

The case for ... Compassionate Education?



Mick Waters sets the scene ... for the 'popular dialogue' we seek

A cloud seems to hang over many children and young people in the UK. They have the ongoing worry of Covid and what it might do to their families, which in turn are - in too many cases - dreading a winter of food or fuel poverty, or both. Stability in Europe is threatened by the war in Ukraine, as well as in numerous regions around the world. There are regular reports of the global shift of population due to climate, war, or economy.

On the Front Line?

Our young seem more aware than any age group of the catastrophe which is global warming. All this on top of the usual challenges and threats to optimistic, enjoyable, and productive childhood and youth: diet, exercise, alcohol, drugs, sex, weaponry, and the Internet to name but few. Little wonder that anxiety is growing in children and calls for more attention to well-being and mental health rise in proportion. Adolescence has always been a difficult period, but it now begins earlier and seems more difficult than ever to negotiate.

The concerns of pupils are of course shared by most in our society and many parents turn to schools as beacons of hope. Schools traditionally pick up the mantle of caring for pupils in the widest sense, some through formal systems and others through that intangible thing called ethos. Schools must grapple with the complexities of children's lives while trying to keep learning moving forward, yet most of the separate concerns are seen more as provisions schools might make rather than aspects of learning. Food banks, warmth banks, counselling, family support are almost taken as read and government guidelines prop up actions over Covid or 'messaging' about conflict. Schools are warned by government and Ofsted that they should be careful to remain 'impartial' over anything that might be deemed 'political'.

There is a need for a sense of proportion.

Society has a way of lazily saying '*we need to start in our schools*' and assuming that is enough. Schools can help to change society, they can only do so in support of the effort that society wishes to make for itself.



Many schools will support families and local communities within the context of food and energy shortages, just as they did during lockdown. They know that some essentials need to be in place for learning to flourish. Schools will continue to help their pupils to welcome refugees and understand some of the horrors of their experiences whilst being careful not to step on metaphoric minefields.

Within the context of global sustainability, there is now a more formal expectation on schools. The DfE released its ‘Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy’ in April, which sets out how schools should build sustainability into their curriculum, green skills and careers, and the development of the school estate. A pity then that the White Paper published just days before, ‘Opportunity for All: strong schools with great teachers for your child’, spelt out what seems to be a limited ‘vision’ for education with ‘challenging’ targets to help children lead a ‘happy, fulfilled and successful’ life. **There is not one mention of ‘sustainability’, or ‘environment’, or ‘climate’.**

For many schools and trusts, sustainability was already a central priority and part of a commitment to a more sustainable future and to leaving the world in a better place for future generations. Although the DfE’s strategy will be welcomed as a first step from those on the frontline of the climate fight, schools need to see these as suggestions for a starting point rather than the end goal. In some schools, sustainability is a strategic priority and the achievement of sustainability objectives takes its place alongside other key priorities. Leaders amongst both staff and students are committed to action to drive positive change. A critical part of this is pupils’ active involvement in developing and taking sustainable action to reach Net Zero by 2030. In too many schools the display of posters showing the UN Sustainable Goals becomes the extent of leadership influence, a bit like thinking the provision of a library ensures children enjoy literature, or a clock and a bell ensures punctuality.

What could and should schools be doing?

How might schools respond to the twin pressures from government outside and pupils within in terms of structuring their response?

How can schools organise their teaching to have maximum benefit for children who will go forward to become the adults who both influence and carry the consequences of our current actions in the future?

As with any subject discipline, what we want children to learn, our curriculum content, falls into three sections: what we want to teach them about the subject, what we want to teach them how to do and what we want to teach them through the discipline. In this way they build important knowledge, skills, and understandings. **It is the same with sustainability, except that many children are already ahead of the game.** Just as with ‘e’ technology, where many youngsters know ‘how to’ far more than their well-meaning, diligent teachers, so they have remarkable awareness of the issues surrounding sustainability and often a level of frustration whilst the adult world has not grasped the issues that will affect them. Indeed, many would argue that governments have only begun to include the issue of global sustainability within educational policy because of the pressure from young people themselves.



The learning *'about'* and *'how to'* agendas are the ones that governments tend to see as the curriculum, listing the things children need to be told, practise and tested upon. It is essential that sustainability is not separated from subject disciplines with an allotted time allowance, but that it permeates a range of disciplines: engineering, mathematics, science, design technology, art, history, geography, business studies and careers **all have a collective role to play in providing an authentic and embedded understanding relevant to the maturity of pupils that will build an increasingly sophisticated progression.**

Schools need to be aware of the need to go beyond the 'special event' or addressing issues in a token manner. A display of the detritus of single-use plastic makes an impact and gets a message across to children but, depending upon their maturity, children need to be helped to see and explore complexities. It is not that all plastic is bad. A close look around any classroom will show just how much plastic holds our world together and allows flexibility and progress and how the previous wooden, metal or glass alternatives are a bigger drain on the world's precious resources if we want to have the lifestyle we have created.

An 'Eco-week' is a brilliant way of highlighting the range of issues and demonstrating the role we can all play. However, if the end of the week sees the end of attention until next year, it is surely an opportunity lost.

Actions speak as loud as words?



We need to be aware of 'double standards'. While a new set of exercise books at the beginning of a school year provides a 'fresh start', the collective waste of nearly empty books from the previous year denies our teaching about protecting woodland.

Sticking photocopied SDG worksheets on clean pages of exercise books provides evidence to show inspectors sustainability has been covered. But - they have also added to the wasteful use of resource.

Real benefits lie in teaching children 'through' a focus on sustainability.

When it comes to sustainability, all staff and students can agree that direct action is needed to drive sustainability forwards.

As we continue to see the devastating impacts of climate change, including the rise in natural disasters and the consequential human impact, children and young people are increasingly impassioned, driven to want to make a positive change.

Empowering our pupils to become self-regulating and take responsibility for themselves and others as contributing citizens will unlock personal potential as well as opening academic, practical and vocational avenues *through* the *'about'* and *'how to'* elements.

A Learner's Role?

How do we help pupils to feel that they are at the forefront of sustainability development, while oiling the wheels and moving the building blocks to help them make it to happen?

The Children's Commissioner's recent 'Big Ask' emphasised that children care deeply about the environment. In good schools this is echoed by calls from pupils, who continue to use their voices to highlight the urgency they feel over climate change and their own futures. **Being an active part of the planning helps students be part of the solution.**

Some schools begin with a 'Student Summit' on sustainability, where leadership presents their ideas and students are encouraged to share their views, helping them play an active role in decisions.

