**WWF** *for a living planet* ®

reos

# The primacy of the personal

Synthesis report | May 2009

ONE PLANET EDUCATION

# About WWF

WWF-UK, the UK arm of the world's leading independent environmental organisation, is at the heart of efforts to create the solutions we need – striving for a One Planet Future where people and nature thrive within their fair share of the planet's natural resources. To make this vision a reality, we are addressing three key environmental challenges in partnership with governments, businesses and communities both here in the UK and around the world: safeguarding the natural world, tackling climate change and changing the way we live.

WWF's education programme was established in the early 1980s, encouraging schools to put sustainability at the heart of school life. WWF's programme provides schools with a range of engaging and inspiring activities which show how all schools can play a part in striving to live within the ecological limits of one planet.

**More information about WWF's work can be found at:
wwf.org.uk/oneplaneteducation**

" The neglect of the personal dimension in development at first sight seems bizarre. It is self-evident to the point of embarrassment that most of what happens is the result of what sort of people we are, how we perceive realities, and what we do and do not do.

Whether change is good or bad is largely determined by personal actions, whether by political leaders, officials, professionals or local people, by international currency speculators, executives of transnational corporations, non-government organisation (NGO) workers, or researchers, by mothers, fathers or children, or by soldiers, secret agents, journalists, lawyers, police, or protesters.

Especially, what happens depends on those who are powerful and wealthy. One might have supposed then that trying to understand and change their perceptions, motivations and behaviours would have been at the centre of development and development studies, and a major concern for the IMF, the World Bank, other donor agencies, governments and NGOs.

Yet there have been few studies of individual officials as leaders. Studies of greed and generosity are few. There are quite a number of institutes devoted to development studies but there is, to my knowledge, no institute devoted to the study of greed or power.

Part of the neglect stems from academic culture with its anathema of evangelism, its value of objectivity, and its search for general rather than individual explanations. More potently, perhaps, the neglect is a defence. It can disturb profoundly to reflect on what one does and does not do. It embarrasses to be confronted by poverty and suffering compared with one's own condition. When a poor farmer in India asked me my income I could not reply. To put the personal to the fore in this editorial is to expose my own hypocrisy and to make it difficult to continue. But hypocrisy is no excuse for silence "

**- Robert Chambers (Ideas for development: reflecting forwards, Institute for Development Studies, Sussex, 2004)**

# Contents

# Context

In February 2009, The Guardian education section featured these headlines: "Where now after damning indictment of education?" and "Tests blamed for blighting children's lives". On the same day, The Telegraph declared: "Generations of pupils let down by focus on tests" and The Independent quoted: "Schoolchildren's lives 'are being impoverished'".

These startling headlines were prompted by the Cambridge Primary Review[1] which had just released its findings on the current state of primary education in England. Three years in the making, the Cambridge Review is hailed as one of the most comprehensive, independent reviews of government primary education policy since the 1967 Plowden Report. Timed to coincide with the release of a major government-commissioned review by Sir Jim Rose, the Cambridge Review and the Rose consultation constitute a watershed moment in education policy review.

Meanwhile, somewhat removed from English policy debates, in the United States, the Brightside School in Washington DC has been struggling. Some 12% of children are proficient in reading and 8% in mathematics. As a predominantly African-American school, there is a statistical likelihood that one in seven African-American boys currently at the school will end up in prison. To address these challenges they have joined forces with Harvard economist, Professor Richard Fryer, to run a unique experiment called 'Capital Gains'.

It's very simple. Pupils are rewarded financially for good performance. If they do well by a certain set of indicators then they get paid. Students can earn up to US$100 every two weeks for good performance. The experiment, running over two years, with three schools, aims to show that shifting the basic incentive for learning, from a combination of values to more purely economic, produces results that other incitements cannot match.

Fryer, the Harvard professor who designed the experiment, appeared on a BBC Horizon programme proclaiming "I don't like learning, I like what learning gives me," presumably meaning wealth, status and power. What then is the purpose of schooling? What constitutes an education? What is our education system doing to and for our children?

Two recent publications, Too Safe for Their Own Good (Michael Ungar, 2007) and Last Child in the Woods (Richard Louv, 2007) have raised awareness of the consequences of the growing separation of children from the natural world. They are not being given the opportunity to take their own risks or responsibilities. Their experience of the natural world is mediated through television or supervised visits. Wandering around the local area alone, building a den or climbing trees is not allowed as they are seen by adults as too risky. This is resulting in a generation of anxious, overly cautious or foolhardy, reckless individuals who lack the common sense and resilience to handle adversity. They remain dependent children rather than independent young adults.

1. See website: primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/ CambridgePrimaryReviewrep.html

"The terms 'bubble-wrapped kids' and 'nature deficit disorder' are now becoming common currency, but what implications do they have for education?"

The terms 'bubble-wrapped kids' and 'nature deficit disorder' are now becoming common currency, but what implications do they have for education? How do we develop children's resilience? What role do schools play in providing opportunities for children to reconnect with the natural world?

The Cambridge Review, the flood of critical headlines, and experiments with education such as Capital Gains raise deep and fundamental questions. They are signs of a contemporary debate about the very nature of education, of schooling and of learning. While much of the ongoing debate is conducted in classic policy form, through reports and counter-reports, the situation demands more from us.

How do we feel about the Cambridge Review? About the headlines? How do we feel about the Capital Gains experiment? Do we want our kids to be paid for performing well? What do we feel about the idea that our children are becoming increasingly alienated from their natural environments? How do we feel about the idea that generations of children have been let down by the education system? Not simply what do we think… but how do we feel?

In order to adequately address the fundamental questions posed by Cambridge, Rose and experiments such as Capital Gains we will have to get in touch with and connect with our emotional, as well as intellectual drivers. Why do these things matter to us? We have to ask ourselves "why?" many times over. Actions that come from this deeper level, from the level of passion, of anger and of love, will fuel our efforts to act and change.

# 1. Introduction

"We now feel we are sufficiently trusted across the system to be able to bring together a representative group to explore the purpose of education as we enter a period of rapid environmental world change, with implications for social, economic and governance paradigms. It is clear that sustainability can only be addressed by significant changes in the way humanity relates to the planet and its resources… What will an education system look like which will enable children to be happy, fulfilled citizens of this new world?"

- from WWF-UK's Influence within the English Education System 2003-07[2]

"Someone should be studying the whole system, however crudely that has to be done, because no gluing together of partial studies of a complex nonlinear system can give a good idea of the behaviour of the whole."

- Murray Gell-Mann[3]

In April 2008, as part of WWF's Vision for a One Planet Future programme, WWF-UK and Reos Partners set out to convene a number of stakeholders in order to explore, reflect on and initiate shifts in the English education system.

We started with a firm belief; based on long experience, that tinkering piecemeal with the system would not result in the kinds of changes that our contemporary context demanded. The required approach would involve understanding, grasping and acting on the system as a whole.

Taking Nobel Prize-winning physicist Murray Gell-Mann's words to heart, we began our work, "however crudely", of understanding the English education system as a whole, and not simply the parts.

This report outlines our approach and summarises our team's understanding of the situation, and it reflects a highly complex system. The report is a synthesis of our interviewees' diverse perspectives on the education system, and should not be seen as WWF's policy position on education.

## I. Understanding the whole

What does it mean to try and understand something as complex as the English education system as a whole?

Our approach required a departure from the dominant culture of social science research and perhaps the dominant culture of education, which, somewhat touchingly, continues to insist that increasingly complex, inter-related, wholes can be understood through study of the parts.

As one scientist puts it, "We are accustomed to thinking of going from parts to whole in some sort of summative manner. We think of developing the whole, even of making the whole, on the practical basis of putting parts together and making them fit… it implies a linear sequence, first the parts, then the whole… The implication is that the whole always comes later than its parts."

"Someone should be studying the whole system, however crudely that has to be done, because no gluing together of partial studies of a complex nonlinear system can give a good idea of the behaviour of the whole."

Murray Gell-Mann

2. WWF Internal document
3. The Quark and the Jaguar

"The secondary purpose of these interviews is for participants and the delivery team to gain a broad, whole understanding of the current state of the education system from people who constitute the system."

Our departure from dominant approaches and our search for other ways that would support our desire to grasp the whole, led to forming a partnership between WWF-UK and Reos Partners. Reos brought in approaches to understanding and working with whole systems developed over the last 15 years of working in complex social systems.

We began with the primacy of the personal as a way into the whole, with the idea that 'the whole is nowhere to be encountered except in the midst of the parts'. Our aim was to conduct a number of interviews to start addressing this "neglect of the personal", and, in the process connect with how people understand their own work, their values, what they do and don't do, and critically the 'why?' of their life's work as an individual.

## II. The dialogue interview process

The interview process we employed, the dialogue interview, is different from traditional fact-finding interviews. A dialogue interview is a long, unstructured interview over 1-3 hours, in which the interviewee is asked about the narrative and purpose of their work.

The primary purpose of the dialogue interview is to cultivate the start of a new relationship, while building a shared understanding of the education system. It offers the interviewee an opportunity to reflect on the current reality of the education system and, more critically, their role within that system.

How did they get to where they are today? Why are they doing what they are doing? What were the factors that influenced them to do what they do? What were the contextual factors? What were the personal reasons? This often enables the interviewee to reflect on the sources of their own inner commitments to effecting change in the wider system and can sometimes reinvigorate or resurface their deeper intention.

The secondary purpose of these interviews is for participants and the delivery team to gain a broad, whole understanding of the current state of the education system from people who constitute the system. All too often the interviewee is a stakeholder in the system who rarely has access to the depth and diversity of perspectives that exist across the system, even as they spend all their time in it. The dialogue interviews provide an opportunity to gain just that insight and allow the participant to begin to experience first-hand the multiple realities and logics operating across the whole system.

Every interview is conducted with two members of the team present, an interviewer and a scribe. After the interview the pair spends some time de-briefing their impressions, exploring the judgments that are surfacing for them and sharing the opportunities they see emerging. The notes are made anonymous and posted online (on a password protected site) for the wider project team to read and digest. Interviewees are given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview.

It could be argued that taping an interview is congruent with the positivist stance, where a precise digitial (and mathematical) encoding of the phenomenon of 'hearing, seeing, and smelling' someone tell their story has more validity than the subjective experience of the listener. The decision of either choosing to tape interviews or not can be seen as one practical dimension of a wider sociological debate, that between the subjective and the

objective. In privileging the personal, we have to ask ourselves, what effect will a recording device have on the story being told? Will a person really talk freely and openly when a digital recording of their story exists? Will an individual really express emotion or talk about their most profound learning experiences, which are often difficult and traumatic? Will an individual talk about the relationship between the personal and education? About being bullied? Or about failure? About their parents? Will an individual stick to the "official" narrative? To the purely professional and impersonal? To the curriculum vitae? Will we mostly hear opinions on issues as opposed to their formative experiences and decisions? Clearly our process privileged the subjective over the objective and so we did not tape any of the interviews

## III. The synthesis process

The intention behind our approach is to return to the real-life experience of people within the education system. Our aim is to connect with what could be thought of as the phenomenon , the 'thing' that we refer to when we refer to 'education', through a deep sensing and experiential learning process. This is an approach to knowledge where we let the phenomenon become fully visible without imposing subjective mental constructs – in other words, without applying our usual judgments, assumptions and personal frames of reference.

In conducting the interviews and working with the data, we aspired to suspend our usual frames and classifications to let the 'phenomenon' speak and see what systemic patterns emerged from the diverse conversations that we had with practitioners from across the English education system and beyond.

Accordingly, we did not consciously seek to fit what we saw into any pre-formed hypothesis. This was one reason why the dialogue interviews were unstructured, and why the patterns that emerged often surprised us.

This report is an impression of the systemic themes and patterns that we as a team collectively saw emerging from our conversations.

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## 2. Report Structure

This report is structured into six 'meta-themes', created out of the original themes that emerged from the synthesis process. Together they constitute the main body of this report, and are outlined below.

### I. The current education system

This section explores the ideas that interviewees had on a range of features of the existing landscape of the English education system, covering the following topics: the national curriculum; the role of the civil service in education; regulation in education and 'worksheet culture' in classrooms; assessment and measurement in education; issues of self-esteem in schools; the class system and social division in education; and the prevalence of female teachers.

### II. The experience of people leading change in education

In this section, interviewees discussed their own personal experience and reflections on the process of leading change or sustainability in education. They covered a range of features including: acting for the common good; rethinking the purpose of education; leadership qualities; personal inspiration to act; hope; the experience of isolation; and the importance of asking difficult questions.

### III. Systemic change in the education system

In the third section, the understandings, ideas and opinions of interviewees are given under the rubric of systemic change. Many of the views derive directly from interviewees' first-hand experience in implementing change in education. The following sub-themes are provided: the need for systemic change across the education system; the need for effective communication about change; the idea that change begins with the self; the understanding that real change takes time; the importance of working within the system; and an overview of the many barriers to change, articulated by different interviewees.

### IV. Sustainability, ecology and nature

Sustainability and environmental and ecological approaches to education were major themes in the majority of the interviews. In this section, interviewees discussed sustainability as they experience it, and make suggestions as to how sustainability, in its broadest sense, could become a major priority in education.

During the interviews, the following questions were addressed: What is sustainability? What are we doing about it already? What more could we do? How is it prioritised? Where does sustainability fit in the curriculum? In addition, interviewees discussed ideas of ecological approaches to education; the role of individuals, local schools and communities in driving change; personal experience of nature in early development; and understandings of the importance, and experience, of incorporating nature and the environment into education.

## V. New cultures of learning

In this section, ideas for the future of learning and education are discussed. Ideas came from experience of best practice and also visions for the future. The following topics are covered: understandings of what learning means and what enables learning; the importance of relationships in learning; the importance of care in education; the value in thinking differently; the need for support for teachers; the role of a teacher in learning; and the limits of teacher training, enabling others, and creativity and constraints.

## VI. New ideas and innovation in education

In the final section, interviewees discussed new and innovative ideas that have been and are being developed in response to the current needs they experience in education and among young people. The question that emerges is: what do young people need from education in order to thrive in contemporary English society and in the future, as increasingly global citizens? Among these ideas, the following sub-themes emerged: education that is tailored to social context; experiential education; connection to the community; the importance of local history, culture and place; empowering young people; and the life skills that are needed for living successfully in the 21st century.

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Head teacher

# 3. The current education system

This section outlines how different interviewees working in the contemporary education system in England experience, understand and perceive it. Interviewees covered a range of subjects and discussed issues with some of the frameworks and institutions that currently comprise the education system. The following topics are covered:

I        The national curriculum

II       The role of the civil service in education

III      The regulation of education and 'worksheet culture' in classrooms

IV       Assessment and measurement in education

V        Issues of self-esteem in schools

VI       The class system and social division in education

VII      The prevalence of female teachers

## I.   The national curriculum

A range of interviewees identified problems with the existing national curriculum in England. There was a range of perspectives on issues including the implications of the link between the national curriculum and the national economy and the gap between the national curriculum and sustainable development. The alternative to the national curriculum, some interviewees suggested, is a system where education is more tailored to individual learning needs, and some critical reflection is given to what teachers are teaching their students.

"As soon as you try to tie it [the national curriculum] down it is prescriptive and that may not be right for everyone, this is not about one size fits all. David Hargreaves was doing a presentation on 'Personalised Learning' recently and he described this as 'customised learning' where the offer is tailored to the individual, developing the skills you need, not the skills I think you need. Moving from the Henry Ford curriculum to the Fiat Punto version."
**Schools advisor**

"The national curriculum is dreadful. I hated what was going on. In the 60s and 70s schools had control over the curriculum and could determine local content. The 90s got worse: constraint, de-skilling, serving global competitiveness."
**Academic**

"I can see the logic of the national curriculum and it's not fit for purpose. It doesn't allow sustainability to underpin the whole curriculum. It's predicated on the capitalist model of churning out more consumers."
**Head teacher**

"What are the next steps [for change]? Opening up the curriculum. We need to start agitating to get sustainable development valued as an important part of the curriculum. We need champions at a high level e.g. Ann Finlayson, Jonathon Porritt, who will badger government. We need champions at individual schools. There is not one single avenue."
**Subject association**

"But I'm a big believer that you should never teach anything you wouldn't teach to your own children. I always ask teachers "would you be happy if someone taught this to your child?" It's a challenging question! You should always be proud of what you teach."
**Education consultant**

## II. The role of the civil service

On the subject of the civil service, some stakeholders discussed the rigidity of power and modes of accountability of the civil service with regard to education. Some suggested that the power to influence education needs to shift beyond the realm of the civil service.

"There are a massive number of people that believe the education system is not working. We need to shift control of the education system away from civil servants. In private, MPs agree with what we are saying. Most civil servants are products of private education. We need a body that argues against civil servant control of education."
**Education consultant**

"I've talked to DCSF many times, but it made no difference. Ed Balls made his first speech to DCSF after he became minister. He said all the things he intended to do but at the end the head of DCSF said: "thank you, that was very inspiring but you'll be gone in 18 months. So we'll feed what you said into our planned programme, if we can". Where is the democracy?"
**Education consultant**

## III. The regulation of education and 'worksheet culture'

On the topic of the regulation of education, various interviewees spoke of the national curriculum creating prescriptions for teaching that restrict teachers' creativity and their effectiveness in teaching and enabling learning. Furthermore, a few interviewees felt that the demands of the national curriculum did not allow time for critical reflection on the purpose and logic of what was being taught and how.

"It doesn't happen because of the constraints of the system: accountability, goals, Ofsted. These are real pressures that can't be ignored. How to do something about these pressures? We need to take teachers away from worksheet culture. My daughter is a teacher, she is constrained on what she can teach by the national curriculum."
**Subject association**

"She [my manager] liked lots of worksheets. We had a different way of working and struggled. My approach was more practical."
**Teacher**

"In school, teachers are on a treadmill, there is no control of timings, the bell goes and there is no opportunity to follow things. There is never time to step back and reflect on the question: 'why are we doing it like this?'"
**Schools advisor**

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Schools advisor

"The problem with education is that some things are easy to measure but they don't mean anything and are not going to change lives. When my students go and get jobs I want them to have the skills of being able to communicate and take responsibility."

Head teacher

## IV. Assessment and measurement in education

A number of interviewees raised the issue of measurement – specifically, who does the measuring and assessment? Some interviewees discussed the influence that those doing measuring and assessment have on the school and the classroom. Some interviewees spoke of the need to rethink what the role and value of measurement is; how we measure what really matters in education and development; who decides what really matters; and how to measure non-academic skills and development.

"The problem with education is that some things are easy to measure but they don't mean anything and are not going to change lives. When my students go and get jobs I want them to have the skills of being able to communicate and take responsibility."
**Head teacher**

"[What is needed is] education for life rather than education for an academic subject. But how do you account for children's progress in this? It is difficult to measure in terms of government targets. How do you measure shifts in values and behaviour change?"
**Subject association**

## V. Self-esteem in education

Many interviewees proposed that self-esteem is a serious issue in education and that the prevalence of low self-esteem in schools is an important contemporary issue. It was found that low esteem of the school overall was a problem, as well as the self-esteem of individual students. Some interviewees mentioned that this was particularly acute in disadvantaged schools and disadvantaged geographical areas. Some argued that the notion of success in an academic setting is often viewed in narrow terms of academic success. It was suggested that other kinds of skills such as body intelligence, social and emotional intelligence, creativity, leadership and other skills also need to be recognised, nurtured and ultimately, valued or seen as success in children.

"I found that they all suffered from low self-esteem."
**Head teacher**

"Basically the community deserves a better deal – if you don't believe you can change, you'll get nowhere. If you believe in yourself then you can change the world."
**Head teacher**

"You meet so many people who feel they're failures because they failed at the academic stuff. Education is the most important phase of life but we devalue children. It's not surprising we have a generation growing up who feel disenfranchised."
**Education consultant**

"People only live up to expectations – people's capacities are far greater than the expectations put on them."
**Government body**

## VI. Class and social division in the education system

Several interviewees commented that, in their experience within the English education system, class divisions have strongly influenced young people's perceptions of themselves and their sense of self-esteem. Some suggested that schools have not been designed to support young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Some believed that this might be due to education policy makers' lack of experience and understanding of the different experience of children from lower income brackets, when they themselves had come from more privileged and middle-class backgrounds.

"In education there are too many middle-class policy makers and no notion of what it's like to live in poverty, with no money, no opportunities. We have got to understand what that feels like, not the other way round."
**Head teacher**

"Class division is a problem that is so instilled. Once set up, these kids [from lower class backgrounds] get repeated messages of being lower. If you are told something when you are young, it will get integrated."
**Teacher**

"In leafy areas, kids are socialised and well skilled. Here, some kids cannot speak or are not toilet trained before they come to school. The gap between 'the haves' and 'the have-nots' angers me. Middle-class parents send their kids elsewhere, maintaining the gap between rich and poor."
**Head teacher**

## VII.    The prevalence of female teachers

There was a diversity of views among interviewees that the lack of male teachers in schools is an issue. Some felt that the ratio of male to female teachers has an impact on schools.

"Yes, there are a lot more women who teach, there were always more women on the course. It's not really a problem for me."
**Education consultant**

"A lack of male teachers is a problem."
**Education consultant**

"In leafy areas, kids are socialised and well skilled. Here, some kids cannot speak or are not toilet trained before they come to school. The gap between 'the haves' and 'the have-nots' angers me. Middle-class parents send their kids elsewhere, maintaining the gap between rich and poor."

Head teacher

> "I threw out the rulebook and the curriculum. I asked what is our moral purpose? What kind of human beings do we want kids to be? It was very freeing for the staff."
>
> Education consultant

# 4. The experience of people leading change in education in England

The majority of those interviewed were leading change and sustainable development in schools; they were making bold changes in education in diverse and creative ways. In the interviews, they spoke of their personal experience in trying to make changes and improve schools and education and what they had learned from this experience. The following topics were covered, and are explored in more detail below:

I        Acting for the common good

II       Rethinking the purpose of education

III      Leadership qualities

IV      Personal inspiration to act

V       Hope

VI      The experience of isolation

VII     The importance of asking difficult questions

## I. Acting for the common good

Many of the interviewees spoke of their impulse to act for the common good. This included concepts of right and wrong, social justice, fighting hypocrisy and a duty to act for the common good.

"Often in education you get brownie points for saying the right thing. I was battling against the unfairness of the education system."
**Head teacher**

"I was a school governor at age 22 because no one was standing up for younger teachers. I have a strong sense of right and wrong and fairness. There is an arrogance that comes with the moral authority to act."
**NGO**

"I threw out the rulebook and the curriculum. I asked what is our moral purpose? What kind of human beings do we want kids to be? It was very freeing for the staff."
**Education consultant**

## II. Rethinking the purpose of education

Many interviewees raised the issue of the need to rethink the purpose of schools and education with teachers, parents and children. Some suggested that there is a real need for a new, more holistic approach to education that addresses the complexity of contemporary issues and realities.

"A very valid question is: what is education for?"
**Subject association**

"You can ask fundamental questions of education. What better place is there to ask these types of questions?"
**NGO**

"What is the role of schools in society? Where to start! It's more important now than ever to be in partnership with the parent. You have to take responsibility."
**Head teacher**

"Teachers need to ask 'what is my ultimate purpose? It's not to deliver literacy, it's about the future."
**Subject association**

## III. Leadership qualities

Some interviewees discussed the important qualities of leadership in schools. Among these ideas were the importance of collaboration, teamwork, empowering others and sharing leadership responsibilities.

"I think great leadership is about doing yourself out of a job. Empowering others until they don't need you anymore. Great educators are great leaders!"
**Education consultant**

"What is generally expected of head teachers is impossible. As a system it's set up the wrong way. In industry you never have just one person accountable. Steve Munby from National College had an idea of distributed leadership accountability. Not just the burden on head teachers but others who will also share the load."
**Head teacher**

"It's a team effort. The senior leadership team is very committed to our vision. They are critical but share sustainability principles."
**Head teacher**

## IV. Personal inspiration to act

Many of the interviewees were inspired to act to improve things in their school or area, sometimes without much support. They reported that they drew their inspiration from different sources: family members, teachers they had been taught by, academic study, and their own inner drive. Several interviewees pointed out that more inspirational people are needed in education.

"My main influences are all the teenagers I have ever known, because I'm always a teacher at heart. I love enabling others from the boss to the post room to do the best they can."
**NGO**

"My biggest influence is probably my grandmother."
**NGO**

"Kids are desperate to have role models. Role models should be encouraged and rewarded."
**Teacher**

"Teachers need to ask 'what is my ultimate purpose? It's not to deliver literacy, it's about the future."

Subject association

# "I have a profound belief in humanity and humans' ability to do good. Humans also do terrible things but I'm an optimist."

Education consultant

## V. Hope

Some interviewees described their hope that underpins their hard work. They also mentioned their resilient, positive attitude; their belief in humanity; and their belief that it is possible to effect change.

"Why worry? If you can't change it, don't worry. If you can change it, then change it."
**NGO**

"A desire never to give up, picking up on positives, very good at explaining how things can be different, serving people, change one person at a time, more people. If I give up, then the next person gives up. Giving a positive example."
**Government officer**

"I have a profound belief in humanity and humans' ability to do good. Humans also do terrible things but I'm an optimist."
**Education consultant**

## VI. The experience of isolation

Some interviewees spoke of the isolation that they had personally experienced or witnessed when trying to change things, or pursue sustainable initiatives in their schools. A clear need was identified for sustaining the energy for new ideas and initiatives in schools. Different stakeholders recounted how they personally received support to 'make a difference' from different sources including local government, teachers, school, family and others.

"The head teacher is great here but at times I'm a lone voice. I've met lots of teachers who have ideas for sustainability but it's not possible to push it through."
**Teacher**

"Make teachers feel like they are not alone, there is support out there. How do we make teachers feel like they are not the only one in the school? You have to try and get the head teacher involved or it falls apart."
**Government officer**

## VII. Asking difficult questions

Some interviewees proposed that for transformative change to occur, challenging questions are required on topics that we don't currently have the answers to. They suggested that challenging questions about the way things are currently can make people feel uncomfortable. Therefore confidence and courage is required both for people to ask and to answer such questions about the education system.

"Questioning the big picture is good, and new flexibility is given to teachers, but I know not many teachers are confident about this new freedom."
**Subject association**

"I would ask the question no one else would ask."
**Head teacher**

"Being challenging doesn't guarantee you know the answer, you just want to ask the question."
**Government body**

"Unless the whole system is radically remodelled, things won't improve substantially."

Head teacher

# 5. Systemic change in the education system

Under the theme of systemic change in the education system, stakeholders discussed a range of ideas, many of which can be grouped into the following sub-themes:

I   The need for systemic change across the education system

II   The need for effective communication about change

III   The idea that change begins with the self

IV   The understanding that real change takes time

V   The importance of working within the system

VI   An overview of the many barriers to change in English education raised, and often experienced first-hand, by different stakeholders

## I.   Systemic change

A common view among various interviewees was that change on a small or incremental scale is not enough: within the education system change is needed at a whole system level. For systemic change to be achieved, it was suggested that there is a need to identify the levers and interventions that can implement large-scale change.

"There is a lot of fiddling about whilst Rome burns. We need radical action but it will involve painful change but not necessarily in terms of quality of life."
**Head teacher**

"The big barriers [to sustainability] are only voiced by individual teachers… It's a systems thing, multiple interventions are needed."
**Subject association**

"Unless the whole system is radically remodelled, things won't improve substantially."
**Head teacher**

"I spent eight years in the classroom, and I understood how little teachers are prepared to change. Someone told me it would be better for me to teach teachers."
**Government body**

"I always wanted to change the system. I had a vision of what I wanted the school to be. I got the job but the school was a mess, a complete emotional mess. Demotivated, everyone felt useless. But there were people that were passionate about the community. They were just told to deliver the curriculum. Do it more, do it faster, deliver better results."
**Education consultant**

## II.  Effective communication about change

Various interviewees spoke openly about the need for effective communication about the current reality of the education system, what needs to change and why.

"We need to communicate why people aren't happy with the current system. We need to communicate to people that their instinct is right. We need to communicate to the government what needs to be done to help children become responsible citizens."
**Education consultant**

"I want to change the way people see kids and the western education system. I just want to get my message across."
**Education consultant**

## III. Change begins with the self

Many of the interviewees articulated the idea that change begins with the self, centred on changing personal behaviour and living out aspirations in the world. Some had found realising their aspirations and changing their own behaviour and choices to be empowering. A few interviewees mentioned that for behaviour change to occur, people need support.

"I don't fly, I cook on wood, and I cycle everywhere. Being in the same community as the kids reinforces the message of sustainability. The only thing you can really do is change yourself and, if you do that, you can hope that the world might change."
**Teacher**

"It's critical that citizens take responsibility for their own lives. People need support and encouragement to develop skills, capacity, vision and space for reflection. It's democracy, directed not by the values of an institution, but by the values of an individual."
**Think Tank**

## IV.  Change can be slow

From on-the-ground experience of implementing change, various interviewees reported that changing the education system takes time, and that change is greatly influenced by the level of political support for change.

"It's difficult to influence big institutions; it's like a tanker moving."
**Government body**

"Change is slow, unless there is political will. It's very difficult to change people's behaviour. Some ministers are supportive but then move on; then a less knowledgeable person arrives."
**Government officer**

"Change must come from the heart. It's slow and frustrating and seriously not fast enough."
**Civil servant**

"I don't fly, I cook on wood, and I cycle everywhere. Being in the same community as the kids reinforces the message of sustainability. The only thing you can really do is change yourself and, if you do that, you can hope that the world might change."

Teacher

"What would
be great would
be if we were all
working together.
Seamless
progress from
babies to adults
where schools
and other
agencies work
together."

Head teacher

## V. Working within the system

Interviewees made the point that to bring about change in the education system, working with people within the system is imperative. It was also suggested by many that the different agencies and institutions, such as primary schools and secondary schools, need linking together. Some interviewees went on to say that the development of a consistent set of beliefs and values that continue throughout the whole learning experience, which would involve linking different actors within the system, is also required.

"Primary and secondary schools need linking. If not, they will be less effective. It's more effective if you can link up the whole education system."
**Government officer**

"What would be great would be if we were all working together. Seamless progress from babies to adults where schools and other agencies work together."
**Head teacher**

## VI. Barriers to change

Almost all our interviewees spoke of their knowledge and experience of barriers to change and sustainability. Different interviewees identified different barriers to change that they had experienced across the English education system. The major barriers identified by the stakeholders are:

a) Too many new initiatives and policy changes to keep up with

b) The responsibility for sustainable development is limited to a few actors and wider support is needed

c) Parents

d) Economic priorities

e) Assessment

f) The curriculum

g) The structures

h) The limits of conversations

i) Schools are disconnected from systemic priorities

j) Public discourse and public understanding of the need for change

## a) Too many new initiatives and policy changes to keep up with

Some interviewees suggested that teachers are already overloaded with commitments so there is not enough time or space for new initiatives that might be sustainably focused.

"People are walking away from [government] initiatives. There is initiative overload – one a week! How can they take them all seriously and when professional development is not valued?"
**Subject association**

## b) The responsibility for sustainable development is limited to a few actors

Some interviewees mentioned that currently there is not enough support for those pioneering sustainable approaches to education and there is a risk that without the minority, sustainability would fall off the agenda.

"It makes you wonder what would happen if champions of education for sustainable development move away? Would [SD] crumble or would it be taken forward?"
**Subject association**

## c) Parents can be a barrier to sustainability and change

Several interviewees mentioned how teaching children about sustainability could sometimes cause disharmony with their parents. For instance, when young children wanted to make sustainable choices but their parents were not aware of, or interested in, sustainability and sustainable behaviour choices such as fair trade, recycling and reduced car use.

"I taught kids about fair trade and now their parents are upset."
**Head teacher**

"I've asked the kids to calculate their carbon footprint. I had kids calculate carbon footprint, but I've yet to find a good carbon calculator for kids. Kids often don't have a choice over transport because it is their parents' decision how they get to school. Carbon footprint calculators don't deal with food and that is one issue that kids can choose. They can choose to buy locally, sustainably sourced. They can say 'I'm not going to eat that because of an ethical belief'."
**Teacher**

## d) Economic priorities

Some interviewees felt that the approach of policy-makers towards education was driven by economic, not social or sustainable priorities.

"My own experience at DCSF, a lot is around economic benefit, it's driven by economics, reducing energy and resource costs. There's not enough joined-up thinking."
**Teacher**

"At the moment, kids go in, take exams and go out. It's like factories; that's how I justify my pay."
**Teacher**

## e) Assessment

A few interviewees felt that the high value given to assessment, as opposed to other aspects of learning, was a barrier to sustainability in schools.

"Assessment is also a prohibitor to sustainability in schools."
**Head teacher**

"My own experience at DCSF, a lot is around economic benefit, it's driven by economics, reducing energy and resource costs. There's not enough joined-up thinking."

Teacher

"The structures we live in are powerful structures, sometimes we can't change them."

Academic

## f) The curriculum

The curriculum was perceived by some interviewees as rigid and prescribed, without space for creativity, sustainability, multi-disciplinary thought and practical skills.

"At the moment, the curriculum is a barrier: subject silos, the subjects don't talk."
**Government officer**

"The curriculum is so prescribed and subject focused. Other topics are not there, perhaps because they are not valued."
**Subject association**

## g) Structural inertia

The structures of the education system are powerful and institutionalised across the country.

"The structures we live in are powerful structures, sometimes we can't change them."
**Academic**

## h) Conversations that exclude the purpose of education

Some interviewees felt that there was a lack of critical or reflective discussion on what education is and what it is for.

"Because we don't have a discussion re: what education is supposed to be about, we don't change."
**Head teacher**

## i) Schools are disconnected from systemic priorities

Some interviewees suggested that acting systemically and supporting innovation are seen as being costly and potentially wasteful, and that this attitude was a barrier to systemic change or innovation in education.

"What is problematic with school-based innovation are two things: schools are unresponsive to systemic priorities. Openly, they only care about local issues. Secondly, innovation is high resource, or completely new and doesn't work if it's seen to be wasting energy and resources. The government solution is a highly centralised response, literacy and numeracy. It's slow, difficult, low buy-in and low innovation. Bottom up change focused on systemic change is what's needed to be resourced. A very specific model of change is needed, focused on innovation, cognisant of context and equally highly networked."
**Think tank**

## j) Lack of public discourse

A few stakeholders raised the issue that the public are not aware that the education system is not addressing contemporary needs and issues. Therefore, it was expounded, this presents a barrier because there is not an understanding of the need for more public awareness of the issues in education or the need for a more sustainability-oriented system.

"Public discourse is divorced from the need for fundamental changes in education."
**Think tank**

# "Public discourse is divorced from the need for fundamental changes in education."

Think tank

"The first barrier is to agree what sustainability means. The second is to embed it in the whole school."

Teacher

# 6. Sustainability, ecology and nature

In this section, sustainability and the environment are broadly discussed in the context of the English education system. Discussions covered existing approaches to teaching sustainability in schools, and beliefs around the potential of ecology and nature in education. Various interviewees put forward different understandings and analyses of sustainability as a concept as applied to education. Interviewees discussed sustainability and the application of sustainability in schools. Some also reflected on sustainability in their own education, such as their experience of nature in development.

The themes of the interviewees' discussions can be grouped into the following topics and questions in relation to schools and sustainability:

I   Sustainability

    a)   What is it?

    b)   What are we doing about it already?

    c)   What more could we do?

    d)   How is it prioritised?

    e)   How is sustainability prioritised within schools and the curriculum?

    f)   Where does sustainability fit in the English curriculum?

II   Ecological approaches to education

III   Sustainability and change need to come from the grass roots

IV   Personal experience of nature in early development

V   Nature in the curriculum and teaching

## I.   Sustainability

Six key questions came up among interviewees' discussions of sustainability:

## a) What is it?

There are different ideas about the meaning of sustainability – overall and also in the field of education.

"The first barrier is to agree what sustainability means. The second is to embed it in the whole school."
**Teacher**

"There are different shades of green though. One leader in education did sustainability but saw it as a way to increase SATs, quite a utilitarian approach. Another leader did lots of stuff on sustainability and achieved a lower carbon footprint. I perceived a personal commitment to preserving the natural world. They could rise above accountability of national curriculum and have a more rounded approach to sustainability."
**Head teacher**

## b) What are we doing about it already?

Several interviewees made the point there is a risk that attempts to bring in sustainability do not produce real change.

"Education, for sustainable development [ESD], has gone wrong. For example, producing a taxonomy of skills for ESD is following the same mindset as the predominant global competitiveness model."
**Academic**

## c) What more could we do?

Some interviewees suggested that sustainability is locally situated and builds local communities.

"An ideal ESD would be locally based: encouraging local democracy and healthy community."
**Academic**

"It's important to look at everything in a local way, ideally school food should be local, the dinner ladies are local. Someone, a woman, Angie, brought vegetables for school meals from the garden locally. Not trucks with packaged food. Again try to encourage schools to do its bit in its own way."
**Teacher**

## d) How is it prioritised?

Some interviewees suggested that making a commitment to sustainability is making a commitment to the future of society and people's interaction with the environment.

"If we can't get it right in schools we are in really big trouble: in the long-term we are going to have to figure it out. If humans are going to be on Earth, we either become extinct or we figure it out."
**Teacher**

## e) How is sustainability prioritised within schools and the curriculum?

There are views among interviewees that messages about sustainability are not consistent and that top-level support is necessary for sustainability to grow and flourish in schools.

"There are also mixed messages from DCSF. They have no options for sustainability. There was more on sustainability on the old SEF."
**Teacher**

"You need top level support to filter it down. If there is clear direction with clear commitment, people will follow."
**Government officer**

"If we can't get it right in schools we are in really big trouble: in the long-term we are going to have to figure it out. If humans are going to be on Earth, we either become extinct or we figure it out."

Teacher

"If you harness
the energy in
the people
things can really
happen. That has
galvanised my
idea about how
to create change.
Rather than sitting
in a room forcing
the world to
comply with your
views."

Teacher

### f) Where does sustainability fit in the English curriculum?

Some interviewees felt that sustainability ought to be the major priority to support young people to live in changing global environments, amid environmental degradation and other contemporary issues.

"Sustainability should be central: problem-solving, carbon neutral… We need to create opportunities for children to understand living in global societies."
**Government body**

### II. Ecological approaches to education

Various interviewees suggested that there is a need for an alternative model to the current model of education – one that is more ecologically influenced, joined-up and more creative. Many voiced a concern that current models of change within education will only make superficial changes.

"Two years ago I signed up to the eco-schools. We've done a few good things. The reality is that very little has changed."
**Teacher**

"We need to look at the Montessori model, the Scandinavian model. These models are ecologically joined up, creative. Ours is narrow and stultified."
**Head teacher**

"We have a cross-curricular approach to education. Next week we focus only on trees but we include everything. We are working to become a green flag eco-school, campaign for school gardening, we get so much out of it. […] Sustainability and the environment are embedded in the curriculum. We have a paper bank and a recycling bank. The children call me an eco-freak."
**Head teacher**

### III. Sustainability and change need to come from the grass roots

Many interviewees felt that change and a push for sustainability need to come from the grass roots. Similarly, some suggested that it must not be prescribed from above or outside. Others proposed that contextual knowledge is essential in the movement towards sustainable education and therefore local people are well situated to drive change. A few proposed that both the third sector and people acting on the ground ought to create changes within the education system.

"If you harness the energy in the people things can really happen. That has galvanised my idea about how to create change. Rather than sitting in a room forcing the world to comply with your views."
**Teacher**

"The whole idea is a bottom-up system; you don't impose sustainability on the kids."
**Teacher**

"Bottom-up change focused on systemic change is what's needed to be resourced. A very specific model of change is needed, focused on innovation, knowledge of context and equally highly networked."
**Think tank**

"If sustainable schools strategies are seen to be compulsory strategies from the government they will be less effective. It's much better to come from the voluntary sector, which engages with hearts and minds. It would be good to contact schools that don't yet do Education for Sustainable Development: the movement needs bodies, not government policy, nor local authority pressure."
**Civil servant**

"All schools like ours are described as maverick as we make changes without government. We didn't wait for policy to change. We need to change practice to drive policy change."
**Education consultant**

## IV. Personal experience of nature in early development

In quite a number of the interviews, nature and early experiences of nature were perceived to be very important in the development of adults and children. Many interviewees recounted their own experiences of nature in their own development paths.

"I can see that it's so different for kids that don't go into nature. For example, on a field trip in Swanage a kid was scared of the rain, they had never been in the rain because they were always inside. They had never been exposed to the full force of stormy rain."
**Subject association**

"I have interviewed eight head teachers of eco-schools. The common distinguishing feature was childhood empathising or connection with the natural world."
**Head teacher**

"I read Rachel Carson's Silent Spring and it really got me going, also my childhood experiences were geared towards appreciating the outdoors – we did a lot of camping and walking."
**Subject association**

## V. Nature in the curriculum and teaching

Some interviewees advanced the idea that nature is also a resource for teaching and learning. Some interviewees had found in their practice that nature is useful as a place to teach, learn and grow and therefore relevant to teaching, learning, development and tackling behavioural problems.

"You could take children outdoors and treat them as adults. You could see children who were pretty horrible in the classroom come back alive."
**Subject association**

"You could take children outdoors and treat them as adults. You could see children who were pretty horrible in the classroom come back alive."

Subject association

"Creating the wildlife garden as a curricular resource was one of my proudest moments… Bringing some awe and wonder into kids' lives."

Head teacher

"Creating the wildlife garden as a curricular resource was one of my proudest moments… Bringing some awe and wonder into kids' lives."
**Head teacher**

"If you find something a child enjoys doing, often take them outside. Give them a knife, woodwork, make a fire. I find that this is the best way to connect with children who have discipline problems."
**Head teacher**

# 7. New cultures of learning

Among the interviews there was a diverse array of ideas for the future of learning and education. Some of these ideas were currently being carried out in the interviewees' own work; others were ideas, directions and proposals for the future. Among these discourses, these ideas can be grouped into two broad areas: ideas for creating new supportive cultures of learning; and new ways of learning in connection to context and local communities. The first part is outlined here and the latter appears in the next section.

Many interviewees stressed the importance of support for teachers, to enable a more supportive culture for children. They stressed it was important for teachers to unpack their understandings of the role of a teacher in learning and expand training for teachers. Finally, some spoke of the need to enable others and build capacity at multiple levels – from student to teacher. The following topics are covered:

I    Understandings of learning

II   The importance of relationships

III  The importance of care in education

IV   The value in thinking (and doing) differently

V    Support, learning and reflection for teachers

VI   The role of a teacher in learning

VII  The limits of teacher training

VIII Enabling others

IX   Creativity and constraints

## I.  Understandings of Learning

There were different views among some interviewees of the nature of teaching, and their understanding of learning and their experience of how children learn. A few interviewees proposed that learning and the ability to learn are necessary to be able to thrive amid changes in the contemporary world. Others suggested that education must be able to adapt to different rates of learning among children.

"Real learning is not complicated to enable, but rare."
**Government body**

"To thrive in the face of change, young people need to love learning and be capable of learning throughout life."
**Think tank**

"We are born curious and school beats it out of us."
**Government body**

"Children progress in their learning at different rates."
**Government body**

"To thrive in the face of change, young people need to love learning and be capable of learning throughout life."

Think tank

# "If you don't push you don't know where the limits are."

Government officer

## II. The importance of relationships

Many interviewees reiterated the importance of strong relationships between students and teachers as a firm foundation for learning. They suggested that these connections and relationships between peers/students enable learning, community cohesion, care and support, and create inclusive environments.

"Through a relationship you create, you can make someone want to learn."
**Teacher**

"If you have some kind of relationship then you have the beginning of life long learning."
**Head teacher**

"I thought I could walk in and do the job [teaching] but you have to earn their respect. I realised the way to defeat them was to like them."
**NGO**

## III. The importance of care in education

There were various views of the importance of the practice of care in schools, as well as in classroom environments. Some interviewees believed that it was important that care ran throughout the school – from teacher to student. The significance of 'an ethos of caring' was raised.

"You have to create a caring environment where students start caring themselves. This is how schools should be – caring and welcoming."
**Government officer**

"There should be more focus on well-being and an understanding that a child who is unhappy at school will not learn well and there are a number of things a school can do to make sure the child is happy. It can be the whole ethos of the school, the environment, the food provided, the relationship that children have with their peers and teachers. If it is an open school, children can talk about their feelings. If a child is having issues at home, a school can provide counselling."
**NGO**

## IV. The value in thinking (and doing) differently

A few of the interviewees advanced the idea that there is an urgent need to think differently and act differently, and to push the boundaries of what is already in operation in the education system. Some held the view that enabling young children to appreciate different views and mindsets was also an important skill.

"Schools need to do new things, not what they are already doing in a different way."
**Civil servant**

"If you don't push you don't know where the limits are."
**Government officer**

"Appreciating multiple perspectives is a life skill that is required now. You will come across people with different views that are very valid to them. This is happening in geography, I'm not sure it's happening in other subjects. It could be a principle of the national curriculum."
**Subject association**

"I can remember that I had teachers who were supportive and helpful and also I had teachers who were like bullies really."

NGO

## V. Support, learning and reflection for teachers

A number of interviewees proposed opportunities to learn and reflect, which would support teachers in their jobs – by sustaining their energy, their drive to teach, and their ability to support young people.

"If someone [a teacher] is keen, they can lose energy if they don't get support."
**Government officer**

"When I discovered action research it made such a difference to how I reflect myself and gave me a more productive way of reflecting."
**Teacher**

"Ranger training: heuristic, it is really made my head expand. It was all about how you as an individual constructed your own role and responsibility as a ranger. I loved it. I felt in control of my own learning."
**Government body**

## VI. The role of a teacher in learning

On the topic of the role of teachers in learning, some interviewees suggested that it was essential that teachers recognise their own influence in children's development and use this positively. Some suggested that their role as a teacher is more like a connector than an expert. Others had mixed experiences of teachers in their own schooling.

"I believe in young people. You can change lives. Teachers are in a privileged position. You are a powerful group. You can change lives."
**Head teacher**

"I can remember that I had teachers who were supportive and helpful and also I had teachers who were like bullies really."
**NGO**

## VII. The limits of teacher training

It was raised by various interviewees that teacher training and personal development is currently limited to the areas prescribed by the national curriculum. Some mentioned that there is no teacher training available in self-directed learning, personal development or sustainable development, despite a clear need for it.

"The professional development of teachers is part of their rights. But it's been very restrained into areas that are prioritised against the national curriculum e.g. literacy and numeracy, not other areas like sustainable development."
**Subject association**

# "School was stifling."

Subject association

"The curriculum for teacher training is even more prescribed than the national curriculum. It's very difficult to change at a personal level. You can work your personal interests into the programme but you have to meet targets. Sustainable development [ESD] is not part of them."
**Subject association**

"From my questionnaire I've seen that teachers want to put sustainable development into their teaching but they have no knowledge."
**Subject association**

## VIII. Enabling others

Various interviewees pointed out the necessity of enabling and empowering others – students, teachers and educators – to help themselves, to encourage self-directed learning and development.

"I've had a lot to do with building the capability of the staff. If they are not interested in changing the school, they should go somewhere else."
**Head teacher**

## IX. Creativity and constraints

Some interviewees commented on the absence of creativity in schools – both in the schools they had attended as children and in the schools they operated in as practitioners. Some interviewees asserted that in primary schools there were more opportunities for young people to be creative. Some put forward the view that the economic demands put on schools, and the demands on children to produce exam results, were barriers to cultivating the natural creativity of children and young people.

"School was stifling."
**Subject association**

"Primary and secondary curricula are different. In primary schools it's more creative; there is an opportunity for sustainable development."
**Subject association**

# 8. Sustainability and innovation in education

According to many of those interviewed, what and how young people learn from school needs to be applicable to the real world, particularly in response to a rapidly changing society and environment.

Some interviewees argued that learning must be connected with the needs, issues and realities of communities the schools are located within. There was a strong desire, among some interviewees, that learning should connect with local place, culture and history. Many felt that young people should be empowered by the educational experience. Young people, some argued, need to be equipped with life skills and relationships that will support their capacities to handle the non-academic world for the rest of their lives.

In summary, the following topics are covered:

I    Experiential education

II   Connection to the community

III  The importance of local history, culture and place

IV   Empowering young people

V    Young people's concern for the environment

VI   Life skills

## I.   Experiential education

Many interviewees proposed the need for real-world, experiential learning where children can observe, touch and feel the curricula they are learning about, first hand. Taking children into the environments that they are learning about conceptually was posited as an effective way to achieve this.

"If you are going to learn about woods you need to go into the woods. Reading about such things as 'a wood' is literally second-hand learning, [it's] much more distant."
**Academic**

"Children need hands-on (learning). Planting bulbs teaches more than using a slide. Reality needs to be taken on board. They need experience."
**Head teacher**

"Place based learning... Epistemology: some things can only be learned in certain ways. Also motivation: it is easier to learn about the food chain if you are in a wood."
**Academic**

> "If you are going to learn about woods you need to go into the woods. Reading about such things as 'a wood' is literally second-hand learning, [it's] much more distant."
>
> Academic

"What is pro-social behaviour? We're always on about anti-social behaviour, but what is pro-social behaviour?"

Think tank

## II. Connection to the community

Many interviewees commented that it is important both for schools and teachers to link with their local communities. Many encountered barriers, both at the individual and the institutional level, to connecting with the local communities that children grew up in. One person raised the question of how to cultivate behaviour in young people that has a positive impact on society, rather than mitigates against anti-social behaviour.

"I think of teachers as part of the community. Being around the area where the kids live is important."
**Teacher**

"The more I learn about sustainability, the more I realise it is about the community and creating a place that enriches itself."
**Teacher**

"Schools are neutered – they can't respond to their local area needs."
**Head teacher**

"What is pro-social behaviour? We're always on about anti-social behaviour, but what is pro-social behaviour?"
**Think tank**

## III. The importance of local history, culture and place in education

Some of the interviewees were very interested in local history and place, learning from other cultures. Some interviewees were keen to incorporate local history, local people and local cultures into their teaching and in doing so bring classroom lessons to life and make teaching relevant to the contexts that students live and grow in.

"I am incredibly linked to Celtic thought, landscape, knowledge of the past and fascinated by peripheral communities and societies, distance and loneliness."
**Academic**

"All these things we have been experiencing now, we have been experiencing for thousands of years. It makes us not too self-obsessed: we are not centre of the universe."
**Head teacher**

"There are about 5% [of children from a particular community] that live in the forest. The more I learn about what they do and their ways the more I am interested in them and they can be tied into local history lessons."
**Teacher**

## IV. Empowering young people

Some interviewees commented that young people are powerful, but that they are currently disempowered in the education system by adults and the structures of the existing system.

"Young people have amazing power, you need to give them time to do things."
**NGO**

"Young people are worried about the future and not being equipped to do something about it."
**Subject association**

## V. Young people's concern for the environment

Many interviewees suggested that young people are acutely concerned about contemporary issues and the environment. Currently, young people are worried but are constrained in the extent to which they can address these concerns by doing something to change unsustainable trends and behaviour. Older people do not always share their concerns.

"Children have said to us: 'we are really worried about ecological issues, you have messed it all up'."
**NGO**

"I'm always encouraging children to look at conservation and ecology. They are really worried about it. I have real meaningful conversations with them. Older generations are really pompous about it."
**Head teacher**

## VI. Life skills for the modern world

Finally, many stakeholders discussed how current approaches towards education put emphasis on the academic dimension of education, rather than emphasising other skills such as the life skills needed to enter a (post) modern and changing world.

There was a suggestion that life skills are really needed, in addition to academic training, for young people to grow and thrive in society when they leave education and enter work and adulthood. Some also raised questions about which skills are needed to feel confident to navigate the contemporary social, economic, political environment in England and the UK.

"I'd like education to meet the needs of each individual child. I realise this is difficult. What is it that equips children to live a successful life, from their perspective? What are the life skills needed for the 21st century? Hasn't education always had to change to meet the social context?"
**Subject association**

"To thrive in the face of change, young people need to love learning. This is the job of education. We need multiple aims in education: knowledge, skills, emotion, physical skills, creativity, critical thinking.
**Think tank**

"The constant worry is that you focus on exam teaching. Actually, life skills are needed."
**Teacher**

"I'm interested in teaching children how to learn; what life-long learning looks like. Curriculum and research are not reflective."
**Government body**

"Young people are worried about the future and not being equipped to do something about it."

Subject association

While it is hard
to grasp one
consistent story
from this mosaic
of different
perspectives,
some clear
and meaningful
themes emerge

# 9. Conclusions

What story is told through this selection of interviews from people working across and beyond the education system? What can these diverse and disparate views and logics tell us about the whole? Can the views of many different actors in different institutions and geographies tell a common narrative?

While it is hard to grasp one consistent story from this mosaic of different perspectives, some clear and meaningful themes emerge that clearly signal what the issues are, what needs to change and why, and where there is energy to change or to do things differently.

In the first section, it was demonstrated that many interviewees are experiencing serious problems with the education system in its current shape and form. The majority of interviewees suggested that there are inherent and systemic problems with the national curriculum, the role of the civil service in education, and the regulation of education. The underlying message was that these structural issues need addressing and need to change. If we want to address issues of structural inequalities, low self-esteem, continuous assessment and overbearing workloads, the major features of the existing system need to change.

Secondly, from hearing about the personal experience of a range of interviewees who are trying to change or innovate in the existing system, we learned what it takes to address the failures of the existing system: leadership, courage, reflection and motivation. Many of the interviewees had asked hard questions about the existing ways of doing things and had explored new theoretical and practical landscape and territory.

In the third section, we learned in more depth about the practical realities of systemic change. Various interviewees suggested an urgent need for systemic change across the education system. We see what they have learned from implementing change on the ground in their schools and communities, as well as what real change could be like and, crucially, what stands in the way of addressing the issues in the contemporary education system.

In the final three sections the dominant message is about the importance of sustainability and the environment in education. This message is influenced by our agenda and from our framing of this work, but it also came from the personal experience of our interviewees: from the experience of teaching young people in nature, or using natural environments to learn and stimulate excitement towards learning and growth. Despite the issues attached to the concept and practice of sustainability, the significance of sustainability in education overall was keenly understood by the majority of interviewees.

Looking ahead, many had ideas and insights into new futures of education and learning. There were some clear directions for moving forward in contemporary education: critical reflection on how to create real learning in schools, supportive relationships between teachers and students, caring schools and classrooms, support and training for teachers, and the integration of sustainability and the environment into education and schools.

There was a strong theme of the need for an education system that can keep up with societal changes in a rapidly changing country and world facing ecological threats. The clear message that was found in the majority of the discourses was that young people require skills and knowledge that will equip them to thrive and flourish in an uncertain future.

These may include tackling environmental issues and environmental sustainability in their schools; learning how to accommodate multiple viewpoints and perspectives; and learning life skills that will allow them to make informed choices, to the benefit of themselves, society and the natural world after they finish school-based education.

This means enabling young people to learn through doing and experiencing, and cultivating a connection with the physical environment that they live and learn in. It also requires empowering young people to care for the environment, themselves and each other and moving beyond structures that constrain leadership and creativity. We have learned that some individuals, schools and agencies are doing this already in their realms of influence, but that this is not enough to change the system for all.

Finally, and perhaps critically, we discovered that because these efforts to bring about change are currently either geographically located or piecemeal, many actors feel isolated or alone in their attempts to shift the wider system.

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We rarely allow ourselves to consider some of the biggest social issues of our time

# 10. Afterword: The primacy of the personal

"The world we have created has outstripped our capacity to understand it. The scale of interconnectivity and interdependence has resulted in a step change in the complexity of the operating environment… The anchors of identity, morality, cultural coherence and social stability are unravelling and we are losing our bearings. We are living in a conceptual emergency."
- The International Futures Forum.

We are living in what has been described as a 'conceptual emergency'. While we can think of conceptual emergencies in the most macro of terms, such as policies, standards, systems, institutions and so on, by their very nature conceptual emergencies are also immensely personal. Larger structures are made up of individuals with a set of beliefs, values and understandings. These give rise to countless actions that constitute the larger systems we are working to grasp and change.

We rarely allow ourselves to consider some of the biggest social issues of our time – such as health, education, climate change, poverty and democracy – in personal terms. What questions are we willing to ask ourselves? Are we willing to interrogate our own stories? Are we willing to question our fondest and most cherished beliefs? What is the purpose of 13 years of school-based learning? Is this an appropriate model for the future? What is the value that school adds, over learning beyond the classroom? What is the new role for teachers? What is the role of the wider community in education? Are we willing to consider reflexively the role we have played in the wider situation?

Our approach, which involved posing such questions, proved challenging. During the course of our interviews we encountered a variety of reactions to the highly personal nature of the process. These ranged from delight at spending an afternoon talking intimately and personally, to bafflement as to the need for such a process. Almost all participants offered us either encouragement or feedback that helped us reflect on our own approach.

The individuals who participated in this process all exemplified a degree of personal courage that is all too rare. They reflected on their own stories and their life-narratives, in order to serve a higher goal of trying to understand how 'we' (comprised of many 'I's) got to where we are today. They articulated nothing less than a set of socio-historical narratives. These give us a deeply personal picture of the education system. Each quote comes from a narrative that has its own logic, its own internal coherence and, ultimately, gave us the feeling of stepping into other worlds.

Far from an antiseptic, impersonal and disconnected analysis, we heard stories of an education system that is intimately part of everyone we spoke to. Stories of personal struggles – of growing up, of family, of politics, of struggles to experiment and struggles to change; we heard stories of influences, from grandfathers and grandmothers, to those special teachers that leave indelible marks, positively or negatively, on young people. We heard what led this extraordinary group of individuals to life-long vocations of integrity and passion within the education system.

We also heard that among the hard work of a diverse set of practitioners, there is an opportunity to work together to address some of the toughest questions in education and sustainable education.

Our sincerest hope and aspiration for this work is to continue these conversations and shift them into an invitation for collective action. We wish to pursue how best we can, together, act on what we have heard and seen; and what it means for us to act together. We are not interested in convergence to a single action, but rather in launching multiple experiments that have the potential to shift some of the underlying trends and issues we are concerned about.

We have our own thoughts on the way forward. We are, however, trying hard to hold our myriad thoughts, beliefs and feelings lightly. This is because we would like our friends and our critics to join in the work of shaping our collective path forward. Tell us what we're missing and help us see our blind-spots.

Ultimately we would like to join forces with all those who have the energy and desire to cultivate the kinds of changes that our current situation and the coming future demands.

You are welcome to contact us at **oneplaneteducation@wwf.org.uk.**
Keep up to date about One Planet Education at:
**wwf.org.uk/oneplaneteducation**

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there is an opportunity to work together to address some of the toughest questions in education

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The mission of WWF is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature by:

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
- reducing pollution and wasteful consumption.

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