

## International and UK contexts for learning for sustainability: a brief comment on issues

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When I attend events such as this, I usually try to anticipate what I hope I'll hear (and not hear), so my contribution this morning is something of a personal wish-list that focuses on the following: on diversity, on doorways, on learning, on action and behaviours, on links between ESD and sustainable development, on school development, and on what our sustainable school goals ought to be.

First, something on *context and diversity*. We're now halfway through the Unesco decade of ESD and a lot seems to have been done – as we'll see today no doubt. Doing's one thing, of course; being *effective* is quite another, and I hope we'll get insights into that question as the day unfolds. Given the importance of this work we call ESD, and its high level support by Unesco and the UN, it's a surprise that when you look at the front page of the Unesco education website, you see no reference to ESD. Instead, it says that Education for All [ EFA ] is the top priority. This is not surprising, perhaps, with 75 million children not even getting a primary education. But why can't ESD be an equal priority – stressing *both* EFA and ESD, and the way they're linked? It's all a bit puzzling.

At Unesco's recent 'Halfway through the Decade' conference, there was strong emphasis on the idea that ESD has to be sensitive to context and local development priorities – and hence will differ from place to place, and time to time, because it will have different drivers and emphases. Viewed across the globe, this seems obvious, but it has to apply within countries as well as between them. This means that the sort of ESD you might find, say, in Lancashire cotton towns should be distinctive, and so should that found around the old wool towns (in Wiltshire, where I live), as should that in the farming communities in the Eden valley, where I was born.

So, I'm looking forward to seeing something distinctive today as befits the rich culture of this region. For me, this also means that the question: 'What is what we're doing, here and now, contributing to sustainable development?' needs to be asked – and answered – continually, and I hope someone will be doing that with conviction today.

Second, a word on *doorways*. The DCSF's doorway metaphor seems to have been effective in enabling schools to enter into thinking about sustainability. That's what good doorways do, of course: they allow you to enter, but that's all they do. Once you're inside, you don't usually then spend time looking back at the doorway. So why do so many of us seem to be doing just that: reifying these 8 areas and building work around them? This is not to argue that the doorway themes don't matter, but *if* you do get the point about sustainability, then the doorways have done their job and you're inside.

The risk is that too great an emphasis on the doorway metaphor encourages a fragmented approach to the issues. Whilst it might enable a range of perspectives, this can militate against seeing connections, relationships, and consequences, and limit creativity. All these are plausibly highlighted as essential qualities of ESD in Chris Gayford's recent 3-year study for DCSF and WWF. And anyway, once you've inside, and want to develop practice and understanding, you need a way of thinking about sustainability in relation to learning, and young people's lives. This means you need a framework for thinking about sustainability itself; which is something that the doorways cannot provide.

So, I'm hoping we'll not hear too much today about how great the doorways are.

*Third*, is it to be *learning* or *doing*? Developing capabilities or just behaviours? ESD comprises activities whose purposes are to engage young people and stimulate their development of awareness, understanding, skills and capabilities in relation to living

sustainably. And all this gives rise to social participation and action and contributes to the goal of social justice and human well-being on the global scale, and bolsters the integrity and resilience of ecological systems within the biosphere. Thus, ESD is about both learning *and* social action – and questions about where the balance of emphasis between these should lie, are important. DCSF seems clear about this when it says “the fundamental educational task is to help learners think for themselves.” Quite so.

But all this exposes a central question for those involved in ESD: At heart, are you really interested in educational, or social outcomes? In what learners learn, or in what they do? And if you say that you’re interested in both, as you might, then I’d ask what relationship are you seeing, and what balance are you striking, between these very different outcomes – and how are you thinking about all this? As you’ll appreciate, this is a curriculum question, although it’s not a particular new one. It is, however, one that needs to be asked at a time when there is a narrow focus on changing behaviour, and the conscription of education and schools to that end.

When it comes to making judgements about school effectiveness, I’d say that these need to be focused on young people’s learning, rather than on, say, the amount of energy saved, waste recycled, trees planted etc. Whilst it’s hard to think that there are schools where students’ learning is neglected in favour of promoting social and environmental change, it is all too easy to think of individual lessons and teaching materials where this might be the case.

So, I’m hoping to hear today a heavy emphasis on both the what, and the how of learning.

*Fourth, Actions – private or public.* Another problem is that when it comes to what students do, there’s a tendency to view these as personal. This sees the student as a young individual citizen-actor who knows what to do and what not to do, who is adept, for example at both biking to work and recycling her waste, at growing his own food and composting. She’s also adept at energy efficiency, and local sourcing of materials, as well as reducing consumption overall. However, all this negates an emphasis on doing things that individuals are not able to do themselves. These include bringing about a policy change, say around energy or transport – or around procurement to cut down waste in the first place. This, essentially privatised, view neglects the role of the student as a social and more public actor – as someone involved in democratic citizenship projects both within and outwith the school and its community. Such actions relate to both the formulation and critique of public policy (both national and local), and to purposive interaction with social institutions about their practice. By and large, schools tend not to emphasise this view of action. It can, of course, be somewhat political in nature, but, then, that’s the whole point. This difference was another issue emphasised in Chris Gayford’s recent report.

In some other countries, Denmark notably, they are much clearer about all this. They see schools as a vital means of helping young people develop citizenship skills around interest, participation and critical scrutiny.

So, I’m hoping today to hear more than we usually do about capacity-building to enable democratic participation.

*Fifth, What has ESD got to do with sustainable development?* I have found this to be a useful question to ask because the link is not always obvious. You can have excellent educational activities with an ESD or doorways label, where much useful learning is clearly taking place with well thought through interventions, but where the link to sustainability is simply not made. For example, inclusion and participation are good things in their own right, in a liberal democracy; but in the context of sustainability they have particular meanings which need bringing out.

So, I’m hoping that we’ll hear today about how these links are made more overt.

Sixth, *Stages of Development*. Schools are obviously at different stages in this work. One way of picturing this is as having 4 stages which Ken Webster has termed:

1. *Exploratory*
2. *Assimilating*
3. *Strategic*
4. *Evolved*

Although I think that there's probably a Pre-aware, Stage 0, as well. Another way to think of Ken's first 3 stages is where the school's leadership is [1] *aware* of sustainability; where it [2] *understands* sustainability, and where it [3] is *seized* by it. And I wonder if we have schools represented here today which would claim that they were so *seized*. Whilst I think it is possible to say something (though not, yet, very much) about the characteristics of these stages. It *isn't* possible to know how many schools fall into each one, or anything much about the progress being made through them. All this is a different way of thinking about progress and achievement, but one, I think, that holds much more promise than either the S3 or Ecoschool frameworks.

Leadership and co-ordination has to be key, of course. Ofsted noted in a recent report that the lack of a coordinated whole-school approach, and insufficient opportunities for students to reinforce and develop what they had learned, reduced its impact.

So, I'm hoping that we'll hear today about how schools are thinking about what they're doing, and how they're planning their journey, and evaluating progress made.

*Lastly*, it seems to me that one of those seminal moments is approaching, when we shall have to decide whether sustainability in schools is to be seen and treated as just another initiative, a bit like environmental education has been. That's to say that this has often been interesting and even sometimes innovative in a take it or leave it sort of way, but set firmly within our existing, conservative, curriculum framing that's been broadly economy-oriented for 150 years. Or if it is to be seen and used as a means of changing that framing into something more oriented around ecological integrity and social justice.

A slightly different way of thinking about this question is to ask this: Is it enough for a school to address sustainability (creatively and effectively) through its teaching of young people, and the opportunities for learning that this generates – or does a school have to live out sustainably – to *be* sustainable, in the widest sense, as an institution in its community? The rhetoric of the sustainable schools initiative leads us to the second of these with 2020 as a target date. Ken Webster adds some substance to what this might mean with his description of a school at Stage 4 as 'eco-restorative' with positive contributions being made both socially and environmentally, as well as through student learning and the development of skills and capability. This is an exacting target that will not be met in this timescale. But there's a choice to be made here, which will determine strategy. It's an issue of how radical we want to be – of how radical we feel that we *need* to be. Which is it to be, I wonder? Which ought it to be?

Perhaps today will shed light on this important question. I'm certainly looking forward to finding out.

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