



Sustainability and renewal: findings from the Leading Sustainable Schools research project

Anna Birney and Jane Reed

Resource

A research study highlighting the characteristics of sustainable schools and the leadership qualities required to develop sustainable schools.

Summary report

Contents

Context

- Sustainability defined
- Background

Findings

- Characteristics of sustainable schools
- Processes that help bring about the seven characteristics
- Leadership for sustainability

Conclusions

Bibliography

Context

The Leading Sustainable Schools research project took place in 2008-09 and involved fifty six schools around the country who are currently leading the way in developing and promoting sustainability in their school and wider community. They were invited to share and disseminate their expertise by leading a community of practice¹ in their area over the year and to reflect on the leadership, action and outcomes of this work. Through this research, seven characteristics of sustainable schools and the key leadership qualities and processes required for creating a sustainable school were identified.

Evidence from this research suggests that **the leadership in these schools has contributed substantially towards these schools becoming sustainable**. The research also showed that **when a school places sustainability at the core of its activity, it supports adults and young peoples' learning, their contribution to and improvement of their community and the sustainability of our planet**. The school leaders represented here have brought improvement, change, learning and leadership into a new relationship with each other and their community of practice for a different and bigger purpose.

Sustainability defined

Sustainability is a complex concept to define and describe. For this project, it has included environmental, social and economic sustainability. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) describes a sustainable school as one that is 'guided by the principle of care: care for oneself, care for each other and care for the environment²'.

This central principle of care is not new to schools but it is the addition of the reference to care for the environment and its global citizens as a whole school priority that moves a school from being a good school to a sustainable school.

Sustainability **is about the relationship between people, their purpose and their place**. It is about engaging, learning and leading to create a positive, empowering future for our children and their children. Sustainability as both a goal and practical activity is by its nature life-giving for communities, educators and the children and young people in their care; it brings life to learning and learning to life.

¹ Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common concern that they are passionate about, in this case sustainability. In a school context, they could involve any stakeholders or members of the community including pupils. They come together on an ongoing basis to deepen their practical knowledge in this area, to reflect and to support change (Wenger, 1998).

² Sustainable Schools – How National Recognition Schemes can support your schools practice: DCSF

Background

In the first phase of the work on leadership for sustainability for the National College, it was noted that the task for sustainable leadership was to:

- move the agenda from its current partial status in schools to being fully embedded
- make sustainability the responsibility of everyone rather than the personal commitment of a few
- move sustainability from being an additional priority to being a fundamental way that a school thinks and acts
- make the transition from sustainability being part of some people's personal beliefs to becoming a set of collective properties
- be outward-looking instead of inward-looking
- help sustainability to be seen as a whole-school approach

Ofsted's recent report (HMCI, 2008³) supports this analysis, indicating that sustainability in the majority of schools remains unprioritised, partial and unco-ordinated.

This research aims to show that sustainability can move from this status to becoming embedded in schools, and to illustrate the clear benefits of doing this as well as the leadership qualities required for this to be achieved. The schools involved in this research have been engaged in a rich range of sustainability activities working with their communities of practice using DCSF's eight-doorway framework⁴.

³ <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Leadership/Management/Schools-and-sustainability>

⁴ DCSF's National Framework for Sustainable Schools articulates the importance of sustainability, setting a requirement for all schools to be sustainable by 2020. Schools are asked to have an integrated approach using the framework's eight doorways which are: global dimension, food & drink, energy & water, travel & traffic, purchasing & waste, buildings & grounds, inclusion & participation, and local well-being.

Findings

Characteristics of sustainable schools

The characteristics of a sustainable school are listed below.

1. Sustainable schools give attention to their broader social and ecological footprint.

- This creates outcomes in campus and for communities.

Some schools looked at growing food, using allotments, their grounds and gardens to do so. This often had a positive effect on healthy living, but also brought about benefits in terms of biodiversity and environmental improvements to their campus and community. Others looked at reducing their waste and changing their purchasing decisions.

“Students have looked how we can improve the biodiversity of our site through research and action.”

School leader

- It also builds social capital and stronger links with the community.

“We have succeeded in establishing strong and sustainable links with the local community.”

School leader

Our findings echo those found by Leadbeater & Mongon (2008) that schools and leadership can create value for their communities, in the form of valued social outcomes.

2. Sustainable schools view their ethos and purpose within a broader global context, and develop an understanding among stakeholders including students of that purpose.

- This produces a movement from sustainability being a partial, add-on initiative to becoming the core purpose from which a school develops all aspects of its policies, strategies, planning and day-to-day operations.

“It’s at the heart of everything we do.”

School leader

- It also helps to develop an educational philosophy and ethos aimed at achieving a sustainable society, enabling children and young people to have the knowledge, skills and understanding to lead for that purpose.

3. Sustainable schools create positive benefits for pupils including student engagement, participation and leadership.

- Sustainability creates direct benefits for students, including opportunities of involvement and participation which in turn leads to better behaviour.

“It was clear while gathering evidence from the schools in this study that there is a strong link between effective learning for sustainability ... and the general socialisation of children as they progress through the education system.”

Researcher

- It enables students to become more readily engaged in the complex issues and dilemmas of sustainability. Evidence shows that their participation and enthusiasm are part of what equips pupils with the capacity to learn and become leaders.

“Being chosen as a student representative to work with staff and students or with trainee teachers became a coveted position!”

School leader

4. Sustainable schools allow the development, integration and connection with other educational policies and initiatives.

- Sustainability informs, strengthens and integrates other current initiatives especially those in relation to Every Child Matters (ECM) but also other initiatives such as healthy schools.
- This provides a way of building coherence across all the activities and purposes of a school.

“It is my firm belief that the issue of sustainability underpins what we do as school leaders ... enabling all other agendas to fall into place and be brought together like a jigsaw.”

School leader

“The ECM agenda ... can be very well supported through work on sustainability generally”

School leader

Sustainability outcomes that support ECM include pupils adopting healthy lifestyles, enjoyment of their education, good behaviour and making positive contributions to their community.

5. Sustainable schools provide direction and focus that bring about school improvements including the ECM outcomes, and supports raising achievement and attainment.

- Sustainability provides a clear direction and purpose in terms of what schools should be focusing on, which in turn brings about school improvement outcomes, including those of Every Child Matters.
- It builds school leaders’ confidence, efficacy and sense of achievement by enabling them to create concrete outcomes and real results in terms of improvement.

⁵ For this research all schools taking part had to submit a report

“The school feels more united ... in 2008/09 our results are the very best they have ever been ... attributed to a rise in pupil and staff satisfaction and involvement in sustainable development.”

School leader

“Sustainable development is becoming an integral part of our curriculum and impacting positively on pupil achievement.”

School leader

6. Sustainable schools focus specifically on improving the learning of children.

- Enhances learning for everyone but particularly for the participation and engagement of students.
- Provides a rich range of opportunities, contexts and activities for learning.

“The pupils are interested in it because it is real, they can see their future and it’s about their world.”

School leader

“Staff feel strongly that learners’ involvement in sustainable development and their growing global awareness has motivated them to learn and helped raise standards.”

School leader

From the reports⁵, the kind of learning that is taking place is described by the leaders as:

- practical and hands-on, with pupils able to see what impact they are having and learning from that
- outdoors and based locally
- engaged in the community, both by bringing in people and learning about local issues
- aligned to citizenship and community cohesion as it involves a pupil learning as a person in the world rather than as a pupil in a school, and aligned to cross-disciplinary working, with all departments involved

7. Sustainable schools engage in curriculum change and development as sustainability is embedded across the whole curriculum.

- Sustainability affects the way in which the curriculum is viewed, structured and implemented.
- Sustainability is becoming a cross-subject, cross-curriculum, cross-school approach.

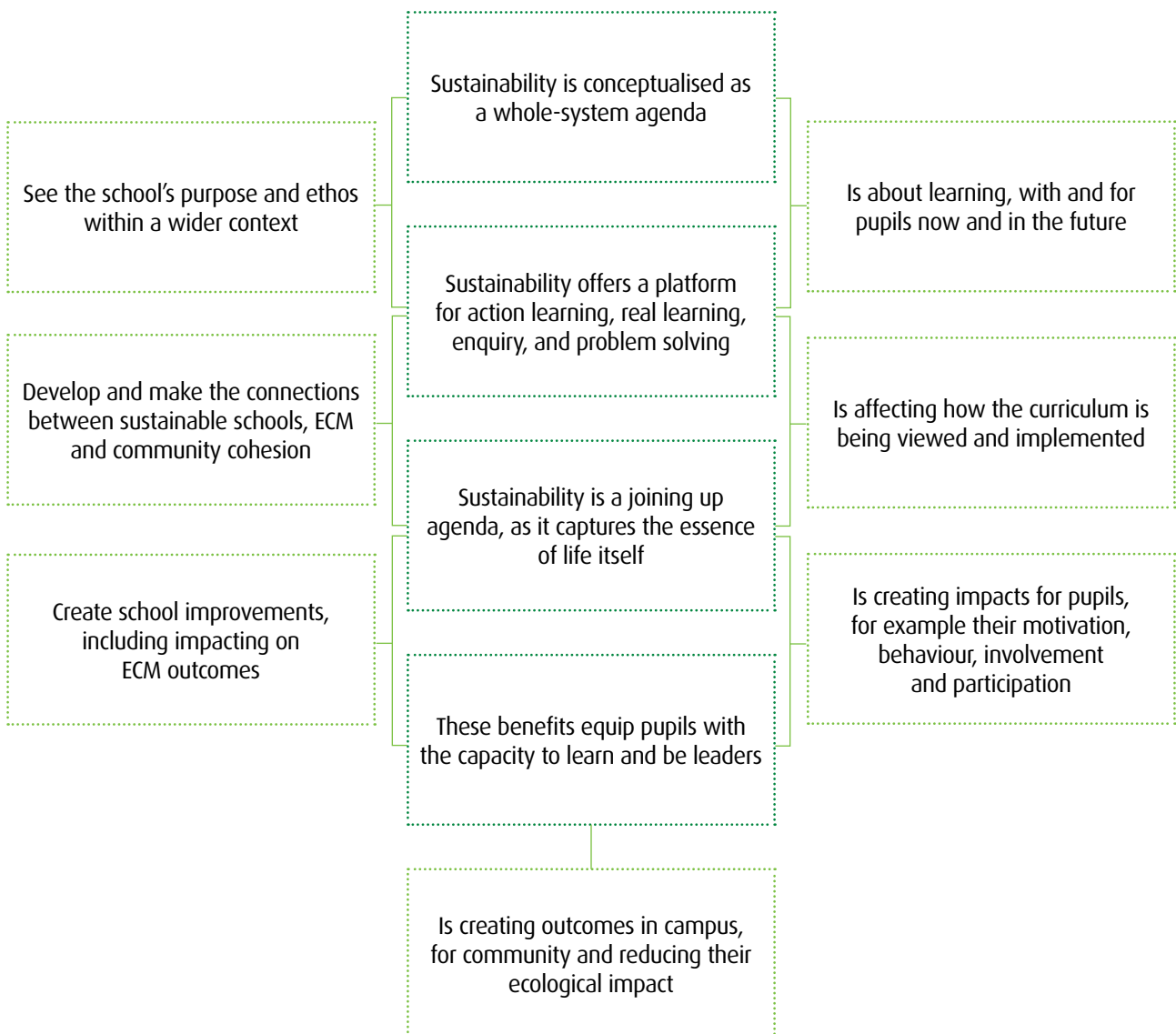
“It has enriched our curriculum.”

School leader

“Activities and resources used in the project have strengthened the way the curriculum is planned and approached and activities developed to engage children.”

School leader

Figure 1: Sustainable schools



Processes that help bring about the seven characteristics

The following three processes that help schools become sustainable were identified through the research.

1. Starting from where people are, building leaders and celebrating what we are doing already

This includes using tools and processes that help people find their role and connect to the agenda. This might be using the DCSF Doorways Framework model and/or tools such the National College's Sustainability Toolkit⁶ or the sustainable schools self-evaluation form to help the processes of engagement.

2. Providing a context from senior management for others to lead

The research found that the role and commitment of the headteacher coupled with strong leadership is critical and necessary to enable sustainability to take root.

Some leaders have also sought to influence the thinking and practice of the senior leadership team, including changing from more authoritative and solo leadership styles to democratic and inclusive leadership.

3. Helping pupils and adults to grow as leaders

Many leaders talked about using the expertise and creating the knowledge-base within others so they could take forward the sustainable schools agenda. Leaders recognise that they need to give permission to others to take forward this agenda as well as cultivating their own capabilities.

"It has been important in our community of practice to recognise, highlight and use the talents and expertise of others and not try to be expert at everything yourself."

School leader

Recommendations for leaders wanting to engage in this agenda

Through this research, leaders were asked what advice they would give to a school leader embarking for the first time on a journey of leadership for sustainability. Here are their suggestions, grouped into ten categories.

1. Involve students.

Form an action team of pupils.

2. Envisage what you want.

Have a vision of the sort of school you want to be and create it with the whole staff: it is important that everyone develops it together!

3. Network, share with partners and visit others.

Visit other institutions to see how education for sustainable development operates in practice.

Set up communities of practice or other support networks to allow interested parties to work together.

Engage interested partners, including community partners, on projects that will benefit them and add value to their work.

Provide support at a local and regional level.

4. Plan, and put it in your school development plan.

Sustainable development should be a school improvement target.

Include the work in your development planning and leadership framework.

⁶ <http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/leadershiplibrary/leadingschools/leading-change/key-initiatives/sustainable-schools/developing-sustainable-school-toolkit>

5. Be patient, flexible and creative with change and take risks.

Have patience and a belief it will happen.
Don't expect change to happen overnight.
Be flexible and creative.
Be prepared to allow risk-taking behaviour in yourself and others.

6. Evaluate, prepare and reflect.

Allow time for preparation, processing and measuring your progress.
Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate.
Use leadership tools, for example the sustainable schools self-evaluation form, to facilitate development, monitoring and review.
Share your findings with the school community, at staff meetings, on training days and via a newsletter.
Create an action plan and monitor progress.

7. Make what resources you can available.

Provide a budget.
Give time and (if possible money) to allow the work to move forward.
Take the initiative to look for funding.

8. Encourage and distribute leadership and involve the senior leadership team.

Distribute leadership across as many areas, teams and staff as possible.
Encourage the commitment of staff and make sure shared commitment is not just driven by a few people.
Identify key leaders and make people accountable.
Be outward-looking and link to other organisations.
Set up network groups.
Share good practice.

9. Make connections

Make the connection between sustainability and other development issues for the school so that heads and the senior leadership team support the programme.

Produce DVDs about what has been achieved so far to communicate the practicalities and achievements in a way that is accessible. It is spiritually satisfying to see success stories told by the people involved and it makes you feel you can do it too.

Build sustainability into all aspects of the development and assessment of school facilities and performance.

10. Extend learning

Look for every opportunity to extend learning. Seize these opportunities and exploit them.
Take risks and learn.

Share your experiences and rewards however small.

Learn from each other.

Listen to staff, parents and the community. They often have the answers to the questions we spend ages contemplating.

Working with a community of practice

The schools highlighted many success stories of working within a community of practice and there was a rich and wide variation in types and size of communities of practice among schools. Some report that they use a whole-authority approach (where the local authority was relatively small), one has a dispersed e-learning community whilst many are small groups of three or four schools. Some communities of practice are based on existing networks and some are establishing totally new groups.

“Communities of practice join together to explore issues and questions as peers. They value everyone’s expertise”

School leader

“Everyone is involved in developing and generating knowledge.”

School leader

The purposes and processes of the communities of practice were also wide-ranging and identified by participants in a range of examples which included having a flexible agenda while remaining true to purpose, developing contacts and identifying enthusiasts, the lead school developing curriculum materials for everyone, spreading the message, different uses of the eight doorways and getting everyone on board.

“Through system leadership, the community feels that higher achievement has been made than would have occurred if schools were working in isolation.”

School leader

Leadership for sustainability

Broad characteristics

This study identified a number of consistent themes in the leadership of effective sustainable schools. In broad terms, it found such leadership to be exciting, inspiring and challenging.

Moreover, it found strong parallels between the leadership practice displayed in these contexts and the principles that underpin transformational leadership theory (eg Bass & Avolio, 1994).

These centre on:

- the presence of an inspirational and moral vision (an outward-facing passion)
- a commitment to nurturing the potential of others, thereby encouraging and enabling them to contribute to the realisation of the vision (cultivating the potential of others)
- consistently modelling the behaviours required to achieve the overarching vision

Leading through relationships

A belief in and commitment to developing relationships with others is fundamental to each of these aspects, and was strongly evidenced throughout this study. Indeed, it was by nurturing relationships with and between others within the school, the broader partnership and the wider community that these leaders established the systemic⁷ commitment to sustainability that is essential to achieving the broader vision of the sustainable school:

“It is important to recognise that the sustainable schools agenda is too big and diverse for just one person to implement. If change is going to happen then schools must ensure leadership is distributed.”

School leader

⁷ ‘Systemic’ is a term used in organisational development and drawn from the theory of cybernetics. A useful definition is drawn from O’Connor & McDermott (1997): ‘Something that maintains its existence and functions as whole through the interaction of its parts’.

These themes are explored further below.

Qualities of sustainable leadership

Passionate and outward-focused

Holding the values and visions of sustainability in a way that gives an imperative to act from a larger sense of purpose, one that is outward-looking, where leaders look beyond the school and into their community and its environment.

“Sustainability covers all aspects of school and community life, it is not an add-on. Therefore it requires effective leadership that is at the heart of whole-school development at a strategic level and throughout all aspects of school life. It requires everyone to be outward-looking and have the ability to see how organisations and roles link together to create effective partnerships.”

School leader

“A vision that I share with all within the school and I actively take out to others who form part of the school’s wider community, reflecting on outward-looking leadership style which has resulted in extensive partnership working supporting education for sustainable development across the school. This has been a key driver throughout this project particularly in getting our COP on board where as a lead school, I have shown to others my commitment and passion for education for sustainable development, ensuring others can see how it underpins all that I do in my school and the difference it has and does make in daily school life.”

School leader

Cultivating the potential of others

This requires leadership that is inclusive, committed to a shared vision, demonstrates care and concern, and develops ideas from others, thereby enabling others to develop their ability to lead.

“It’s about creating people that are confident.”

School leader

“It’s important to recognise and reward individual effort and involvement and take a back seat yourself sometimes.”

School leader

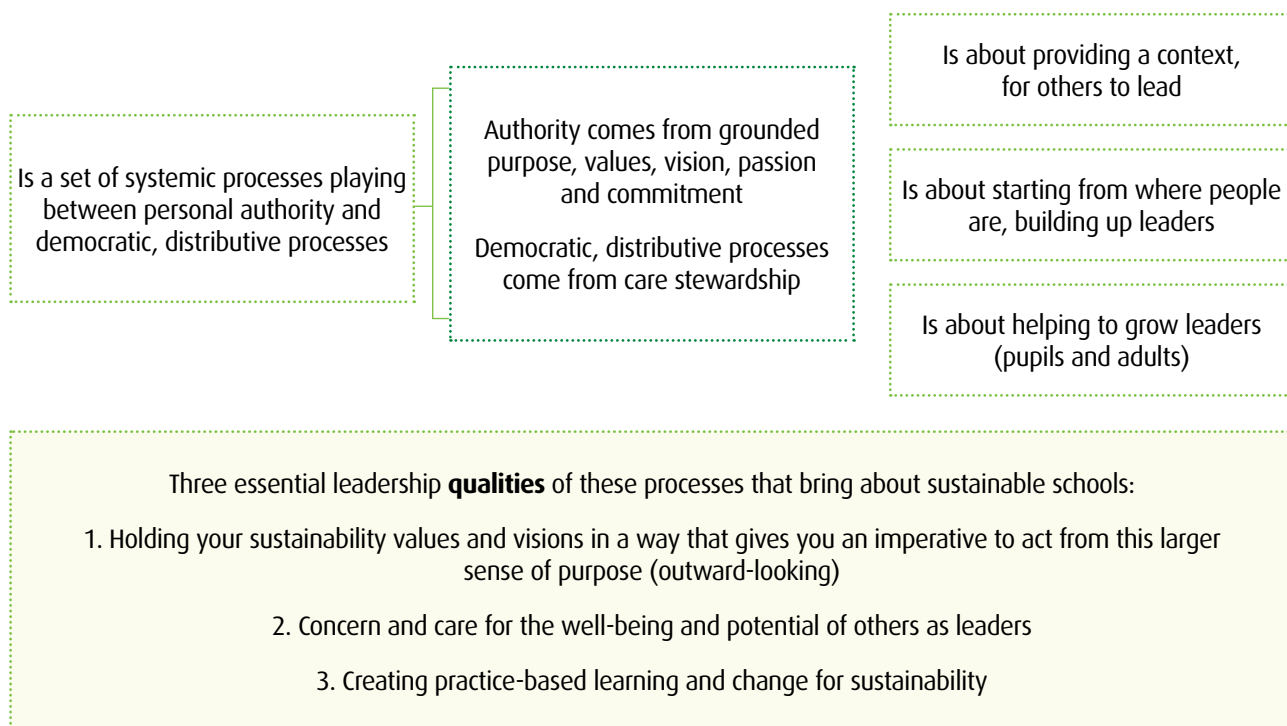
Demonstrating courageous agency

The term ‘courageous agency’ is defined as seeing oneself as able to make a difference and having the ability to change the status quo. It requires taking the initiative, as well as a willingness to take risks and having the energy to create practice and change.

“For me, our sustainability project was a new venture and took me out of my comfort zone dealing with issues I had never faced before.”

School leader

Figure 2: Leading sustainable schools



Conclusions

The school leaders represented here have brought improvement, change, learning and leadership into a new relationship with each other and their community of practice for a different and bigger purpose. They are contributing to a powerful shift for the school system by bringing these four educational goals and aspirations to life. Fostering greater sustainability becomes a process of nourishing, freeing and restoring the relationships and connections between people, their school and community and its environment; between people, their purpose and place.

The approaches described by the school leaders in this research are highly innovative as they seek to achieve what has not been done before, leading in the absence of a blueprint and instead seeking to create the future they wish to see for the next generation in their midst. We can see from these school leaders the power and benefit of leadership for sustainability.

Placing sustainability at the heart of school culture, ethos, policies and activities is a challenge. Throughout this research the schools show there is no single approach or one person who can take it on and be successful by themselves. If a whole-school approach is to be achieved and the partial status of sustainability overcome, it cannot be a journey that is travelled alone. Sometimes school leaders for sustainability are headteachers or part of senior leadership teams. Sometimes they are teachers, governors, teaching assistants or parents and often a combination of these. Sustainable schools are particularly successful in enabling students of all ages to become leaders.

“Sustainability gives us a strategy for working in relation with schools for creating a ‘new story’ for education.”

School leader

Holding sustainability as a moral imperative, seeing everyone as a potential leader, learning through action and developing communities of practice are in combination a powerful force to influence the school system.

The findings from this research demonstrate that sustainability offers something to schools that is more than just another initiative or agenda to follow. Sustainability is life-giving to people and their organisational purposes, policies, practices and processes. It gives meaning when it provides a robust moral framework to operate within, as it addresses the fundamentals of life – the need for a strong, healthy and just society, that can only continue to operate now and for future generations within our planetary environmental limits.

We have seen evidence in operation in these schools that sustainability offers leaders a way to join up and build coherence, within their context and around the multitude of educational priorities. This life giving property offers a strong platform for learning and leadership, learning that is based within the challenges we all face that in turn makes for active, real and meaningful leadership that nourishes those who are engaged.

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