

CASE STUDY

Connecting school based sustainability initiatives with community action

OVERVIEW

This project was concerned with investigating the role of schools in bringing about more sustainable communities; in particular, how learning in schools could spill over into action in communities. It explored the skills, knowledge and processes of learning and action that are most effective in contributing to sustainable communities; the role children and young people can play as agents of change in this process; and how schools might further their role as community catalysts. The primary academic contribution of this research has been to develop a better understanding of what forms of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) are most likely to stimulate action by children, families, and schools in their wider community.

This case study provides insights into issues and processes at play as school based learning for sustainability seeks to spill over into action and change in the community based on action research in one partner school and community.

BACKGROUND

Learning is seen as key to creating sustainable communities. A key challenge for ESD is how to move beyond simple acquisition of knowledge to learning which challenges and transforms thinking practice and systems and rings about change in communities. ESD has tended to focus on work in schools with the assumption that learning spills over into communities. Yet, a recent report cautions that spillover that leads to 'simple and painless' behaviour changes is insufficient for bringing about the necessary changes in communities. The challenge is how to engage communities more actively in learning for sustainable development.

THE PROJECT

The research was conducted as a collaborative action research project engaging pupils, school staff and members of the wider community in cycles of learning, action and reflection. The project has been undertaken in collaboration with 6 partner schools and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who are delivering ESD programmes. Brabins Endowed Primary school is a small school in the rural village of Chipping in the Forest of Bowland, Lancashire with a roll of 55 drawn from surrounding villages. There is a well developed rural tradition in the local area based on farming and an established heritage of locally produced food. There is a strong sense of community within the village of Chipping with two schools, three churches, two pubs and a village hall providing focal points for community activity.



Building on inquiry work with children in the school, invitations were sent out to parents and adult community members to share perspectives about possibilities for becoming more sustainable in the community. A group of 8 people were recruited meeting 3 times during the research. By the second meeting group members were already taking responsibility for running the group and drafting a Newsletter.

Key Words

■ Community action ■ Sustainable Communities ■ Action Research ■ Schools



Some people who attended the first meeting did not return, but were replaced by new members in the second meeting. 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.

In the first meeting participants were invited to think about how 'sustainable' they feel their community is. 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 communities become more sustainable and what actions could be taken to become more sustainable in Chipping.

"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."

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. However, in reality 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 Chipping Community Newsletter** to communicate information, news and advice on sustainability issues to local people
- **Organize a spring community event** in collaboration with the Chipping in Bloom group to encourage green activities – by providing free compost, bedding plants for sale, seed and plant swap, advice and


information on home grown vegetables, composting and sale of tea and cakes.

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 producers. In the end the event was rained off and has, as yet, not been 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). From this exercise the idea of promoting car sharing was suggested by children and subsequently the Chipping Group as an important focus for the second newsletter (see below).

A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY FOR CHIPPING

Share it??



Car sharing—a.k.a. lift sharing, ride sharing or car pooling. You can put in details of journeys that you take and find out who else travels on the same route and would be willing to share.

www.carshare.com

More organized than sticking your thumb out when you need to get to Longridge or Clitheroe!

What are the benefits of car sharing?

Considerable. Reduced costs, reduced congestion and pollution and improved access in areas with limited public transport. Not to mention the change to meet new friends.

What are the problems we face?

- Traffic has increased by over 60% since 1980.
- Cars are the biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions.
- Congestion costs the UK £19 billion a year.
- Public transport costs are rising.
- Every day there are 10 million empty seats on our roads.

What difference can car sharing make?

- If average car occupancy were to increase by half - with 2.37 persons per car rather than 1.58 - it would lead to a 1/3 fall in traffic.
- If there were an increase of 10% - with 1.74 persons per car on average - this would reduce traffic on our roads by 9%.
- Over half of drivers would share a car to work if there was someone suitable to travel with.
- A 10% car occupancy rise would reduce congestion by as much as a doubling rail usage.

Transport contributes over a 1/3 of the UK's climate changing gases.

Transport's share of the UK's carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions is over a quarter - and it's rising. But there are **practical solutions** to the transport crisis.

What can you really do about it?

As well as driving greener and more fuel-efficient cars, we need to **change the way we travel**.

This means:

- **Travelling less**
Shop local. Work from home using available technology. Use video-conferencing for meetings.
- **Changing how we get around**
Use your car less and opt for public transport. Keep fit by cycling or walking for short trips.
- **Greener driving**
Choose a greener car and follow the tips overleaf on eco-friendly driving.
- **Time traveling** Cut the number of flights you take. Turn your journey into part of the holiday experience making visits to places of interest on the way... The kids will thank you to!
- Ensure your vehicle is **regularly serviced**—ensuring maximum efficiency.
- After performing maintenance, **recycle** engine oils other fluids and batteries.

Buy a Cow!

You may be interested in a link between Brabins School and an orphanage in Burundi, East Africa. The children in Chipping have been busy raising over £700 to buy cows to help feed the children in Burundi - that's enough to buy 4 cows that will provide lots of nourishing milk. The money was raised by making and selling colourful cow cards, a fun run, and coffee & cake stalls. It's hoped the link will develop over time, with children able to talk to each other across continents about their life experiences. If you are interested in finding out more about this link and want to get involved, contact Wendy Foot on 61550.


"A Sustainable Community for Chipping"

Next Meeting
19.30 - 7th October 2008
in the James Berry Room, Brabins School

Please do come along & share your views and ideas!

For further details please contact
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ACT ON



Give your car a holiday — every 6,000 miles your car will produce its own weight in CO₂.

"They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself"

Andy Warhol

Editors - Clare Compton & Andrew Foot. To include items in the next edition email loudsiders@tinicals.co.uk



THE IMPACT

In a short time the group was successful in coming together and harnessing the enthusiasm of a small group of individuals to identify possibilities for local action. Two Chipping Sustainable Communities Newsletters were produced by two members of the group and a successful spring community event was held to promote development of sustainable activities within the community. One observer stated:

“... people were talking, relaxed .. there was a sense of community wellbeing ... people coming and going. I saw lots of people from the community you don't normally see. I thought it was good.”

Other **actions for becoming more sustainable** identified by this group included:

- promotion of car share schemes
- joint fuel purchasing schemes
- plans for allotments
- supporting local producers and retailers
- an application from the school for a poly tunnel
- getting people involved to share information and expertise.

Some actions had been progressed (e.g. joint fuel purchasing) and another spring community event had been organised in 2009 supported by the school.

Sustaining community engagement

In spite of high levels of enthusiasm when the researcher left this group, as of spring 2009 the community group activities has slowed significantly. The initial vibrancy and

dynamism in the group it seems was not been sustained through action outside of the group meetings. No further Newsletters had been produced and the spring community event was organised more by the school than the community.

The decline in community group activity was due to a range of factors including work and family commitments of key members and the reliance on a few key ‘movers and shakers’. When these key players were temporarily otherwise committed the drive and energy of the group dissipated.

“What I noticed from this was that people knew what they should be doing but time and commitment to work gets in the way and importance of spending time with family. But if we get people together we can perhaps find ways of sharing / helping each other with that.”



Whilst group members initially took on responsibility for running the group (albeit with support from the Head teacher) and hosted by the school, in reality the energy for the group was coming from the school. This process did however demonstrate how schools can play a key role as catalysts in community learning and action, whilst not necessarily having to take on the responsibility for running the group. For the group to continue there needed to be leadership from the community itself rather than reliance on the leadership of the Head teacher for initiative and direction.

“We need to have a committee ... and we need a group of movers and shakers so we don't rely on one person.”

All the same, sustainable community developments have continued, but on the back of school initiatives with 'extended school' benefits to the community. These have included development of their school garden as part of their Local Food Project - involving installing a greenhouse, building raised beds, food digesters, a wormery and a chicken run. These are significant for the schools achievement of the objectives of the Sustainable Schools strategy in terms of becoming sustainable as an organisation as well as acting as role model, hub and information point sharing good practice and supporting sustainable community developments in the wider community. The Local Food project at the school - a school project but extended to the community as a community learning initiative - is coordinated by a member of the community, who has in turn received training in, for example, bee-keeping.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Schools can play a key role in developing community learning and development initiatives as extended schools, based on school projects.
2. Providing local activities to get people involved is a good start. Action emerges out of conversations about shared concerns.
3. Community action is more likely to be sustained through a variety of activities which are relevant to people's everyday lives and interests and build on local assets and local ideas.
4. Emphasis should be placed on small achievable local projects

5. Leadership is crucial in initiating and sustaining community activity. Many are happy to support, but not take on key roles.
6. 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.
7. Sustaining community involvement takes time, which many with families and jobs do not have; it is therefore imperative that a sense of collective responsibility is developed.
8. People benefit from sharing information, advice and good practice

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