

Sustainable Schools: exploring the contradictions

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Good afternoon everyone and thank you for inviting me to your conference on sustainable schools. And thank you in advance to my interpreters who will do their best to ensure that you understand most of what you see and hear.

In the next 45 minutes I will outline recent developments in England and begin to explore some of the contradictions in the UK government's policies and teachers' practices in schools. I will argue that if sustainable schools are to really contribute to more sustainable futures they must go beyond the current dominant model of ecological modernisation to embrace more radical forms of both environmentalism and citizenship education. This will involve teachers examining the root causes of unsustainable development, their impacts on children's lives, and radical social alternatives that point to a more critical approach to education for sustainable development in schools.

The UK government announced its intention that all schools should become sustainable schools within the next decade as long as six years ago. In a speech he gave in 2004 Tony Blair promised that *Sustainable development will not just be a subject in the classroom: it will be in its bricks and mortar and the way the school uses and even generates its own power. Our students won't just be told about sustainable development, they will see and work within it: a living, learning place in which to explore what a sustainable lifestyle means*

His words point to the two key ideas that have guided the development of policy. Pupils, parents and teachers should learn by taking action to make such provision as school transport or school catering more sustainable. School should also model sustainable ways of living by, for example, generating their own energy.

According to the UK government a sustainable school is one that prepares young people for a lifetime of sustainable living and is guided by a commitment to care. To care for oneself (one's health and well-being); to care for others (across cultures, distances and generations); and to care for the environment (both locally and globally).

The Department for Education published its national framework for sustainable schools in 2006. In addition to a commitment to care, this comprised an integrated approach to education for sustainable development and a number of doorways or entry points through which schools can develop more sustainable practice. Sustainability is to be explored through the curriculum (learning and teaching); the campus (buildings and grounds); and links with the community near and far.

Here is a diagram of the sustainable schools framework. At the top are the three areas of school life (curriculum, campus, and community). Down the left side are the eight doorways: food and drink, energy and water, travel and traffic, purchasing and waste, buildings and grounds, inclusion and participation, local well-being, and the global dimension. At the

bottom are statements showing how a school might address the energy and water doorway. At bottom right is the government's expectation that by 2020 all schools will be models of energy efficiency and renewable energy, showcasing wind, solar and bio-fuel sources in their communities, and maximising their use of rainwater and wastewater resources.

For each doorway, the framework suggests what schools might be doing in the three areas of curriculum, campus, and community. With regard to travel and traffic, lessons provide the knowledge, skills and values needed to address travel and traffic issues; campus values and ways of working promote walking, cycling and public transport; and the community is engaged through the development of school travel plans.

Becoming a more sustainable school has many benefits. Teaching and learning are more issue based and relevant to students' needs with the result that pupils are happier and achieve well. The school saves money by conserving resources and purchasing more wisely. Parents and the community are more engaged in the life of the school as both school and community together learn their way to more sustainable ways of living.

There is much to assist schools and teachers, most notably the Sustainable Schools website.

There are training materials for teachers and school governors on planning a sustainable school and sample lessons, that address the eight doorways, for students of different ages.

There is a self-evaluation instrument for schools to assess their progress in becoming more sustainable.

And the Government's curriculum agency has prepared a curriculum planning guide for schools.

The National College for School Leadership has a toolkit for developing sustainable schools

Publications offering guidance are available from commercial publishers and subject associations. NGOs, such as WWF, run courses and conferences for teachers

Despite policy, a national framework, and related support and guidance, survey results from the Office for Standards in Education suggest that schools are making limited progress towards sustainability. There is limited awareness of government policy, limited emphasis on sustainable development, and teaching is inconsistent and uncoordinated. In most schools ESD is a peripheral issue . . .

There is more attention to local rather than global issues. Some schools are doing pioneering work and these tend to be primary rather than secondary schools.

The survey results remind us that conventional schools are largely about reproducing the prevailing unsustainable economic and cultural order. They can accommodate education for sustainable development to the extent that it does not really question or threaten this order – but simply promotes reform or a greener version of business as usual. There is some scope for critical teaching and learning within conventional schools but those interested in truly

sustainable schooling can learn much from progressive educators such as A S Neill and his school, Summerhill, in Suffolk.

If schools are to move beyond reformism and engage in critical rather than mainstream education for sustainable development then policy makers and teachers should, like A S Neill, step back and examine the big picture. What are the structures and processes that render current lifestyles unsustainable? What are their impacts on children and young people? How can schools improve young people's happiness and well-being while at the same time empowering them to participate in social change?

Benjamin Barber is one author who does explore the real causes of unsustainable development and their impacts on people and politics. His thesis is that in recent decades capitalism has avoided a crisis of over production by inducing a culture of childishness amongst adults and cultivating children as consumers. Sustaining production, consumption and profits, requires the young to grow up too fast; adults to remain perpetual adolescents; the poor without purchasing power to be abandoned; and the environment to suffer under ever increasing demands for ecological resources and services.

Barber maintains that business, government and educational institutions are all involved in infantilising adults and corrupting children. Privatisation and branding are related strategies. Privatisation extends opportunities for profit making while branding secures stronger attachment to the goods and services that capitalism provides. Advertising, branding and the media target children, bypassing parents and teachers as gatekeepers of children's true interests, and offering temporary and ultimately unfulfilling pleasures.

Concern that consumer capitalism may be compromising children's healthy development and ability to learn has led other authors to write about toxic childhood. Sue Palmer's book explores the ten aspects of modern childhood shown on this slide, and supports Barber with research showing that 'waking children up too early' or treating them as mini-adults, compromises their development and results in behavioural problems and unhappiness. Sedentary and increasingly screen-based lifestyles are resulting in the loss of imagination, the inability to concentrate, the tendency to confuse fact with knowledge, and the homogenisation of children's minds.

Consumer culture produces more narcissistic adults and children. People are more individualistic, more self-centred and less inclined to care for others and the environment. Such narcissism leads children to have unrealistic expectations and view achievement and happiness in limited and damaging ways.

The commercialisation of childhood is resulting in unhappiness and mental illness amongst the young. The OECD reports that Britain's children are amongst the most unhappy in Europe. Girls are particularly damaged by commercial pressures while boys find it harder to grow up and mature in a world where girls are outperforming them in education and many traditionally male jobs have disappeared.

Popular culture focuses on the lives of the rich and famous, providing a limited range of role models, and offering dreams that cannot be realized. By suggesting that we can all be rich and famous it distracts attention from inequality and the fact that social mobility has actually declined in recent decades.

The sustainable school should help young people to understand and resist the commercial pressures shaping our lives. It should examine a range of alternative lifestyles and identities and develop the psychological resources they need to remain content when life does not offer the type of rewards so strongly promoted by the media.

As consumer capitalism has corrupted children and infantilized adults, it has also eroded democracy. The dominant political ideology of the past two decades had been neo-liberalism, a set of ideas that favours free markets over government regulation; associates liberty and sustainability with personal choice of the kind exercised by consumers, and undermines collective choice and the social contract whereby individuals give up unsecured private liberty for public liberty and common security or sustainability.

In Britain neoliberalism was until recently masked by the rhetoric of Blairism or third way politics. This claimed to be an updated form of social democracy that no longer saw the left/right distinction or class as relevant, and confined itself to dealing with the social consequences of market failures rather than challenging entrenched wealth and power. Shrinking the state has proved politically impossible, public spending has continued to rise, and the neoliberals have turned instead to using the state to reshape social institutions, such as education, on the model of the market. Recent financial and political crises have prompted a return to antagonistic politics, but the denial of conflict and division, and indeed a virtual denial of the politics of sustainability, can be seen in policies on sustainable development and education.

The UK government's policies on sustainable development and sustainable schools promote ecological modernisation or the greening of capitalism. They see no inherent contradictions between capitalism and sustainability and suggest that new technologies, including environmental economics; corporate social responsibility, environmental law, and education for sustainable development, can do more with less, provide incentives for greener production and consumption, encourage environmental citizenship, and so balance economic growth with environmental protection and social justice.

Third way politics also resulted in policies for education. Here the main thrust has been on improving standards in basic subjects so that Britain has young workers who will enable it to compete in the global economy. The neo-liberal emphasis on individualism, consumer choice, and market competition, is reflected in more testing and competition between pupils; greater parental choice and competition between schools for pupils; and greater involvement of the private sector in building and sponsoring new schools and providing services previously provided by local government. The comprehensive principle whereby all pupils attend a common neighbourhood school where fairness, enjoyment, and a sense of social justice coexist with a broad curriculum, has been eroded. Some elements of UK

education policy do however continue to reflect social-democratic ideas. There is for example increased attention to the needs of disadvantaged pupils, and a requirement that secondary schools teach citizenship education.

So aspects of education policy contradict policy on sustainable schools and this partly explains the survey results outlined earlier. Greater individualism resulting from more testing and increased competition between schools erodes the principle of caring for one another. Greater inequality between schools and pupils part closes the doorway of inclusion. More parental choice and a consequent increase in the distance pupils travel to school, part closes the doorway of travel and traffic. Erosion of the comprehensive principle part closes the doorway of local well-being and the privatisation of school catering part closes that of food and drink. Private contractors have not built schools to the highest environmental standards and their financing passes costs to future generations.

If current policy on sustainable schools is full of contradictions and fails to encourage schools to examine the true causes of unsustainable development and radical social alternatives that may deliver sustainability, then what is to be done? My argument so far has suggested that sustainable schools should be common comprehensive schools with a broad curriculum that promote pupils' well-being and empower them as citizens who understand something of the politics of sustainable development. The final part of my talk will suggest that such schools should give some attention to the theory and practice of green socialism.

Green socialists suggest that the world now has the resources and technologies to provide for everyone's needs and restore the health of human and non-human nature. Co-ordinated planning of production to meet real needs would take place at all levels from the local to the global; the co-operative and voluntary sectors would make key contributions alongside the private and public sectors; and the economy would be based on principles of solidarity, self management, and attention to limits imposed by ecological systems and the requirements of global justice. Reduced working hours and a basic income for all would give everyone freedom from want and time to develop all aspects of their lives.

How might school pupils be encouraged to consider the possible benefits of a green socialist economy? The school allotment is one space in which pupils might be introduced to an alternative mode of production and consumption. Growing our own food involves participatory planning, appropriate technology, mutual aid and awareness of ecological limits. By studying the history of allotments in Britain they could learn much about past and present antagonisms between rich and poor, the virtues of public provision and land use planning, and the need for community action to protect public assets against privatisation. While the school allotment features in many prescriptions for sustainable schools, it is only when pupils understand the background to allotments more generally that they become productive sites of critical education for sustainability

Turning to politics and citizenship, green socialism seeks to reform rights and responsibilities so that everyone has the right to self-determination, participation and well-being, in return for work in the formal and informal sectors. Everyone would be guaranteed work and a basic

income, and working hours in the formal sector would be much reduced to allow time for self-development, participation in politics, and work in the informal sector. New forms of ecological democracy would ensure that political decisions took account of the rights of future generations, people at a distance, and other species, while new forms of global democracy would regulate the global economy in the interests of social justice and sustainability.

So school pupils might be encouraged to think about the reasons why voluntary work, or participation in community life, is marginal rather than central to most people's lives. They might consider the virtues of establishing a citizen's right to a basic income and what obligations should accompany such a right. Similarly they might consider the virtues of limiting and re-distributing working hours in the formal sector. As regards ecological and global citizenship they might consider the limited outcomes of the recent climate summit in Copenhagen and the alternative models of global democracy advocated by the protestors who attended and those who contributed to the children's climate forum.

Turning to culture, green socialism suggests that consumerism is fuelled by alienating work that separates people from their own true natures, other people, and the rest of the natural world. Re-connecting people with nature, or ending alienation involves providing the right to meaningful and rewarding work and time for self-development and participation in civil society. Such developments will encourage adults to reach maturity and will protect children from commercialisation.

Sustainable schools should examine alternative forms of consumption and ways of developing identity and status that do not involve consumerism and branding. They should consider ethical consumerism and fair trade as they relate to such doorways as food and drink and purchasing and waste. In Britain the campaign co-ordinated by the television chef Jamie Oliver has done much to focus attention on the declining standards of school meals following the commercialisation of school catering and to re-introduce healthy meals cooked in school kitchens using locally sourced ingredients and local labour. The Simon Bolivar youth orchestra of Venezuela demonstrates how the lives of children can be transformed by providing them with the means of self-development beyond consumerism. Sustainable schools should develop the arts for it is through appreciation of music, art, literature and drama that we develop sustainability as a state of mind. Much art leads to the realization that non-human nature not only has a right to exist but that its continuing well-being enriches all our lives.

So to summarize my talk. Current policy on sustainable schools in England is enabling but not sufficient. It fails to address causes or suggest real alternatives. It is also full of contradictions. Sustainable schools should enable pupils to see themselves as co-producers of a new sustainable economic, political and cultural order. In the areas of curriculum, campus and community they should give critical consideration to the greening of socialism alongside that of the greening of capitalism.

And finally it is worth reminding ourselves that we are living at a time of crisis. Bankers and politicians have betrayed our trust, public spending and social stability are threatened, yet there are

few signs of collective narratives of hope. While powerful voices seek a return to a slightly greener version of business as usual, sustainable schools should offer alternative narratives of hope and sustainability. The work of teachers will then contribute to the process of social dialogue and consensus building which Papandreou seeks.