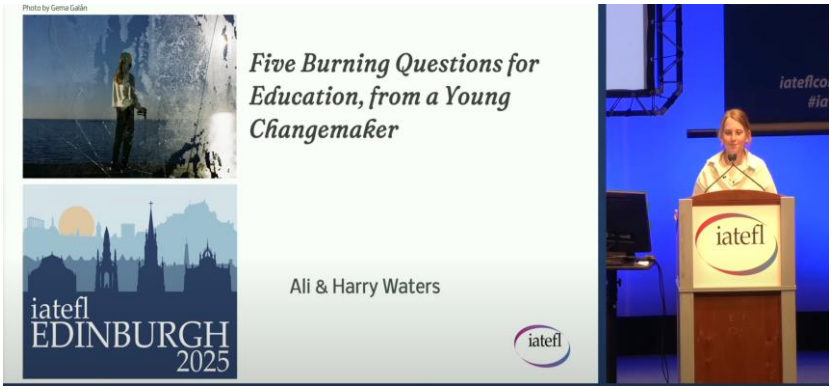
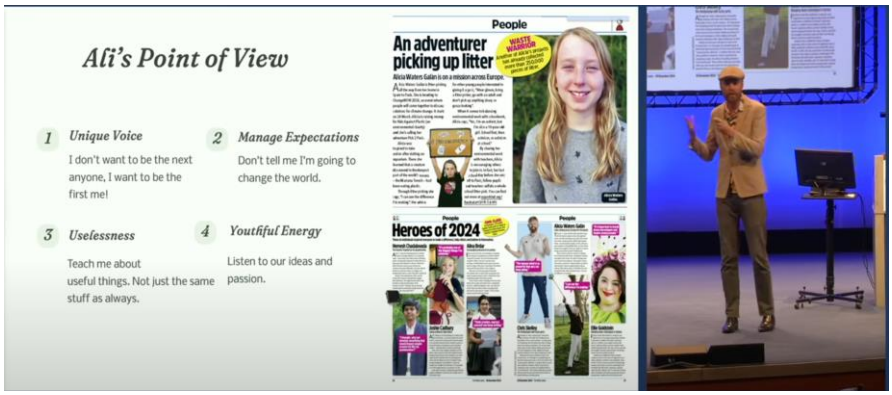
Five Burning Questions to Education from a Young Changemaker

By Eleni Challouma





In the final plenary session of the IATEFL Conference in April 2025, 11-year-old Alicia Waters reflected on her experiences as a child activist with Kids Against Plastic[i], offering insights into how it has shaped her worldview. Alicia posed five burning questions for educators, challenging them to rethink traditional approaches to education and empower the next generation to address real-world issues, such as the climate crisis. Harry Waters, her father and an educator himself, then proposed potential answers to her thought-provoking questions.

In their inspiring speech, the daughter and the father, the teenager and the educator, talked about how to save education and the planet all in one go. Alicia and Harry strongly believe that schools should be the place where everyone feels like their voice matters. Alice is the voice of vocal and active youth. She doesn't want to be the next changemaker or the next of anyone; she wants to be the next "her". She asks educators to teach her about useful things, not just the same stuff as always. She doesn't want to be told by grown-ups that she's going to change the world. She asks grown-ups to listen to young people's ideas and help them discover their passions and talents, as well as make good use of their youthful energy.

Here are Alice's five burning questions, followed by Harry's answers:

1. Why do students spend so much time in school learning things they won't use in the future, instead of focusing on making the world a better place?
Harry explained that schools are preparing students for the Future by learning from the Past. The goal of education, however, is to help students develop as individuals and as responsible, active citizens, not just as future workers. To achieve this, we should first encourage our students to discover what's happening in the world. For example, students can be asked to talk about something in the news to their classmates every week. They can present a news

story about the genocide that is going on in Caza, right now. In this way, students become aware of those events and are encouraged to think about them. This will help them learn from past mistakes and inspire them to take action so that they do not happen again. Project-Based Learning is also a popular educational method that can be used to achieve this goal. It is often used in ELT because it encourages students to actively explore real-world topics, develop language skills, and work collaboratively on meaningful tasks with hands-on, real-world applications. ELT, in general, has this unique power to transform minds by using PBL and promoting autonomous learning. Real-world topics and global issues should be integrated into our school curriculum. We should connect subjects to life skills through our textbooks and classes. This is again a common practice for English textbooks, which feature contemporary topics like environmental destruction, climate crisis, bullying and social inequalities. English language teachers aim to make students confident to talk about these issues by asking them to present them to their peers and offer solutions to them. Finally, we can invite guest speakers who can present and explain things to our students, thus bringing outside insights to our class.

2. How are our students expected to make the world a better place if adults are ignoring clear and obvious science?

Despite the fact that some adults, and even world leaders, ignore scientific facts, there are lots of role models who inspire eco-conscious behaviour and environmental action. There are youth activists, indigenous land defenders, educators, scientists and local community leaders who can persuade our students that they can make the world a better place by helping them believe in themselves and amplifying their voices. There are a lot of Green Teams and Eco Buddies, Eco Projects, Community-wide challenges like *One million Litter Picks*[ii], the Sustainability Calendars[iii] (that celebrate Earth Day, World Environment Day, etc.), which can be used for promoting sustainability and environmental awareness. We can have our classroom heroes, too, students, for example, who have gone from using plastic water bottles to fancy refillable bottles. In addition, we can organise classroom initiatives together with our students and create our green teams and eco-projects for our schools or communities. Responsibility Reflection as a strategy is also important. Students should ask themselves: «What can I do? What can I control? What do we wish adults understood?» It seems like it is too much to ask a child to save the world, especially when some lunatics are in power in some governments. There is also the issue of capability vs responsibility. Young people may not have the power to change the whole world, but they can save their world. They can look at their sphere of influence first, then try to branch out a bit further. They can start by making a difference within their school and then spreading that influence in their communities. Teachers can encourage them by telling them that they can do amazing things! Or ask them what amazing things they want to do? Or even tell them that they are going to save the world, and ask them how we, as adults, can help them along the way.

3) Why at schools don't they talk about more important things like climate, emotions, anxiety and exam stress?

Mental Health and Emotional Well-being in class are, indeed, crucial for all, especially young people. Obviously, if emotional and mental health were graded, maybe we'd take them more seriously in schools. It's important to ask what students learn in school at the end of the day. Do they improve themselves? Do we teach students how to apologise or forgive rather than about the industrial revolution and then regurgitate that information into an exam? It's also useful to have Mindfulness Moments at schools as a daily classroom practice. There are hundreds of simple activities, like breathing activities, where we can teach students how to calm themselves down, especially before a test or an exam. In addition, Emotional Literacy, the skill to understand and express one's feelings, is significant. We should not forget to ask our students about how they are, and how they are feeling about whatever they do. We can use the Mental Health Wheel from the Mental Health Network[iv] or the Climate Emotions

Toolkit[v] for Middle School Users for that purpose. Finally, Role Plays are effective teaching tools for practising real-life behaviours as well as language fluency in the ELT classrooms. For example, students can take up the role of people in power, discussing plastic pollution with students or the role of climate refugees/immigrants who are new at school, where other students are showing them around.

4) What's the best way for teachers to help students find what they're good at and what they're passionate about?

Finding passions and strengths is not easy. We usually ask kids what they want to be and then give them no time to figure it out, as we keep giving them tests and exams. We can design Passion Projects for our students to help them find out what lights them and what they genuinely care about, projects that they forget they're getting marked. We can look at different justice issues or gender equality issues and see which ones resonate with them. Ken Robinson's book *The Element,* which is primarily a workbook full of practical exercises, can help us help our students explore their passions and skills and challenge their identity. According to K. Robinson: Passion + Natural Talent = True Potential. Additionally, we can organise Passion Speed-Datings where each student takes turns and talks about their passion, or Hidden Strengths Hunts where we guide them to find out about what they are good at. We can ask them to keep a Passion Portfolio of all the wonderful things they have done during their school years. Once they have found their passion, we can hold Passion Interviews, so we can interview them about it. We can ask them to make a Ripple Map to build their sphere of influence or an Impact Inventory to record their ideas and what they can do. We can organise a 30-minute Changemaker Challenge among your students about a difference they can make in 30 minutes. For example, they can make sure there are recycling bins in their schools or decide to make meat-free Mondays and Thursdays. Finally, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals[vi] by the UN (SDGs) can serve as a guiding framework to explore their interests and passions in areas such as social justice, economic development, environmental protection and health.

5) How can teachers make school more real-life-like, where students learn more about things they will actually use later on in life?

It's very important to make school reflect real life and to teach students things they will actually face as adults. Social and emotional skills, such as empathy, self-awareness, respect for others and the ability to communicate, are becoming essential as classrooms and workplaces become more ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse. These, together with 2030 skills, such as Critical thinking, Collaboration, Resilience, Creativity, Emotional Intelligence and Analytical Thinking, are vital in the workplace, but how often are they examined? Where do we see these skills reflected when we look at our children's school reports? We should present our students with real-world problems and ask them to tackle community problems and global problems. We should encourage their community involvement or perhaps partner with local businesses. We should teach them practical skills like budgeting, cooking, communication and sewing. If education's goal is just a certificate, we've already failed. Real education is preparation for a life worth living, not just a job worth applying for. Teachers can inspire students to start building their future and not just sit there waiting for their future to happen. Teachers should make sure that every single classroom is a place where all our students' voices are heard, their passions are nurtured and that the future isn't something that we talk about but something that we build together. Together, we are not just students and teachers; together, we are changemakers!

About Alicia and Harry:

Alicia has been involved in climate activism since the age of seven. She joined Kids Against Plastic and hasn't looked back. Her recent campaign to collect one million pieces of litter led her to be invited to speak at both the World Retail Congress and ChangeNOW in Paris. She is passionate about learning more about

how she can make a difference in the world and would love to be helped by the education system she is a part of.
Harry wears many hats, both literally and figuratively. He's a multi-award-winning teacher trainer, a teacher, writer, climate activist, podcast host and a TEDx speaker. His journey into sustainability-driven education culminated in the inception of Renewable English, a platform merging language learning with environmental consciousness. While adorned with numerous professional hats, Harry's down-to-earth nature and knack for environmentalism shine through. An advocate for sustainable practices, Harry finds joy in second-hand shirts and endeavours to weave sustainability into every aspect of education.

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[i] https://kidsagainstplastic.co.uk/
[ii] https://kidsagainstplastic.co.uk/1millionlitterpick/
[iii] https://consultivo.in/responsible-business/sustainability-communication-calendar/
[iv] https://www.talkspace.com/blog/wellness-wheel/
[v] https://www.neefusa.org/what-we-do/health/climate-emotions-toolkit
[vi] https://sdgs.un.org/goals

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