

CASE STUDY

Sustainable Food: Schools Based Action Research Inquiry

OVERVIEW

This project was concerned with investigating the role of schools in bringing about more sustainable communities; in particular, how learning in schools could spill over into action in communities. It explored the skills, knowledge and processes of learning and action that are most effective in contributing to sustainable communities; the role children and young people can play as agents of change in this process; and how schools might further their role as community catalysts. The primary academic contribution of this research has been to develop a better understanding of what forms of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) are most likely to stimulate action by children, families, and schools in their wider community.

This case study provides evidence of different approaches to ESD which can help develop more sustainable food habits in communities.

BACKGROUND

Learning is seen as key to creating sustainable communities. A key challenge for ESD is how to move beyond simple acquisition of knowledge to learning which challenges and transforms thinking practice and systems and brings about change in communities. ESD has tended to focus on work in schools with the assumption that learning spills over into communities. Yet, a recent report for WWF cautions that spillover that leads to 'simple and painless' behaviour changes is insufficient for bringing about the necessary changes in communities.

The challenge is how to engage communities more actively in learning that brings about more sustainable communities.



THE PROJECT

The research was conducted as a collaborative action research project engaging pupils, school staff and members of the wider community in cycles of learning, action and reflection. The project has been undertaken in collaboration with 6 partner schools and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who are delivering ESD programmes.

All schools tended to teach about healthy eating but in 3 schools Sustainable Food was chosen as a key strand to focus the inquiry. A focus on food – how and where it is produced, the packaging it comes in and how it is sold - raises multiple sustainability issues concerning diet and health, waste and recycling, transport (food miles and shopping trips), local economies, and conservation of natural habitats. This case study shares the experiences of this inquiry in 2 of the schools.

KEY WORDS

■ Action Research

■ Inquiry

■ Schools

■ Sustainable Communities

■ Food

■ Healthy Eating



School 1: Promoting healthy and sustainable eating habits in a low income, out-of-town estate.



In one of the primary schools the inquiry focused on diet, health and quality of food. Interactive activities, including matching games and cartoon dialogues, were used to help children explore issues about healthy eating, where food comes from and how people learn to eat more sustainably. Children also had the opportunity to identify and try a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Children identified things they could do to help their families eat more sustainably at home. Based on experiential learning in school gardens involving children growing vegetables some children tried to start growing vegetables themselves at home. Others took action by asking for healthy options in their lunch boxes. Given the prominence of problems of poor diet in the community the school had already invited a cooking bus into the school to provide simple recipes for eating healthily. However, within this community apathy is widespread making it difficult to get parents into school.

A further open afternoon was held to try and draw parents into the school to see what children had been learning and to engage them in discussions about eating more sustainably. This provided further opportunities to engage with parents around the theme of sustainable food and healthy eating. It was clear that whilst many parents felt eating healthily was important, this had only recently become important since their children had been learning about healthy eating in school and going home and demanding healthy food.

School 2: Encouraging sustainable shopping habits

In one of the secondary schools students engaged in inquiry into how people could shop more sustainably. Their aim was for a project that would help the town become a 'sustainable food zone'. To do this they realised they needed to identify the issues (eg. are there local shops selling local produce), the barriers (eg. what effects people using local shops) and how to change people's habits. The students undertook a survey into food habits in the local town. They asked questions about where people buy food from and why; whether they bought from local shops; how they travelled to do their shopping and what affected where they did their shopping. Key findings included:

- A majority of people shopped in supermarkets
- People wanted to use local shops more to support the community, but often didn't because of costs and availability of products and types of shop.
- Price and quality are more important indicators of food purchasing habits than if the produce is local, seasonal, organic or fair trade.
- Some people did not know about some local shops
- Whether food is healthy and of quality were the most important reason affecting where people shopped. Price also affected whether people bought from particular shops

The survey also uncovered some potentially conflicting positions in shopping habits between locally produced food and using local shops and also between organic and fair trade and sustainably farmed products.

"I don't know of any local grocery stores open where I live. If they were open after 7pm on weekdays I would definitely use them more. There is only one farmer's market per month in Harpenden. If these were every weekend and sold fresh produce at reasonable prices I would shop there instead." (Parent)

"Local shops don't necessarily stock locally-produced food. How does this relate to fair-trade and sustainability? Who is the most green?" (Parent)

"I wish there wasn't so much packaging on food. I try to buy 'loose' fruit and veg if possible. I am torn between food miles (eg Kenyan green beans) and supporting 'small' farmers in (say) Kenya." (Parent)

In response to issues raised by the food survey, students felt that if they provided information about the issues and what is available that this would encourage people to shop and eat more sustainably. The result was a Sustainable Food guide put together by students (below).

Since a majority of people shop at supermarkets the packaging, pricing and supply of food is to a large extent controlled by supermarket managers and company directors. However, whilst young people and the public at large may have little direct influence on food supply they can indirectly influence the economics of food production and retail through changes in patterns to demand.

Raising awareness and providing information to local people with local sustainable food guides can help to encourage changes in behaviour, and young people can play a key role in that process. However it has not been possible to confirm what impact this type of intervention has had on sustainable food shopping habits although anecdotal feedback from parents has been positive. In another secondary school students wrote letters to supermarket managers to discuss their ideas for promoting sustainable food, but none replied.

The infographic collage consists of 12 individual pages, each with a title and various text, images, and icons. The pages are arranged in a grid-like fashion. The titles of the pages are:

- Food shopping with a conscience
- Do you buy any locally produced food?
- Do you buy any Fairtrade products?
- Do you make any efforts to reduce the amount of food you throw away?
- Do you buy any organic produce?
- Do you buy fruit and vegetables when they are in season?
- Do you buy food products with a lot of packaging?
- What matters to you?
- Do you think about the impacts of the animal products you buy?
- Do you grow any of your own food?
- Do you try and eat healthily?
- This guide was produced by pupils and staff from Sir John Lawes School

 Each page contains specific advice and information related to its title, such as tips for shopping locally, understanding fair trade, reducing food waste, and making healthier food choices. The design is colorful and uses various fonts and icons to make the information engaging and easy to read.

IMPACT

A focus on sustainable food and healthy eating is an effective way to catalyse action in the community since it is relevant to the everyday choices families make. For some families for whom sustainable food consumption and healthy eating are part of their value system, knowing about the issues is less of an issue than the cost and availability of sustainable options. For poorer families diet and healthy eating, in addition to price of food, are a key part of sustainable food decisions. In one of the primary schools, a focus on diet and healthy eating is more pertinent than decisions about organic or fair-trade produce. Some parents from the poorer estate around one of the case study primary schools were simply unaware of the importance of healthy eating until their children had talked about it as a result of what they had learnt from the sustainability curriculum in school.

Practical hands on learning in the school garden have played an important role in providing children with some skills in 'growing your own', which supports their role as agents of change. Providing opportunities for children to try out different fruits and vegetables and talk about where they come from can be quite instructive in effecting young people's attitudes to healthy eating and sustainable shopping and a powerful basis from which they can make choices and influence their families. This is further perpetuated by younger children's concern for nature. However, whereas children can have an impact on their parents by discussing healthy and sustainable food, changing patterns of shopping appears more difficult in part as a result of the economic factors concerning availability and cost of sustainable alternatives, which effect behaviours.

In one of the school localities the young people found that there wasn't a greengrocers and the butchers shop further out from the town centre was often not used by local people. They decided that if more independent local shops selling local produce could be encouraged these would support local business, bring the community together and would help people to shop more sustainably.

At the same time young people feel strongly that if people are informed about the issues (how food is produced) and what they can do to make a difference, then change can happen.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Many children understand and are committed to healthy eating and sustainable food sourcing, but need to be opened up to those influences at an earlier age.
2. Many children are keen to grow their own food. Growing vegetables at school is a powerful motivator for children to grow their own produce at home.
3. Children learn about sustainable food issues from TV and internet as much as from parents and school
4. Families are only likely to eat sustainably if sustainably produced food is available and at a price they can afford.
5. Young people can play a significant role in identifying and researching sustainable food issues and come up with measures to help people change behaviour.
6. Whilst young people can play an influential role in educating the wider community to eat more sustainably, ultimately sustainable options need to be available for behaviours to change.

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