Action research to promote leadership and agency in developing sustainable schools and communities

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Introduction

Over the last 20-30 years there has been a growing literature discussing strategies for change in response to global environmental crises and the challenge of living sustainably. From the more ‘radical’ projects characterised by 1960s values of organic natural and community living there have developed a whole plethora of initiatives which spread to the extent that environmental discourses are now mainstream in policy and public arenas. Central to these developments has been the growing acknowledgement of the centrality of learning in the creation of sustainable communities. From the day when environmental education was seen as the preserve of a few committed and interested nature lovers who recognised the value of intimate learning about the environment, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is now central to educational policy and sustainability key to public policy agenda. Yet these developments are merely the start of fundamental changes needed if major global environmental collapse is to be averted. Increasingly critics are asking whether these developments are having any impact. Is recycling and saving energy really going to save the world?

In 2006 the Sustainable Schools strategy was announced setting out the obligations of schools in providing education for sustainable development. The underlying assumption seems to be that, by ensuring children and young people have the necessary skills and

¹ The project on which this paper is based also involved my colleague at SOLAR Danny Burns
knowledge, they will be better equipped to confront challenges of living sustainably – that is, ‘meeting our needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’ (Brundtland 1989). Ensuring children have the necessary education to confront future challenges is highly important, yet there are a number of assumptions with regard to whether and how ESD learning gives rise to intended impacts which in turn raises questions about the ‘effectiveness’ of approaches to learning for sustainability being adopted. In particular placing the emphasis on ESD in schools suggests that children have a role as agents of change in bringing about sustainable communities. But a critical question concerns whether approaches to ESD currently being adopted are providing appropriate learning opportunities for children and young people and the implications of these approaches for sustainable change in communities.

In response to these questions, this paper critically examines some of the key challenges and assumptions that characterise current approaches to ESD, and in response discusses the value of an action research approach as an alternative strategy for learning for sustainability. The paper highlights some of the key requirements of effective ESD in terms of the imperatives of leadership, agency, critical reflexivity, community learning and action which, the paper argues, better equips children and young people, and in turn, adult community members, with the competences, skills, knowledge and predisposition to be leaders in making sustainable changes a reality in their own lives and their communities. The paper will draw on insights and examples from a recently completed research project exploring the role of schools in developing sustainable communities funded by the ESRC and Homes and Communities Academy².

**Illusions and realities: Some challenges and assumptions of ESD**

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Critical reflection on ESD reveals some underlying assumptions which, if left uncontested, suggest that in its current form ESD is unlikely to give rise to the desired impacts of sustainable behaviour change and measures to address major global ecological collapse. This section puts forward some key challenges that have arisen as a result of reflection on the evaluation of ESD impacts.

**The spillover of instrumental learning**

First, there seems to be an assumption that school based ESD will spillover into communities and bring about sustainable behaviour change. It is clear that children have a very definite impact on the adoption of some individual sustainable practices at home such as recycling, saving energy and growing vegetables, but with limited impact on fundamental changes to lifestyles needed to address the global environmental problems we face. Whilst the changes that occur can be meaningful, they are often small scale and likely to have limited impact on the wider challenge of responding to global ecological collapse. A recent report (Crompton and Thorngerson 2009) argues that assumptions about learning spilling over into communities will at best only lead to ‘simple and painless’ changes with limited impact on the wider ecological problems confronting us. One of the shortfalls of spillover is that parents simply experience the learning from spillover as another bit of ‘transmitted’ knowledge their children bring home rather than being engaged in deeper inquiry-based critically reflexive learning to bring about fundamental changes in their values and actions.

**All you need are ‘skills’**

There is an assumption that behaviour change is possible with the acquisition of skills and knowledge for sustainable living. Yet, there is a complexity of mediating factors at play influencing whether people adopt sustainable practices, such as time, cost, convenience, availability of sustainable options and psycho social factors concerned with individual values and motivations. Faced with likely global ecological collapse a rational response would be to not see these factors as choices, rather as contingencies which need overcoming. A key challenge for ESD is therefore to confront this disconnection from the urgency of the problem. For many in the relatively affluent western world, the failure to make significant change is arguably the product of having too much to sacrifice voluntarily (in terms of comfortable materialistic consumer lifestyles) when the manifestations of global environmental collapse are not directly experienced in everyday lives. Indeed, for many, the
only awareness of environmental problems comes virtually through the TV with little direct impression on the illusory bubble of material comfort in which we in the west live. The integrity of the bubble is then preserved by the myth that through progress and technological innovation perhaps, we will find the answers, as we think we have always done (Kingsnorth 2009). This is not conducive to individuals developing leadership for change.

**Children need educating to live sustainably**

By focusing on ESD in schools there seems to be an assumption that children should be relied upon to be key players in sustainable development. This is exciting and not unwise yet, within current educational regimes and social constructions of childhood, there are a number of contradictions in the way children are educated and ESD curricula provided. Whilst we focus on the need for children to learn to live more sustainably, at the same we deny children the opportunity to develop and articulate their own sense of agency and creativity. The result is that children ‘learn about stuff’ but do not necessarily have the wherewithall to act on that learning and develop a sense of leadership and agency in their own lives. In part this reflects a culture in which children have historically been seen as in a state of becoming, not yet having developed sufficient competence to become ‘actors of change’ and therefore in need of adult guidance and education for when they become citizens in adulthood. Yet it is adults who have plundered the earth and created the problems, whilst children have so often demonstrated a strong affinity for nature and the role of earth stewards (Hart 1995). Many children are passionate about environmental issues and are keen to learn and do something to look after nature and save the planet.

Children and young people are innately ‘youthful’ in the sense that they demonstrate an energy and enthusiasm in experiencing, experimenting and articulating their own ideas and sense of agency – in essence making their own contribution to the world. We simply need to remove barriers and restrictions to children’s creativity, commitment and agency as actors of social change and allow the space for them to create different worlds. This does not mean we leave children to get on with it. Indeed children’s participation in change projects benefits from the support, guidance and input from adults; but not control. The possibilities of inter-generational learning here as advocated by, for example, Mannion (2007), Fielding (2004) or Percy-Smith (2006) are clear.
**ESD is the magic wand to save the planet**

There appears to be unstated assumptions about what ESD is realistically expected to achieve. It seems that by enhancing ESD in school curricula that this is believed to have some impact on the global problems we face, through technological adjustments to the way we live, whilst failing to recognise that it is the structures and values of how we live that have lead us to this historical precipice. Many would present this argument as the limitations of transmissive education as opposed to the transformative learning that is arguably needed (see for example Shallcross 2006; Sterling 2001; Selby 2008; Scott 2009). By recognising the importance of ‘learning’ for sustainability (Tilbury 2007; Hart 2007), there is a disproportionate emphasis on ESD being the solution to the global environmental crisis whilst insufficiently acknowledging the importance of wider factors and variables which structure and shape communities and lifestyles, choices and actions.

**Development without change**

There is a limit to what ESD in schools can realistically be expected to achieve without the necessary social, economic and political adjustments that are needed to help provide a context in which the benefits of ESD can be enacted and realised in practice. In the research with schools on which this article is based, key variables affecting whether change happened included cost, availability of sustainable alternatives and time. In essence people did not appear predisposed to change within existing time/space/cultural/economic structures – all of which are shaped by the prevailing capitalist mode of production. In seeking possibilities for change, many parents as well as children suggested the importance of government measures alongside local action to provide a context in which sustainable options are more easily realisable, for example through financial incentives and supports, provision of appropriate facilities and services and regulation and controls to dissuade unsustainable practices. However, whilst initiative needs to come from the top and bottom, ultimately it is changes in the actions and lifestyles of people that will dictate how sustainable human civilisation is. Local learning for sustainability needs to be part of a wider process of social, economic and political learning at all levels. This requires a whole system perspective on learning for sustainability which takes the focus of learning beyond the classroom and acknowledges that all actions and choices are interdependent.
**Disconnection from an incomprehensible problem**

Whilst ‘development’ and industrialisation have given us the opportunity to make our lives easier through machines, this has simultaneously given rise to the unintended effects of losing our sense of power, wisdom and connectedness in our relationship with our global habitat. This has to be addressed as part of any plan to create sustainable futures. In essence this means ensuring our lived realities are characterised by experience of human connectedness with nature, which Capra (1997) refers to as eco-centric rather than anthropocentric values. Seeking to take action in response to global ecological collapse is a huge and unrealistically daunting task. The goal of arresting global ecological collapse is simply too big for many to feel their actions are having any kind of impact. Yet, strategies of education for sustainable development are based on the assumption that if we learn the necessary knowledge and skills we can avert the global ecological crisis (Egan 2004). Evidence\(^3\) suggests that whilst there is some merit in promoting sustainable habits through education, the impact of these changes on the wider ecological problem is likely to be limited whilst the juggernaut of global capitalism rolls on. Neither is it possible to effectively confront global capitalism head on and create an alternative in a short time span. Indeed we don’t even know what that alternative will be yet. The only option we have is to reduce the scale of our focus from the global to what we can directly affect at a local level in our everyday lives. Both children and adults are more likely to engage in learning and action when they see the relevance to their everyday lives.

Becoming aware of these challenges and contradictions in the assumptions that underlie current approaches to learning for sustainability, allows us to start to identify those issues and elements which need to be constitutive of ESD strategies. In particular the need to confront the paradox of our current existence, being honest about the reality of the state of the planet and, perhaps most importantly, taking responsibility for how we respond to our current situation individually and collectively. This requires developing capacities as leaders (in terms of being proactive) and feeling ‘empowered’ as agents of change making decisions and choices fully cognisant of the connectedness of human societies with the wider global web of life (Capra 1997). This also necessitates developing an ethic of practice in everyday

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\(^3\) See for example Percy-Smith and Burns 2009; Crompton and Thorgerson 2009
actions, decisions and choices (Capra 1997). This cannot happen whilst we are fixated on a linear model of instrumental learning to achieve predetermined ends. Instead this paper proposes an action research approach which focuses on the dialectic relationship between learning and action; engaging differently through learning by doing (learning in and from action) and developing capacity for critical reflexivity.

**Exploring the praxis of sustainability education: Action Research as a strategy for leading and learning for change in schools and communities**

A key dilemma in sustainability education has been to try and achieve transformative learning within a paradigm of transmissive education. Action research offers an alternative approach based on participative inquiry and action based learning for change. Action research is essentially a participatory strategy of learning for change involving groups in processes of critically reflexive social learning. Tilbury (2007: 117) states that “Sustainability is an ongoing social learning process that actively involves stakeholders in creating their vision, acting and reviewing changes.” If ESD is to progress towards achieving its goals of transformative learning and action, new approaches to developing an education as active citizenship are needed which implicate the learner as leaders in their own lives as a central part of the focus. The remainder of this chapter will elaborate the relevance of an action research approach to sustainability education and explore elements of such an approach as used with children in schools as an approach to learning for sustainability in which individuals develop capacity as leaders of change in their own lives and communities.

1. **Experiential learning: Reconnecting with nature**

David Kolb’s experiential learning cycle views learning as a process of continual modification of ideas and habits as a result of experience (1984). Experiential learning is a key characteristic of action research involving learning from doing in the context of everyday lived experience. Experiential learning provides a number of benefits for learners. First it provides opportunities for first hand experiences of nature - physical, sensual, emotional and spiritual - which provide possibilities for connecting (or reconnecting) with nature and the roots of human existence. There is an essential psychology in our relationship and
connection with nature (Heft and Chawla 2006) and the planet which has been lost through ‘progress’ in modernity. Many children and young people experience a very real sense of empathy and connection in their experiences of nature. Second, through first hand experiences children are able to learn practical skills and abilities and develop a sense of mastery or ‘environmental competence’ (Heft and Chawla 2006) out of their transactions with nature. Third, experiential learning is essentially participative in that the learner engages in learning in relation to their own experiential realities and learning needs. Through first hand experiences, children are better able to understand and reflect on their own values, thinking and actions in relation to the world. In essence experiential learning is participatory and person-centred focusing on human experience in relation to the world.

To achieve these goals of experiential learning, the setting for learning needs to move beyond the classroom to community settings where ‘real world’ learning can take place as an integral part of our lived experiences (Bentley 1998). Within schools, school gardens and farms provide opportunities for children to gain experience outside of the classroom and develop practical knowledge and skills that can build capacity, confidence and self determination but also develop empathy with nature. Developing connections with nature in local contexts also develops a sense of belonging, ownership and duty of care. Connection with nature does not only mean being in and feeling or experiencing nature (the elements, the feel of the soil etc) but also understanding the cycles and processes of nature and human rhythms in relation to that.

2. Inquiry based learning: developing critical thinking

By situating learning within the context of experience and self awareness, reflection and inquiry naturally follow as learners begin to ask questions as they seek to understand their experience and place in the world in a process of situated social learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). At one level this involves reflection on what we know and do to challenge taken-for-granted norms and assumptions. On another level it involves asking critical questions to reach a deeper level of understanding and insight into how and why a problem has occurred.

“We need enough time created for open-ended investigation and links to the
creative curriculum ... Young people instigating action research to explore and solve their own issues is a positive step ... empowers them to take action”
(ESD coordinator)

In turn, this leads to a more holistic or whole system focus for inquiry as people relate local realities to wider social, economic and environmental systems. In three of the schools in this project Sustainable Food was chosen as a key strand to focus their inquiries. Food and healthy eating is an effective way to catalyse action in the community since it is relevant to the everyday choices families make. The following case study documents how children can develop critical thinking and agency by using an inquiry-based approach to learning.

Case study: Inquiring into Sustainable Food

A focus on food – how and where it is produced, the packaging it comes in and how it is sold - raises multiple sustainability issues concerning diet and health, waste and recycling, transport (food miles and shopping trips), supporting local economies, and conservation of natural habitats.

In the first instance, interactive activities including matching games and cartoon dialogues were used to help children explore issues about healthy eating, where food comes from and how people learn to eat more sustainably. Providing opportunities for children to try out different fruits and vegetables and talk about where they come from can be quite instructive in effecting young people’s attitudes to healthy eating and sustainable shopping and a powerful basis from which they can make choices and influence their families. In parallel children had opportunities to gain practical hands-on experience in the school garden where they were able to develop skills in ‘growing your own’, which supports their role as agents of change. To further support children’s inquiry into food, a picture linking exercise was used to help them think about the links between local actions and global impacts, for example between food miles and global warming or impact of plastic bag use on wildlife. The inquiry was then extended further so that children could think about what could happen differently and a story was used -
involving the fictitious characters of Fast Food Freddie and the (wise) Jolly Green Giant - to help children think about how people could eat more sustainably. Through this story children were able to think about alternative scenarios of what might happen differently at a local level. Children identified things they could do to help their families eat more sustainably at home. Based on experiential learning in school gardens involving children growing vegetables some children tried to start growing vegetables themselves at home and engaging relations in the process. Others took action by asking for healthy options in their lunch boxes. Whereas sustainable food consumption and healthy eating are already part of the value system for some families, for poorer families diet and healthy eating, in addition to price of food, are key variables in sustainable food decisions. Some parents from one of the poorer estates were simply unaware of the importance of healthy eating until their children had talked about it as a result of what they had learnt from the sustainability curriculum in school.

The importance of activities such as these within the context of sustainability education is that they help develop in children the capacity and inclination for double- rather than just single- loop learning (Argyris and Schon 1978). Whereas single loop learning involves a more instrumental process of finding alternative practices, double loop learning involves a process of challenging our own thinking and values which underlie action.

3. **Empowerment through critical reflexivity: Realising a sense of agency**

In re-orientating our focus to our everyday worlds we are necessarily activating our own agency by taking back control of our lives, as individuals and groups. This means taking increasingly more responsibility for the actions and choices which shape how we live in our immediate everyday realities, but doing so in ways which have a built in accountability through environmental and social responsibility. Through encounters locally with nature it becomes possible for individuals to become more self aware of their own values and actions in relation to nature.

“Action research, viewed as interactive learning construed as critically reflexive of ‘what’s behind human actions’, implicates notions of identify (self) and agency in linking individual and socio-cultural dimensions of this process.” (Hart 2007: 321)
Although we live in a social world, ultimately motivation and change originates within each individual’s struggles to come to terms with their own sense of identity, place and contribution to the world. As Hart goes on to say:

“Identity comes through action, that is, through daily activities which are acts of communication collectively shaped (and broadly conceived) to include self dialogue/thinking” (Hart 2007: 321)

If individuals feel valued and cared for they are more likely in turn to care for the world around them. People are more likely to actively participate in social change processes if they feel a sense of agency and empowerment themselves and have that acknowledge by others. In the Maori tradition there is an expression ‘tino rangatiratanga’ which refers to self-determination over one’s life (Williams et al 2010). ESD needs to involve the development of a sense of tino rangatiratanga in terms of taking responsibility as change agents ourselves rather than devolve responsibility to others. ‘Participation’ is seen as one of the features of current approaches to bringing about change. Yet, the emancipatory potential of participation has gradually been hijacked and colonised by mainstream policy discourses which offer the illusion of empowerment whilst in reality exacerbating control and dependency of individuals on the state. Kingsnorth similarly observes how the deep ecological commitment implicit in environmentalism has given way to a superficial ‘green’ consumerism characterised by a reliance on ‘managerialism’ as a strategy for change as the environmental agenda has become mainstreamed. This co-option as well as the deeper underlying crisis in human-environmental relationships can only be challenged through developing a different conscientiousness and capacity for empowerment and leadership.

In order to reconnect with nature and become more aware of the reality of the impacts of our relationship with it, we need to redevelop a capacity for critical reflexivity (Weil 1998), or as Postman and Weingartner (1969) put it: we need to become ‘crap detectors’; developing the attitudes and skills of political and cultural criticism (p.16). This involves what Freire (1972) referred to as conscientization - the development of a critical consciousness - which can be understood in terms of:

“looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. Provided with the tools for such an encounter, the individual can gradually perceive personal and
social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, [...] deal critically with it ... and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world” (Freire, 1972 pp14,16).

This suggests that simply acquiring new knowledge is insufficient to bring about sustainable change in communities. Instead, following Sterling we need transformative learning which challenges our whole way of thinking about how we live, our lifestyles, attitudes and behaviours e.g. about what food we eat and how we travel, what we consume and how we dispose of the waste and what energy we use and how we function as a community. However, empowerment through critical reflexivity is not just about reaching a more enlightened position for implementing technical solutions, rather is about a way of being characterised by a heightened consciousness of human-environment relationships and guided by an ethic of practice (Kemmis 2009) or a process of reflective living practice (Shallcross, Robinson and Wals 2006).

Becoming more aware of our place in, and interactions with, the world by implication also means becoming more critically self aware about our choices and actions and the intended as well as unintended impacts that result. This needs to start in children’s everyday life settings of home and school. In this research children began their inquiries by using their understanding of sustainability to critically examine how sustainable their own school was involving environmental audits and carrying out research with staff and pupils (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Children critically assessing how sustainable their own school is.
4. Creativity and innovation through social learning

Generating new thinking is a creative process requiring space for new ideas and visions to germinate, take root and blossom. Doing what we have always done will get us what we always got. Unless we find spaces for creativity in which we can develop different ways of thinking and practice we will end up simply reinforcing the status quo. Human beings are innately creative and intelligent, but rarely is that intelligence tapped and utilised. The use of creative forms and processes, like action research, support different ways of seeing and knowing that can provide a fertile ground for learning for change. Unless we create spaces for critical inquiry and reflection, for wonder and for experimentation we will simply reinvent the wheel. Creative problem solving can be most effective when different individuals and groups get together in what Kemmis (2001) refers to as a ‘communicative action space’. Communicative action spaces provide opportunities for dialogue and collaborative inquiry involving social learning (Wals 2007; Wildemeersch et al 1998).

A number of writers use ideas of social learning to signify the importance of learning in groups and communities (see Wildemeersch et al. 1998; Percy-Smith 2006). Through engaging with others new possibilities for creative learning arise as a product of collaborative engagement characterised by dialogue and reciprocity around issues of mutual concern. Wildemeersch et al (1998) identify four axes of social learning in terms of action, reflection, communication and cooperation which they use to construct a theory of social learning understood as:

The learning of groups, networks, organizations and communities, in conditions which are new, unexpected, uncertain, conflictual and hard to predict ... emphasis is on the optimal use of the problem-solving potential of which a group, institution or community disposes. Social learning is action- and experience-oriented, it is critically reflective, meaning that actors question the validity of particular opinions, judgments, strategies, actions, emotions, feelings, etc. It is cooperative and communicative, which means that the dialogue between actors is crucial ...

(adapted from Wildemeersch et al. 1998).

Through participatory social learning individuals develop a sense of responsibility and an action consciousness – that they can make a difference. Inter-generational learning and
peer to peer learning are important dimensions to participatory social learning wherein learning becomes a collaborative venture rooted in shared experiences.

Figure 3: Thinking about ideas and roles for making the community more sustainable

5. Agency and action

Through reflection and inquiry within the action research process the individual is able to build knowledge, skills and understanding which can open up choices for alternative action and build capacity for self determination, empowerment and leadership. In contrast to lived realities for many in the western world in which people have little direct control or power over their lives, through person-centred, inquiry-based learning and reflection, individuals and communities can develop a sense of empowerment over their lives and strategies to fulfil that goal. Children and young people articulate a keen sense of wanting to be involved in change processes. Children have something to say and an enthusiasm to put ideas into action and evidence from this project suggests that many parents are keen to encourage their children to be more involved in taking an initiative with new ideas. Yet education systems and prevailing views of childhood tend not to be conducive to supporting children’s roles as agents of change. Four reasons emerged from this project which had a particularly strong influence on whether children were able to act on their learning and take action in their homes and communities:
i) an approach to learning which supports creativity and action

ii) ensuring children have opportunities to take initiative and take on leadership roles

iii) active encouragement and sustained support from adults.

iv) adult-child relationships based on an explicit recognition of the capabilities of children.

The idea of children as agents of change in communities challenges learning providers and adult community members to think about the extent to which opportunities are provided for children to undertake roles as active citizens (Fielding 2001). Within an action research paradigm action, and by implication leadership, is integral to learning. Through this research we found significant enthusiasm and creativity from children and young people who wanted to take on more active roles by leading and extending sustainable learning and development initiatives to the community for example, as community educators, community activists, community researchers and as peer educators (or ambassadors of change)\(^4\). The case study below provides an example of how inquiries in school can be extended out into the community by children and young people taking an active role.

**Case study 2: Encouraging sustainable shopping habits**

In one of the secondary schools students engaged in inquiry into how people could shop more sustainably. Their aim was for a project that would help the town become a ‘sustainable food zone’. To do this they realised they needed to identify what the issues are affecting sustainable shopping habits (e.g. are there local shops selling local, sustainably produced goods), the barriers (e.g. what effects people using local shops) and how to change people’s habits. The students undertook a survey into food habits in the local town. They asked questions about where people buy food from and why; whether they bought from local shops; how they travelled to do their shopping and what affected where they did their shopping. The students learnt from the survey that price, quality, convenience and availability were more important variables affecting where people shopped than whether

\(^4\) The role of children and young people as agents of change are explored further in Percy-Smith and Burns 2010. 'Ambassadors of change’ are young people who support younger children in primary schools as part of Peace Child International’s Be the Change Challenge programme (www.peacechild.org).
the products were seasonal, local, organic or fair trade. But they also found out that many locals did not know about sustainable options available locally. At the same time young people feel strongly that if people are informed about the issues (how food is produced) and what they can do to make a difference, then change can happen. They decided that if more independent local shops selling local produce could be encouraged these would support local business, bring the community together and would help people to shop more sustainably. In response to issues raised by the food survey, students felt that if they provided information about the issues and what is available that this would encourage people to shop and eat more sustainably. The result was a Sustainable Food guide put together by students (Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Sustainable food guide produced by students at Sir John Lawes school](image)

6. **Cycles of reflective learning**

One of the key problems with the managerialist view of technical fixes in response to social problems is that we back a solution to win. Yet many of the problems that confront human societies cannot be solved through simple solutions. Many are complex and are likely to involve a series of action research cycles as new choices and actions are put into place, tried out and evaluated. Developing new possibilities for action therefore is necessarily an experimental, reflective and emergent process of learning. Central to transformative learning in schools is the development of a culture of reflective learning rather than learning ‘tried and tested’ knowledge. In this project, children identified things they could do in school and at home to be more sustainable. Children then came back together to learn from their experiences. In a majority of cases children reported that their ideas had been
successfully embraced by their families, with only a small number of cases where parents were unsupportive.

**Widening the inquiry**

Identifying the impact children have in acting on their learning in the home is relatively easily achieved. Yet the potential for learning for sustainability having a wider impact on the community is more difficult. A key challenge for ESD is to widen school based inquiries beyond the classroom. This section discusses key issues at play in widening inquiries beyond the school. It begins with a case study vignette of an attempt to widen class-based learning to sustainable learning and action in the wider community.

**Case study: Chipping sustainable community group**

Building on inquiry work with children in Brabins school in the village of Chipping in rural Lancashire, parents and adult community members were invited to share perspectives about possibilities for becoming more sustainable in the community. A group of 8 people engaged. The objective of organising the group was to learn experientially what might enable school-based ESD initiatives to spillover into action in the wider community to achieve a more sustainable community. The group met 3 times during the research. By the second meeting group members were already taking responsibility for running the group, drafting a Newsletter and planning community activities. Some people who attended the first meeting did not return, but were replaced by new members in the second meeting.

Participants collectively discussed views on sustainability within the community. Good aspects were identified (for example school based recycling and a sense of community spirit) along with areas where the community were not doing so well (such as reliance on high levels of car usage, problems with older houses using more energy and potential for using local producers and suppliers more often). Reflecting on current levels of sustainability participants then started to think about how they could become more sustainable in the village.

The group acknowledged the good work being undertaken with children in school, and also the importance of inter-generational activity where children and adults could teach each other, although the actions proposed by the group did not explicitly include the involvement of children.

Out of these initial discussions the group identified two specific actions they would take following the meeting: production of a Community Newsletter to communicate
information, news and advice on sustainability issues to local people and to organize a spring community event in collaboration with local groups to promote sustainable practices by providing free compost, seed and plant exchange, advice and information on growing your own vegetables and sale of home-made produce.

The Community group then met on two subsequent occasions before the researcher left the group. The group then met once more but hasn’t met since. Subsequent activities were planned to coincide with the opening of a new Amphitheatre which was built out of recycled materials from funding acquired by Brabins School. The Chipping Community group had planned to invite local producers to this event to promote local produce. In the end the event was rained off and wasn’t rescheduled. A further Newsletter was produced around the theme of transport which had emerged as an important sustainability theme from the inquiry work with the children (including travel diaries which were completed by children and families for one week) and included an initiative to promote car sharing – one of the ideas suggested by children from their own inquiry.

This case study provides insights into key dynamics affecting wider community learning and action, in particular the importance of leadership; getting people together and just doing something; and building capacity and commitment in the community.

**Leadership and initiative**

The community initiative in the case study above happened as a result of this research on the back of the work already undertaken by the school. In spite of the enthusiasm in the group and some potential ‘leaders’ the group was unable to sustain itself due to family and work commitments. What seems clear is that whilst whole community change needs the engagement of all, there is a need for movers and shakers who are prepared to exercise initiative in taking a lead. Leadership is crucial in initiating and sustaining community activity. The actions of a few can have significant impacts on the wider community, which in turn serves as a catalyst for achieving a critical mass.

“We need to have a committee ... and we need a group of movers and shakers so we don’t rely on one person.” (Community group member)

At the same time, a key element of learning for sustainability is activated leadership in everyone. Leadership needs to happen at different levels:
At an *individual* level – there is an onus on all members of the community in looking at their own actions and behaviours and exploring possibilities for change. Not all people will want to take a lead but equally all members of a community can potentially contribute something to the collective good. Many are happy to support, but not take on key roles.

At a *community level*, people often look to schools to provide a lead. Indeed the Extended schools initiative, bolstered by the Sustainable Schools strategy provides impetus for this to happen. According to the DCSF guidelines on sustainable schools (DCSF 2006) by 2020 schools should become models of sustainability themselves and extend their sustainable education remit to encompass the wider community. Schools play an important leadership role as a physical hub for the community, providing information, a space for activities, a catalyst for community initiatives and, as this project has revealed, possibilities of developing as sustainable community learning and development centres. In addition schools are often present on local partnerships which can be pivotal in galvanising local organisational support. In spite of the rationale for advocating schools as person-centred learning communities (Fielding 2006), the reality is that for many schools, without a particular interest in the sustainability agenda, this just becomes ‘another thing to do’. In any case there is a need for appropriate ring-fenced resources and staffing for schools to take on this role.

*Creating spaces for community learning and action*

For change to happen at a wider community level people need to get together, acknowledge the issues at play and do something. Action emerges out of conversations about shared concerns when people get together and interact. Providing local activities to get people involved is a good start. Key here is the provision of spaces to make things happen.
Communities often look to schools to take a lead, but equally many children and young people are keen to take on leadership roles and responsibilities within their communities in initiating activities. In one of the schools, following failed attempts to engage parents from the local community in this inquiry, the school organised an open afternoon to try and draw parents into the school to see what children had been learning. This provided further opportunities to widen the focus of the inquiry into the community and engage with parents around the theme of sustainable food and healthy eating. It was clear that whilst many parents felt eating healthily was important, this had only recently become important since their children had been learning about healthy eating in school and going home and demanding healthy food. In this case the school also laid on a ‘cooking bus’ to provide a further resource for parents. A key outcome from this research was the rationale for schools developing extended school capacity as Sustainable Community Learning and Development centres, similar in conception to Neighbourhood centres or Urban studies centres of the 1970s (Ward and Fyson 1976). Such spaces can provide opportunities for community learning involving adults as well as children.

**Building community capacity and commitment**

As individuals engage in processes of inquiry their focus inevitably widens to the broader social economic and political contexts in which they live. In communities this means bringing individual inquiries or schools into constellation with the wider community. Whilst we need to root our learning and action in our individual lifeworlds, our realities are lived out in
social arenas in relation to others. Building a sense of community wide commitment and social efficacy is therefore critical.5

“It should be based on getting people together – building community. That means getting people involved, providing a focus and taking part – creating a ‘can do’ attitude … communicating and sharing ideas, information and expertise.” (Adult community member)

What was clear in the research was the extent to which bonds of community identity and belonging, mutual interest and concern can be a powerful driver for collective action. In schools, notwithstanding any intrinsic motivation, children are a captive audience and also often eager to learn. Getting adult community members together in a process of learning and action is somewhat more difficult. As the case study above reveals, many adults have demands of home and work to juggle and may be reluctant to take any more commitments on. Developing a critical mass of support, sense of local commitment and collective efficacy is essential for community wide sustainability initiatives. Innovative projects can have a limited life if deeper levels of learning and commitment are not diffused throughout the community. Community action is more likely to be sustained through a variety of activities which are relevant to people’s everyday lives and interests, which build on local assets and local ideas and which are realistic in making things happen.

Conclusions

The sustainable schools strategy in the UK provides a significant challenge for schools as centres of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Whilst many schools have embraced the ‘green’ agenda and made advances in their provision of learning for sustainability, there are questions about the extent to which this learning results in the development of more sustainable communities beyond the classroom. There is an abundant literature outlining theories of learning and change needed for communities to become sustainable with widespread acknowledgement of the need for transformative approaches

5 See also Warburton et al 2008 who, in outlining a strategy for community learning and action, believe that for communities to become more sustainable they need to build their capacity and embed learning for change throughout the community.
to ESD. Yet in practice moving beyond the conventional ethos in education of skills and knowledge acquisition appears more difficult. This paper critiques current approaches to education for sustainable development by highlighting key assumptions and challenges and instead argues for an action research approach as an alternative strategy for learning and change. Drawing on ESRC research exploring the role of schools in sustainable development, the paper elaborates key dimensions to an action research approach, arguing throughout that for meaningful sustainability education and change to take place children as well as adults need to exercise a sense of leadership by developing the capacities for critical self reflexivity, social learning, agency and empowerment in their own lives. In turn the chapter discusses issues at play in widening the focus of learning and change beyond the classroom.

References


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