



Black Lives Matter in the Climate Conversation

Seventh and Eighth Grade
Science
North Carolina

During the 2015-2016 school year, as attacks on Black people and other communities of color increased in the news, my 7th and 8th graders wrestled with the response of the newly emergent Black Lives Matter movement. Though not completely, their responses were very much along racial lines, with many of my students of color fervently and openly supporting Black Lives Matter, while more of my white 7th grade students arguing for all lives to be centered when the topic came up in our daily student news, project work, or seminars.

Near the end of our unit on climate in third quarter, I decided to utilize Naomi Klein's article "[Why #BlackLivesMatter Should Transform the Climate Debate](#)" with my students. As we dug into the article in a Socratic seminar, I posed the question: "Whose lives in the room were affected directly daily by climate change? Did anyone in the room have to think about climate change all the time?" Once they were over the shock that even their science teacher didn't think about the topic all the time, we were able to have an honest conversation that none of us in this particular classroom did. As we dug further, many students began trying to figure out who did and began referencing the [Zinn Education Project's Indigenous Peoples Climate Summit](#) role play and Klein's film *This Changes Everything*. It was here that students began to identify how the crisis more heavily impacted people of color throughout the world, even though it was the decisions of largely wealthy and white corporations that needed to shift to bring about this change. One student shared: "Remember the climate summit. Those people are affected by climate today, everyday. They are Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Africans. They aren't most of us. And they aren't the ones causing the climate to change with big factories or cars or energy." And the next

student echoed this: “The same thing with most of the people in the video. It’s not rich people who are affected. It’s not the people who are destroying the climate.”

Additionally, students agreed that the actions that would help those most affected are the best decisions for all of us too: “Well, if people had listened to the demands of the people at the indigenous climate summit, then the indigenous people who aren’t able to farm or fish anymore or live on their islands, we’d help them a lot and stop climate change. Which would really help all of us too.” Slowly, student after student began making connections of how the principle of “Black Lives Matter” is similar, that centering those oppressed does not diminish others’ lives, it instead focuses and strengthens the conversation towards a shared liberation. In their reflections, a real shift was clear: “Do white people have to think about being white most of the time? It’s kinda like how most of us don’t have to think about being affected by climate change all the time” and “Black lives matter and if we work to stop racism everything would be better. Freedom for everyone is always better. Why wouldn’t stopping climate change be better as well? For the people in the video and for Black people and for everyone.”

It was through this concrete science lesson that these 48 twelve to fourteen year old students were not only able to grow deeper in their climate science knowledge, but maybe more importantly grew in their understanding of racial justice and equity, finally able to grasp this abstract concept and shift their understanding; a shift my teaching partner and I felt throughout the community the remainder of that year.