007; Amorim-Maia et al., 2022; Malafaia, 2022). Rather than passive recipients, young people are active constructors of knowledge, shaped and honed by their active participation in social struggles (Johnson and Morris, 2010; Amorim-Maia et al., 2022). The pedagogical dimension, therefore, is intrinsically linked to the core of youth activism.

### 3 Method, context and participants: a multi-sited ethnographic exploration

Ethnography has long been valued as a method offering a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences, cultures, and practices of various groups and communities through a prolonged immersion in the field, involving direct and often participant observation (e.g., Wacquant, 2003; Martins and Mendes, 2016; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2020). When aiming to understand the on-the-ground experiences of young climate activists, ethnography came as particularly fitting, granting an in-depth insights into their motivations, actions, interactions, and the socio-cultural context shaping their activism (O'Reilly, 2009). Considering the globalized and networked nature of today's youth climate movement, a multi-sited ethnography assumed paramount importance (Falzon, 2009), as it enables the tracing of individuals, connections, and ties across spatial and temporal divides (Marcus, 1995). Young climate activists do not operate within isolated spheres; they are interconnected, both materially and symbolically, to a worldwide network of activists, movements, ideas, and events (della Porta and Tarrow, 2004). Whether through internationally shared strategies for local protests or nationally spread local groups, the nature of climate activism is inherently multi-sited and unfolds differently in diverse locations, even within a same country.

This article draws on data from coordinated multi-sited fieldwork conducted by two ethnographers involved in the School Strike for Climate's activities in Porto and Lisbon, the two largest cities in Portugal, from February to October 2023. The fieldwork, which involved young activists aged between 17 and 25 years, is part of a wider research project on youth climate activism. Participants are mainly university students from middle-class backgrounds, who are also engaged in other activist collectives, namely the Occupy initiative in Lisbon, the Porto Antifascist Group, and the LGBTQI+ Pride March. These activist interrelations and their prevalence throughout the ethnographic fieldwork with climate activists motivated this article, which aims to illuminate on the confluences of affiliations, alliances, and shared causes that define today's youthful climate movement landscape in Portugal. Thus, ethnographic data is used to enable an extensive understanding of the intersectionality approach employed by young climate activists, shedding light on how it translates into informal educational experiences.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee from the academic institution responsible for the development of the ethnographic phase of the project - Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences (Ethics Process Reference: 2023/04-04). A rapport-building process was developed with the young participants, based on trust and reciprocity relationships, which was crucial in facilitating a long-term engagement in the field, aiming at enriching the breadth and depth of the research insights. The activist groups were contacted by the project's researchers, who presented the goal of following the young activists' activities—ranging from school occupations to protest actions and internal meetings—to produce inside knowledge on activist practices, including interactions with other activist groups and movements. Balancing the “impression management” and the reciprocity efforts in the ethnographic fieldwork (Goffman, 1993; Neves and Malafaia, 2015) is challenging, especially when trying not to inadvertently sway the direction of the activist movement, while simultaneously serving as a bridge between academic pursuits and activist concerns. In this regard and aiming at fostering a more participatory and horizontal relationship with the young “gatekeepers” in the field, a monitoring group composed of key young activists was established. This group played a pivotal role in ensuring that the perspectives and voices of the participants were actively integrated into the research process. This strategy not only mitigated potential tensions during interactions between the adult ethnographers and young activists but also ensured the relevance and validity of the ethnographer's presence throughout the nine-month fieldwork period. To safeguard participants' anonymity, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Fieldnotes, written regularly, were the main recording device to preserve the naturalistic process of immersion in the field, as originally advocated by the ethnographic method (Goffman, 1993). The raw fieldnotes written by the ethnographers were frequently visited by a more experienced ethnographer, not involved in the fieldwork, who both provided feedback on the writing process and hinted at the main insights to be drawn. This process propelled an interactive selection of key pieces from each fieldnote, which were then featured in a collective ethnographic diary created in a password-protected shared folder to facilitate asynchronous composition and joint analysis. A procedure of “coding and memoing” was developed, following the leads of Emerson et al. (1995) for analytically processing ethnographic fieldnotes while safeguarding the necessarily fluid and narrative nature

of the method. This involved initial line-by-line memos to identify ideas and issues of particular interest in the field, which gradually progressed toward broader analytical themes and arguments (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 143). The analysis is organized into two main sections, showing how intersectionality works as a political commitment and a pragmatic strategy, while discussing the educational power of intersectionality in youth activism.

## 4 In-between climate activism: intersectionality as a political commitment and a pragmatic strategy

The celebration of the International Women's Day on March 8th featured prominently in the observation notes of both ethnographies conducted with the School Strike for Climate in Porto and Lisbon. The fieldnotes account for the climate activists' participation in the event, highlighting how they politically articulate climate issues with a deep commitment to confronting socio-political concerns, including the relationships among environmental degradation, systemic exploitation, and feminist struggles. This broader and intersectional approach can be discerned from the specific demands and claims made, which did not come merely as additional claim-making layers, but rather as an integrative political frame of the climate-feminist link. This integration is exemplified by the call for an “ecofeminist” transition from the Lisbon activists, highlighting the intricate relationship between ecological concerns and gender-based discrimination. Ecofeminism, as a branch of feminism and political ecology, discusses the patriarchal structures underlying environmental degradation (Mies and Shiva, 1993). By advocating this perspective, the movement signals its commitment to a more holistic political approach to climate, one that recognizes the multi-layered nature of the crisis, as shown in the next fieldnote excerpt:

The young activists of the School Strike for Climate made a public discourse during the march: (...) “Exploration is systemic. We need a just ecofeminist transition (this message was also depicted in the banner that the School Strike for Climate activists carried out). We need the end of fossil fuels by 2030, including the guarantee of affordable and renewable energy for everyone by 2025. These are existential needs. And for this we need the collapse of the capitalist, racist, colonial, hetero-cis-sexist, and ableist systems. As a diverse student movement, we demand: The right to a fair, dignified, and safe life; The right to care; The right to our bodies; The end of violence against trans women and other LGBTQA+ identities; The end of harassment in universities along with the creation of effective and serious reporting mechanisms, inclusive sexual education in schools, an anti-racist and anti-colonialist education system. We demand that life be placed at the centre; the task of changing a system that is fossil, patriarchal and that leads us towards civilizational and climate collapse is in our hands, as civil society, through our collective, direct, and united action (...)” (Fieldnote, Lisbon, March 8, 2023).

The demand for the end of fossil fuels and for the guarantee of renewable electricity not only underscores a sense of urgency but also highlights the existential nature of the young people's activism. It is not just about future changes; it is about addressing immediate threats



that affect their present life. Interestingly, the demands for an urgent shift in the socio-political paradigm are linked to broader systemic issues: capitalism, racism, colonialism, hetero-cis-sexism, and ableism. This is not about environmentalism in a vacuum; it is a call to dismantle and challenge a plethora of oppressive systems that, in the activists' view, jointly contribute to the climate crisis. Furthermore, the emphasis on diverse student identities—the rights to their bodies, and the calls to end violence against LGBTQA+ individuals and harassment in universities—shows the movement's commitment to creating safe and democratic spaces for all. The demands for an “anti-racist and anti-colonialist education system” reinforces the notion that to effectively tackle the climate crisis, societal structures (of which the school institutions and curricula are integral elements) must be restructured to eradicate discrimination and promote inclusivity.

The activists from the School Strike for Climate also actively participated in Trans Visibility Marches. During one of these marches and intrigued by the intense involvement of the climate activists in a range of causes, the ethnographer sought to better understand the motivations behind it. The next fieldnote illustrates one of these moments, in which a young climate activist, who is also a member of the Porto Antifascist Nucleus, talked about his involvement with the Trans cause and the connections between climate change concerns and issues of gender and identity:

I witnessed a conversation between members of the School Strike for Climate and the Porto Antifascist Nucleus, during a break in an informal gathering of the two groups. The discussion was sparked by a question about the intersectionality of social justice movements. Participants expressed their solidarity with LGBTQI+ and Feminist movements, housing rights, and the anti-racist cause, emphasizing their shared commitment to fight various forms of oppression. This discourse reflected the deeply ingrained values of inclusivity and intersectionality within both groups, highlighting their awareness of broader social issues and their interconnection with environmental activism. “(...) This is why we are here today, taking part in this demonstration. It's about to assert our solidarity with the LGBTQI+ community and to reinforce our stance as intersectional activists. We recognise that multiple forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and class-based oppression, are intricately linked. These oppressions impact individuals differently, contingent upon their identity and life experiences (...)” Kiko said. (Fieldnote, Trans Visibility March, Porto, March 31, 2023).

At the heart of this ethnographic piece is the essence of intersectionality and its defining role in the identity of young activists. The fieldnote excerpt showcases more than just cause solidarity; it depicts a political commitment to a broad view of activism, including the young participants' self-identification as “intersectional activists.” Thus, there is a mature understanding of the contemporary challenges posed by the multifaceted nature of societal oppressions—ranging from racism and sexism to LGBTQI+ rights—echoing wider sentiments among youth activists globally (Yates, 2015), which require united struggles (Cho et al., 2013; Carastathis, 2016).

The increasing preponderance of intersectionality as a groundwork for activist practices can be viewed as more than just a politically committed move within the climate movement; it is also a

pragmatic response to the diverse lived experiences of today's youth and an effort to enhance the relevance of the movement's struggle. The range of socio-cultural backgrounds, identities, and stories that young people bring into activism necessitates a movement that is both inclusive and reflective of these multiplicities. By framing their activism as intersectional, the young activists are not only acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of climate justice, but they are also seeking representation on varied activist platforms. It is an attempt to ensure that the movement is not just about a singular environmental narrative but encompasses the broader challenges intersecting with climate change, enabling diverse young people to see themselves, their struggles, and aspirations, mirrored in the collective fight for a sustainable future.

During a coordination meeting between young activists from the School Strike for Climate and the Antifascist Nucleus in Porto, and while preparing the Trans Visibility and Housing Rights demonstrations, Kiko (from the School Strike for Climate) intervened to make sure that the climate movement would be represented in both events:

Kiko emphasised that he would be attending both demonstrations as a representative of the School Strike for Climate (SSC). When I said that was intending to participate, Kiko said to others: “(...) Ana is with me! You're attending on behalf of SSC, you are aligned with SSC, aren't you?”—he asked, hoping for an affirmative response from me. I replied that I would be doing observation but that I would be available to assist if needed. He smiled and accepted my stance. (...) Kiko, then, coordinated with his fellow activists of the School Strike for Climate, ensuring that both the banner and the megaphone would be brought to the demonstrations, in order to visually mark the group's presence amidst the crowd. (...) Kiko keeps stressing the intersectional dimension of the struggle and “the importance of unity amongst several social movements to ensure visibility and respect for all battles against oppression and in favour of diversity.” This endeavour to nurture alliances and solidarity among different activist groups and social movements is also an effort to ensure that various groups are involved and represented on multiple fronts, especially because of their “limited mobilisation capacity,” which was referred in other meetings. Collaboration among diverse collectives emerges to strengthen and solidify action and presence in the public sphere, particularly as they grapple with the challenge of reaching non-activist young people. (Fieldnote, Meeting of the Porto Antifascist Nucleus, March 28, 2023).

Besides the complexities inherent to the ethnographer's insider position in the field, the above excerpt offers a glimpse into the strategic positioning of the School Strike for Climate within the broader activist arena. Kiko's insistence on having the School Strike for Climate represented while engaging with other activist fronts (such as trans and housing rights' movements) highlights the pragmatic role of intersectionality. As observed by the ethnographer during the preparation of the Trans Visibility March, the climate activists managed to strategically reinforce their intersectional confluence with other movements and symbolically inscribe this political alliance in the public sphere through concrete materiality—e.g., banners and megaphones. This serves a dual purpose: politically, it underscores the climate movement's commitment to diverse socio-political causes,

reflecting the essence of intersectionality (Collins, 2015); pragmatically, it amplifies the movement's visibility and voice within a crowded activist landscape (Jasper, 2004). These maneuvers illustrate the coexistence of political and pragmatic strategies that sustain activist movements (Snow and Soule, 2010; Tarrow, 2022).

The unification of the Antifascist Nucleus and the School Strike for Climate in this context signals not just a combination of causes but their strategic alignment toward collective resonance and impact (Carastathis, 2016). Kiko's emphasis on the "importance of unity among several social movements" captures the ethos of today's activism (Cho et al., 2013). This strategy is especially salient in contexts marked by limited mobilization resources. Indeed, after Greta Thunberg's effect in 2018/2019, which sparked a widespread peak of mobilization and engagement in climate protests, recent years have seen a notable decrease in the general public involvement with climate-related activist events. This trend underscores the importance of strategic approaches that seek to maximize impact in addressing environmental concerns while maintaining the movement's social relevance. The congregation of diverse activist groups not only enables the representation on a multitude of fronts, but also amplifies the collective outreach, especially concerning the efforts to engage non-activist youth—a key yet challenging goal (Kahne and Middaugh, 2012).

By analyzing the activist practices and motivations—going beyond the rhetoric and the public discourses—one can uncover what may be interpreted as paradoxes in the intersectionality of the Portuguese youth climate movement. On the one hand, the intersectional approach as a political commitment that translates into genuine attempts of the young activists to acknowledge and address the multifaceted challenges intersecting with climate change (Collins and Bilge, 2020). On the other hand, intersectionality as a pragmatic strategy, revealing an instrumental nuance to the activist practices in the Portuguese context. Environmental challenges often intersect with socio-political contexts, and as Taylor (2018) highlights, issues such as environmental racism and industrial pollution profoundly impact communities. Given the Portuguese socio-political landscape and the challenges of gaining traction for environmental causes, integrating multiple causes can also be seen as a strategic survival mechanism for the movement (Carastathis, 2016). By aligning with broader issues that resonate with diverse segments of the population, the youth climate movement ensures a wider base of support and solidarity. This approach increases its visibility, reach, and impact, making it harder for both the public opinion and the political establishment to downplay or dismiss the movement's demands.

This empirical section sheds light on the intersectional practices and strategies within the Portuguese youth climate movement, particularly how these practices are shaped by the convergence with diverse groups and causes, and how they are important in amplifying the movement's voice, giving rise to new meanings and identities attached to activism. The next section explores the educationally empowering potential of these processes in the development of the burgeoning generation of activists.

## 5 Climate and beyond: the educational power of intersectionality in youth climate activism

As we ethnographically followed young activists' engagement in various events, our research findings prompted us to explore how the

intersectionality approach adopted in these engagements constitutes informal educational experiences with pedagogical value. Indeed, through their involvement in activities such as school occupations, protest actions, open assemblies, debates, and digital activism, the young activists collectively construct knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities that transcend conventional classroom learning. As will be elaborated, these experiences of participating in collective political processes that cross diverse movements and causes, requiring them to navigate power dynamics and make sense of complex social issues, serve as transformative educational opportunities. These opportunities nurture political awareness, civic engagement, and the capacity to imagine social change.

During the ethnography with the young activists from the School Strike for Climate in Porto, we observed their involvement in organizing several city events. One example includes an initiative in the city center that involved inviting a film director to engage in a public climate-focused discussion. This initiative provided insights into the combination of artistic, educational, and activist elements as pedagogical means to bring climate change to the public debate. As depicted in the next fieldnote's excerpt, the initiative's organization illustrates the activists' engagement with the city's cultural life, emphasizing the role of education, consciousness-raising, dialogue and pluralism in confronting the global challenges posed by the intertwining of climate and social inequalities:

The young activists from the School Strike for Climate in Porto collaborated with the programming team of 'Cinema Batalha' to curate a special session in celebration of Earth Day. This event was meticulously prepared and discussed in previous meetings over the past few weeks. Kiko, Amélia, Didi, Fábio, and Dani were the key contributors to the selection of films and the structuring of the afternoon session. They felt grateful and excited to be part of such a symbolically significant cultural venue in the city. Despite their young age, they showed an understanding of its storied and iconic significance in Porto, which is held in high regard by many. Amélia specifically noted the "fundamental historical and cultural importance of Cinema Batalha." Didi considered the venue's reopening to the public as a "positive development" for the city, especially its cultural orientation of "hosting events of thematic significance that cater to societal and individual interests." The two films selected were 'No Ordinary Protest,' an eco-feminist parable about the power of collective action to achieve social and political transformation, and 'Bigger Than Us,' a documentary that follows young activists living in far-flung corners of the globe, showing the young generation's fight for human rights, climate justice, and access to education. During the debate, which involved the young activists and the film director, the central argument revolved around the role of education in activism, empowering and mobilizing individuals concerning social, political, and environmental issues. "Education provides critical knowledge that is essential for informed action," said the film director, underscoring that activism is essential to question inequalities and to allow young people to explore alternative solutions. (...). (Fieldnote, School Strike for Climate Porto – 'Earth Day,' April 22, 2023).

Any discussion of the educational dimension of youth intersectional activism must be anchored, first and foremost, on the

recognition of the educational role of unconventional learning environments, including interactions with the cultural landscapes of the city—as exemplified by the century-old cinema venue in the case above. This interaction is not merely a convergence of spaces and people but a fertile ground for learning as an experiential and dialogic process (Hall and Clover, 2005). The young activists' engagement with the cinema is far from passive; they actively participate in a dynamic exchange of ideas, beliefs, and perspectives. Their collective decisions about the climate-related films to be publicly exhibited and the incorporation of climate themes into the cinema's cultural programming reflect educational processes that transcend formal boundaries. These processes are not only contextual and connected to real-world issues (Biesta, 2013) but also intersect with climate change, cultural heritage, and community identity (Dewhurst, 2014). Education is not a static experience nor confined to traditional learning contexts. It is a dynamic and expansive process that encompasses the various contexts where young activists are encouraged to think critically, question, and confront complex socio-political and climate issues (Bellino and Williams, 2017; Malafaia, 2022).

On the one hand, activism as education builds on a conceptualization of learning linked to environments that foster opportunities for reflection and (inter)action, valuing pluralism and diversity. Knowledge is built, experimented with, and refined through engagement with real-life social challenges (Dewey, 1916; Biesta, 2013). In the case of intersectional activism, this includes collaborating with other groups and organizations, negotiating differences in public action strategies, developing public communication skills, and collectively articulating political claims (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004; Stevenson et al., 2014). On the other hand, activism as education directly challenges normative educational practices, both through claim-making forms that intentionally incorporate protest performances reversing the traditional teacher-student roles and hierarchies (Malafaia, 2022) and through questioning the formal and Western schooling system that determines what should count as knowledge in today's world of climate crisis and colonial-capitalist structures (Verlie and Flynn, 2022; Biswas, 2023). Interestingly, the ethnographic data with the School Strike for Climate in both cities allow us to appreciate both dimensions of activism as education. The fieldnote piece below accounts for a wave of university and school occupations carried out by young climate activists, showing how these physical disruptions are more than climate claim-makings; they encapsulate “curricula” proposals driven by political demands:

For students with classes in the amphitheatre, entering the occupation space was unavoidable, as it was situated in the atrium directly in front of the amphitheatre. I observed several youngsters entering and exiting the space, treating the occupation space as a ‘passageway.’ (...) I noticed that the activists had displayed a series of demands, written in pink and black on boards beside the occupation's benches: ‘Ecofeminism: Gender-Neutral Bathrooms; Enhanced Qualitative Feedback; Increase in Teaching/Student Staff; Community Curriculum on Climate/Social Change; Reduction in School Working Hours; Provision of Food and Menstrual Products; Unconditional Contraceptives and Psychological Support; (...) Transformative Justice’ (...). Discussions and reflections ensued regarding the possibilities for

enhancing spaces of care, from an eco-feminist perspective, both within activism and at the university. (...) At the same time, informative lectures on the ‘End Fossil’ actions were being facilitated by activists, aiming to raise awareness among other young individuals to join them (...) The wave of occupations continued, also including secondary schools, announced in the following week by an Instagram post: ‘Dear Buddies, Teachers, and Allies, (...) this week of struggle is part of the second international wave of occupations in schools and universities for the climate, once again set up by the End Fossil Occupy! movement. We offer a programme parallel to the in-person classes, including concerts and sessions related to climate activism. We will be camping at the school, so we urge you to join us. This fight is urgent and cannot be postponed! End Fossil!’ (...)” (Fieldnote, Spring Occupy, Lisbon, 27 April 2023).

The fieldnote highlights the intertwining of formal education and activist learning, illuminating the pedagogical dimensions embedded within the school and university occupations organized by young climate activists. The school becomes not just a physical space of formal learning, but a dynamic platform where alternative, participatory, and collaborative forms of education unfold. The activists' creativity in orchestrating a parallel program alongside regular classes showcases an innovative pedagogical approach, wherein climate activism and education feed each other. The activist demands are more than mere calls for action; they incorporate educational insights interwoven with ecological and feminist orientations toward more just societal conditions. Schools emerge as spaces of both political protest and pedagogical encounter, designed to appeal for mobilization and transformation while fostering collective learning experiences and critical engagement with key societal issues. The activist initiatives illustrate a radical pedagogical shift, where learning transcends traditional boundaries, becoming a contextual, experiential, and participatory process, deeply attuned to the urgent and complex real-world issues and contemporary societal challenges. Activists are young people, students, and citizens growing up in a context of climate emergency, conceiving the struggle for just climate futures in intersection with broader social injustices, which requires an intersectional approach and a rethinking of the role that schools should play.

## 6 Conclusion

Our ethnographies in Porto and Lisbon have provided important insights into the practices of youth climate activism, particularly highlighting how intersectionality is embedded within the Portuguese climate movement. The data revealed that young activists' climate-related claims are shaped through alliances with diverse activist collectives, intertwining the climate struggle with other social issues, particularly those addressing socio-economic disparities, gender inequality, and other forms of systemic injustice. These findings emphasize the pedagogical value of the intersectional practices, with young people adopting an intersectional perspective to connect climate justice to broader social justice issues.

Our data shows that intersectionality is not a static label nor a mere rallying cry; it is an everyday activist practice that unites



struggles, aspirations, and resistances. The intersection of various social categories and identities lends complexity and inclusivity to the youth's creative activist spaces, supporting a youth-led learning environment. Each social issue, campaign, and mobilization introduces new learning dimensions, showcasing the educationally value of activist practices (Collins, 2015; Malafaia, 2022). Thus, the intersectionality approach within youth climate activism can serve as a powerful framework for fostering inclusive, transformative learning.

By examining intersectionality as an educational practice within climate activism, this article highlights how it manifests as both a political commitment and a pragmatic strategy. The findings stress the need to expand spaces for youth political participation, both within and beyond conventional educational settings. This article sheds light on how intersectional practices in activism transcend formal education's boundaries and elicits critical engagement with societal injustices and ecological imperatives. The school occupations epitomized these dynamics, providing opportunities for young people to relate their formal curricula to real-world challenges, such as climate justice. Through the ethnographic method, analyzing the complexities of the motivations, struggles, and actions of climate activists revealed how they navigate multifaceted identities while confronting systemic racism, patriarchy, and economic disparities. Our data from the School Strike for Climate in Portugal's two largest cities showed that intersectional activism creates fertile ground for participatory learning. Young activists learn from one another, embrace diversity, and foster solidarity. The demands articulated during school occupations incorporated learning processes that challenge hegemonic educational structures. In these intersections of formal education, activist practices, and societal engagement, these youngsters are not just learning about the world, they are actively shaping it.

Their experiences in activism enabled them to refine their strategies, deepen their understanding of interconnected oppressions, and grow both individually and collectively. These practices not only challenge traditional educational structures but also offer models for participatory and intersectional approaches to social change. Our research aligns with recent scholarship analyzing the School Strike for Climate as an international movement that leverages students' agency to challenge traditional socio-political norms and reconfigure educational paradigms (e.g., Biswas, 2021; Malafaia, 2022). This article reinforces the importance of conceptualizing education to include spaces where intersectional activism thrives and examining how these intersectional practices can inspire more participatory approaches to learning, as well as more inclusive and democratic learning environments.

Considering the educational background of the participants in our study, and recognizing school education and cultural capital as classic predictors of political engagement in both youth and adulthood (e.g., Quintelier, 2008; Verba et al., 1995), one may question whether conventional education may be playing a key role in fostering critical and divergent thinking, equipping young people with subversive perspectives and tools to critique the system from within, as observed in the case of the university students-activists spotlighted in this article. This prompts a reflection on two interconnected, yet complex, dimensions: the shortcomings/promises of formal education, and the formal/non-formal education continuum.

On the one hand, as discussed in the theoretical section, traditional education has been failing to engage properly with contemporary challenges. It tends to rely on anachronistic approaches to today's world problems, fragmented disciplinary knowledge, limited opportunities for plural debates, and the reproduction of hierarchical social power structures (Malafaia, 2022; Piedade et al., 2023). Yet, as Hooks (1994) reminds us, educational institutions, while frequently perpetuating hegemonic practices, can also serve as spaces of resistance and critique when students and teachers challenge norms. At the same time, research from Portugal consistently underscores how citizenship education, despite being an integral part of the school curriculum, is inconsistently implemented and often left to the discretion of individual teachers, who face challenges such as time constraints, assessment pressures, and insufficient training (Menezes et al., 1999; Piedade et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2016). Reacting to the long-standing governmental education priorities around human capital and nation building concerns, UNESCO (2021) launched a Report produced by the International Commission on the Futures of Education—a committee chaired by a Portuguese academic. The Report proposes “A New Social Contract for Education” that could shift away from market-driven educational paradigms toward holistic, inclusive approaches to learning. However, as earlier analyses of official documents on citizenship education and democratic participation policies have shown, the gap between the prescribed and the real is often deepened by the dominance of economic factors on political decision-making (Ribeiro et al., 2014).

On the other hand, it is vital to consider how experiences across formal and informal education contexts interrelate, shaping young people's critical capacities. For instance, research highlights the relationship between participation in political activities (e.g., being involved in protests, boycotting products for environmental reasons) and the development of critical thinking and other skills, valued in conventional education (Malafaia et al., 2016; Cress et al., 2010). This interplay underscores the ontological inadequacy of viewing formal education as the sole site for cultivating critical thinking. Instead, it reveals the permeability between learning contexts and emphasizes the power of individual and collective agency in shaping the structures and institutions in which people are embedded. This dynamic interaction between contextual structures, individuals' thinking capacities, and learning processes reinforces the relevance of exploring lived realities (e.g., Malafaia et al., 2018). Our article provides empirical insights into how young activists navigate and merge diverse learning contexts to address societal challenges and reclaim a climate-just world, as well as more inclusive education paradigms and institutions.

Echoing UNESCO's call to “reimagine our futures together,” the need for a new social contract lies in an expanded vision of education as common good, nourishing diverse ways of knowing and being, while fostering imagination beyond the status quo. It emphasizes the importance of informal and non-formal education and calls for reconnecting education with its ecological and social responsibilities to build equitable and sustainable futures. Our article demonstrates how this reimagining endeavor is actively being undertaken by students themselves. Through activist practices rooted in an intersectional approach to climate and social justice, young people are reclaiming education's transformative potential.



## Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the dataset corresponds to ethnographic fieldnotes kept in a private repository, only available to the researchers involved, once they include sensible and identifiable information, which is curated when an article (or any other public document) is written. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to [carlamalafaia@fpce.up.pt](mailto:carlamalafaia@fpce.up.pt).

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Comissão de Ética da Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade do Porto (Reference number: 2023/04-04). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

## Author contributions

AG: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DR: Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JD-L: Data curation, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MF-J: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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