



Sustainable Schools: seven propositions around young people’s motivations, interests and knowledge

Think Piece from SEEd Fellow Professor William Scott, University of Bath

This paper discusses the link between ESD and young people, and particularly brings the light the importance that should be placed on the promotion of ESD for young people, and how to do this correctly. The author is Professor William Scott, Professor of Education, Head of the 'Education and Sustainability' Research Programme and Director of the Centre for Research in Education and the Environment (CREE) at the University of Bath.

Policy and practice around sustainable schools, and ESD more generally, tends to be based around largely tacit assumptions about young people’s motivations, interests and knowledge. In this brief paper I shall examine a number of these, and the implications for the enhancement of the learning we shall all need to do. I start from the notion that it is learning that matters above anything else. The seven propositions are that ...

Young people:

1. come to learning contexts with experience, knowledge, understanding and concerns.
2. don't learn what teachers teach.
3. are rarely eager to absorb other people's preoccupations and prejudices.
4. never respond well to pessimism and tales of looming disaster and dread.
5. are not there to cure their parents' bad habits.
6. rarely judge lessons – and school – in terms of how interesting or relevant the content is.
7. aren't fully able to develop social and citizenly skills until they can practice these for real.

YOUNG PEOPLE COME TO LEARNING CONTEXTS WITH EXPERIENCE, KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING AND CONCERNS

We know how true this is, and how significant young people’s networks, families and the media are to who they are, and to their learning. So why is it that we tend to discount all this and behave as if it's just what we know that matters, and spend so much time second guessing issues of relevance and interest? Mark Rickinson’s new book on environmental learning from the students’ perspective illustrates the pitfalls of getting this wrong, and the subtle ways in which students manipulate and manage the learning context – and teachers. As Mike Hulme writes in the latest RSA Journal, we need the spaces to argue fearlessly with one another about issues that demand we take a position on. Sustainability generates lots of those issues, and schools are one of the spaces.

YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T LEARN WHAT TEACHERS TEACH

This follows from the last proposition, and is always true at every level. What we learn, what it means to us, and what sense we make of it, depends on what we bring to the table in relation to knowledge, interests, concerns, questions, values, etc. What we learn either reinforces or changes what we know, feel, think, and value, and the skills we have. Thus it is, that no matter how social a process education and learning is, at heart it leads to individual change and difference. This means that starting from local, neighbourhood issues, which young people often know more about than teachers do, is fundamental in developing the sort of citizenly skills which we need.

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE RARELY EAGER TO ABSORB OTHER PEOPLE'S PREOCCUPATIONS AND PREJUDICES

Put like this, it seems self-evident, so why do we try to do this? An advisor to Kofi Annan once said that a key purpose of ESD was to give young people perspectives other than their own – and he might have added add: other than their teachers. But why do we persist with crude behaviour modification programmes around fair trade, organic food, recycling, climate change, etc? Why is fair trade shamelessly promoted rather than critically examined, when it's a highly contentious commercial enterprise? Why do some NGOs have non-negotiable issues that learners seem to have to accept, and why is there so much reluctance to have open-minded discussion? Young people say preaching is counter-productive, and Chris Gayford's recent research for WWF found clear evidence from young people that telling them what to think and do about the environmental is not effective. This and other studies, for example our own recent work for DCSF, demonstrate that using active, participatory and collaborative learning approaches helps young people to enjoy what they do, and helps the transfer of learning to everyday life.

YOUNG PEOPLE NEVER RESPOND WELL TO PESSIMISM AND TALES OF LOOMING DISASTER AND DREAD

Research shows that young people become increasingly worried and disinterested when schools place too much emphasis on problems. Research for the Cambridge Primary Review noted that "pessimism turned to hope when young people felt that they had the power to act. The children who were most confident that climate change need not overwhelm them were those whose schools had decided to replace unfocused fear by factual information, and practical strategies for energy reduction and sustainability". So, we need to be wary of painting too gloomy a picture for young people; the feelings of hopelessness that this can engender will not help them play an active, positive role in their – and everyone else's lives.

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT THERE TO CURE THEIR PARENTS' BAD HABITS

Young people tend to compartmentalise school and home – and see their parents' habits (bad or otherwise) as their parents' concern. Gayford found the greatest learning gains occurred where there was close agreement about sustainability between the school and young people's families – hardly surprising really. But research also shows that very exacting conditions need to be in place before this reverse inter-generational learning – the sort mediated by young people – will be effective. And attempting to have young people do this can lead to their being caught between conflicting school, parental or community values. In any attempts to do any of this, it's what young people learn through doing it that has to matter.

YOUNG PEOPLE RARELY JUDGE LESSONS – AND SCHOOL – IN TERMS OF HOW INTERESTING OR RELEVANT THE CONTENT IS

Young people tend to judge these things by the quality of personal relationships that are developed with teachers and peers rather than in terms of content. The new Rickinson book has a lot to say about relevance and interest – reminding us that these are difficult things for teachers to guess. My colleague, Paul Vare, has argued that pedagogy that promotes the building of relationships needs to be given greater stress, because in this sense the teacher can be a role model of excellence where a critical competence is the capability to build positive relationships. He says that these require a degree of teacher self-awareness and self-confidence, a willingness to be seen to be an imperfect human being doing their best – less all-knowing, and inevitably changeable with circumstances. And, as Vare notes, all this cross-references well with the need for engagement in practical citizenship and action-competence. Here, as the outcomes are unknown, the teacher becomes a facilitator with the learners as fellow explorers.

YOUNG PEOPLE AREN'T FULLY ABLE TO DEVELOP SOCIAL AND CITIZENLY SKILLS UNTIL THEY CAN PRACTICE THESE FOR REAL

Clearly, these are important, and schools are right to put stress on them. However, there are limitations about what can be achieved if the context is not realistic. My colleague Andy Stables writes about schools' roles as nurseries of responsible citizenship. He argues that students in school are only ever likely to pick up a general, rather diffuse, sense of concern about, and for, the world's problems that is either led, or reinforced by any involvement they may have in the overall public debate in the media. For Stables, this implies that the curriculum focus should be on the development of skills of critical thinking, dialogue and debate, with environment and sustainability only one of many possible foci to enable this. It is, essentially, an education for life-long, open-ended, open-minded, participatory citizenship. Stables also argues that, whilst openness to the real public debate is crucial, it is vital to remember that capacities are not outcomes, and that they do not simply precede outcomes. He says that, to a large extent, it is the making of real-life decisions that most fully enables, in an iterative, developmental manner, the capacity for exercising responsible citizenship.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS – FOR NOW¹

The fact that the school sector's direct greenhouse gas emissions, at 2%, is a small part of the UK's contribution is no reason to ignore it completely. It is, however, an argument for being very clear how every attempt to reduce carbon use, whether through good design, waste reduction, smarter procurement or energy savings, can be linked to opportunities for student participation and learning, and the practice it affords in their making real-life decisions. Gayford's work with WWF shows that where an institution is seen by students to care enough to focus on sustainability issues, this can be a key motivator, as is the opportunity that participation can bring for both learning, and the development of a sense of hope. Such engagement with real social and community issues is at the heart of well-documented approaches where the purpose is to develop young people's understanding and capability to act, rather than to ensure that social benefits accrue. And this brings us full circle back to our knowledge that young people are not empty vessels or blank slates (or screens) just waiting for the wise to fill. In summation, then, I am arguing that any imperative for schools to try to be sustainable, as institutions, needs to rest, primarily, on the way that this supports learning by students, teachers, governors, and others who are involved. To proceed otherwise would seem to miss the point that schools remain institutions whose prime social function is to help young people to learn.

¹ With Paul Vare, I am currently developing this argument for publication.