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## Bringing Them Together: what children think about the world in which they live and how it could be improved

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**ABSTRACT** Attitudes towards environmental issues are influenced by many factors, including what is learned in formal educational settings such as schools and more informally, through such sources as the media, interaction with family and friends and our everyday lived experiences. This study investigated children's ideas about the environment and their perceptions of their future world. The initial stimulus for the discussions was a television advertisement for a soap detergent and in total 51 children aged 10-11 years old discussed what actions could be taken to make 'a nicer world'. The concept of global learning, which draws on aspects of environmental and development education, provided the framework for the discussions and the analyses of the outcomes. The children demonstrated their awareness of environmental issues as well as some confusion, whilst also revealing their appreciation of media strategies.

### **Background**

In recent years environmental education has gained a higher profile in English schools, although inconsistently and in a number of guises (Serf, 2006), and whatever the next round of educational reforms brings, it is certain is that it will continue to contest for limited curriculum time with other 'educational good causes' and its fortunes reflect the mood of the government at that particular time. For example, the UK government's Department for International Development's championing of global issues partly explains the increased interest recently in the 'Global Dimension', through which young people learn, amongst other things, to 'explore their own place within a changing world' and 'to think imaginatively about what individuals can do to develop a more ...

sustainable future' (QCA, 2009, p. 22). What is needed is a wide-ranging review of the current school curriculum focusing on what future generations should learn and why it is important that they learn it, rather than a knee-jerk reaction to the latest 'crisis'. This strategy must be adopted if we are to identify a curriculum for the twenty-first century. There is no shortage of analyses from which to begin such a review; for example, Olssen et al (2004), Harrison (2006), Jerome (2006), Osler & Starkey (2006) and Huckle (2008).

Global learning can provide an education that is fit for purpose in preparing learners to survive and thrive in, as well as contribute to, their society. Global learning will ensure that learners develop basic skills, for example in literacy, numeracy and IT and, although these may appear mundane, they must not be undervalued. These, together with what may be termed social skills, are essential in a curriculum fit for purpose as such competences hold, for some, the key to becoming successful individuals in a successful society in a successful economy.

This [curriculum], be it based on facts or skill competence, may be regarded as the 'majority curriculum'; ... that the majority of our children learn for the majority of their time in the educational system and is recognised as being 'what education should cover' by the majority of members of society. However, there is a very real danger that these essential elements of Global Learning will ... dominate (or may even already be dominating) the learning experienced by the majority of learners in our schools. (Serf, 2008, p. 413)

Therefore, it is important to consider what other elements of global learning may be overlooked, even though being essential in a curriculum that is fit for purpose. This could be the 'minority curriculum'; experienced by the minority of learners for the minority of their time in the educational system and appreciated as being of value by relatively few society members.

Global learning, which offers a curriculum appropriate for the twenty-first century, may be defined as about meeting the educational needs of those growing up in an increasingly globalised society; for example, helping them see themselves as global citizens; helping them to have a deeper understanding of interdependence; and providing opportunities to participate fully in their education. Table I outlines some of outcomes of global learning and resulted from discussions held by teachers' working groups and from guidance from the project's steering group.

**Young learners are entitled to:**

- have a sense of their connections to the wider world;
- be encouraged to be open-minded and have a questioning approach to the world around them;
- be confident in themselves and their right to speak out for justice, equality and the dignity of all others;
- develop as individuals, with their own identities, languages, cultures and lifestyles;
- learn from others and value alternative viewpoints and perspectives.

**be able to employ the skills of:**

- communicating – listening, discussing, expressing their ideas and opinions;
- critical reasoning, thinking and using/evaluating evidence;
- identifying prejudice, bias and discrimination;
- recognising their own values and what influences them;
- taking responsibility for their actions and the consequences;
- evaluating the actions of others;
- empathising with others.

**know about:**

- the centrality of human relationships;
  - common human experiences, needs and rights to dignity, justice and life;
  - disparities in human living conditions;
  - the importance of change – technological, economic, social, political and environmental;
  - concepts of democracy, governance and citizenship;
  - cultural and social identities, conflict and conciliation;
  - sustainable development and conservation;
  - rules, rights and responsibilities;
  - their own worth and the worth of other people.
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Table I. Outcomes of global learning. This table is an extract from a more comprehensive paper available online at [www.tidec.org](http://www.tidec.org)

**Purpose**

*Bringing Them Together* was a joint project between the University of Wolverhampton and TIDE – an educational charity, which is a network of school teachers and other educators that aims to enable teachers, schools and organisations to adopt global dimensions and development perspectives as part of their own agenda.

The project engaged children in discussing issues relating to the outcomes of global learning (Table I) and aimed to:

- explore children’s opinions about what actions (and by whom) could be taken to improve the world;
- consider the extent to which their opinions reflect the outcomes of global learning as outlined in Table 1;
- identify what/who the children perceive as the main providers of ‘knowledge’, skills and dispositions related to about such outcomes.

The children’s responses demonstrated the success of using a stimulus with which they were familiar (i.e. a television advertisement) to raise a series of questions about the environment in general, as well as illustrating that 10-11 year olds can consider such questions in a relatively short discussion.

### Methods

*Bringing Them Together* consulted 51 Year 6 children (10-11 years old) in a non-random selection of five primary schools in the West Midlands about their views on the environment and the world in which they live and would like to live in the future. Of the 51 children, 27 were boys and 24 were girls.

An outline profile of each school is provided in Table II, which illustrates the schools’ diverse natures. The intention was to gather the views of children from different backgrounds and, therefore, schools were sought in very different localities. It was assumed that geographical location would have a significant impact on the children’s socio-economic and ethnic-cultural backgrounds.

School (age range)	Description*	
	Location	Pupil characteristics
School 1 (3-11 years)	Rural, village school	107 pupils – almost entirely White British backgrounds – below average numbers with learning difficulties or disabilities and statements of special educational need – very few entitled to free school meals.
School 2 (3-11 years)	Suburban school in relatively affluent area	560 pupils – predominately all White British – wide range of social economic backgrounds – proportion who have learning difficulties or disabilities is a little below average, although proportion with statements of special educational need is average.
School 3 (3-11 years)	Outer-ring deprived council housing estate	338 pupils – less than 10 Muslim or mixed-race background – number receiving free school meals & proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above average.
School 4 (7-11 years)	Inner-city school	360 pupils – 100% Muslim, predominately of Pakistani origin, growing numbers of Somali – 29% free school meals – higher than average with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

School 5 (4-11 years)	Rural, village school	48 pupils – almost all from White British heritage – most from advantaged economic backgrounds.
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Table II. The five schools.\* At the initial meeting the head teacher/senior teacher of each school was asked to provide a brief description of the school's location and the characteristics of its pupils. Additional information from Ofsted inspection reports.

The children were volunteers who responded to their teachers' requests for 'children to meet with someone from the University to discuss what they felt about the environment'. The only additional criteria given to the teachers, besides a willingness to meet and talk, was that it would be helpful if there were a gender, cultural and racial mix that reflected that of the school. Table III provides an outline consultation schedule that lasted 45-60 minutes.

The consultation began with the children viewing a 30-second television advertisement for Persil's *Small and Mighty* detergent.[1] The advertisement claims that using this concentrated detergent means using 'half' the resources, i.e. water, packaging and lorries. It concludes with the phrase, 'Every child has a right to a nicer world'.

The researcher followed the consultation schedule (Table III), using the key questions to guide the discussion, but in each consultation children's comments and interests took the discussions in different directions.

Phase of session/activity/record	Key questions	Links to/evidence of global learning (see Table I)
1. Initial stimulus – Persil's <i>Small and Mighty</i> advertisement – 'Every child has a right to a nicer world' – discussion audio taped.	Why did they make that advert? Is it true? Is it accurate? How do you know that/Where did you learn about that? What do you think they mean by 'Every child has a right to a nicer world'? Would other people agree with you?	- Identifying prejudice, bias & discrimination. - Recognising their own values & what influences them. - Being open-minded & having a questioning approach to the world around them.
2. Your world – discussion audio taped.	What would make your world 'nicer'? Who would have to do what to make your world 'nicer'? What could you do to make your world 'nicer'? How do you know that? Where did you learn about that?	- Recognising their own values & what influences them. - Evaluating the actions of others. - Taking responsibility for their actions & the consequences.
3. Other children's worlds – discussion audio taped.	What would make the world 'nicer' for others	- Recognising their own values & what influences

<p>4. Prime Minister for the day – children note bullet points on paper.</p>	<p>in this school? In England? In the world? Who would have to do what to make the world 'nicer'? What could you do to make the world 'nicer'? How do you know that? Where did you learn about that? Would those children agree with you? If you were PM for one day, what three things would you do to make it a 'nicer' world?</p>	<p>them.          - Evaluating the actions of others.          - Taking responsibility for their actions &amp; the consequences.          - Empathising with others.          - Common human experiences, needs &amp; rights to dignity, justice &amp; life.          - Various</p>
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Table III. Consultation schedule.

The discussions were based on Hart's principles of democratic process (1997, pp. 49-51). The children were made aware fully of the intentions of the project and, as stated above, were volunteers. The nature of the researcher's position (i.e. the power basis of the group) was identified clearly and the children were assured that all their comments would remain anonymous. Clear rules were established at the beginning of the discussions; for example, the children were assured that they would all have the opportunity to say what they wished, but that if they wished to make no comment, they were free to do so. The children had been given several days' notice of the consultation and had taken home letters to explain the activity to their parents/carers, who could request their child not to take part. No parent/carer exercised this right. The study was designed and conducted to correspond with the British Psychological Society's *Code of Ethics and Conduct*.<sup>[2]</sup>

### Analysis and Findings

Four themes emerged in the discussions:

1. Television advertisements in general and Persil's *Small and Mighty* in particular.
2. The children's knowledge and understanding of environmental issues.
3. The children's imaginings of the views of others.
4. The children's suggestions for satisfying the principle that 'Every child has a right to a nicer world'.

Each theme was analysed for 'evidence' of the outcomes of global learning (Table I). Table III shows how selected outcomes of global learning relate to the phases of the consultation.

*1. Television Advertisements in General and Persil's 'Small and Mighty' in Particular*

The children were in no doubt as to why advertisements are made and transmitted on television. Each group expressed opinions corresponding to this response to the question, 'Why did they make that advert?':

So people will know about the washing powder ... so they will buy it. (School 5)

The children's responses suggested that they are under no illusions as to why large amounts of funding are spent on television advertising and revealed some understanding of 'green advertising' by which commercial companies stress the non-impact of their products on the environment. For example:

What they're saying is "Look at us, we're making environmentally friendly powder to wash your clothes in." (School 1)

However, some individuals recognised that there may be other, less magnanimous motives.

They probably wanted to sell the product more. They were just trying to look good in front of other people ... like if we're doing it for the environment they probably just wanted to sell their product more. (School 3)

Some children recognised the potential for prejudice and bias, and most of them were certainly capable of questioning the media that is part of their everyday lives. Their abilities to identify bias, together with some elements of critical evaluation of evidence (i.e. the television advert), provided indications of the development of some of the skills noted in Table I, including critical reasoning.

The children recognised the concept of 'pester power' and they used it effectively in their discussions.

Pupil 5: I think it's [the advert] aimed at children and adults. Children try and persuade their parents to actually use it because they think it's going to make the planet a better place because all the things it's been saying it can do, it's also for adults because they're the actual ones who buy it.

Pupil 7: They make it child friendly and you see it a lot on the children's programmes and because they've got the pop-up book and everything and I know that my little sister really likes playing with those, but it gets across to the little children and they might think, 'Oh, Mummy if this happens so can you go and buy it and then the parents might see it as well.'

Researcher: So is it an example of what some people call 'pester power'?

Several: Yes.

This group continued discussing how children influence their parents' spending and displayed a relatively well-developed understanding of pester power and how it may be exploited by the advertising industry to sell items not generally associated with children.

## *2. The Children's Knowledge and Understanding of Environmental Issues*

Each of the groups demonstrated knowledge about the environment, but as one might expect there was some confusion. Many of the children followed the argument presented in the advertisement. This discussion was typical:

Pupil 10: It's [the advert] saying that it's half the lorries, so when it was a big pack they had to use more and more lorries, but when they made it a smaller pack they only use half the lorries.

Pupil 2: I think it will help the environment because when it's a small pack, twice the packs will fit in, and because the lorries are giving out smoke from the exhaust and carbon dioxide, it makes the plants die out because there's too much carbon dioxide. (School 4)

However, vary degrees of confusion existed. For example;

R: Pupil 17, you said 'No' ... you don't think it would [help the environment].

Pupil 17: No because the small one might stop the pollution, but it will make you spend more money, if you buy the bigger pack it might last you for two weeks, but if you buy the smaller pack it might only last you a week and if you have a big family you have a lot of washing. (School 4)

Children in School 2 demonstrated an awareness of the interconnectedness of environmental issues.

R: So it's not just about buying Persil then?

Pupil 7: No ... if you buy Persil, I think it is true, but say if there was 10 different things ... that would be just like taking one of them, but there's still 9 things left.

Pupil 18: I think it's partly true, like it is true that if you reduce the amount of lorries and packaging and things you will help save the planet, but partly not because packaging will still increase global warming, if you recycle it, it will probably make as much ... but if you don't recycle at all and you're really lazy and just throw it away on the street then it will still increase global warming so it's you that has to help.

The children's discussions suggested that they had sufficient environmental awareness or knowledge about 'sustainable development and conservation' (Table I) to follow the argument presented by the advert and to appreciate, at one level, that if less materials are consumed, the planet should benefit.



However, some individuals did not appreciate that what made this product special or different, according to the advert, is its 'concentrated power' and these children thought simply that a smaller box would mean having to buy more boxes for the same amount of washing. Another common misunderstanding was the confusion over such concepts as 'global warming' and 'the ozone layer'.

It is worth noting the children's comments about the sources of their knowledge. When asked, 'How do you know that?', 'Who told you that?' and 'Where did you learn that?' the first and most common response in each school was 'On TV'. When asked to be more specific, the children named individual programmes, most frequently BBC's *Newsround* or talked generally about 'nature programmes'. All groups listed family and friends as sources of information about the environment, as well as the Internet, but none could quote a specific website. Only four out of the five schools offered 'school' as a source of their knowledge, but this, I hope, was an oversight. Those that did recalled specific topics and curriculum areas where they had learnt about 'Recycling', 'Pollution' and 'Whales and things'. Children in School 4 explained how they were more likely to believe what they are told about, for example, a natural disaster if they see visual evidence. Only one child quoted the radio as a source of information or knowledge.

### *3. The Children's Imaginings of the Views of Others*

The children found it relatively easy to suggest what would make their world a 'nicer place' and their ideas are reflected below. The children were given a more difficult task in 'What would make it a nicer place for other children – in different parts of England and beyond?' The most successful strategy for supporting the children to empathise with others (Table I) was for the researcher to provide the following challenge as an introduction.

You're all very similar ... because you're all in the same year in the same school and you all live in XXX. So you may have similar ideas. But what if I had people from different schools around the world? One person from a school in America, one from South Africa, one from India, from Australia, from Russia and so on? Do you think we'd get a similar sort of agreement as we've got here? Do you think there'd be differences in that group?

Children's responses showed an awareness of the global implications of climate change and an appreciation that others might have different opinions. For example:

Pupil 6: I think it [what other children would suggest as contributing to a nicer world] would probably be the same because global warming is obviously a global thing and all children are affected by it all round the world meaning the ice caps are melting and making floods and animals being endangered lots of people like

animals all around the world so basically global warming affects everyone.

Pupil 5: I think lots of people from different parts of the world, they're more worried about ... like in Africa, if you had about just enough money. I mean if you lived in Zimbabwe at the moment you wouldn't be half as worried about global warming than about yourself whether the next day you were suddenly going to be executed.

Pupil 8: ... in Africa it would be like HIV and drought and not having enough food and things that they should have and poverty. (School 2)

Clearly, Pupil 5 has an awareness of justice, dignity, rights and responsibilities (all noted in Table I), whilst others showed an awareness of elements of commonality of human experiences beyond that of climate change. For example, Pupil 24 drew on his holiday experiences and the charity work that had taken place in his school in aid of a street shelter in Birmingham:

Pupil 24: It's a bit like the street kids and people who live on the street, like when I went to Thailand there's, wherever you walk, there's hundreds of people just on the streets.

Researcher: So what would make their world nicer?

Pupil 24: If we had more street homes like you know the place in London or Birmingham where they come in and that's what they need more of.

The children demonstrated clearly an awareness of disparities in human living conditions (Table I), and also their perceptions of a range of countries and continents.

Pupil 21: A place like Africa it's a very poor country so like they don't have things like cars and in South Africa which is the richest part and northern Africa and round the Sahara Desert they don't have cars and so they wouldn't talk about pollution because they don't know what it is.

Pupil 22: In America nearly every family has about 2 cars and they travel a lot and there's not many places that don't have buildings.

Pupil 23: In poor countries, if they had a better lifestyle ... because most people there are quite poor, if they had a better life.

Pupil 23: Better food and a healthier lifestyle ... in Africa they don't have clean water. (School 5)

4. *The Children's Suggestions for Satisfying the Principle that 'Every Child Has a Right to a Nicer World'*

Each consultation ended with a short written task as the children responded enthusiastically to the question, 'If you were the Prime Minister for one day, what three things would you do to make it a 'nicer world?' Their ideas reflected the main focus of their earlier discussions, i.e. environmental issues, which was the direction indicated by the use of the Persil advert. A different initial stimulus could have resulted in a different theme dominating the consultation. The children's ideas as to what they would do if they were the Prime Minister also drew on Phase 2 of the schedule: what would make their world 'nicer'.

Many of the children would, if elected, ban families having two cars; would only allow non-polluting vehicles to be made and sold; and would increase the minimum age at which one can hold a driving licence. Others would seek ways of increasing the recycling of materials by offering cash incentives; increase the preservation of woodlands; and restrict building outside of existing urban areas. The child-Prime Ministers would prohibit the hunting of many mammals and other endangered species and increase the size and number of conservation areas. There was, therefore, further evidence of the children's knowledge and understanding (and in some cases misunderstanding) of sustainable development and conservation.

The children did not lack ideas for improving their local communities. There was strong support for restricting, and in some case the total banning, of smoking, as there was for punishing any local graffiti artist or dealing illegally in drugs. Honesty would be rewarded by cash or holidays and the children seem quite relaxed about civil liberties. For example:

Put spy cameras on walls and when people do wrong they can be caught and arrested. (School 4)

Many of the children see community cohesion and human relationships (Table I) as important aspects of a 'nicer world' and would seek to ensure that we, for example, 'Treat other *religioned* people the way you would be treated' (School 1) and one suggested:

A huge event including every race so we can hang out with different races get to know them. (School 4)

When considering what could or should be done to make it a 'nicer world' for more distant communities, many of the children stated that their suggestions to address climate change would also impact on other countries. However, the children did put forward other ideas that they felt would impact more directly on more distant communities, the most common involving the direct transfer of wealth from richer to less rich communities (for example, 'Open up schools in poorer countries' and 'Give Africa food, water, clothes, animals, goats, sheep, cows, hens').

A significant number of children argued that as the Prime Minister they would seek peaceful conflict resolution (Table I) as this benefits all communities, including their own.

Stop war so parents don't have to go away and have the risk of dying. (School 1)  
Stamp out wars and use mental strategies instead of physical. (School 2)

### Conclusions

The most obvious conclusion is that the children were able to listen, discuss and express their own ideas and that they all enjoyed talking about their world, showed real concern for their own futures, for other people's futures and for the planet. The children had thoughts that they wanted and were willing to share in the forum. Whilst there is clear evidence of their confusion over the 'cause and effect' of some environmental issues, they displayed an awareness of the several significant issues and are not short of ideas or commitment. In short, they demonstrated traits that will stand them in good stead as 'Tackling global environmental change will require enormous creativity and adaptability' (DCSF, 2009, p. 2). How else is anyone to survive, thrive and contribute to society in such uncertain times?

### Notes

[1] [http://www.utalkmarketing.com/Pages/CreativeShowcase.aspx?ArticleID=4077&Filter=0&Keywords=&Order=LATEST&Page=1&Title=Persil\\_Small\\_and\\_Mighty\\_%27Pop\\_Up\\_Book%27](http://www.utalkmarketing.com/Pages/CreativeShowcase.aspx?ArticleID=4077&Filter=0&Keywords=&Order=LATEST&Page=1&Title=Persil_Small_and_Mighty_%27Pop_Up_Book%27)

[2] [http://www.bps.org.uk/document-download-area/document-download\\$.cfm?file\\_uuid=E6917759-9799-434A-F313-9C35698E1864&ext=pdf](http://www.bps.org.uk/document-download-area/document-download$.cfm?file_uuid=E6917759-9799-434A-F313-9C35698E1864&ext=pdf)

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### *News Items*

While he was busy promoting Swedish-style 'free schools' before the General Election, our new Education Secretary Michael Gove, was remarkably quiet about the fate of a 'private-partnership' school in his own Surrey constituency. King's International School in Camberley opened in 2001 in partnership with 3Es Enterprises, the commercial arm of Kingshurst College in Solihull, outside Birmingham, which had opened as the country's first City Technology College in September 1988. A front-page story in *The Observer* on 2 May 2010 revealed that the Surrey School had recently received a withering OFSTED report, which criticised the leadership of the School and the Governing Body for 'failing to embed aspiration in the pupils, drive improvement and promote equality of opportunity or tackle discrimination'. As a result, Surrey County Council was forced to take the School back with council control and end all links with 3Es.

Michael Gove told *The Sunday Times* on 6 June 2010 that public (independent) schools should no longer have to prove to prying officials from the Charity Commission that they provide 'public benefit' in order to retain the tax breaks they enjoy with 'charitable status'. Apparently, poorer public schools find it very difficult to provide 'business' for deserving non fee-paying pupils. Public schools can become *exempt charities* which are not subject to Charity Commission jurisdiction.