One school at a time

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Leadership for Sustainability: saving the planet one school at a time

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September 2022 saw the 60th anniversary of the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* which drew attention to the devastating impact that the indiscriminate use of pesticides such as DDT was having on the natural world. It also pointed to a fundamental problem in our attitude towards nature. Interviewed shortly before her death in 1964, Carson said: 'We still talk in terms of conquest. We still haven't become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a tiny part of a vast and incredible universe. We in this generation, must come to terms with nature, and … prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves'.

Almost 60 years on from that interview we still haven't 'come to terms', and no national education programmes in the UK, or anywhere else for that matter, have taken the idea seriously. If we had, what David Dixon did in his schools might have been commonplace rather than exceptional, and he might have been able to write a different book, or perhaps would have had no reason to write a book at all.

One key impact of *Silent Spring* was the realisation that young people needed to learn more about the natural world, our dependence on it, and the threats we pose to it. This gave rise to environmental education programmes in schools and universities, and the establishment of organisations dedicated to their promotion. Across the UK in the 1970s, a range of schools added an emphasis on the environment to their curricula, and there was support from HMI, exam boards, NGOs, the UN and other international agencies. The Department for Education's attitude was lukewarm at best, as Sean Carson (no relation) memorably pointed out in 1978: '[It] claimed to have been encouraging environmental education all along — while taking care to absolve itself from any obligation to give any leadership in the future'. In this, nothing has really changed.

The imposition of the national curriculum saw the end of innovation and experimentation in the schools led by the likes of David Dixon. What replaced it was a defined and minimal coverage of climate and environment topics firmly sequestered within science and geography. Cross-curriculum guidance was provided but to no great effect.

As time passed, the environmental problems we faced grew in scale and seriousness,

and thanks to UN reports, world summits and activist agencies, the nature and range of our concerns also spread. The concept of sustainability became prominent and with it the idea that people mattered as well as the environment, particularly the marginalised and dispossessed; all those living on less than a dollar a day. The concept of environmental justice was a component of this. Today the breadth of our concerns, which now include climate change of course, is embodied in the sustainable development goals that were agreed in 2015.

Because of this broadening, the idea of education for sustainability emerged and then the notion of the sustainable school. Over the last 15 years or so, a number of attempts have been made to set out depictions of what a sustainable school might or ought to look like. The most recent is the descriptors produced by the National Governance Association – NGA – (working with the National Association for Environmental Education) in its *Environmental Sustainability: a whole school approach*. Understandably, these foreground the importance of school leadership. David Dixon's book obviously chimes with this emphasis, not only with its title but through its notion of *captaincy* which is one of the Cs in his 5-C model of sustainability. His other Cs are curriculum, campus, community and connections. By contrast, the NGA model has 4 Cs: culture, campus, community and curriculum.

The overlap between book and model is considerable. Both illustrate how far we have come from the environmental education of the 1970s. Then, providing young people with rich experiences and focused challenges within and outwith the school was mostly what mattered. Now, all such models go beyond this to embrace how the school is led, how it functions day-by-day, the values that drive it, how it links to its communities and, crucially, what its aim are. In the compelling race to net-zero carbon and a restored biodiversity, such models, and the organisations that advance them, position schools not just as active players in making how we live more sustainable, but also as particularly significant ones given how many people they potentially can influence. As David Dixon notes:

> … one sustainable headteacher with a school roll of, say, 500 pupils, with 50 staff, would not only have the potential to influence those 550 individuals, but also their families, extended families and friends, which could take the figure up to several thousand. If the school had a high profile in this field, with the way social media works, it could reach many more, perhaps tens of thousands.

Maybe so, but the effectiveness of this will depend on what 'influence' and 'reach' actually mean here.

The real significance of this book is that it is a step beyond mere attempts to picture a sustainable school in terms of what *might* take place. Instead, it recounts what has happened, how it was done and how this was possible. If you like, it represents a step

('stride' might be more apt) from theory to practice. It shows what can be done if there is a well-informed and compelling vision and determined and effective leadership.

It will be clear by now that this is not just a book about what young people learn through the formal curriculum. It is not even just a book about this plus what they are able to learn more broadly through their whole school experience between and beyond lessons and from the hidden curriculum. Rather, it is about the whole school and how it thinks about and organises itself, its budgeting, procurement, material, energy and resource use (and re-use), its approach to social responsibility and its relationships with parents and the wider community. The book also takes seriously what young people increasingly say they want their schools to help them develop; that is, understanding, motivation and skill sets that will equip them to participate in personal, social and political decision-making in relation to climate and other sustainability issues.

Furthermore, and crucially, it is no longer about all these issues merely being added to that great agenda of things that leaders have to think about when running their schools: business as usual with a bit of recycling and lights being turned off, perhaps. Rather, it is focused on rethinking the school with sustainability as a core organising principle.

Well, thank goodness for the David Dixons of this world. And for the other inspiring school leaders who refuse to be suffocated by DfE flannel or hamstrung by Ofsted's view of which aspects of sustainability should and shouldn't be addressed in schools. Thank goodness for those who create opportunities to do what they and their governing boards know is in the best interests of their students and of society. Not all such heads write books, and so it is particularly pleasing to see the publication of *Leadership for Sustainability.*

After a wide-ranging introduction to the various sections of the book, there is a discussion of why it was written. This sets the scene and introduces us to the ideas and people that have influenced David Dixon in his professional life. What follows is organised into six chapters. The first, *Sustainability steers,* examines the scope of the idea of sustainability as used in the book. It explores the difficult ground of definitions and meanings. The next chapters each focus on one of the Cs: *captaincy, curriculum, campus* and *community*. All these, apart from the conclusion, culminate in bullet point recommendations about leadership for sustainability, and there would be merit in drawing these together into a coherent framework that might be used as a personal audit tool and the basis of a reflective diary. The last chapter focuses on *Connections* and this serves as the book's conclusion. Finally, there are 11 appendices which provide detail on key aspects of a school: its mission statement, policies on such things as ethical procurement, fair trade, energy and food, together with a number of charters, curriculum statements and planning guides. All these emerge from school practice and take up a seventh of the book. I suspect they will prove more useful to readers than

many appendices often do.

This is a book about leadership, and the captaincy chapter illustrates the benefits of studying school leadership at an advanced level. At its heart is a working model that the author developed to 'show staff and inspectors the rationale behind my sustainability drive' which sets out to show 'the added agency sustainability has to improve a school across the board whilst keeping the accountability wolves from the door *and* helping to save the planet'. Understandably, the curriculum chapter is the longest.

It is possible to read this book in many ways: as a reference manual, as a history of ideas, as a case study of practice, or as a leader's thoughtful journey of discovery. The book is an easy read yet a challenging one. It's easy to read because it is well written and structured, and because its subject is compelling; so much so that you will likely come away stimulated, better informed, and maybe even a bit wiser. It's a challenging read because it is hard to ignore what you are reading, given what we face.

All schools working towards becoming sustainable will need to strike an appropriate balance between student learning goals and goals relating to sustainability. I conclude that it is David Dixon's view that the push for sustainability works best when these goals are actively and strongly articulated, and this makes complete sense. However, where choices must be made between, say, necessary student learning and saving a bit more carbon, the priority for schools must always be the learning as that is their social purpose. That is, the priority always needs to be to engage young people with ideas about sustainability through imaginative teaching strategies that provide stimulating opportunities for learning, including practical activities and practice at citizenly engagement. It follows that the imperative for schools to try to *be* sustainable, as institutions, has to rest on the way that this supports learning by students, teachers, governors and others, and not, say, on how far it takes the institution down the net-zero road.

I'm giving almost the last word to David Dixon. This comes from near the end of his concluding *Connections* chapter:

> I've argued that we require a change of culture more than we need technical wizardry – which can be greenwash or eco-bling anyway – to avert looming disasters. Education is an integral part of this change of cultural paradigm. I've also argued that leaders for sustainability need an entrepreneurial streak and to not be afraid to strike out in different directions. This sometimes means taking risks, disrupting, embracing innovation and being creative.

Well so it does, and this book teaches this well. Given the DfE's continued insistence on curriculum as usual there will continue to be a need for action one school at a time. This book is well placed to help others along this necessary road in the unique circumstances of their own school.

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