

Response to ‘Sustainable Schools: for pupils, communities and the environment’, consultation paper for the Department for Education and Skills, August 2006

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The opening pages of the consultation set out the agenda under discussion. It suggests that ‘issues that matter to young people, from the state of the local park to global warming, (be) used as a context for learning across the curriculum so that time in schools is relevant to their lives, not abstract or disconnected from their futures.’ The main report notes that a central objective of the consultation proposes that the merits of using or developing schools and the curriculum in this way is to promote ‘good citizens in later life’ as well as to encourage ‘healthy living, environmental awareness, community involvement and citizenship – many of the aspirations set forth in Every Child Matters’. Indeed, ‘the government,’ the consultation states, ‘would like every school to be a sustainable school.’ The consultation thus is a fine-tuning exercise of how best to achieve the government’s ambition and fits into the DfES’ 2-year action plan ‘to achieve outcomes to underpin a sustainable society.’

This consultation exercise is not a forum for discussing the merits of the proposition itself, but is about how best to achieve the pre-determined goals. It is a mechanism for exploring how best to incorporate education into the framework of creating a sustainable society, but it seems to do this without questioning the impact sustainability agendas will have on educational standards. A dogmatic approach to these issues (of environmentalism, personal behaviour and demand management, amongst other things) surely undermines – or at very least, sidelines - the very notion of universal standards, educational enquiry, critical thinking and creative exploration that has long been the essence of the educational system. In this consultation, the principle of sustainability underpinning the consultation is sacrosanct, but this response takes such governmental didacticism to task and suggests that the implications of the review will have negative consequences for educational standards, and for education *per se*.

Educational enquiry or social conformity

The consultation states that ‘the past 30 years have seen a growing realisation that our current model of development is unsustainable. From over-fishing to climate change, our way of life is placing an increasing burden on the planet, which cannot be sustained.’ This seems to set education as a part of a grand narrative of earthly concerns and business practices, rather than looking at the impartial teaching of subject matter. Undoubtedly, there is reason to suggest that there is a growing *belief*, rather than a growing *realisation* that the current model of development is unsustainable, but is it the purpose of education to pander to beliefs? Even in the framework of moral

teaching and religious instruction there has traditionally been the potential for a critical dismissal of metaphysical ideas, provided the child has the conviction to carry the argument through. In this consultation's moral construct of sustainability, no such scope for rebuttal exists it would seem.

What is learned by the bald assertion that our way of life has dangerous consequences for the planet, and by default, for humanity? It certainly undermines the idea that science education – the act of understanding the natural world in order to change it – is a positive goal. It also implies that human aspirations should be reined in, rather than allowed experimental free rein; quite a constraint in childhood. What about those children who might not agree that their way of life, such as it is (presumably meaning the way of life of their parents, as schoolchildren tend to be too young to be independent of their guardians) is detrimental? Argyle Primary School in Camden, for example, 'having integrated sustainable development within the curriculum, they are now seeking to engage parents in understanding the value of this approach.' Any parent with young children will know that if asked to sign a good conduct, anti bullying, pro-environmental or anti-litter pledge, cannot refuse for fear of acting to their child's detriment. All of the aforementioned consequences of asserting that our way of life needs to be reined in, simply serve to reduce aspirations in the education system, and in society more generally.

But, it seems that no pupil (nor indeed the parent) can maintain a critical stance in such a morally charged arena; to do so would cast aspersions on the righteousness of citizenship, tolerance, sustainability and the sanctity of nature, all of which are being promoted through this consultation. To criticise any or all of these ethical foundations for this consultation would be destabilising to it and couldn't go unchecked. Presumably, under these consultation proposals, children will be educated to understand that, even though they think that their way of life is positive, they are simply in denial. Under this scenario, children who appear satisfied with their current model of development ought to be educated to show that they are wrong. The minutiae of their everyday actions will thus be subject to scrutiny with the sole purpose of pointing that out. Under such relentless pressure, most children will conform. This may make for more pliant, quiet classrooms, but it certainly undermines the dynamic basis for education. As such, the government should be aware that 'engagement' may not always be synonymous with 'educational attainment'. In the dogmatic framework of this educational consultation, however, there seems to be no scope for critical distance, political choices, individual decision-making, or even youthful rebelliousness. Ultimately, much of this report will end up destroying the very thing it seeks to create, and the critical faculties of the next generation may atrophy in such conformist environments.

Education for education's sake

Education should create the next generation of intelligent actors keen to understand the world rather than the next generation of environmentalists eager to conserve the planet.

The drive for 'educational literacy' recommends that children learn subjects through a range of relevant media, exploring science through controversies in the news for example, or using the geography curriculum to ensure that 'all children have the opportunity to work in the school grounds, choosing between mending fences, picking up litter, and tending crops in the garden' (Glebe School, Bromley in Kent). Or 'maths can be taught using data from bird observations or climate change statistics... English can be taught through world literature, exposing pupils to different perspectives, and challenging their own attitudes and behaviours.'

Starting up their own vegetable plot in Alderbrook Primary School in Wandsworth in London, and twinned with a school project in Ghana 'has helped pupils understand the problems faced by farmers in developing countries, and to appreciate the value of the fair trade movement,' it says. Does gardening really give a meaningful insight into the plight of subsistence farming in the Third World; and even if it does, does it doesn't say anything about the *causes* of such inequity? The mere act of tilling the soil (which *looks* very similar in any part of the world) might tend to allow a comfortable comparison between the farming in the UK and Ghana rather than to confront the socio-political differences of each country. It might confound rather than explain. Furthermore, the suggestion that this 'lesson' teaches pupils the merits of fair trade, automatically refuses to countenance other legitimate conclusions: 1) might the differences between the two countries (if you allow for the fact that the two situations are not the same, despite appearances) be the result of a lack of real development, rather than a case for sustainable development? 2) does fair trade work, under who's rules and what does such a relationship with the west say about the economic conditions in the developing world; and, 3) what is the curriculum response to a child who endorses unfair trade, for example? None of these responses is legitimate under this consultation.

Finally, could not these experiential 'lessons' have been equally well conveyed (and presumably in less time) in the classroom through the intellectual rather than physical engagement of the pupils? Might not a politics, sociology or geography teacher be able to explain some of these ideas without recourse to picking up litter or painting the school's fences?

This consultation presents education as something that needs sexing up, and by so doing, it is in danger of playing into the childish belief that education is boring. On one hand this defensive approach panders to the pupil's boredom threshold and risks destabilising the adult/child; teacher/pupil authority relationship. The flip side of this is that it over-states the belief that education has to be fun, and tries to hide the fact that it is, in fact, hard work. Finally, it

refuses to engage with hard subjects, preferring instead to skirt around the issue using metaphors, symbols or distracting activities and thus patronises the pupil. The consultation, for example, has a synopsis of this consultation especially written for 'young people' presumably because the government doesn't even believe that it can hold a youth's attention for 52 pages.

The most important aspect of education is to inspire a love of inquiry; a desire to interrogate ideas; to find out things rather than having parts of legitimate inquiry denied because it does not fit with the framework. Admittedly the National Curriculum has often prioritised some subjects over others, and even approved some *interpretations* of subjects over others, but in general, the intention has been to provide the pupil with a rounded educational backdrop from which to continue further enquiry. Today, the participation in the learning environment is valued in its own right and the *interpretation* of the subject matter itself denies – or at least frowns upon – further enquiry unless that enquiry is premised on the approved terms already set down.

The consultation use the example of 'Schools us(ing) the curriculum to cultivate the knowledge, values and skills to address energy and water stewardship,' for example, although the educational merit provided by Cassop Primary School, Co Durham's headmaster's '(shock) to learn how much water was being wasted' by a malfunctioning toilet valve, is somewhat questionable. Engaging pupils in the running, maintenance and monitoring of schools, undoubtedly provides financial benefits for the school and an 'active' pupil involvement, but the educational benefits are being overplayed. Often the justification for the educational content has simple pragmatic motives.

Overstating the benefits and the individual problems

Poor pupil attainment and behaviour at St Matthew's Primary School, Belfast in one of the most deprived wards of Northern Ireland is attributed to 'poor diet'. Here, 'the school wanted to go further than simply banning junk food – it wanted to have a lasting impact on the eating habits of pupils and their families... decid(ing) to provide only milk, water and fruit at break times. Out of this grew a fruit cooperative in which fair-trade fruit is sourced each morning.' Aside from the fact that this sounds more like a market stall rather than a school, the notion that diet impacts on children's behaviour is a highly contentious assertion. Even empirical data ('[consequently] litter has ceased to be a problem') is hard to attribute to eating fruit. ('Pupils consum[ed] 88,000 pieces of fruit in around three years' apparently). But there are many influences on pupil behaviour, from general infrastructural improvements, social stability, political aspiration, personal wealth, and not forgetting teacher authority and control. To place such emphasis on the educational and behavioural benefits of fruit consumption is disingenuous and is part of a wider problem whereby local and individual solutions are seen to be the easy answer to broader 'political' and technical issues of underfunding, lack of educational direction, poor teacher management and reluctant educational standards, etc.

Throughout the consultation, the role of the individual pupil's behaviour is flagged up as *the* solution –by default suggesting that un-amended pupil behaviour is the problem. But simply changing pupil's personal eating habits and 'reviewing the impact' of their individual use of water, energy and travel, etc, is surely an 'educational' approach that seems not to be aimed at children's 'minds' but at their everyday actions. One boy who took part in Alderbrook's vegetable gardening experience 'took part... because he wanted to be talented at something and now he knows he is.' Being 'talented' at digging a garden is the stuff of the Boy Scouts badging schemes, not school certification. Suggesting otherwise is overclaiming for the educational benefits of non-educational activities.

Overstating the problem and focussing solely on remedial personal behaviour, leads to redefinition of attainment. And it puts the responsibility for education squarely at the door of the person being educated. Teachers need to re-enter the equation.

Schools or community centres

A sustainable school, the consultation says, is one that 'is guided by the principle of care: care for oneself, care for each other (across cultures, distances and time), (and) care for the environment (far and near).' *Inter alia*, this translates into anti-bullying, a 'zero-tolerance approach to graffiti' and drives for environmental conservation and resource efficiency. Ultimately, if a pupil doesn't care about their school and locality, so the argument goes, then how can they possibly care about other people, cultures and the natural world. Thus, as a result of this consultation, there will always tend to be a concentration on the parochial even if presented under the guise of wider concerns.

This celebration of school management, vigilance, cleanliness and a pride in the locality permeate this consultation document. However, this may not be the most social or liberating approach to the wider world. In Kingsmead Primary School in Cheshire, for example, the pupils seem well insulated in more ways than one. 'The school's highly insulated windows open and shut automatically based on weather conditions, helping pupils to retain an awareness of temperature fluctuations throughout the day.' Presumably, instead of understanding barometric pressures, their slightly less universal (and less useful) point of reference will be the angle of the window sashes. As they sit indoors 'children can also view plant and animal life in the grounds using the CCTV cameras that double as security monitors at night.' And so, of all the necessary encounters that children require for biological study, in this instance, nature is encountered virtually. This retreat is symbolic of the reversion to local, small-scale concerns promoted in this consultation.

The consultation suggests ways that sustainable development can contribute to school improvement. One of the ways to achieve it, it seems, is through a

recommendation that schools work 'with local people on shared concerns like diet, litter, drugs, teenage pregnancy, congestion, safety and respect demonstrate a school's commitment to its community, and builds trust'. The implication, in this context, that schools should promote themselves as the vigilant eyes and ears of the community, but also as the body best place to instil civic virtues. This begins to go well beyond the remit of an educational establishment, straying into personal familial territory. A loss of respect for the environment', it says, 'can lead to a downward spiral of litter, vandalism and crime.' It continues: 'especially when combined with difficult family situations or other forms of hardship in the community.' Suddenly, schools are placed in an ominous position as parental monitors, moral guardians, social workers and community police service. If a school is constantly expected to appraise personal relationships for signs of 'difficult family situations' then wariness may very soon replace trust.

Conclusion

1. If schools want to mend fences, paint walls and improve services, they should draw up a maintenance contract with professional services rather than using children to do it for free.

2. Schools are not community centres. Engaging the local community in using the school facilities could lead to a confusion over the central role of the school - to wit, educating children. A school imposing its own ecological agenda on local residents is an intervention that should be better carried out – with recourse to democratic process – by local political representatives. It seems that rather than challenging the democratic deficit, the DfES wishes to circumvent it. In this scenario, the school is simply a convenient institution that retains some clout in the community, whereby the government can get its message across without the inconvenience of electoral dialogue with the real people... instead, using children as DfES footsoldiers to pester parents into changing their habits.

3. How a child gets to school, by foot, bike, car, or helicopter is none of the school's business.

4. Schools should provide good, balanced meals. Pretending that diet and educational attainment and good behaviour are inextricably linked in a causal relationship is unproven and it is irresponsible to pretend otherwise. Either way, it should not be necessary to look for links: giving children good food - in the same way that providing decent facilities and good teaching staff – will tend to improve the environment for educational attainment. However, teaching standards are the key – and the one thing not mentioned in the consultation.

5. Blaming individual lifestyles for poor performance will inevitably destroy the very thing that it seeks to create. Such social stigma - based on a criticism of children's and families' eating habits, travel modes, recycling credentials,

energy profligacy, etc - can only encourage more fractiousness within schools and the wider community. This is a new morality that has nothing whatsoever to do with education.

6. Real education is being downplayed in this consultation and is being replaced with social policy initiatives. This is no consultation: it is a demand that schools comply with social policy, masquerading as education policy. We need to stress that teachers are not social workers

7. Schools should not try to instil ecological values.. Schools, should not even be attempting to mould *good* citizens, their job is to encourage *intelligent* citizens. After all, whose 'values' are schools promoting?

8. This consultation embodies the problem: it is a consultation that offers no room for criticism. Even though facts are key, education is about enquiry, but this consultation has set clear boundaries to enquiry.

9. While focussing on the individual pupil's actions, this consultation seems to imply that any pupil (and by default, any pupil's family) that criticises or critiques the environmental agenda with a view to defending their 'current way of life' cannot be countenanced.

10. Education is not about immediate relevance, developing transferable skills or finding meaning in the everyday. At primary level, it is about developing a love of learning and a desire for knowledge. This consultation ignores this central aspect of education.

This Policy Watch response to the DfES consultation, commissioned by the Institute of Ideas, has been written by Austin Williams, director of the Future Cities Project. www.futurecities.org.uk.