"From Agent of Change to Global Citizen?" Dialogue, drawings, narratives and performances of secondary school children engaged with the design of a sustainable school.

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Abstract

Why is comfort such a key term for engaging children in dialogue about their natural and designed surroundings? This paper discusses the findings of a 3 year RCUK post-doctoral research project with children in secondary schools describing the methods adopted and the conclusions of findings. I argue that comfort acts as a means to connect the personal to wider issues of climate change and to move children's understandings of themselves from agent of change to global citizen. This paper speculates on the future for the design of the 'sustainable' school. It also poses the following questions: are there new ways of thinking, living and being emerging from the younger generation, demanding support from adults; and does the 'sustainable' school and its design provide a testing ground for supporting changes in patterns of living? These questions are explored and illustrated through the dialogue, drawings, narratives and performances of secondary school children.

Keywords

Sustainability, school, participation, philosophy, education

Introduction

The Bruntland Report published as *Our Common Future* (1987) defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". It is a much cited definition. *Caring for the Earth: A strategy for sustainable living* (1991), another international publication directed at policy makers, describes sustainable development as "improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems": a utilitarian definition that met with much criticism at the time. To examine sustainability from a phenomenological perspective, as this paper does, and indeed a critical feminist phenomenological perspective, is to suggest an ontological exploration: an examination of how we are in the world in relation to others. This does not deny the difficult concepts of human need and of human limitation contained within the Bruntland definition, or questions about

improving the quality of human life within natural limits, but rather presents the question as one about the nature of our condition in relation. For children these difficult concepts are very well known, and not outside their comprehensions. In their own language (and when allowed to explore such concepts) they are problems of human greed and fairness. To adopt a philosophical approach, faithful to my own position, means to define sustainability as a way of being and as a critical adoption of the question.

Heidegger argues that the human is in the world in a way that dwelling is an issue for it. Dwelling is fundamental to the human: It is the manner by which he is. To adopt the work of feminist philosophy is to ask, is how can we reformulate what it means to dwell? (see Wheeler, 2005).

For Caroline Spelman (2012), describing the notion of GDP+ ,in a recent lecture, governments have to begin to take steps to account for natural and social capital and not simply measure success of economic growth more traditionally defined. Her speech reinforces growing arguments that suggest ways of accounting for well-being Atkinson, S. *et al* (2012).

Sustainable development is not yet mainstream in economic policy and despite legislation for architectural practices dependent on these forms of organisations, sustainable architecture remains outside of the mainstream and hence needing of definition. Beginning with an ontological question, the everyday work of the architect becomes *praxis* and not "sustainable architecture" but simply design.

The art and art based methods adopted in this project gave space for children to ponder the question of sustainability and to create narratives about a sustainable future for themselves. The notion of a democratic relationship of researcher and research participant forged within workshops was key to the project. For one young research participant, designing a school around the idea of 'pondering' space, described an idea that the 'sustainable' school must continuously engage in questioning: this was her description of the pedagogy required to build a sustainable school.

Allowing young participants the freedom to adopt the role of co-researchers in the design of a sustainable future helped them to develop a sense of agency in their immediate environment and to build on existing motivation to change the day-to-day practices and behaviours of themselves and friends: moving the child research participants' perspective from the imagination to action – from agent for change and towards global citizen.

The work with children contradicts a common understanding regarding a lack of knowledge about, and engagement in, sustainability amongst young people of secondary school age. On the contrary, workshops demonstrated the enthusiasm of children to speculate about new sustainable buildings, about the potential meaning of a sustainable lifestyle, and even to devise new ways of learning and new forms of pedagogy to make people more 'environmentally friendly'. The art and the art based

methods adopted provided opportunities for children to think about transforming spaces and relationships in their immediate surroundings, and the notion of comfort was common to these dialogues, Whilst innovative methods that aim at exploring a wider agenda are not uncommon in this field (Clarke, 2011, 2012) the methods adopted allowed children to explore architectural design as theory (that is to say in its broadest sense – an understanding often lost to educational researchers) and moreover the idea of comfort grounded conversation and provided a standard for children to measure the validity of their speculative designs for the whole school community and others.

These are especially potent methods of research when working with children and young people. Within the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, such 'worldly' pedagogies aim to connect young people to a global context: to the worldly experience of human beings in their plurality, sharing a 'common world' (Fanghenel and Cousins, 2011, Biesta, 2006, 2009). According to Biesta, a school should be a "worldly" place and education should not be "…just about the transmission of knowledge, skills and values, but [...] concerned with the individuality, subjectivity, or personhood of the student, with their 'coming into the world' as unique, singular beings" (Biesta 2006: 27). This humanistic and democratic vision puts emphasis on educational relationships, "on trust, and on responsibility, while acknowledging the inherently difficult character of education" (Biesta 2006: 15). He suggests that the learning environment of the school should motivate children to ask what it means to be human and how we live with others; and not give answers, but incite questions. For Biesta, teachers have a responsibility for the coming into being of the unique subjectivity of each student: the teacher is responsible for what and who is to come, but without knowledge of what and who is to come (see also Wheeler, 2011 forthcoming). Whilst global citizenship demands both a concept of citizenship and globalisation, Arendt's philosophy and the adoption of her work by educationalists suggests a place of freedom and becoming. Furthermore, designing for comfort acts as intermediary in these dialogues, a way of understanding how the physical (a dimension criticized by feminist philosophers as missing from the work of the early phenomenologists), connects to the political with its global dimensions.

Children understood, and could articulate, the potential significance of values as barriers to change, but also that they have personal agency. For example, in a dialogue with a group of pupils (all aged 12 and 13) in a Catholic secondary school, it was not adults that were to blame, but growth in consumerist societies and globalisation. In a criticism of the researcher's question for the girls, intended to assist in designing a sustainable school, the global dimension quickly emerged:

> *Child 1: It's not all about schools polluting. There should be a better way to make people stop polluting because scientists and people like that spread their message but what have they done: nothing! So I think school could be more eco-friendly which B***School [the speculative designs for an eco-school were given a name by the participants] are eco-friendly schools but I think*

that they should in America and Beijing, I'm not saying it's just their fault, but they should cut down on the amount of cars they have because for the Olympics they cut down all the cars they had but now they are reusing all the cars!

The girls perceived those promoting personal action (an accurate description for how sustainable schools are being taught in schools) as neglecting this global dimension.

An extraordinary number of 'sustainable' schools

The context of the fellowship research project was the now abandoned Building Schools for the Future programme and the extraordinary number of secondary schools being built in the UK. The initial Government vision that these schools would be 'sustainable', through the relationship of the building design and the behaviour of the children (Blair, A, 2004), was a significant question for the research programme and a discursive element of workshops with children. The role of children's participation in the design of schools way a key element of the marketing of the programme, and has been discussed critically by Parnell and Patsarika (2010). The connection between sustainability and participation was, however, often poorly conceived and a focus of the fellowship project.

Writing extensively on the sustainable school and the problems of measuring success, William Scott argues that staged progress descriptors are the best way to think about assessment. These allow schools to understand their achievement and plan for the next stage in development. The work of Ken Webster and Craig Johnson (2009) is cited by Scott (2010). They describe a first uncritical exploratory stage, characterised by seeking opportunities for small actions and dependent on individual moral agendas; the last and the highest stage in development is described as, the 'eco-restorative' school: ' produce more energy than is used, enhance biodiversity and social capital'. These descriptors are speculative and, moreover, the ability to motivate change suggested is dependent on the formative educational impact of the assessment. Children's perspectives on the sustainable school are just as imaginative (see Figure 1).

This question of assessment has developed within a Government perspective that architecture can improve the educational performance of children, and has indeed spawned much academic discussion and an extensive literature review. A considerable amount of literature has been published in this field arguing that a causal relationship is impossible to determine. The other side of this assumption, and one deeply dependent on it, is the blame directed at designers for poor educational performance and a criticism that architects are responsible for embedding and reinforcing a reactionary political agenda which has a significant negative impact on children. Both sides of the argument are restrained by a particular world view, one that Scott and many others within Education for Sustainable Development have attempted to contest (Stirling, 2003) and that an approach influenced by a philosophy

of 'wordliness' challenges. Whilst the DCSF, in the midst of the BSF programme and Sustainable Schools initiatives, was keen to state its desires, the means to achieve the aims were ill defined. For example, the report of their Zero Carbon Schools Taskforce states:

> We would like all schools to be models of social inclusion, enabling all pupils to participate fully in school life while instilling a long-lasting respect for human rights, freedoms, cultures and creative expression (DCSF 2009: 1).

How we might achieve this was left for architects to ponder. Conversely. the objective of the research project was to determine how educational philosophy and its critical engagement with design can lead the way towards adopting new approaches to building the sustainable school. The desire and critical visions of children provided that starting point and the work of children's Rights activists the idea that these ideas could be influential and achievable affording children a sense of agency (Shier H. *et al*, 2012, Wheeler, A and Shier, H. 2010).

Method

Hence, the methodology adopted in the research project was influenced by Democratic Education, Philosophy in Education, Research with Children and Educational Philosophy. The research methods used were broadly based on participatory action research and the use of visual research tools with children. Nevertheless, where visual tools limited some young participants' expressions, the emergence of performance, and written narrative, also played an important role. The question of a 'sustainable future' was presented as open to interpretation from the beginning. Whilst young participants commonly wanted to discuss immediate problems and media descriptions of climate change and technical innovations, children's thinking was not limited to the familiar or simply the local. Furthermore, whilst responses to the problem of 'sustainability' named visible products (solar panels and wind turbines, for example), researcher facilitation of dialogue – simply asking the question "why is it like that?" – allowed criticisms to develop, together with drawings, writing and even the performance of 'stories' (see also Wheeler, 2010). In this way a deeper conversation developed and different ideas emerged about relationships and about what is common and what can be shared. These sorts of approaches are slowly gaining merit amongst the educational community (Clark, P. 2010) whilst methods of participation with children remain rigid and formulaic their scope limited by policy and practice (Parnell and Patsarika, 2010).

Results and discussion

The media portrayal of environmental change looms large and young peoples' stories expressed this media attention. One of the problems of Education for Sustainability is one of how we get young people to behave responsibly towards a future human being whose world and society we cannot know and moreover, where action now has no apparent or immediate effect and media images of climate change dominate childrens'

imagination. Illustrative of this influence, the young participants of workshops often commented on the extreme scenarios expressed in the media, as a group of 11 year olds put it:

> *Child 1: Has anyone seen that movie? The day after tomorrow? Some people say that that is going to happen, the day after tomorrow.*
>
> *Child 2: Oh is that the one where the earth gets flooded? Yes, the world all gets flooded and stuff like that.*
>
> *Child 3: I don't know what's going to happen to the world, who knows what's going to really happen. Whether we're going to get finished off by flooding, whether it's going to fly into the Sun, whether we're all going to die due to global warming...Whether the Magma's going to come out and flood the world with Magma. Who knows whether someone will create a Zombie virus and bring Zombies, dead people back to life. Who knows if aliens don't exist and they might destroy the earth.*

Whilst young people felt confused by media portrayals of the dangers of environmental change and global warming they also questioned researchers on whose responsibility it was. Should these researchers really be trying to change theirs and others behaviours; indeed, could they? Responding to researcher's questions, some of the 12 year old research participants complained about the lack of concern of both peers and adults and questioned whether they should feel responsible. Even at this stage the pupil was aware of the global dimension to the problem:

> *Researcher: What do you think it would take to make people behave more sustainably?*
>
> *There's a lot of rubbish on the field, more bins around the back for the school... [...] Supermarkets are saying to people [to recycle], but they put drinks in packets and wrappers [...]On some packing it says you can recycle it, but some people just chuck it on the floor [...]Because one some games, computer games, there's like plastic and you've got to separate it [...] they should make an easier way to recycle. It's not just like the public getting it wrong because the Government aren't really doing much about it [...] and they are sending it to India!*

In other words, children believe that responsibility does not lie only with them or with their communities.

> *Everyone is just worrying about the credit crunch, the credit crunch at the moment. It might be about the public, but it is the Government as well.*

It is important to note the expression of lack of agency in both instances – the problem of sustainability and its 'antidote' are for these children just as much a problem for 'Government' to address as for others in their community. Greed and consumerism,

even the 'credit crunch' were discussed. However, this externalisation is modified and later the dialogue moved towards a strong encouragement to do something different and to take a direction.

> *Researcher: Do you think the credit crunch [...] or the 'economic crisis' has something to do with global warming?*
>
> *Yeah [all of the group responding to the question]*
>
> *Child 1: Because the banks are lending money, but people aren't paying it back...Because it's like [a man] maxed out like six credit cards and killed himself, and then his wife had to pay it off. Because like if moneys gone out of your bank account you won't have enough money to buy light bulbs. People want, want, want, they want to go on holidays, they want big cars, they want their children to have the latest video games.*
>
> *Researcher: Do you think people could stop behaving like this?*
>
> *Child 2: Some kids get spoilt abit sometimes [...] because kids get spoilt my Dad started saying things I don't need and I want I have to buy it myself. It teaches me how it's going to be like when I grow up. You're limited in what you can buy. And one's that get spoilt should do it as well [...] because when they're older it's not going to happen and you need to work for it.*
>
> *Researcher: Do you think it is young people that recycle and care more than their parents?*
>
> *Child 2: Yeah they might. Depends on their attitude.*
>
> *Child 3: I want to say that it doesn't depend much on the adults, it's like you act, you don't have to copy them. You can just say "no", "not doing that".*

The essence of the argument that emerged in this workshop was the children's lack of clarity about their own agency and influence, about personal action, motivation and desires and about the global and political dimension of the problem of sustainability. The question of habit was suggested by one of the child participants:

> *Child 4 [girl]: Is it about habits? It takes alot to break habits. [...] you know with the green umm... thing it's the way you've been brought up, I think, and the way you act. If you act like you share all the time, you won't be greedy, but if you don't share and you say "no I want that now" not later, that's just greed. And if you want it, it's better for like the credit crunch and everything, and it's cheaper, a week later.*

The approach adopted suggested that to address the problems of climate change, loss of biodiversity and dwindling resources, we not only need technological innovation, but ways to deal with excessive levels of consumption and consumerist aspirations driving our current lifestyles in the developed world. Designing a sustainable school

meant understanding why our lifestyles and our relationship to the natural environment have to change.

Figure 1

Children and young people have to have the right within our existing educational systems to be able to encounter all the complexities this involves. What is interesting is the ease with which children and young people can engage critically with these complexities and creatively envision pedagogical and associated design solutions.

Hence, sustainability does not require behaviour change, but a critical engagement with living and being to be forged in a different sort of relationality that 'teaching' can address. It is not a matter of lifestyle practices we can or cannot adopt. It demands both ontological and political interrogation: what does it mean to be in an ethical or just relation to the environment and to other human beings? Who is this historical human being characterised so well by his/her exploitation of the natural environment and how do we understand his or her rights? The question of a sustainable lifestyle relates directly to the traditions of philosophical and political discourse and this cannot be absent from teaching in schools.

Working in this way with children, presenting sustainability as a question, presenting not a encyclopaedia of facts, not even the most current hypothesis, suggests the influence of Philosophy for Children. It demonstrates the influence the research took from educational theory, from Democratic Education and from the Philosophy in Schools movement. The adapted methodology was a mode of engagement intended to encourage children and young people to participate and to be agents in the buildings of sustainable communities. The research had purpose: to test an approach to engage children in the design of a sustainable school, and in so doing motivate change in their lifestyles. It also had potential to establish sustainable design within a context of 'worldly' practice.

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