

Primary Education - Getting to grips with the world?

Ben Ballin

A version of this article appeared in Primary First magazine, for the National Association of Primary Education, Summer 2015.

“This is the era of globalisation, and perhaps of unprecedented opportunity. But there are darker visions. The gap between the world’s rich and poor continues to grow. There is political and religious polarisation. Many people are daily denied their basic human rights and suffer violence and oppression. As if that were not enough, escalating climate change may well make this the make - or - break century for humanity as a whole. Such scenarios raise obvious and urgent questions for public education.” (Alexander, 2010, page 15).

This article looks at where English primary education stands in relation to these questions. It draws on a seminar run by the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Tide~ global learning and Birmingham City Council.

Darker visions

Robin Alexander, writing above, is not alone in seeing ‘darker visions’ about the world and its future. Here is David Davis, Professor of Drama in Education at Birmingham City University:

“We are complicit in driving ourselves and the planet to destruction. We have glimpses of what is happening and momentarily look to see if there is a brake but then let those in power crack the whip and hurtle us more rapidly into the crisis ... So what sort of education do we need to avoid sleepwalking towards death?” (Davis, 2014, pp 2-3)

As I wrote this, the Library of Birmingham was in the news. Opened by Malala Yousafzai in 2013, amongst loud fanfares, it was my home city’s new iconic building. What could be a better symbol for England’s second city, as a place valuing education and culture, than this great big wedding cake of books and steel filigree? Who better to open it than an inspirational young advocate for universal literacy? Moreover, a pupil in the city?

And yet, in 2015, less than two years later, it looked set to lose over half its staff. How do we make sense of news like that? What do we say to the children? It is hardly likely to escape their notice.

By definition, the ‘global’ is not just out there: we are a part of it. In our globalised economy and interdependent world, no community, or library, is immune to worldwide economic, environmental, social and technological pressures.

If we think (as I do) that this news item is symptomatic of both the state of the world and the status of education within it, then we are inevitably wading into

the muddy waters of politics, of competing values and ideologies. This is not easy for primary teachers.

Education for ... global learning and sustainable development

In a changing and sometimes threatening world, what is education for? Not indoctrination, clearly, but there also seems to be broad agreement among educators, governments and policy makers that it is about more than literacy, numeracy, test or even PISA results, employability and economic competitiveness. Here are some milestones along the road ...

Mid 1970s onwards. Development Education Centres spring up across the UK, offering creative hubs for addressing global issues. By the late 2000s, there are more than 40 such centres.

1988. The cross-curricular dimension of 'environmental education' is part of the first National Curriculum for England and Wales.

1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Governments around the world pledge to 'reorient' their education systems to sustainable development (United Nations: Agenda 21). Local authority Agenda 21 programmes begin to appoint officers with an education brief.

2000. The first Citizenship curriculum explicitly references both sustainable development and the idea of 'global citizenship.'

2000s. Several ambitious initiatives are launched in England.¹

- **Enabling Effective Support** builds schools' capacity for global learning.
- **International school linking** is promoted as part of the statutory commitment to promote community cohesion.
- **The Sustainable Schools Framework**, supported by a vast body of resources and regional networks, emphasises whole school change.

2010. The Global Learning Programme offers CPD and support for schools on global issues at KS2 and 3.

Now. Engagement with global issues in school is voluntary. Despite other pressures, many primary schools make the choice to do so. Schemes like the Global Teachers' Award, Rights Respecting Schools and Eco Schools remain popular, with their emphasis on pupil participation and community engagement. Despite a reduction in the statutory 'global' content of the National Curriculum, many teachers find 'hooks' like the distant locality study in KS1 Geography, or the non-European modules in KS2 History.

¹ Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales had their own parallel initiatives, Wales combining the two strands together under the title of 'Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship.'

“Children, their World, their Education”

The final report of the Cambridge Primary Review lent its name to the seminar for teachers and educators in Birmingham in November 2014.

Two key developments helped set the scene for this event. Firstly, the influential Cambridge Primary Review Trust had made the decision to add sustainability and global citizenship to its priorities (they were already aims).

Secondly, The United Nations was about to establish a new set of worldwide ‘Sustainable Development Goals’, with Goal 4.7 calling on member states to “*by 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development.*” (United Nations, 2014).

Speaking at the seminar were Professor Robin Alexander, Chair of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, and Cathryn Gathercole from Tide~ global learning (who was working on indicators against the proposed UN goal).

The following is synthesised from the discussions that emerged, and I hope gives some pointers to primary teachers about policy, practice and principle, now and in the future. Most of them take the form of questions, and I certainly hope that they stimulate further debate.

What are the underlying values at play? If elements in the current economic system are unjust and destructive, do we really want to ‘sustain’ them? Robin Alexander talked about the difference between ‘world-beating’ and ‘world-sustaining’ education.²

Can the present education system cope with practices which necessarily emphasise critical thinking and transformative action? Can we really trust governments’ ability or willingness to take on the challenges involved?

Are PISA’s present proposals to embrace criteria for ‘global competencies’ ultimately self-defeating? (Einstein: “*We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them*”) (Einstein, 2015).

We do not need to wait to receive permission from on high to make positive changes happen. There is a ‘climate of caution’ in English schools at this time of great systemic change, but we can draw strength from the Cambridge Primary Review’s statement that “*pessimism turned to hope when witnesses felt they had the power to act*” (Alexander, 2014, page 189).

If we censor the scariness of the world from children, do we end up failing to protect them?³ The statement continues, “*The children who were most*

² David Davis’s book is particularly interesting about using drama in education to start ‘Imagining the Real’ – that is, to start seeing ourselves and the world without the prism of ideology.

³ There were similar findings in a 2004 Birmingham University survey on children’s views about Global Citizenship education, which spoke of their “*anxiety about the global future,*

confident that climate change would not overwhelm them were those whose schools had replaced unfocussed fear by factual information and practical strategies for sustainability.” Does failure to engage leave children feeling overwhelmed and in a state of ‘unfocussed fear’? If so, the responsible course of professional action seems clear.

Constructive strategies go beyond the formal curriculum. They include thinking about the school’s vision, and engaging children, parents and community in generating that vision. The diverse communities around many schools offer particular opportunities for ‘thinking globally, through their inbuilt connections to the wider world.’ Is there scope for seeing the debate around ‘British values’ as an opportunity, insofar as it raises questions about schools, democracy and the wider community?

Leadership that is prepared to take responsible risks is crucial. This includes heads and governors, as well as teachers as trusted curriculum makers who are able to bring the ‘paper’ curriculum to life in meaningful ways. Leadership touches on questions about ‘pupil voice’ and participation.

There are many ‘win-wins’. Addressing global questions presents huge curriculum opportunities: for personalised learning that reflects local and individual needs; for access to information, new experiences and fresh perspectives; for learning partnerships; for the use of Information technology; for providing a context and purpose for literacy and numeracy; for hands-on, grounded learning that also develops higher-order thinking; for using and applying skills and knowledge; for developing emotional literacy; and as a key vehicle for Social, Moral, Spiritual and Cultural Understanding.

Global interdependence is not only a threat: it can open up new opportunities for dialogue and communication; for intercultural and international learning; for introducing diverse perspectives; for understanding commonalities between our lives and those of people in other places; for change and constructive citizenship.

The local community can provide many opportunities for engaging with wider global issues. This is a sphere where local action can lead to real empowerment, where parents and others can be directly engaged: invigorating both children’s learning and a sense of community.

How do we introduce the idea to children that our local communities are also global ones? About how the wider world impacts on the local area? About the many ways that what people do locally can have both local and global benefits? This implies taking time to listen to children (and parents), so as to understand and connect to their issues.

especially climate change and geopolitical instability.” See: www.tidec.org/further-reading-reflections/global-citizenship-education-needs-teachers-and-learners

This could build on and extend the work of a school council. There are opportunities at both KS1 and 2 for meaningful data collection, for looking at local geography and geographical processes, for investigating local and global history, for creating persuasive or instructional texts, for art, for science, design technology, drama, PSHE and citizenship.

For all this to work, we need to get beyond one-off projects and into sustained learning. Otherwise, grand plans can misfire and “*become a series of disconnects, which ultimately lead to a lack of agency.*”

If we want citizenly action to be seen to make a difference, then we need to tap into global success stories: gains for literacy or healthcare; communities around the world who have made things work for themselves. We need these stories to help empower learners, and to help balance and contextualise the truths conveyed by the ‘darker visions’

All this means ‘thinking time’ for teachers, resources and CPD; networking to share ideas, practice, questions. Many of the organisations referenced below offer relevant support.

Conclusion

The world is undergoing a period of rapid change. The nature of that change has the potential to cause great and irreversible harm, but could also create immense benefits. Primary schools are not immune to the processes involved, which impact on them both structurally and educationally.

In the current climate of testing, measurables, league tables, and international competition, many schools will need a stronger sense of permission and support from national government than the present ‘it’s-all-up-to-you’ approach. The proposed new UN goals for education seem to be a welcome step in that direction, but more is needed as a matter of urgency.

Right now, teachers and schools can take a lead, and give themselves permission to engage with these questions. There is a paradox in this: we need to justify engagement in terms of the existing system and the things that it values; even if those values may themselves be questionable.

To engage with big global issues means offering motivation and purpose for learning, fostering meaningful dialogue and higher order thinking. These are also features of good teaching in general, and this offers one clear and pragmatic way forward.

When we look for solutions, it will be important to remember that there are good ideas, resources and examples that we can build on. However, the ‘darker visions’ of today’s world also demand fresh thinking by teachers and educators, moral leadership, critical awareness and professional creativity. I hope this brief article helps set the debate rolling.

Links and references

Alexander, R. (Ed.) (2010). *Children, their world, their education. Final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Cambridge Primary Review Trust: <http://cprtrust.org.uk>

Davis, D. (2014). *Imagining the real – Towards a new theory of drama in education*. London: Institute of Education Press.

Einstein, A. (2015). Quoted at <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/alberteins121993.html>, (accessed 1/1/15).

Global Learning Programme (England): <http://globaldimension.org.uk/glp>

SEEd: <http://se-ed.co.uk>

Sustainable Development Goals:
<http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>

Tide~ global learning: www.tidegloballearning.net - including resources, CPD and a report on the seminar

United Nations (1992). *Agenda 21*. Downloadable at <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf> (accessed 1/1/15). Chapter 36 deals with “*Reorienting education towards sustainable development*” and states clearly that “*While basic education provides the underpinning for any environmental and development education, the latter needs to be incorporated as an essential part of learning.*”

United Nations (2014). *Open Working Group proposal for Sustainable Development Goals*. <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html> (accessed 1/1/15).

Some useful blogs

Robin Alexander, Cambridge Primary Review Trust <http://cprtrust.org.uk/cprt-blog/>

Ann Finlayson, SEEd <http://se-ed.co.uk/edu/category/blogs/>

Bill Scott, University of Bath <http://blogs.bath.ac.uk/edswahs/>