

PRIMARY EDUCATION FOR GLOBAL LEARNING AND SUSTAINABILITY

**Douglas Bourn, Frances Hunt, Nicole Blum
and Helen Lawson**

Children are growing up in a world where global forces such as environmental pressure, economic migration, the movement of refugees and the rapidly changing nature of economies are increasingly influencing their lives. Children also have instant access to information about the wider world and many of them engage directly in forms of social networking. This means that it is crucial for children to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes so that they can effectively and ethically navigate their way through this increasingly complex world and, correspondingly, for educators to be able to teach global understanding and sustainability.

This briefing highlights the key issues, evidence and opportunities for primary schools discussed in the research report *Primary Education for Global Learning and Sustainability* commissioned by CPRT from Douglas Bourn, Frances Hunt, Nicole Blum and Helen Lawson of the Development Education Research Centre at UCL Institute of Education.

Policy context

International bodies increasingly recognise the need to equip children with the knowledge and skills to engage in a global and sustainable world. This includes initiatives such as the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development from 2005-2014, the UN Sustainable Development Goals launched in 2015 and the planned OECD PISA review on 'global competencies' in 2018.

As the names suggest, there are a number of terms used to describe global and sustainability initiatives: Development Education, Environmental Education, the Global Dimension, Global Learning, Global Education, Global Citizenship, Education for Sustainable Development and Education for Sustainability. A lack of conceptual clarity and interchangeable usage of these terms has led to a degree of confusion for both policy makers and practitioners. Evidence from research, however, suggests that in primary education the shared emphasis of initiatives under these labels is largely focused on the 'softer skills' of fairness, tolerance, compassion and concern for protecting the natural world.

At national level, the influence of global learning and sustainability within primary schools has had a relatively high profile within the UK education system, but there is increasing divergence across the four nations in their response. In Wales, 'Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship' is a cross-curricular theme. In Scotland, 'Learning for Sustainability' is recognized as an entitlement for all pupils. In Northern Ireland, at key stage 2, there is a recommended discrete area of learning called 'The World Around Us'. In England global learning and sustainability have a much lower profile, appearing only within specific curriculum subjects or as a subsidiary aspect of policy initiatives such as 'Fundamental British Values'. A consequence of the many changes that have taken place recently within UK education policy has been the difficulty of developing and sustaining an effective body of practice within this area.

Current UK initiatives in global learning and sustainability

However, there are a number of initiatives from both the UK government and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which support teachers and school leaders. For example:

- The Global Learning Programme has distinctive programmes within each of the four UK nations, which share the aim of engaging large numbers of schools, including primary schools, in learning about global issues.
- Connecting Classrooms, delivered by the British Council, includes a strong international school partnership element alongside the professional development of teachers, in themes such as citizenship, critical thinking and problem solving and collaboration and communication.
- Sustainable Schools, an initiative in England coordinated by an alliance of civil society organisations, is based around learning through eight 'hgdoorways'.

Learning about global and sustainability themes in UK primary schools is also often associated with award schemes. These can be attractive because they provide frameworks for engagement and progression pathways that guide teachers to improve their practice. Examples include the Eco-School Award (organised by Keep Britain Tidy), International School Awards (British Council), Rights Respecting School Awards (UNICEF), Fairtrade School Award (Fairtrade Foundation), Primary Geography Quality Mark (Geographical Association), and the Global Teacher Award (Consortium of Local Development Education Centres). A number of subject associations (e.g. the Association for Science Education and the Association for Citizenship Teaching) and NGOs (e.g. Oxfam, Christian Aid, Send a Cow, Tide~ global learning and local Development Education Centres) also provide support to schools through projects and activities.

Evidence from practice

The extent to which schools engage with global learning and sustainable development varies widely. Some schools adopt a whole-school approach whereby the themes are embedded within the school ethos and are evident in their professional development programmes. For others, the focus may be on particular topics such as recycling or fair trade, or specific to work in one or two subject areas. Activities might include links with a school in a developing country, environmental projects in the school grounds, topic or theme-related teaching sessions (e.g. on water, waste, human rights), school assemblies, and fundraising or NGO support campaigns.

Research evidence shows that primary schools tend to emphasise 'soft' or more 'empathetic' approaches to global learning and education for sustainability, emphasizing themes such as fairness and justice. This can lead to their tackling more complex and controversial issues as teachers and school leaders develop their practice over time. Addressing stereotypes, for instance, is often seen as an important stepping stone in this process.

The evidence also suggests that practice in these areas depends on the enthusiasm of individual teachers and school leaders. The commitment and enthusiasm of educators is in turn often related to the extent to which learning about these themes becomes part of everyday practice, rather than just occasional or ad hoc activities. This means that the engagement and support of school leaders is critical to the success of learning about global and sustainability themes within a school.

Impact

There is a growing body of evidence on the impact of global learning and sustainability on both pupils and teachers.

The more these themes are part of the ethos of the school, the greater the impact they have on pupils' learning. This has been picked up by a number of school OFSTED inspections in England where global learning and sustainability have been recognised as enhancing pupils' outlooks on the world and their own well-being. Research also highlights that learning can be substantially increased in areas such as literacy and numeracy when 'real world' examples and experiences are utilised. Another theme to emerge is that where children are encouraged to talk actively about the issues, their communication skills are likely to improve.

Evidence from a number of studies also confirms that teachers' confidence and skills in global learning and education for sustainable development are enhanced through effective professional development.

Pedagogy for global social and environmental justice

Learning about global and sustainability issues needs to involve long-term and active engagement on the part of schools, teachers and students. It also requires a focus on how such learning is encouraged. There has been a tendency in schools in the UK and elsewhere to see global learning and sustainability as additional content for which space has to be found in the existing curriculum. We suggest, however, that learning about these themes is more effectively and meaningfully encouraged by adopting a pedagogical approach which:

- is located within a values base of global social justice;
- promotes critical and reflective thinking;
- encourages learners to make connections between their own lives and those of others throughout the world;
- provides opportunities for the learner to have positive and active engagements in society that contribute to their own perspective of what a better world could look like.

This means that whilst increased knowledge about global and sustainability themes is important, it is also important to consider how it is presented, understood and perceived by the learners. This includes recognizing the importance of learners' own experiences, their outlook on the world and their social and cultural backgrounds. Such an approach chimes with CPR and CPRT evidence on children's voices and lives outside school as well as CPRT's emphasis on aims such as interdependence and reciprocity - as well as, of course, sustainability.

Conclusion

As both the CPRT priorities and the new UN education agenda have underlined, learning about global and sustainability themes is a necessary aspect of children's primary education. Children are growing up in a globalised world where protecting and saving the planet is a dominant and urgent concern.

Historically, global and sustainability learning in schools has been steered by the agendas and priorities of policy-makers and external bodies. International bodies such as UNESCO and the recent UN Sustainable Development Goals provide an important impetus to the support and rationale for schools addressing global and sustainability issues.

Within the UK there is increasing divergence of approach at the policy level, with government support strong in Scotland and Wales, much less so in England. The Global Learning Programme, however, has given a new and important impetus to learning about global themes throughout the UK.

Global and sustainability themes pose wider questions about approaches to teaching and learning. If they are to have real impact upon learners, they must be taught in a way that challenges assumptions about the wider world, which engages them, and instills in them a sense that they can make a positive contribution to making the world a better place. The importance of empowerment, too, has been a constant message of CPR and CPRT.

Related sources:

Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Priority 4:
http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-priorities-in-action/sustainability/

Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Priority 5:
http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-priorities-in-action/aims/

Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Priority 6:
http://cprtrust.org.uk/about_cprt/cprt-priorities-in-action/community/

Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010), *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge. Chapters 4 (Childhood today), 5 (Children's lives outside school), 10 (Children's voices), 12 (What is primary education for?), and 14 (Towards a new curriculum).

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Bourn, D., Hunt, F., Blum, N., and Lawson, H. (2016) *Primary Education for Global Learning and Sustainability* (CPRT Research Survey 5), York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust. ISBN 978-0-9931032-5-4

The report is available at www.cprtrust.org.uk. The website also contains information about other surveys in this series, and those related to the Cambridge Primary Review.

Cambridge Primary Review Trust was established in December 2012 with the aim of consolidating and building on Cambridge Primary Review's evidence, findings and principles. Supported by Pearson Education, it is based at the University of York and chaired by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Trust has eight priorities (equity, voice, community, sustainability, aims, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) and four programmes (policy, research, schools, professional networking and development).

Enquiries: The Administrator, Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Derwent College M, University of York, York, YO10 5DD. Phone: 01904-323468.

Email: administrator@cprtrust.org.uk. Website: www.cprtrust.org.uk.

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