



# Sustainable Leadership Solutions

## Think Piece from SEEd Fellow David Dixon, Bowbridge Primary School

*This paper describes one school leader's understanding of what 'Sustainable Schools' really mean and how this fits with the Big Picture on Climate Change and current debates on what the aims of education should be. It is informed by his recent completion of a doctoral thesis at the University of Lincoln. The author is Dr David Dixon, Head Teacher of Bowbridge Primary School Newark, Nottinghamshire, England. The school has 470 on roll and serves an area of significant disadvantage.*

The Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen was rather a damp squib given the alleged importance of addressing a truly global threat. In a nutshell, the world leaders signed up to a commitment to avoid average global temperatures rising more than 2 degrees Celsius from present levels. This did not include detailed targets for reducing greenhouse gases and so the commitment was sufficiently woolly to create a consensus view. Although individual nations and regions do have more specific and binding targets, the fact that there were no global ones leaves one with the impression that everyone is waiting for everyone else to take radical action.

The vast majority of scientists believe that a rise of over 1 degree will lead to serious and possibly cataclysmic effects on the biosphere. These are already manifesting themselves in melting glaciers and permafrost, expanding deserts, more forest fires, unprecedented species extinction, more volatile weather and rising sea levels. The fact that most of these effects are being experienced by the poorer nations is likely to be the main reason why richer nations are not willing to take measures to cut consumption and switch from an economy dominated by the use of fossil fuels. It is frightening to think that CO<sub>2</sub> levels are at their highest for 650 000 years as measured by bubbles in ice-cores and consumption levels mean that as a whole the human population is using at least two and half planets worth of resources a year. The melting permafrost is releasing methane at an ever-increasing rate and this greenhouse gas is about 23 times more powerful in terms of its greenhouse effects.

Given the possible Armageddon scenario expressed above, why hasn't the education service been fully mobilised to help alleviate the effects of Climate Change and other aspects of environmental degradation? Some may argue that it has if one looks at the Eco School movement and various Department for Children Families and Schools (DCFS) initiatives, delivered through the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). Most notable of these came in the 2006 'Leadership Toolkit' which introduced the 'Eight Doorways of Sustainability' for schools within the context of Curriculum, Campus and Community. This also complimented the 'S3' form which audits sustainable practices in line with the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) Self Evaluation Form (SEF) categories- all schools in England have to keep this up to date.

Ofsted have also done several studies of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in schools; the first of these, way back in 2003 and the latest which was published in December 2009. Through these reports Ofsted highlighted in ever greater detail that ESD should be at the centre of what schools deliver in terms of curriculum, campus and their role in the community. This is to ensure that the national target for all schools to be 'sustainable' by 2020 is achievable. Ofsted is also beginning to acknowledge that ESD can be central to the way schools improve the easily measurable attainment outcomes when linked to the creative curriculum, personalised learning, citizenship and outdoor learning.

However, there is some illogicality and contradictions at work here at various levels. First and foremost there is still no accepted definition for what a truly 'Sustainable School' looks like. This is because sustainability itself has many definitions and interpretations.

For instance, should a sustainable school be totally carbon neutral taking into account the way it runs in terms of energy consumption, procurement (including school meals food miles) and the way the staff and children get to school? Should this also take into account the social sustainability i.e. relationships between all school stakeholders and the effects of social cohesion in the surrounding community (whatever a 'community' is). Should all staff, especially the Head Teacher, lead carbon-neutral lives so that they 'walk the sustainability talk', or is this an intrusion into their personal lives? Should sustainability be a 'moral imperative' for the Head Teacher? I will return to this last point later.



**The Creative Curriculum & ESD in action-  
making and testing solar ovens.**

The DCFS and Ofsted may promote sustainability with one hand, but on the other the bottom line seems to be that easily measurable attainment still rules and schools will not be commended for ESD if these measures are not up to scratch. Although in the latest Ofsted inspection my school gained an 'outstanding feature' from our ESD activities, this aspect of the school was not looked at in detail and Head Teacher colleagues have had similar experiences. There is not much evidence of schools

being sanctioned to improve from an Ofsted negative category through a focused ESD approach- although one of the schools in my research described below had done this due to the passionate beliefs of the Head Teacher. This type of improvement strategy is certainly not on the agenda of the DCFS 'Improving Schools Programme' (ISP) or the emphasis on improvement employed by School Improvement Partners (SIPs) and Local Authority school improvement departments. One could be cynical and think that an ESD emphasis is only a realistic option for schools labelled 'Good' or above in the first place and many of these reside in leafy villages and suburbs, rather than more challenging urban areas.

Another problem is that schools can look as though they are 'sustainable' because they do a lot of recycling, gardening and having special 'Green Events' and even achieve Eco-School 'Green Flag' top accreditation. However, this can be tokenistic 'Green Wash' if one looks critically at the school's overall impact on the biosphere. For example, the Head Teacher and many of the staff might drive environmentally damaging cars and live a long way from the school (and this might also apply to parents). The emphasis on recycling might mask the uncomfortable question of whether the things being recycled should have been bought in the first place e.g. for every aluminium can recycled, there is always about a 2% loss of material and it also takes an enormous amount of energy, therefore should we use aluminium for drinks cans at all?

With all the above in mind I embarked on a doctoral dissertation which aimed to produce a 'Green Leader model for primary schools. This type of leader would be suitably 'different' from those described in other models in that they would lead a school as closely as possible to ecological sustainability. To develop such a model, I studied the lives and practices of eight Head Teachers who led Green Flag Eco-schools to see if there were common traits that incentivised them to promote sustainability. There were many commonalities in terms of their childhood up-bringing, initial teacher training, CPD and the colleagues and schools they worked in before becoming head Teachers. Their child-hoods were marked by lots of freedom

to roam, particularly in the countryside. There were also strong influences from grand-parents and other adults who nurtured a love of nature and gardening. Several of them had a strong Christian faith which linked to the desire of taking care of the world. Their training had strong elements of natural Science and particularly Biology, but also elements of social science and history which gave them an insightful knowledge of how the world works both economically and ecologically and how the former can damage the latter. When class teachers, most had worked for Heads who were also keen on sustainability linked to a Creative Curriculum philosophy, including outdoor learning. They also maintained a wide perspective by being involved with national and local education initiatives, some which involved sustainability, which continued to provide them with information about how the education system works at the macro level. Most were rather cynical about this in terms of not liking the way the Standards Agenda was dominating and narrowing the curriculum. However, this did not stop them from developing a range of ESD activities in their schools which gave an impressive coverage of the Eight Doorways. One Head in particular was working with the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) to develop a community of practice to disseminate ESD to other colleagues. Overall, they *did* walk the green talk and seemed to lead relatively low impact lives when compared to their socio-economic peers. The empirical part of the research was complemented and interwoven with literature from the Green Movement and more general socio-economic research to produce the Green Leader Model.

An unexpected and interesting outcome from my research was to call into question some notions of Distributed Leadership ('The New Leadership Kid' on the block as it has been described). This is because although the heads being studied definitely used this leadership approach extensively and to good effect, it was seen as a management tool rather than as the basis of their set of values for leadership. They seemed to a greater or lesser degree to have a moral compass which impelled them to put ESD at the core of their schools' ethos. This meant that they certainly had strong aspects of 'Hero Head' which is now rather frowned upon. This type of stereotypical model of Headship, personified by Matthew Arnold in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, has been heavily criticised of late. But what Head Teacher would have a school ethos to which they did not agree? Therefore, there is probably more Hero Headship about than anyone would care to admit.

My Green Leader Model had more than a passing similarity with a leadership model developed by Hansen and Middleton (2000) called 'Green Machiavellian'. This embraced the idea of the leader as being a benevolent dictator, again with a strong moral purpose to promote the case for a truly ecologically sustainable economy. This again seemed to relate to a more old-fashioned view of headship and of teaching generally, whereby professional integrity and autonomy were not questioned in the way it is today. Of course pre-1988 schools in England were not accountable to National Standards which made this trust more of a reality and open to abuse.

So, if we really are facing an impending environmental crisis, perhaps we need more Green Leaders with Machiavellian tendencies. I say this because it seems likely that we have not got much time to drastically alter our economy and lifestyle to avert such a crisis. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007) said we had about 8 years from 2008 to 'make a difference'. If there was more time, then our current painfully slow incremental approach to developing sustainability in schools and in wider society would suffice. This is not to decry distributed leadership or co-constructive solutions; rather it is a call for school leaders to be unafraid to lead from the front or push from the back when required to give ESD the priority it deserves. In effect this is saying that it is beholden on all professionals to revisit the discussion on what the aims of education should be in the light of predicted futures. This in itself will mean a move away from the utilitarian and linear ways of working and thinking which have dominated the last twenty years. It will also necessitate challenging the neo-liberal economic model which has dominated society since the Industrial Revolution. Merely tinkering with this will be akin to fiddle playing whilst the planet burns.

Although Head Teachers in England bemoan the formidable national systems of accountability, they are in fact in a privileged position. Fuelled by Local Management of Schools introduced with other changes in 1988, they probably have more day to day autonomy than many of their peers world-wide. This means at a school level they can choose to be suitably 'different' and this can manifest itself in promoting an ESD ethos. Yes, there are added difficulties and pressures if they do this, but the benefits in terms of an acceleration towards sustainability and associated school improvement outcomes can be colossal. How much easier this would be if the regional and national education systems encouraged this more actively and in a more coordinated fashion. One only has to think of the way the Government radically changed our economy virtually overnight when threatened by Nazi Germany. An entire nation was mobilised to combat a common threat. Today, the common threat is environmental degradation. However, this is less tangible than Nazi storm-troopers and has yet to be agreed upon or fully understood by the majority of people and this includes education leaders.

My research indicates that a type of green leader with a strong moral purpose and courage, working with like-minded individuals in professional networks can help to produce significant changes from the 'bottom up', leading to truly sustainable schools and communities. It also points to the importance of developing programmes of training to 'fast-track' more of these leaders. More of the same will not be fit for purpose as the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century unfold.

## REFERENCES

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