Pedagogical publics: Creating sustainable educational environments in times of climate change

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Abstract
The paper offers a pedagogical response to the complexity of sustainability challenges that takes the existential and emotional dimensions of climate change seriously. To this end, the paper unfolds in two parts. The first part makes a distinction between ‘public pedagogy’ as an area of educational scholarship and ‘pedagogical publics’ as a theoretical lens for identifying certain qualities within educational environments, exploring what potential this distinction has for rethinking public pedagogy for sustainable development. Turning to Bonnie Honig (2015) and her call for creating ‘holding environments’ in the public sphere as a response to the democratic need of our time, the second part translates her political notion into an educational notion asking what fostering pedagogical publics as holding environments might involve. In relation to sustainability challenges, it is suggested that an environment that ‘holds’ people together as a pedagogical public has three main qualities: a) it makes room for new rituals for sustainable living to be developed in order to offer a sense of permanence; b) it invites narratives that can frame sustainability challenges in more positive registers; and c) it reinstates an intergenerational difference that serves to give back hopes and dreams to adults and children in troubling times.

Keywords
Education for sustainable development, public pedagogy, climate change, holding environments, sustainability

We children are not sacrificing our education and our childhood for you to tell us what you consider is politically possible in the society that you have created . . . We children are doing this to wake the adults up. We children are doing this for you to put your differences aside and start acting as you would in a crisis. We children are doing this because we want our hopes and dreams back.

Greta Thunberg, ‘Can you hear me?’ (2019: 67–68)

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Introduction: ‘Wake up, there is no PLANet B!’

Despite climate change being one of the most challenging problems facing our planet, and despite all the scientific facts piling up in support of global warming and the loss of the biodiversity of the earth (Stoknes, 2015; see also Cook et al., 2013; IPCC, 2018), the contemporary moment seems increasingly characterized by what Maxine Greene calls ‘the passive gaze that is the hallmark of our time’ (2001: 13; see also Greene, 1995). In relation to sustainability challenges, the passive gaze of our time is most recently criticized by the Swedish school strike activist, Greta Thunberg, who, in her speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019, urges both adults and the world’s economic and political leaders to ‘wake up’, listen to the facts, and act as if, she says, ‘our house is on fire’.¹

Greta is not alone in appealing to the adult world. Following her lead, in the last two years, movements such as Fridays for Future (FFF), Youth for Climate and Youth Strike 4 Climate have engaged children and young people in school strikes and protests all around the world.² These school strike movements can be seen as embodying a kind of ‘public pedagogy’ (Sandlin et al., 2010) on sustainable development in which the younger generation – by engaging publicly in social activism – takes on the responsibility of educating the older generation about the negative impacts of climate change and the urgent need for political change: ‘You told us that formal education is key in making a difference in the world, but apparently you are not doing your homework’, they say. ‘So, we are temporarily leaving school, sacrificing our own education, in order for you to realize that you need to “stop the fire” and restore our only home.’ ‘Do not rob us of our future’, they say. ‘Act now, there is no PLANet B!’ (see e.g. Thunberg, 2019; Thunberg et al., 2019).³

Hence, by opting out of school and by sacrificing their education, the school strike activists are currently unsettling one of the most constitutive logics of formal schooling: the intergenerational difference between teachers/adults (as representatives of the old world) and pupils/children (as representatives of the new world).⁴ What seems to be at stake in the school strike movement, in other words, is that the young generation has taken on the role of the teacher, ‘speaking back’ to the adult generation not just about the urgency to ‘wake up’ and listen to the facts, but about the possibility that coming generations might not even have a future to dream of and hope for at all.

However, at the same time as voices are being raised to highlight the seriousness and urgency of the situation, the ‘public concern and prioritization’ of climate change have been ‘declining in many countries, particularly wealthy ones’ (Stoknes, 2014: 161). Moreover, empirical studies indicate that worry is one of the main emotions related to climate change and that negative feelings of loss, pessimism and hopelessness are common, especially among young people (Grund and Brock, 2019; Ojala, 2012, 2016; Stevenson and Peterson, 2016; Stoknes, 2015). According to a study conducted by Tucci et al. (2007), as many as 27% of Australian adolescents believed that the world will end before they grow old due to the effects of climate change.

One way of analysing the decline of public concern for sustainability challenges, despite the increasing access to reliable data on climate change (Stoknes, 2015), is to turn to the theologian Paul Tillich (Ojala, 2016). According to Tillich (1952/2000), the psychological source for existential anxiety is the threat of nonexistence: the loss of physical or cultural life (ontic anxiety); the loss of innocence and guiltlessness (moral anxiety); and the loss of meaning or purpose in life (spiritual anxiety). In the context of climate change, as Maria Ojala (2016) suggests, ontic, moral and spiritual anxiety can easily be translated into existential questions such as whether humanity and the planet will survive in the future, whether it is morally right to continue to live and act the way we do in (the wealthier parts of) the world, or whether there is meaningful to undertake climate action and hope for a viable future given the complexity of the sustainability challenges people are facing all over the globe (see also Stoknes, 2015). Hence, what the school strike activists draw to attention
in this context is that climate change is closely related to the existential anxiety of losing something valuable and irreplaceable – here: the planet earth as our only home – generating feelings of worry, helplessness and hopelessness among both adults and children. As Thunberg (2019) puts it: ‘We are now facing an existential crisis – the climate crisis, the ecological crisis – which has never been treated as a crisis before’ (55).

Following Hannah Arendt (1961/2006), however, an existential crisis is as much a threat to our old ways of living and acting as it is the chance of new beginnings. As she suggests, ‘A crisis forces us back to the questions themselves and requires from us either new or old answers, but in any case, direct judgements. A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgements’ (1961: 174). Translated into the vocabulary of Thunberg (2019: 54) and the school strike activists, what is needed in response to the urgency of climate change is a profaned form of ‘cathedral thinking’, suggesting that we have to respond to the present situation even if we do not yet have all the answers. Dating back to medieval times when architects, stonemasons and carpenters were asked to build cathedrals which would never be completed in their own lifetime, the term ‘cathedral thinking’ can be used as a metaphor for thinking about undertakings that require being engaged in ‘unfinished work’ for a longer period of time, sometimes stretching beyond our own life span. Cathedral thinking, then, is as much about cultivating far-reaching visions and long-term implementations as it is about sustaining a shared commitment to an intergenerational task or issue that people can publicly gather around in the present. Hence, what the existential crisis of climate change can prompt the public into doing is to make sure that there are spaces created in society where people of all ages can gather around sustainability issues – spaces where questions can be asked, judgements cultivated, and visions of a more sustainable future thought out in an ‘unfinished manner’, that is, without having all the answers. Such pedagogical spaces, we argue, temporarily suspend both the intergenerational difference between teachers and pupils of formal schooling and the need of instant political action, in order to bring adults and young people together in responding creatively to the complex challenges of climate change and in publicly addressing the existential dimensions of the present situation.

Against this background, the main purpose of this paper is to offer a pedagogical response to the complexity of sustainability challenges (Block et al., 2018) that takes the existential conditions of ‘[l]iving-with and dying-with each other’ on a damaged planet (Haraway, 2016: 2) seriously. To this end, the paper unfolds in two parts. The first part makes a distinction between ‘public pedagogy’ as an area of educational scholarship and ‘pedagogical publics’ as a theoretical lens for identifying a pedagogical space between the realm of formal education (i.e. schools) and the realm of political action (i.e. social activism), exploring what potential the term ‘pedagogical publics’ might have for rethinking public pedagogy for sustainable development. Turning to political theorist Bonnie Honig (2015) and her call for creating ‘holding environments’ in the public sphere that can bring people together in joint democratic action in times of political crisis, the second part of the paper translates Honig’s political notion into an educational notion. The purpose of the second part is to explore some of the qualities that pedagogical publics, understood as holding environments, encompass and how they might help both adults and children in addressing the existential issues that are currently at stake. Taken together, the qualities defining pedagogical publics are constitutive, we suggest, of an educational environment that ‘holds’ people together (in agreement and contestation) in a double sense: they gather adults and children around a common sustainability issue to be attended to and cared for, and they acknowledge the need of more supportive frames for addressing the existential and emotional dimensions of climate change. By way of conclusion, we suggest that the temporary arrangement of pedagogical publics can offer spaces in society for thinking together in a ‘cathedral-like way’ about sustainability challenges, as well as for finding the right balance between slow thinking and immediate action in a situation that has no simple or immediate solution.
Part I: From public pedagogy to ‘pedagogical publics’

Following Greene’s (1995) idea about ‘wide.awakeness’ as a goal for education, becoming ‘wide awake’ in relation to sustainability challenges is as much about acquiring reliable knowledge and information about climate change as it is about having the courage to see and to listen to things that we perhaps do not want to see or hear, and about finding ways of responding to present situations by imagining our place on the planet otherwise. Inspired by such a call, researchers within the field of education for sustainable development have long stressed the importance of helping teachers and students handle what they see as the ‘wicked’ character of sustainability challenges, that is, the complexity and uncertainty that are inherently part of such issues (Block et al., 2018). For example, the ecological problems of climate change are always linked to other problems (such as global economy, social justice, health care issues) in complex networks of relations (Block et al., 2018) and responding to sustainability challenges in everyday life often require us to think and act in situations where ‘facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent’ (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993, quoted in Block et al., 2018: 1425). Moreover, instead of presenting climate change as something abstract ‘out there’ or as something happening in a distant future, the aim of education for sustainable development is to make sustainability challenges matter in people’s lives here and now. As Norwegian psychologist Per Espen Stoknes (2014: 162) has suggested, ‘Climate change . . . is almost like a “ghost”: odorless, colorless and invisible. It is easily perceived as a half-real, evil omen from the past hinting of future death and disaster – but it does not really register as real, substantial and urgent in our perceptual system.’ According to Stoknes (2015), the psychological distancing from people’s everyday concerns that often characterizes discourses on climate change is part of what makes information campaigns about climate change so insufficient when it comes to fostering and encouraging climate action. This analysis supports the idea in this paper, suggesting that what is also needed in relation to climate change (besides formal schooling and political action) are pedagogical spaces in society where sustainability issues can start to become part of people’s lives in a real sense. Such spaces, we suggest, are pedagogical in the sense of generating care and interest in the living on of a common world, and they are public in the sense of engaging people of all ages as a concerned and learning community (Masschelein and Simons, 2013). Where, then, can we find and sustain such ‘public’ and ‘pedagogical’ spaces and what theoretical underpinnings can we look towards?

Public pedagogy is a growing area of educational scholarship with the purpose of rethinking conventional understandings of what counts as pedagogy and of what counts as education, suggesting that the real processes of teaching and learning to some extent occur beyond the sites of formal schooling. According to Jennifer Sandlin et al. (2010: 1), for example, public pedagogies are ‘spaces, sites and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institutions of schools’. Along these lines, William Pinar (2010) argues that there is a displacement of education going on from the school to the society, suggesting that society (and not the school) is seen as the primary site for teaching and learning. During the last decades, a broad range of research fields have used public pedagogy as a ‘conceptual lens’ for understanding the intersection of learning, culture and social change (Sandlin et al., 2017: 823). For example, researchers within cultural studies, literature studies and the arts have explored how different sites of media, literature, popular culture, and social and artistic activism operate pedagogically in the public sphere, that is, how they ‘teach us into certain ways of thinking about who we are and how the world works’ (Sandlin et al., 2017: 823). Given this shift towards locating public pedagogy ‘in the real world’, so to speak, social activists like Greta Thunberg are often seen as personifying the ideal of the ‘public pedagogue’, that is, of someone deliberately leaving the formal school in order to articulate their understanding of the world and their place within it publicly, initiating thereby both public learning and political change.
Whilst we are not disputing that education can take place anywhere in society and not just within formal school systems, there is a tendency within research on public pedagogy to put emphasis on what can be achieved outside formal education (Sandlin et al., 2010, 2011). Defining public pedagogy simply by physical location and spatial boundaries in this way, however, does not fully capture the qualitative aspects that a public pedagogy on sustainability challenges might involve. Following Gert Biesta (2014), we suggest that what is needed in relation to education for sustainable development is a more qualitative analysis of how pedagogy can operate in a public way both within and outside formal education. What we are seeking out, in other words, is how pedagogical practices can generate ‘publicness’ (Biesta, 2012) by making people gather – in consent and contestation and across generations – around a shared interest in a sustainable future. According to this view, one could argue, the ideal public pedagogue is neither the figure of the schoolteacher nor the figure of the social activist. Instead, the ideal public pedagogue is the issue itself, or rather, the issues in the world that have the potential to collectively speak to us as a concerned public. Such issues, to our minds, can make people want to be temporarily part of an intergenerational learning community for the sake of thinking and studying itself, that is, for figuring things out in the face of complicated questions (see also Masschelein and Simons, 2009).

While Biesta (2012) defines publicness in broad terms as the space ‘where action is possible and freedom can appear’ (693), his reference to Hannah Arendt helps us to further accentuate the importance of distinguishing between ‘public pedagogy’ as an area of educational scholarship focusing on the active use of pedagogy for social and political change, on the one hand, and ‘pedagogical publics’ as a theoretical lens for identifying certain qualities within educational environments in the public sphere on the other. According to Arendt (1961/2006), the realm of formal education in its original Greek sense of scholé is not a site for political action and social activism but a time and space ‘freed’ from the forces of production for the purpose of thinking and studying, ‘for trying things out’ (Biesta, 2019: 662). The aim of the school, then, according to Arendt, is to function as a middle ground between the private life of the family and public life, ‘a half way house’ where intergenerational difference is crucial and, hence, where the new generation, under the guidance of teachers (as representatives of the old world), are given the time and space they need ‘to meet the world, and meet themselves in relation to the world’ before entering public life as political beings (Biesta 2019: 662; see also Bergdahl and Langmann, 2017; Masschelein and Simons, 2013). However, since the impact of climate change forces us all, children and adults alike, to study, rethink and reevaluate our old ways of living and acting on the planet, we also seem to have to find a middle ground between the ‘free’ study time of the school and the time that demands instant political action in the public sphere. In other words, if the climate crisis ‘becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgments’, as Arendt suggests (1961/2006: 174), we are in urgent need of spaces within the public sphere where people of all ages can gather around a shared commitment to a sustainable future and where new judgements and actions in relation to sustainability challenges can be thought out.

Against this background, the notion of ‘pedagogical publics’, we suggest, shares some qualities with what Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2013) call temporary ‘gatherings’ of people around a common matter of concern that has the potential to speak to them as a learning public. Drawing on the image and language of the traditional classroom, the pedagogical experience of such gatherings, according to Masschelein and Simons (2013), is exemplified as the moment when something from the world (as an urgent sustainability issue) is placed on the chalkboard or the teaching table and – by being presented as an object of study – temporarily transforms both teachers and students into a concerned public. Inspired by the language of the classroom, they write:
These are the rather rare but always magical moments when students and teachers are carried away by the subject matter, which, simply in being said, seems to take on a voice of its own. This means, firstly, that society is in some way kept outside – the classroom door shut and the teacher calls for silence and attention. But secondly, something is allowed inside: a diagram on the board, a book on the desk, words read aloud. Students [and teachers] are drawn from their world and made to enter a new one. (Masschelein and Simons 2013: 38)

In contrast to a public pedagogy as an area of educational scholarship, then, the temporary arrangements of pedagogical publics on sustainability issues do not refer to a specific position or a physical location in society, nor do they draw upon a language foreign to formal schooling. Rather, the language of pedagogical publics belongs to a particular ‘mode of human togetherness’ (Biesta, 2012: 690), which is grounded in a shared interest in, and a care for, the living on of a world of both human and ‘more than human’ others. As Masschelein and Simons (2009) put it, ‘[b]eing exposed to’ things from the world as a concerned public ‘is always at the same time being confronted with the question of how to live together in the face of complicated issues’ (213).

Moreover, while the political sphere is oriented towards urgent action and social change, the educational sphere operates according to a different logic of time (Masschelein and Simons, 2013). Whereas climate change demands of the political sphere to act urgently, forcefully and effectively in the presence of immediate problems, the time of the educational sphere generally calls for hesitation, patience, and for slowing things down in seeking out new and sustainable responses to difficult problems (Wildemeersch, 2018). However, we suggest, in contrast to the slowness and inaction of the educational sphere of the school, pedagogical publics are characterized by finding the right pace between urgency and hesitation, between action and inaction. In relation to sustainability challenges, finding the right pace is about giving people the time and space they need to study, think and explore sustainability issues at the right distance from the urgency of the political sphere as well as from the slowness and inaction of formal schooling. It suggests being able to respond to sustainability issues without being pressured to produce premature answers to complex questions, on the one hand, or to postpone all judgements and actions to an unforeseen future or to coming generations on the other.

This balancing act of pedagogical publics between the urgency of the political sphere and the slowness of the educational sphere can, at first glance, seem counter-intuitive and odd in relation to the seriousness of climate change. As Thunberg reminds us, ‘What we do or don’t do, right now, will affect’ (2019: 11) generations to come. At the same time, we argue, a certain hesitation to act in the face of difficult issues without suspending our judgements and actions to the future can also make possible ways of seeing and reasoning about climate change that leaves space for what we above, drawing on Thunberg, have called ‘cathedral thinking’:

Our house is falling apart. The future as well as what we have achieved in the past is literally in your hands now. But it is still not too late to act. It will take a far-reaching vision. It will take courage. It will take fierce determination to act now, to lay the foundations when we may not know all the details about how to shape the ceiling. (Thunberg, 2019: 53).

So, if Arendt is pointing out that in order for the young to make a transition from private life to public life via the realm of formal education, we are suggesting that in order for there to be a well thought-out public and collective response to sustainability challenges, we need to create pedagogical publics within the public sphere, that is, pedagogical spaces within and outside of formal education that draw generations together around common issues of concern. In sum, then, pedagogical publics as a theoretical lens concerns a rethinking of both the notion of time (allowing for
variations in tempo and speed), space (allowing for a transitional space) and intergenerationality (allowing for joint learning and exploration for both adults and children).

However, if the temporary arrangements of pedagogical publics on sustainability issues are going to be fostered and sustained within the public sphere, we cannot overlook the existential aspects of climate change. As already mentioned, studies indicate that although many children and young people show a global ecological interest, feelings of worry, helplessness and hopelessness are common (Ojala 2016, 2017). Since the climate crisis is also an existential crisis, any pedagogy concerned with sustainability challenges, we suggest, needs to acknowledge what Stoknes (2015) calls the ‘Great Grief’ of climate change, that is, the feeling of a ‘more-than-personal sadness’ that can be related to the emotional experience of loss and the threat of nonexistence (171). Hence, the question we ask is: what might it mean to relate educationally to losing something valuable and irreplaceable – losing physical or cultural life (ontic anxiety); losing innocence or guiltlessness (moral anxiety); losing meaning or purpose in life (spiritual anxiety) (Tillich, 1952/2000) – and how might the temporary arrangements of pedagogical publics stimulate a collective and public mode of curation and repair (Honig, 2015)?

In the next section, we would like to explore more concretely一些 of the qualities that characterize the educational environment of pedagogical publics on sustainability issues, as well as what it might mean to handle the existential and emotional aspects of climate change publicly and collectively.

**Part II: Sustaining educational environments**

Within the field of political theory, a number of scholars have in recent years identified what they see as a ‘democratic need’ (Honig, 2015: 624; e.g. Critchley, 2007; Habermas, 1975) to enliven public conversation for the sake of the living-on of our democratic institutions. According to Jürgen Habermas (1975), for example, Western liberal democracies are characterized by an identity crisis generated by a loss of trust and confidence in administrative and governing institutions. In a similar vein, Simon Critchley argues that there is a ‘motivational deficit’ (2007: 6) at play in many liberal democratic societies, suggesting that its ideas and institutions no longer seem to fully motivate its citizens for public and collective action.

As a response to this situation, political theorist Bonnie Honig argues that what is lacking in what she calls a neo-liberal consumer society of individual loves are ‘public things’ or ‘objects of common concern’ (2015: 625) that can collectively bind us together as a polis. Drawing on Alex de Tocqueville as a ‘political psychologist’ (Honig, 2015: 624), Honig suggests that governance and citizenship not only provide us with frameworks and rules for ‘coordinate collective action’, but also ‘enlist us into imagined pasts and futures, they orient our desires . . . and they shape, and then feed or starve, our hopes’ (Honig, 2015: 624). Hence, without common objects or public ‘things’ to be collectively cared for, society not only lacks, Honig writes, the ‘sites of confrontation and encounter, enjoyment and conflict’ necessary for democratic life, it also lacks the ‘psycho-symbolic work of enchantment and meaning-making’ that public issues may offer (2015: 625). In this sense, democracy as a form of life also enlists us into a certain content to live for and care for. Or, as Honig puts it, ‘democracy cannot work without common objects of care, attention, and contestation’ (2015: 625; emphasis in original).

What is needed in our modern consumer societies, then, Honig (2015) suggests with reference to the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, are environments in the political sphere that hold us as citizens together around public, common ‘things’ or concerns – issues, she writes, that can ‘be held and cared for by us and fought for by us’ (2015: 632). Such ‘a “holding environment”’ (2015: 627) generated for the sake of a revitalized public sphere is, Honig suggests, a space of a double
function: it can create publicness by making people gather in consent and contestation around shared things (such as, for Honig, public institutions like schools, hospitals, parks, town councils etc.), and it can become a space where, psychologically and existentially, feelings of loss, anxiety and grief can be collectively transformed into a mode of curation and repair.

Inspired by Honig’s political-psychoanalytical proposal, this part of the paper seeks to translate Honig’s notion of political ‘holding environments’ into our educational notion of pedagogical publics, seeking out some of the qualities that pedagogical publics as holding environments might involve. In order to bring adults and young people together in spaces where existential questions can be asked, loss and grief transformed, and visions of a more sustainable future thought out without having all the answers, the holding environment of a pedagogical public, we suggest, needs to consider at least these three qualities: a) making room for new rituals for sustainable living to be developed in order to offer a sense of permanence; b) inviting narratives that can frame sustainability challenges in more supportive and positive registers; and c) reinstating a certain kind of intergenerational difference that serves to give back hopes and dreams to both adults and children in time of climate change.

Let us now look at each of these three qualities and briefly sketch how they, within as well as outside formal education, can both ‘hold’ young and old generations together as a public in consent and contestation around common sustainability issues and offer a structure in which we can all be ‘existentially held’ in troubling times.

Rituals and ritualization

In his book Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation, Jonathan Lear (2006) draws on the example of the near extinction of an aboriginal tribe in the United States, the Crow people, to reflect upon what made this people pass through cultural devastation and yet come out on the other side with some sense of a future. Lear does not explicitly address sustainability challenges per se, but his reflection on the strategies that the Crow people develop in facing the end of their ways of life (their land being confiscated, their resources depleted, their rituals rendered meaningless) can be used as a parallel, we suggest, in discussing today’s ecological crisis. Lear’s ethical proposal takes its point of departure in Crow Chief Plenty Coups’ personal narratives and experiences, drawing on this narration in developing strategies for getting through both material and mental crises (2015).

According to Honig’s (2015) political reading of Lear’s ethical account of radical hope, the book’s most important contribution is its ability to steer away from devastation through ritualization, or, in Honig’s words, Lear’s ‘effort to ritualize rather than catastrophize radical change’ (2015: 628). Translating ritualization into the public sphere, Honig suggests that what is needed most in a time when everything people hold familiar is shaking in its foundations is ‘infrastructure . . . to support their new life’ (2015: 626), that is, collective rituals that offer meaning, permanence and stability to the world and help support new ways of living. According to Honig, collective ritualization gives to a holding environment a way of refilling ‘people’s emptied world with things that matter, public things around which to constellate, to which to attach, to fight over’ (2015: 628). In this sense, then, the global demonstrations initiated by Fridays for Future and other school strike activists can be seen as manifesting a form of public and collective ritualization in the public sphere that might be able to steer away from devastation and transform individual feelings of despair, grief and loss into a sense of collective stability and meaning.

Drawing on the above, we argue, ritualization as a quality of the holding environment of a pedagogical public may have at least two functions. First, it may offer to adults and the young some sense of ‘infrastructure’ or material/physical permanence in the midst of troubling times. We are
thinking here, for example, about the importance of creating temporary classroom-like places where some sense of stability can be conveyed in recognizing the familiar materiality of an ordinary school. We are thinking also about temporarily mimicking the well-known routines and rhythms of an ordinary school day and of making use of simple but familiar activities and habits such as reading aloud from books, sitting around tables in discussion, drawing things on the board. These ‘infrastructural’ everyday material ‘things’, we argue, are of particular importance in times when the ordinariness of life as we know it is shaking in its foundations. Secondly, collective ritualization might function as a way of coping with grief caused by having lost well-known ways of living that might have been essential to us but it might also function as a space for inventing, together with others, new ways of sustainable living. If a more viable future requires that both present and new generations – particularly in wealthier parts of the world – question and rethink their old ways of life, a pedagogical public as holding environment can support us in daring to explore sustainably better ways of living and acting together that are hitherto unfamiliar and unknown. What rituals can be thought out as viable and meaningful ways of life and how can these rituals help the next generation face the unpredictability of the future? Making room for such supportive questions, as well as for the infrastructure of everyday school-like rituals, we suggest, is the first consideration in creating a holding environment of pedagogical publics.

Narratives and narration

The state of the climate is alarming, but so also is the way we talk about it. Since ‘it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with’, as Donna Haraway (2016: 118) poignantly has put it, what kind of language might we be using in the undertaking of inventing new rituals for collective cohabitation? What stories do we tell in addressing sustainability challenges in pedagogical publics and how does it matter how we tell them?

According to Stoknes (2014, 2015), the discrepancy between the accuracy of public understanding of what is at stake with the ecological environment and public concern is increasing. Environmental sciences are providing us with a growing amount of reliable data about the seriousness of the situation, but public concern for climate change seems to be declining – a situation Stoknes refers to as ‘the psychological climate paradox’ (2014, 2015). One reason behind the perseverance of this paradox, he argues, is that the language used in framing the situation is apocalyptic, sacrificial and life-denying: ‘Thou shalt not fly. Thou should eat less meat. Thou should not consume’ (2015: 163). Contrary to their intent, such framings are counterproductive in their evoking of blame and paralysis and if we are to bridge the discrepancy between understanding and concern, Stoknes (2015) insists, we need to change our narratives. What is needed, he argues, is ‘a radical rethinking of climate communication’ (2014: 168) where science and narration are integrated. ‘Only through new, attractive stories that we want to identify with will we start to reconsider the scientific facts’ (2015: 149, emphasis added).

As a general approach, then, following Stoknes, the seriousness of climate change needs also to be put in more ‘supportive frames’ (Stoknes 2014: 166) and a way of communicating where what we say and how we say it speak to one another. Stoknes offers several concrete examples of what such supportive frames might look like, which, he argues, instead of focusing on guilt and shame might include focusing on the positive effects of, for example, ‘green growth’ and visions of ‘the good life’ (2015: 149). Instead of repeating as a commandment to not eat meat, for example, supportive frames can instead put in focus how one can increase one’s health and well-being by changing one’s diet or how one can protect the environment instead of exploiting it, Stoknes (2014, 2015) argues. Moreover, a supportive frame can involve telling ‘untold stories’ (2014: 168) as a
way of inviting willingness for renewal and for mobilizing a gentler and more caring approach towards the material world (Stoknes, 2015).

Such ‘untold’ stories can begin, for example, with imagining the climate itself as the fragile skin of the earth, a living, breathing membrane of air connecting and protecting all living things (Stoknes, 2015). Stoknes writes:

This is the primary, scientific framing around our climate discourse: The air is a mix of gases, each with certain physical and chemical characteristics . . . But to our breathing bodies, the air is much more than just a mix of molecules . . . First, we can imagine the air as the earth’s skin. It is amazingly thin, compared with the size of the cosmos it shields us from. Just a fine, flimsy film. The breathable air is only about five to seven miles thick, a fragile wrapping around a massive green . . . Far thinner than the skin of an apple compared with its diameter. Underneath it lies ocean and rock, and upon the rock, lies a wee bit of soil and greenery. Yet inside this unsettled, fluctuating film, between a rock and a cold place, all of life is protected and nourished. (Stoknes, 2015: 166)

Hence, we argue, that a second quality of the educational environment of a pedagogical public is to address the current situation in more delicate, attractive and life-supporting linguistic registers. These are stories that in narration integrate form and content, that do not evade contestation and disagreement, but that nevertheless seek to avoid succumbing to guilt, hopelessness and despair. This would be, following Stoknes, to ‘use the power of narratives’ (2014: 167; see also Facer, 2019). Such registers, we argue, hold potential both for taking seriously the existential feelings of grief and loss that adults and children might experience in relation to climate change issues, and for challenging the disconnectedness and numbness that might follow from a too apocalyptic and guilt-driven language.

A pedagogical public that functions as a holding environment, then, offers time and space where old and new narratives can be collectively examined, debated and contested, interpreted and explored. However, such environments also hold the possibility of presenting other kinds of narratives (as in Stoknes’ example above), that is, of telling hitherto untold stories that instead of evoking guilt and shame can evoke a desire and willingness to protect, care for and respect nature and all living things. According to Stoknes, ‘people have to want to live in a climate-friendly world because they see it as better, not because they are scared or instructed to do so’ (2015, 149; emphasis in original). Inviting supportive narratives and mobilizing this ‘want’ or willingness publicly and collectively across generations, we suggest, is a second consideration in creating a holding environment of pedagogical publics.

Regenerating hopes and dreams

A central concern in the current debate on sustainability challenges is how to make people act more responsibly – a responsibility that the adult world, according to the school strike activists, is currently failing to take on. However, the adult world also needs the renewal of the young generation because ‘[i]f it were not for images of possibility’, Greene (1982) argues, ‘it would be difficult to describe what is lacking’ and ‘without a sense of a better order of things, we would not be moved to break through the limits or to repair the insufficiency that we see’ (1982: 4). As a third quality of pedagogical publics as holding environments, then, and in line with Thunberg’s call in the beginning of this paper for giving ‘dreams and hopes’ back to the young generation, we would like to put explicit emphasis on regenerating ‘images of possibility’ that can support both the adults and the young in suspending hopelessness and despair and engage in a renewed hope for a more viable future whilst also suspending naïve optimism (e.g. Greene, 1995). As Thunberg
reminds us, ‘[S]aying everything will be all right while continuing doing nothing at all is just not hopeful to us. In fact, it’s the opposite of hope’ (2019: 40). What we wish to point out in this last section, then, is that a certain intergenerational difference between adults and children needs to be reintroduced if hopes and dreams are to be regenerated.

As a political thinker, Arendt writes not much about hope but about action (Newman, 2014). On one of the few occasions when she does write about hope, however, it is related to ‘the fact of natality’ in which, she argues, ‘the faculty of action is ontologically rooted’ and it is the full experience of this (being born or being a ‘beginner’ and being able to begin) that ‘can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope’ (Arendt, 1958/1998: 247). As a thinker firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, it is important to point out that Arendt’s notion of hope is of an immanent kind directed towards the renewal and restoration of the world and not towards transcendence and the spiritual transformation of the soul (as in many Christian traditions) (Newman, 2014). Hence, for Arendt, hope is a worldly category: hope is hope for the renewal of the (old) world made possible in and through political action by the old generation (adults) – a possibility, however, that has its ontological roots in the potentiality for future action embodied in, and represented by, the new generation.

What we are suggesting is that the difference between generations that we temporarily suspended at the beginning of this paper might in fact have a place here, in the pedagogical public harbouring a difference in hope between adults and children. Following Arendt, it could be argued that if adults are giving hope to the young in acting (i.e. by ‘acting as you would in a crisis’, as Thunberg puts it above), the young are giving hope back to the adults in representing the new. Listening to Thunberg, it seems as if this intergenerational difference in giving and representing hope finds support when she is suggesting that the hope of the young is not the hope of the adults. ‘I don’t want your hope’, she says, ‘I don’t want you to be hopeful’, ‘I want you to act’ (Thunberg, 2019: 24, emphasis added). Hence, the young generation, according to Thunberg, is demanding action and when they see no action, they see no hope. The task of the adult generation, then, we suggest, is to give hope to the young by doing all they can together with them in order to repair our damaged planet. The adults can never guarantee that acting to save the world will succeed, but by doing everything in their power they make it possible to regenerate hope in the young beyond naïve optimism, giving them their hopes and dreams back. An intergenerational difference in hope, then, is a difference where the adult generation can existentially recharge themselves with the hope that is represented by the young and where the young can become witnesses to hope in seeing adults take on responsibility for action. Reinstiting this intergenerational difference in hope, we suggest, is a third consideration in creating a holding environment of pedagogical publics.

**Conclusion: For the urgency of education**

Returning to the school strike activist movement that introduces this paper, the case could be made that in a time of climate crisis, education seems to have played out its role. ‘What is the point in studying for and thinking about a future when the world might cease to exist only a few generations away?’, the activists seem to be saying. ‘The state we are in demands urgent political action and it would be both environmentally and existentially impossible to remain in education and refrain from action in times like these’ (see e.g. Thunberg, 2019; Thunberg et al., 2019). It seems, in other words, as if the alarming urgency and complexity of climate change and the demand for immediate political action is questioning the role and purpose of education itself.

Without belittling the urgency of political action, this paper has been seeking to make a case for the urgency of education, or, rather, for the urgency of creating educational environments in the public sphere where rituals for sustainable living can be collectively thought out, different narratives can be told, and hopes and dreams can be regenerated whilst steering away from naïve
optimism and wishful thinking. Hence, despite the need for immediate political action, a central educational question is how to acknowledge the existential dimensions of climate change and yet offer a ‘middle ground’ where both adults and children are given time and space to challenge the ‘passive gaze’ of our time and to publicly and collectively engage in far-reaching visions about more sustainable futures. Against the argument that education has played out its role, then, the paper has made the case that what is needed now, perhaps more than ever, is the formation of pedagogical publics where we can come together, as adults and children, in serious and sincere thought and study of the ‘wicked problems’ of the sustainability challenges we are facing, resisting the need for immediate action and response and yet without suspending all our actions and judgements to the future.

There is an urgent need, in other words, for a time and space where we can slow things down, think again and anew, and explore alternative ways of sustainable living in a ‘cathedral-like way’. In response to this need, we have stressed the importance of fostering and sustaining pedagogical publics as an educational environment that can temporarily hold us together in the sense of helping us in publicly thinking through the situation we are in, but where we are also existentially held and cared for by one another, so as to help us handle the worry and anxiety that seems to be affecting people of all ages today. Implicit in this discussion is the overall idea that, for creating a sustainable society, the political and pedagogical spheres should not replace but revitalize one another. It is our contention, in other words, that in order to sustain both ourselves and the world we live in, we need to find the right pace between urgency and hesitation, action and inaction.

Acknowledgements
This co-authored work was supported by the Swedish National Research Council (VR) as part of the research project ‘Lived Values: A Pedagogical-Philosophical Groundworking of the Value Basis of Swedish Schools’ (2015–2019). The authors would like to thank the referees for valuable and constructive comments.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Swedish National Research Council [grant number 721-2014-2200].

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Notes
1. Similar wordings/messages have been conveyed in many of Thunberg’s speeches all over the world (see Thunberg, 2019).
2. See e.g. www.fridaysforfuture.org; https://youthforclimate.be; www.schoolstrike4climate.com (accessed 19 November 2019).
3. The words used here are not direct quotes but are paraphrases of Thunberg and other school strike activists.
4. We are here drawing on Hannah Arendt’s influential distinction between ‘grownups’ or ‘adults’ and ‘children’ in education in her essay ‘The Crisis in Education’ (1961).
5. See https://cathedralthinking.com (accessed 7 September 2020).
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