Educational leadership for sustainability

50 shades of green, and much more

David Dixon

Abstract

The world is facing an existential threat from yoked horses of the apocalypse, including catastrophic climate change, chemical toxicity, mass extinctions, certain populations overconsuming, unstable governments, migration and pandemics. The biosphere of the planet is becoming less conducive to life, including human life. As we enter the Anthropocene, how should we aim to reverse the damaging effects of our technology and culture in order to enter the Ecocene? What role should education play? This paper argues that leadership for sustainability should be a dominant model throughout education and wider society, rather than being consigned to the periphery, or totally unrecognised. It describes how the values and actions of these leaders relate directly to how our type of civilisation can be repurposed and ultimately redeemed for survival into the distant future. It also argues that progressive approaches have more to offer than traditional ones. The paper is polemical in style, and uses broad-brush contexts to hopefully instigate suitably new discussions on leadership in education.

Keywords: progressive and traditional education; school leadership; sustainable values

Getting down to business

In the last 150 years, progressive approaches to education have always been present, for example in child/student-centred teaching, and teachers acting as learning facilitators allowing the learner to explore what they like at their own pace. Such approaches are still exemplified by Montessori and Steiner schools, albeit within a certain structure, and were present in the 1967 Plowden Report and the 2008 Cambridge Primary Review.[1] Another branch of progressive education was the anti-school movement made famous by Ivan Illich[2] and his postmodern 'counter-culture' followers (and this type of philosophy still remains in part of the home-schooling movement favoured by an increasing number of parents in affluent countries). Nevertheless, the traditional approach still dominates. That is, a didactic pedagogy and a curriculum which expects children will learn certain knowledge and skills at fixed stages of their lives and be regularly tested on these. By the time they leave

the system, these narrow parameters largely determine careers/jobs and subsequent life chances. Of course, there remain significant progressive approaches within this system, especially in the primary sector, but the system as a whole still defers to the traditional narrative described above.

The traditional approach tends to favour STEM subjects rather than the arts, and is designed like a production line to feed the needs of the business-as-usual (BAU) economy as measured by GDP. This needs successful producers and consumers, and is predicated on unrelenting growth. Some parents are skilled at gaming this system to make sure their offspring get ahead of the rest. If you opt out of it you may be a hippy; if you're excluded from it, you may be part of the precariat. Whatever the case, the industrial system of education grinds on, helping to feed the industrial economy. Charles Dickens would still recognise this system as exemplified in his novel *Hard Times*; Mr Gradgrind still lives.

An inconvenient truth (to coin a phrase)[3] is that this just isn't sustainable. We live on a finite planet, with finite resources, and only our age of stupid[4] seems to ignore this fact. The children's book *The Lorax*[5] explains this better than this author ever could.

The motor force behind BAU is the capitalist profit ethic, which explains the immoral exploitation of planetary and human resources ever since competing nations developed money and mercantilism (the system preceding capitalism with its fixation with accumulating precious metals and money and having a trade surplus with other countries). I say immoral, and one only needs to look at slavery to prove this point; however, even though it has created a highly rich tiny elite at the expense of everyone else, perhaps it's really an *amoral* economic system because it seems to have taken on a life of its own. Reich described this as an 'unhuman' system which is now regarded by most people as 'normal'.[6] This echoes Freire's notion of 'magical thinking' where we are all hoodwinked into accepting the normal of those in power.[7] Plotkin talks about people being stuck in an adolescent state 'with lots of "if onlys", whilst pursuing the "American Dream" which always seems just out of reach'.[8]

In the 18th century, Adam Smith, who was one of the first economists to describe capitalism in detail and extol its superiority over mercantilism, believed that through the specialisation of trades and the trading between individuals and groups, the economy would grow, and through the trickle-down effect of this everyone would prosper.[9] Unfortunately, not only has this perpetuated the myth of infinite growth, it has also, despite a rise in material wealth for more people, accentuated the gulf between the rich and poor. Often there's an underlying glass stratum of privilege which stymies any trickle down of wealth. This situation has also accelerated unsustainability because of the burgeoning middle classes who, along with the rich, now consume well over a planet's worth of resources a year – in the case of the UK 2.6 and the US 5.0 Earths respectively.[10]

Tall stories?

The business-as-usual narrative is relatively straightforward in terms of how it is understood and operated. It is based upon the rational thinking of the Enlightenment linked to capitalist market principles. The education element goes like this: we go to school in order to get a job and earn money, enabling us to buy stuff and services, which allows GDP to grow for the good of all. Mainstream politics from the left and right generally supports this. Democratic neo-liberal governments are held to account when it comes to the worst excesses of free markets, and legislate against them. However, they also generally welcome market forces because they allow 'individual choice' to determine what the economy produces and consumes. Therefore, rampant capitalism encouraged rampant individualism much beloved by those who believe in a sort of Darwinian economics (which also fits the Protestant work ethic notion that if you're poor, then it's your own fault).

This is why today there is a neo-liberal consensus that green growth is best and will ultimately save the planet. In other words, we need to 'green' the present economy, via changed individual consumption patterns, rather than construct a completely new economic system. This vision also relies upon various types of 'techno fixes', such as nuclear power, electric cars and even perhaps geo-engineering which might, for instance, put mirrors in space to reflect away some of the solar radiation which triggers global heating.

Are friends electric?

This way of thinking would be ok if we had more time, although it hides many dirty truths through the process of greenwashing. An example of this I witnessed at an airport where a sign in the toilets claimed that the hand-dryers were environmentally friendly, in keeping with the airport's aim of becoming carbon neutral. Another example is of someone who put a vast array of solar panels on his roof and then used the income and savings to have an extra holiday abroad. This latter example is known as the 'rebound effect' i.e. you save money by being 'green' and then squander your greenness on buying more stuff, often with an embodied carbon footprint that wipes out your virtue. I can think of schools that do this.

Electric cars are an example of wishing to 'green' the present economy rather than radically restructure the status quo. The embodied carbon of electric cars is vast: they use many rare metals for batteries and computer controls which have to be extracted and processed at an environmental cost equivalent to that inflicted by their internal combustion or hybrid cousins. They still need to have a global network of a nasty hydrocarbons mixed with processed rocks, a network commonly known as roads. They also produce harmful emissions in the form of particulates from their brakes

and transmissions.[11] Their use perpetuates the individualistic myth of the open road, while undermining public transport which is often perceived as inferior (and actually is when most of it is underfunded).

Unbalanced

Environmental tipping points are already being reached or surpassed, with indicators showing exponential trends. If this were applied to a human (that is, if the current state of the world was imagined in terms of human health), we would probably diagnose malignant cancer. The problem is that a radical sustainability alternative to the business-as-usual narrative is not such an easy story to tell. Essentially, it's based on New Economics and seeks to achieve a zero waste 'circular economy', which is regenerative by design and aims to gradually decouple growth from the consumption of finite resources, in order to ensure environmental, social and economic harmony into the distant future.[12] Therefore, it is more complicated than the linear take, make, use, dump model we've been saddled with since the industrial revolution, and also requires much more consensual, collective approaches rather than rampant individualism (ironically, Adam Smith recognised the value of these approaches, rather than the dog-eat-dog model). It also relies upon less widely acknowledged indicators of success than GDP, such as quality of life and degrees of happiness. Although increasingly these are being refined and developed, as with the general progress indicators, such measures are still far from being part of mainstream thinking.[13] One only has to look at the business pages of any newspaper, left, right or centre, to observe this. GDP still rules, even if it has green tinges (often with blatant greenwash).

Within all this there is great power play, whereby tiny elites consolidate their position and the rest of us, thinking that we live in a true meritocracy, via consumerism fight it out for positions in the rest of the hierarchy or are trapped in grinding poverty. Too often take, make, use, dump also applies to human beings! All this means that if the status quo is threatened it's seen as an act of betrayal, depravity or lunacy. In our part of the world, we are seduced by a WEIRD society – Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic[14] – and blindly accept its world view.

This is what proponents of long-term sustainability are up against, including those who operate in education. I was struck by the story of a US journalist who decided to have 'no impact' for a year. This meant getting rid of most of his possessions and bringing down every bit of his consumption to the bare minimum.[15] When he did a tour of radio stations and wrote articles about this quest, he was lambasted by many for being 'un-American'. He was told that if everyone behaved like this the economy would tank. But, once again, the inconvenient truth is that a type of degrowth is needed if we are to have a sustainable future. The idea of degrowth has been around in the

environmentalist fraternity for decades, yet has barely entered the consciousness of the mainstream media or academia for that matter.

Indigenous perspectives and Disney Time

The Iroquois First Nations Americans see themselves as in the middle of seven generations either side. They gain knowledge and wisdom from the seven generations preceding them and use this to help anticipate the conditions for thriving needed by the succeeding seven generations.[16] This is a permaculture perspective to sustainability, and extends to all areas of life. For example, it would say that the ultimate goal of farming isn't to produce crops, but to nurture the soil – if this is done, then crops are forthcoming for the indefinite future. Contrast this with our modern view of sustainability. We talk about leaving the Earth fit for our children and grandchildren, but that period of time is infinitesimal. Ironically, the only people today who take a really long-term view are those who work in the nuclear waste sector. They are considering how we might communicate the danger of this waste to people thousands of years in the future, when language and other modes of semiotic communication might be completely different. The political election cycle means that long-term planning never really takes place and so we buffer along from one four- or five-year set of promises to another, with the assurance that there will definitely be jam tomorrow (jam in the form of economic growth).

Indigenous people seem to know their place within nature, rather than seeing themselves as apart from it as 'modern' people do. Think about how apart from nature you are when traipsing around a shopping mall, where a Disneyfication of experience is the backdrop for the release of short-lived endorphins when we buy things. How sad! However, one only has to look back a few generations to see that, despite the effects of modernism, more people understood and respected the natural world. For example, my own grandparents knew the medicinal qualities of certain hedgerow plants and were able to use them to good effect. Now these are usually found in a 'health food shop' in plastic bottles and only accessed by the relatively affluent. Remnants of this 'indigenous knowledge' can also be seen in the resurgence of 'foraging', although once again this is mainly confined as a minority pursuit, along with yoga, forest bathing and colonic irrigation. Nevertheless, it doesn't take much to reinvigorate our visceral relationship with the natural world, as people found during Covid lockdown. Consider, also, the rise in numbers of people who like to 'wild swim' (in my childhood we called this swimming in a river or the sea!). Forest school is taking off in many schools, another sign of a recognition that we are part of nature and nature is part of us and it actually does us good.

Behaviour boundaries

With this in mind, school leaders should *really* look long-term and ask themselves if their

school's ethos, spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) offer and subject curriculum provision, linked to developing pupils' critical thinking capacity, are fit for purpose in terms of helping our civilisation to last and thrive indefinitely. Scary as it may seem, school leaders are in a unique position to address this need for a cultural shift. It's not all about sitting back and waiting for new technical solutions. It's literally just the reverse. Professor John Whitelegg sent me a model which shows this very well (see Figure 1). He is famous for developing sustainable transport systems in many countries and he's come to the conclusion that behaviour change should trump techno fixes.

Figure 1. Behaviour change and technological solutions
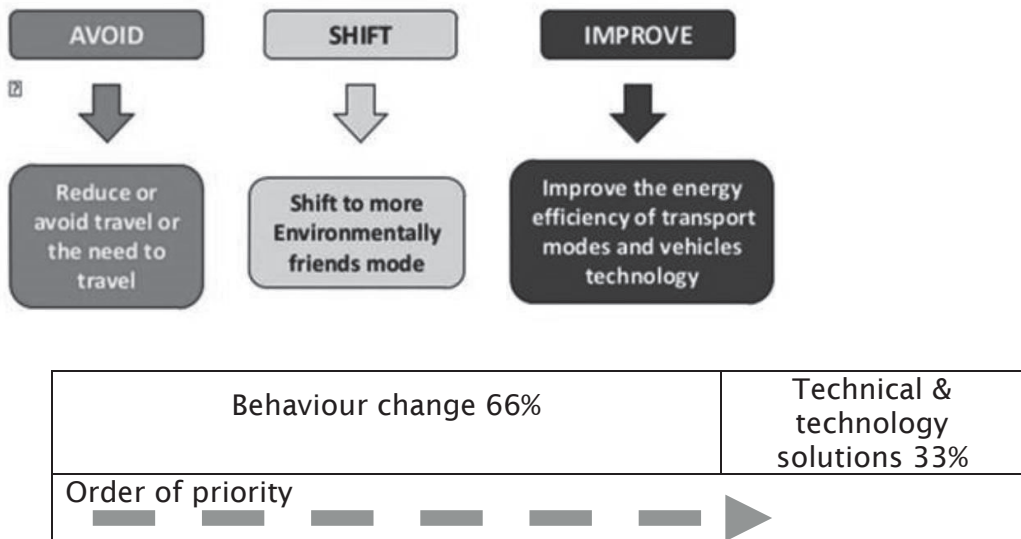
With thanks to Professor John Whitelegg

Green goddesses and gods

When completing my doctorate, I developed a 'green leader' model for schools. This followed detailed research into 10 school headteachers who presided over 'green flag' ecoschools. This is a well-regarded scheme which assesses seven aspects of a school's operations and judges it on its non-greenwash sustainability credentials. To a greater or lesser degree, these leaders were exceptional in that they embraced permaculture philosophy and practice (even though most didn't recognise this label), were progressive in the way they operated the curriculum, while also keeping the 'standards' wolves at bay by consistently producing good exam results. They weren't afraid to game the system or sit with the label 'maverick'.

But what drove them to operate in this way? By investigating their backgrounds in

detail, I found that they had strong sustainability values which emanated from their early life experiences. Invariably, they had experienced some sort of 'free-range 'childhood and developed a good knowledge and appreciation of the natural world which they had picked up from their parents and grandparents. They also grew up in cohesive communities (urban and rural), and so recognised the value of cooperation and neighbourliness. These values are also needed if we are to have a sustainable culture and is an antidote to selfish individualism. I say 'selfish' individualism to make a distinction between that and taking personal responsibility for one's actions and to realise how these might affect others (as these people did) and, armed with this knowledge, behave benevolently.

This benevolence also tied into the concept of the 'village as policeman' where nobody turned a blind eye to injustice or antisocial behaviour. They were also encouraged to have the sort of individualism that invokes a free spirit and the freedom to pursue their own interests and make the most of their strengths, within the limitations of the golden rule that says 'treat others as you would wish to be treated'. It also imbued resilience and strength of character, which meant not being afraid to stand up for what was 'right' in the face of others doing the opposite. Their parents were suitably 'hands off' rather than being of the 'helicopter' or 'curling' variety (this latter type of parent forever smooths the way for their progeny in the manner of a curling player brushing the ice before the sliding stone to, literally, smooth its path).

From this background, they gravitated to higher education that reinforced their belief in sustainability in its many forms, and refined their values to the extent that, when they entered teaching, they had a moral imperative to include this in their work. Once headteachers, this outlook drove their desire to put sustainability at the heart of everything. It was significant that they embedded sustainability into their private as well as work lives; there wasn't a dichotomy between work and home values.

Walking the talk

In school, these leaders for sustainability were keen for children to learn about natural history in the field rather than from books. They created school grounds which were biodiverse and thus a resource for learning, as well as adding to the aesthetic appeal of the school. Most of the schools added to this by children growing their own produce and then cooking it so they had a 'seed-to-plate' experience. This meant that valuable science, geography and health education were covered, but also aspects of the creative arts. Some of the schools had their own forest school area, while others took their children to one nearby. Some introduced microgeneration through solar panels and showed the children how they worked. One school had a large smart meter in the entrance hall showing in real time the energy consumption of the building. Children could then see how their actions made the consumption go up or down. They could also

analyse the data over time and compare it with weather data. This deployed maths with a real purpose. When undertaking integrated topic work, sustainability was always part of the planning. This meant that a local-to-global perspective was constantly in play. For example, when one class was undertaking a topic on food, they traced the ingredients of a pizza from across the world and calculated the carbon footprint. They then tried to create a pizza from local ingredients to bring down the footprint, and debated the merits of pizzas from takeaway outlets in terms of waste and healthiness. This extended to the rights (or lack of them) for certain farm workers and the history behind this. From this, one can see that there are links with decolonising the curriculum, because inevitably the status quo is questioned and exploitation of people and planet is explored at many levels.

Children also became involved in local planning issues and discussed the pros and cons of various kinds of housing or industrial development. All this serves to show a progressive, experiential and motivational curriculum in action. Often this extended out into the community, where children used their 'pester power' to influence the consumption of their families, whether that be energy or one-use plastics. In my own school, this greatly helped fuel poverty, whereby families spend at least 10 per cent of their income on utilities. Children in some of the schools organised an 'eco-team' who, among other things, monitored energy usage and encouraged people to turn things off when not in use and to close doors in winter. They also worked with the site managers to find other ways of reducing consumption of utilities and to reduce waste across the school. Budget managers also had a stake in this and made efforts to procure from ethical sources and acquire goods with the lowest possible carbon footprints in terms of embodied carbon and transportation. Once again, curriculum enrichment occurred by involving children in these processes.

Green is the new red

Before developing my green leader model, I looked at what other leadership models could be applied to the participants of my study. Generative, servant and transformational models all seemed to fit the bill. Generative relates to the permaculture mentioned earlier in that it emphasises the interconnectiveness of issues and aims to make optimal conditions for learning, from creating positive relationships between all school stakeholders, including staff, children, parents, governors and community leaders, to having a psychologically and physically secure school environment. 'Servant leadership' denotes practices which are without ego and where a leader helps others to flourish rather than thinking 'it's all about me', in the manner of some red-caped hero model. Transformational leaders use their strong moral imperative to implement positive and lasting change, and also have servant and generative traits. This means that

the change is not exerted brutally from above, but by winning hearts and minds and being inclusive, not just through consultation, but by facilitating others to co-create the conditions necessary for change. Obviously, these are ideal types, but a combination of them seemed to fit the leader for sustainability bill.

One surprising leader model I found was also pertinent, namely green Machiavellian.[17] Having these two words together may seem like an oxymoron, but this is probably due to a misunderstanding of Machiavelli as much as anything. Although regarded as a self-serving manipulator, this reading of Machiavelli overlooks the benevolent and participative traits in his writing about statecraft and leadership.

Green Machiavellian approaches are interesting in the context of education leadership because they seemed diametrically opposed to distributed leadership. This too is a misnomer because Machiavelli deployed this approach and it was part of the way he forged alliances and loyalties. After all, some so-called distributed leadership can be disingenuous: a cover for delegation, manipulation and even abdication of responsibilities, the intricacies of which are for a further discussion. Also, this model of leadership can ignore the fact that there has to be ultimate responsibility for how any organisation operates. One couldn't imagine a headteacher running a distributed leadership scenario where the rest of his team disagreed with his or her underlying educational philosophy. Although the head's philosophy and leadership behaviour might be modified in relation to discussions and interactions with others, it's doubtful that they would change radically. This is why on occasion heads need to have great resilience to put their heads above the parapet and literally stand up for what they believe in. This is what leadership for sustainability often needs, which is why there's more than a hint of Machiavellian and red cape hero about it. David Orr talks about this being like 'walking south on a northbound train'.[18] Sounds a bit futile, unless one also lobbies for the train to turn around.

My green leader model also revealed leaders who had a detailed ecological knowledge, laced with a global perspective. This showed how 'inside-out'[19] they were in that they were keen to form alliances through local and more distant networks. This is the opposite of being insular and protective, which have become all too prevalent as the quasi-market of education has come into play since the late 1980s, and which prompts a mindset which can ask why my school should share its 'secrets' with others if this means they use them against us and poach our pupils, each of whom is worth big money. This perspective also includes not being afraid to promote the sustainability cause to others. Ecological knowledge also extends to ways of thinking – for example in a joined-up, rather than linear way – and recognising that there are seldom silver bullet solutions to problems, especially 'wicked problems'. This is in contrast to the prevailing mechanistic thinking which emerged during the aforementioned Enlightenment and is associated with the BAU model. Sterling provides an insightful overview of the

differences between mechanistic and ecological educational paradigms.[20] It certainly highlights how 'industrialised' our education system has become.

Time and tide

Above all, green leaders believe in systems-change from the bottom up and aren't content to sit back and wait for instructions from above to create more sustainable schools. In my forthcoming book, I document this approach through a 'five Cs' approach, based on a model I helped to develop with the National College of School Leadership back in 2007-08.[21] This includes Captaincy (leadership actions), Curriculum (content and pedagogy), Campus (school site as learning resource and biophilic inspiration) and Community (school's sustainability influence through interaction). The final C running throughout is 'Connections' (a joined-up approach). See figure 2.

Figure 2. The five Cs sustainable schools model
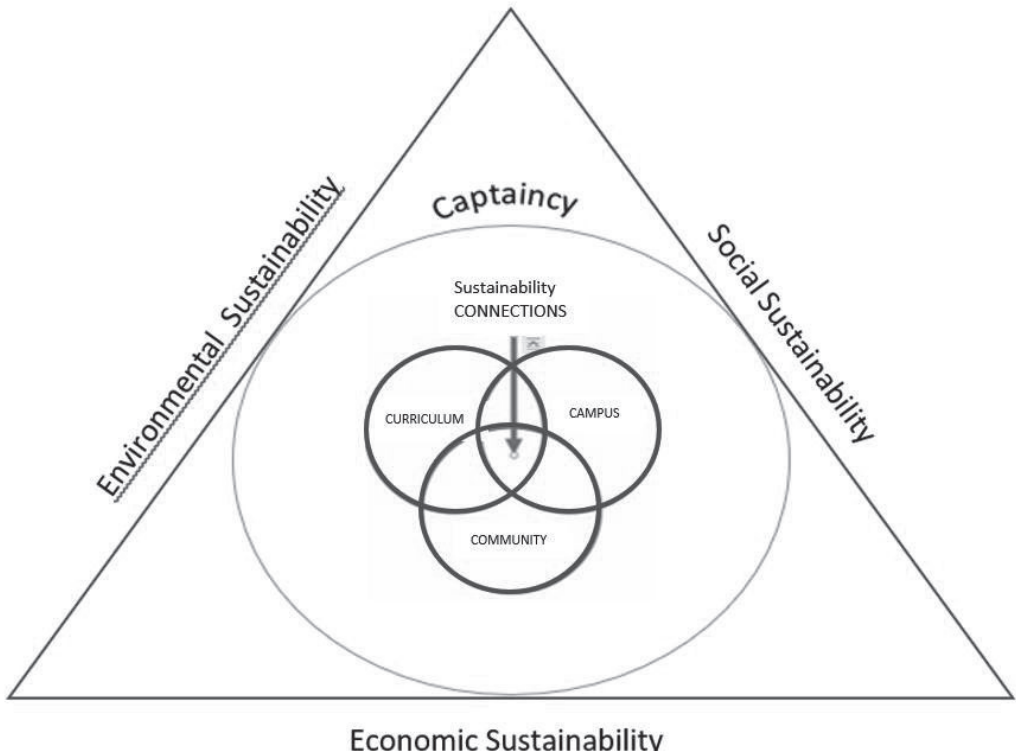
The Department for Education's COP26 draft strategy for sustainability and climate change seems to give the green light (pun intended) to schools to embed sustainability.[22] If the traditional/BAU narrative continues to dominate, then leadership for sustainability may remain as a preserve of the mavericks. More importantly, our culture

will remain as a wrecking ball to the planet. What we need are leaders for sustainability who really *do* believe they can save the planet one school at a time!

I end this piece, with a thought-provoking comment from Satish Kumar, who says that leadership is:

> … not about heroic, headline grabbing actions: true leadership is to live and act with integrity and without fear. Leadership has nothing to do with power, position or office; nor anything to do with birth, class or status … Leadership is an inner calling to lead ourselves and the world from subjugation to liberation, from falsehood to truth, from control to participation and from greed to gratitude. We can all be leaders. All we have to do is *wake up, stand up, live and act.*[23]

David Dixon is an ex-primary school headteacher who now specialises in helping schools to become more sustainable through the 'five Cs'. This includes delivering workshops on local studies to enhance the history and geography curriculum. His new book, *Leadership for Sustainability: saving the planet one school at a time*, is out in spring 2022, published by Crown House, https://www.crownhouse.co.uk/leadership-for-sustainability-saving-the-planet-one-school-at-a-time

daviddixon649@gmail.com

Notes

1. B. Plowden, *The Plowden Report. Children and their primary schools. A report of the central advisory council for education (England)*, London, HMSO, 1967; University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, *Introduction to the Cambridge Review of Primary Education,* Cambridge, University of Cambridge, 2009. Available: https://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/CPR_revised_booklet.pdf__

2. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society,* London, Marion Boyars, 1971/1995.

3. *An Inconvenient Truth* was the title of the famous PowerPoint presentation by Al Gore, later made into a feature film. In it he graphically spells out in data and case studies how humans are wrecking the biosphere.

4. *Age of Stupid* was another film, but this time science 'faction'. An old man in the year 2055 asks why the people of 2008 didn't do more to avert environmental meltdown.

5. Dr Seuss, *The Lorax,* London, Harper Collins Publishers, 1971/2021

6. C. Reich, *The Greening of America,* London, Penguin, 1970.

7. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* London, Penguin, 1970/1973.

8. B. Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul,* Novato, California, New World Library, 2008, p225.

9. Mercantilism still lives. Think how often country trade surpluses and deficits

feature in the business news.

10. Global Footprint Network. *How many Earths? How many countries?*, 2021. Available: https://www.overshootday.org/how-many-earths-or-countries-do-we-need/#:~:text=Here%27s%20how%20we%20calculate%20that,if%20everyone%20lived%20like%20Americans...

11. E. Jupp, 'Tyre pollution could be 1,200 times worse than exhaust emissions', *Motoring Research*, 12 March 2020. Available at: https://www.motoringresearch.com/car-news/tyre-pollution-worse-exhaust-emissions/.

12. K. Raworth, *Doughnut Economics. Seven ways to think like a 21st century economist*, London, Penguin Random House, 2017.

13. For more information on the general progress indicator see: https://gnhusa.org/genuine-progress-indicator/

14. J. Henrich, S.J. Heine and A.Norenzayan, 'Most people are not WEIRD', *Nature* 466 (7302), 2010, p29.

15. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fW5_R-7BClY

16. M. Harland, 'Redefining the third permaculture ethic: future care', *Permaculture Magazine*, 95 (spring 2018), pp 6-7.

17. D. Hanson and S. Middleton, 'The challenges of eco-leadership: green Machiavellianism', *Greener Management International*, Issue 29, Spring 2000.

18. D. W. Orr, 'Walking north on a southbound train'. In D. W. Orr, *Hope is an Imperative: the essential David Orr*, Washington, DC, Island Press, 2011, pp57-65.

19. W. Ryan, *Leadership with a Moral Purpose: turning your school inside out*, Carmarthen, Crown House Publishing, 2008, p6.

20. S. Sterling, *Sustainable Education. Revisioning learning and change*, Totnes, Green Books, 2001, p58.

21. National College for School Leadership. *Valuing our future: a toolkit for developing sustainable schools,* Nottingham, NCSL, 2009.

22. Department for Education, 'Sustainability and climate change. A draft strategy for the education & children's services systems', London, DfE, 2021. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1031454/SCC_DRAFT_Strategy.pdf

23. S. Kumar, 'We are all leaders', *Resurgence*, Jan/Feb 2011. Available: https://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article3272-we-are-all-leaders.html