



Supporting education for a more sustainable world.

Executive Summary

Practice, Barriers and Enablers in ESD and EE:

A Review of the Research



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A Report for SEEd

(a Council for Environmental Education initiative)

September 2008

Practice, barriers and enablers in ESD and EE: a review of the research

A report for Sustainability and Environmental Education

SEEd is a CEE (Council for Environmental Education) project with the primary objective of enabling more of the education sector to engage with Education for Sustainable Development and environmental education.

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Executive summary

The task: This is a summary of desk-based research into ESD and EE (and the global dimension where relevant) looking at past teacher surveys and research: what they tell us about current practice, barriers to, and enablers for, sustainable schools. It also considers good practice in research with teachers and schools, gaps in existing research and recommendations for further research.

The report focuses on schools and teachers in England, but some evidence from the devolved administrations has been included as, although the administrations have different approaches to ESD, teachers' needs, enablers and barriers as expressed in the surveys have much in common.

Sources: The report contains information from internet searches and research that the author was personally aware of and additional research suggested by the Teachers' Needs Advisory Panel.

Key findings

1.0 Current context for ESD in schools

This is a time of change in schools with a number of educational initiatives that could have impact on the ability and willingness of schools to engage with sustainability.

2.0 What existing information is available about teachers' practice and needs?

Key documents are summarised.

3.0 What has emerged about school practice?

Schools which have embedded sustainability report a range of positive outcomes. However, research suggests that the majority of schools have limited knowledge of sustainability, work on sustainability tends to be piecemeal and uncoordinated, and its impact tends to be short-lived and limited to small groups of pupils.

3.1 Key aspects of practice in schools successfully engaged with sustainability include:

3.1.1 A whole school approach

3.1.2 Outward looking

- 3.1.3 Active involvement of students in decision-making and practice
- 3.1.4 A broad understanding of sustainability

3.2 Coverage of doorways themes

Although schools said they considered all the ‘doorways’ from the Sustainable Schools Framework important, many schools have not yet incorporated them. The percentages of schools that say they are working on the different doorways varies between surveys, but this could be partly down to the phraseology of questions. The global dimension and local well-being were found to be least in place in all the surveys which included them.

4.0 Barriers to Sustainable Schools

These included:

- 4.0.1 Time and money:** This was almost universal. A few of the studies dug down to find out what time was needed for. Time for planning, re-writing schemes of work, staff development and researching resources emerged as significant.
- 4.0.2 Lack of priority given to sustainability:** Schools said that they concentrated on statutory priorities and there were no real drivers from DfES or Ofsted, in fact, they were seen as major barriers. However, schools which were successfully incorporating sustainability found it a motivating vehicle for delivering the National Curriculum and Every Child Matters, leading to high levels of attainment. Schools felt they needed permission from the DCSF but, as Jackson (2007) notes, ‘the permission is there but the message is not getting out’.
- 4.0.3 A knowledge gap:** partially due to the lack of time and priority.
- 4.0.4 Lack of training:** noted in ITT and CPD.
- 4.0.5 Overlapping initiatives:** A plethora of information and events relating to sustainable schools and perceived competition between them are seen as overwhelming and confusing.
- 4.0.6 School buildings and estate management:** Despite the Framework addressing a perceived lack of consistency between teaching and estate management practice, limitations of school buildings are still seen as a barrier to sustainability.
- 4.0.7 Lack of evidence of impact:** The link to raising standards is not recognised and is under-researched.

5.0 Enablers for Sustainable Schools

These included:

- 5.0.1 Time to create a shared vision:** as a whole school community.
- 5.0.2 A joined-up approach:** clearly linking initiatives, supported by senior management, subject associations, and national policy. However, there is a tension between external drivers and targets and an open, creative approach.
- 5.0.3 Distributed leadership:** both to share the load and to increase participation.
- 5.0.4 Formalisation:** embedding sustainability in policies, curriculum, budgets and staffing.
- 5.0.5 Local authority support:** identified as crucial but currently very variable.
- 5.0.6 External partnerships:** with local businesses and community, NGOs, and internationally.
- 5.0.7 Student participation and leadership:** student involvement not only enables, but also can drive, the sustainability agenda.
- 5.0.8 Training:** on addressing values, developing an outward orientation and pedagogical principles relevant to educating for sustainability, as well as to increase the knowledge base.
- 5.0.9 Active citizenship:** clear links with the sustainability agenda.

6.0 Which organisations have schools worked with?

Considerable support for Sustainable Schools is provided by outside organisations and often shapes the agenda (though the plethora can be confusing - see above). Schools have utilised resources, initiatives and active support from a large number of local, national and international environmental and development groups. The research suggests that support for individual schools from outside organisations can increase understanding and improve the depth and quality of work. Most schools were involved with award schemes, finding the frameworks and targets helpful, however these can also limit the work attempted.

7.0 Effective research with teachers

This is a summary of what was revealed by the research reports regarding approaches which have provided useful information and insights, and any problems arising. In particular, the limitations of self-completed questionnaires have been noted and the need to dig down to find the underlying reasons and real needs behind teachers' initial responses and perceptions, which can only be explored through focus groups or interviews.

8.0 Gaps in available information

8.1 The impact of the Sustainable Schools Framework. This has several aspects:

- whether it has increased the number of schools engaging with education for sustainability
- its impact on attainment
- its impact on learning: is it increasing understanding of sustainability?

It may be too early and beyond the scope of the proposed research to explore the last two points, but it will be important to bear in mind whether fulfilling the ‘needs’ identified will deepen understanding and develop values that may lead to a more sustainable future, or just encourage limited behaviour change.

8.2 Research into schools who are not yet educating for sustainability

Most of the detailed research is into best practice. Surveys have been wider, but probably tend to be completed by those already interested.

8.3 The lower involvement of secondary schools

Are there factors in addition to the ‘Key aspects of practice ...’ identified in 3.1 which differentiate the few secondary schools which successfully engage with sustainability?

9.0 Recommendations for future research

- Initial contact is advised with organisations which have recent experience of researching teachers needs relevant to sustainability and/ or implementing strategies to engage schools with sustainability.
- Telephone interviews or focus groups are recommended as most likely to provide useful information, either alone or as follow-ups to a survey.
- Possible issues/ questions for research are suggested.