

Children and Young People as Agents of Change

Children have the potential to do more than educate or initiate minor behavioural changes in the home. They can also be active agents of change in their wider communities. Four factors strongly influenced children's ability to act on their learning:

- An approach to learning that goes beyond simply acquiring knowledge
- The opportunity for children to take on leadership roles
- Active encouragement and sustained support from adults
- Adult-child relationships that recognise the capabilities of children.

Approaches to Learning

Practical, experiential and inquiry-based learning is fundamental to Education for Sustainable Development involving the development of skills such as critical thinking, creative problem solving, social entrepreneurship and leadership. ESD is likely to be more effective if developed as a cultural practice within a **'whole school approach'** involving all staff and students across the whole curriculum, rather than delivered as one-off learning events. The action research approach adopted in this project modelled an alternative approach to school based learning.

The Role of Schools

Schools can play an important **leadership** role as catalysts of learning and action in the community, encouraging involvement and stimulating sustainable activities. Apart from acting as a physical hub this research suggests a wider role for schools as **sustainable community learning and development centres**, role modelling and sharing good practice, providing information, supporting innovation and using their authority to connect and coordinate community initiatives.



This research is one of 11 research projects commissioned from Universities across the UK, under the ESRC/HCA Academy Joint Targeted Initiative on Skills and Knowledge for Sustainable Communities.

To see how the HCA Academy is taking forward lessons from the research, visit:

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This summary is published by Department of Geography & Sociology, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow



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The Role of Schools in Developing Sustainable Communities

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Developing 'learning for change' in school and community

Key Policy Implications

- Promoting the adoption of more practical, action-oriented and inquiry based forms of learning across the whole curriculum
- Developing integrated whole-school approaches to learning involving all staff and students
- Encouraging more active forms of participation of children in school and the wider community as educators and agents of change
- Supporting the development of wider school roles as sustainable community learning and development centres and catalysts of community action
- Overcoming some barriers to sustainable choices requires Government commitment and support

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Key Words

- Sustainable Communities
- Community learning
- Children
- Social change agents
- Action Research
- Education for Sustainable Development
- Inquiry based Learning
- Spillover



Background

Learning is seen as key to creating sustainable communities (Sterling 2001). A key challenge is how to move beyond the simple acquisition and transmission of knowledge to learning that challenges and transforms thinking, practice and systems. In the wake of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and new sociological theories of childhood (James and Prout 1990) there has been an unprecedented shift towards recognising children and young people as active agents of change rather than passive learners.

The Sustainable Schools Strategy (DCSF 2006) sets out an agenda for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in schools with three objectives: that by 2020 schools should have ESD integrated into the curriculum, that schools themselves are models of sustainability and that their sustainable education remit encompasses the wider community.

This research therefore focuses on students, their learning and the changes they bring about.

Approach

Research took place in six schools (three primary and three secondary) in England in a range of rural and urban locations. All of the schools had a history of ESD and had worked with either EcoSchools, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or Peace Child International.

Participants in the action research groups were selected to ensure a mix of gender, ethnicity, social class, and previous experience of sustainability work. Groups comprised between eight and 24 children. In primary schools children were drawn from years 2 to 6 (ages 6-10), in secondary from years 7 to 10 (ages 11-14).



In each school four half day action research sessions were facilitated over a year. The action research groups explored the issues and designed actions that they felt would have an impact on sustainability. In this way children themselves were involved in inquiry, analysis, planning, decision-making, taking action and evaluating action – all within the same research process. School ESD tutors supported children to carry out activity between the action research meetings. Impacts of these actions were reflected upon and new inquiry

and action pursued in each subsequent meeting. This process was supported by detailed research notes and flip chart materials which provided a continuous stream of data for collective group analysis.

Actions initiated through the Research included:
A School No - Energy Day
Sustainable food projects
Establishing a sustainable community group and activities

Parallel inquiry groups were held with parents and adult community members. These were supplemented with reflective dialogues with Heads, Teachers and NGO practitioners. Further reflective learning was undertaken in two research workshops with school staff, NGO practitioners and 'invited experts' from the field. The research explored with children whether and how their learning was acted on outside of the classroom, gaining insights into the role of children as agents of change as well as factors that influenced whether their learning 'spilled' over into community action and sustainable behaviour change. The research investigated the role of children and that of the school in enabling sustainable communities.

Findings

Spill-over

It is clear from this study that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) learning in schools does spill-over to impact on behaviours within the home. However, children are only able to influence some areas of activity such as recycling, saving energy and water, composting and to some extent decisions about food. For example, in the East Midlands school many parents did not know about healthy eating or sustainable food until their primary aged children told them.

Although a heightened sense of awareness is no guarantee for action, **information, awareness and advice** are a critical part in communities' learning for change and it is clear that children and young people can play an important role as educators and agents of change in the community.



Spill-over changes with the age of children too. Younger children demonstrated a greater willingness than older teenagers to talk about their learning with others. For many teenagers there is a greater 'distancing' from families. As one pupil said "as you get older - you get more private - you don't talk to your parents". Whilst children can play an important role in influencing behaviour change, their impact falls short of stimulating learning and action across the wider community. This research has however identified different ways in which young people can take on a wider role in learning and change within the community (see below).

Barriers

Through this project a wider complexity of factors that effect whether learning spills over into action has been uncovered. Among the barriers identified were **high costs or lack of availability of sustainable options** and a lack of **time due to busy lives**. Skills and knowledge alone are insufficient in bringing about sustainable behaviours. Even when people know about the issues and the need to act, action may still not follow. There is a wider complexity of **psychosocial issues** underlying values and behaviour that affect whether people change or not. Overcoming these psycho social dispositions with respect to ESD requires a more radical approach which engages and challenges people's thinking and current lifestyles.

Travel Diaries at Brabins School demonstrated that the realities of a parent connecting between workplace, different schools, shopping, home and leisure which makes alternatives to car use impractical

Enabling Factors

Both children and adults are more likely to engage in learning and action when they see the **relevance** to their everyday lives. A **critical mass** is needed in school and community for sustained action to occur. "When things start to happen nobody wants to be left out". Community identity, belonging and the need to feel valued and included are powerful drivers of behaviour.

Leadership is key to community learning and change and is often provided by schools on the back of school based projects as part of their **extended schools remit**. Children and adult participants argued for an important role for government in providing the context for sustainable options to become more easily realisable – for example through a competitive public transport system, provision of recycling facilities and incentives/controls for sustainable actions as well as encouraging research and development.