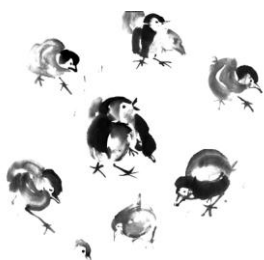


**LEARNING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FOR AN ECOLOGICAL WORLD VIEW****ISABEL CARLISLE**

*'There is science now to construct the story of the journey we have made on this earth, the story that connects us with all beings. There is also great yearning and great need to own that story. The challenge to do that now, and break out of the separate prison cells of our contriving, is perhaps the most wonderful aspect of being alive today.'* (Joanna Macy)



The future that young people and children are currently being educated for in this country is not the future that is approaching.

Two years ago I approached Jane Reed (who was then at the Institute of Education) to join with me in forming a community of practice to address the challenge of how to educate young people in a holistic way for a sustainable future. I could see the opportunity that the ills of the planet and human society presented to open up the whole question of what education is really for. The question with which we invited our fellow practitioners to join us was: "How do we, as educators in the UK, empower young people to know they can make a difference and support the emergence of a new, holistic, approach to teaching sustainability both within and without schools?" The 25 people who gathered for our first weekend meeting at Schumacher College, Devon, UK in September 2010 were head teachers, teachers, teacher educators, academics and advisers, heads of education in sustainability NGOs and charities, working with children and young people on the land, writers, storytellers and activists as well as change agents. We decided to call ourselves *Quince* because we found a quince tree in the forest garden next door.

We shared our practices (including Philosophy for Children, composting and experiencing how it felt to be planted like a tree). We mapped the current education system and looked for allies. We delved into our feelings and pondered what we might do next. We celebrated being together as a group and said how good it felt not to be lone pioneers any longer. We agreed that we were a community of practitioners for ecological learning and transforming educational practice. We were empowering young people to envision and play a role in their futures; putting pupil leadership and learning first; supporting young people as designers of their future; and sharing a lived enquiry into what it means to be human on this planet now. Sustainability is a very inadequate term for acting as if the planet matters so we clarified that, to us, learning for sustainability means: connecting to place and community, designing new learning processes with and for adults and young people based on ecological thinking and being clear about our values and embodying those values. We felt we were getting a good grip on where holistic education needed to go and by the end of the two days our central question changed into: *'how do we co-enquire, with young people, into what it is to be human on the planet now?'*

Quince became interested in exploring what it is to be human on the planet now in a way that breaks the cycle of this collective wounding. We agree that we cannot explore what it means to be human in ways that are always safe. Enquiry and transformation are a risk. The one-planet pedagogue's role is to manage the risk, help learners to manage and learn from the risk, and thus develop the capacity to be courageous. Failure to enquire, and failure to transform are greater risks. People will change their pedagogy only when they realise this in their own practice.

Another challenge that we named is that the present system has too many teachers and head teachers who play out another collective wounding, this time about standards. They allow this, too, to unbalance their pedagogy, imposing external measurements on young people's achievements regardless of any ecological principles of connectedness, relevance, reverence or inter-dependence. It is this imposition that can make much schooling fraught, neurotic and quarrelsome.

We wondered how could we explore what it is to be human on the planet without being either sucked into, or marginalised by, the standards obsession? We decided we can and must explore what it is to be human, and still deliver prescribed standards. And in addition, we must summon forth a new standard that leads to appropriate action for sustainability. The one-planet pedagogue's role is to facilitate enquiry toward action. The capacity to act wisely is the standard by which progress in learning needs to be measured. An incapacity, or indisposition, to act wisely is the greatest betrayal of standards.

The upshot of this group thinking was to design young people into a central position in the Quince meet up that took place at Sharpham House, Devon, UK in September 2011. We invited pupils and teachers from Churston Ferrers School in the Torbay area of Devon, and from KEVICC in Totnes in Devon to join us as we put our pedagogical ideas into practice. We decided to create three challenges outdoors on the estate that would be facilitated by adults but led to solution by young people. One was to get our hands into the soil in the vegetable garden and make things out of cob (clay, sand, straw and water). Another was to heat the outdoor swimming pool using black plastic tubing, a car battery and a small pump. The third was to make a den using only natural materials that could be found in the vicinity. The learning for us all was not so much in what we did but the way that we did it with young people stepping forward and adults holding back, in a support role.

We concluded the day with a listening circle in which the seven young people aged 14 to 17 sat in the middle and spoke while the adults sat around the outside and were not permitted to speak a word, only listen. After a hesitant beginning the young people got into their stride, felt less self-conscious and worked out how to facilitate their dialogue. We posed three questions and this is what we heard:

***What students liked about the afternoon's activities:***

We mixed with adults as a team. The adults were learning, too.  
 We had a choice with our activities.  
 What we wanted to do was valued.  
 There was recognition of what we already knew.  
 I learnt loads but didn't feel as if someone was telling me.  
 I liked being practical and doing things with my hands.  
 The adult teacher role was more like a facilitator.  
 Working in smaller groups felt more supportive.  
 Being outside I thought I'd be more distracted but I focused more inside. They talk, we write, outside I felt more alert. Being outside makes you concentrate more, it keeps you alert.  
 I saw the relevance of today and now want to know what next?

***How students compared this practice with school practice:***

- It made me realise education is more about learning than grades.
- Teachers need to get us outside not sitting in classrooms.
- We sit down for 80 minutes and get up and sit down for 80 minutes and get up.
- When every teacher does a Power Point and that's their idea of modern creative approach, I just get a headache.
- School feels like working in a box. Every teacher says "Work hard or you're not going anywhere."
- I've just done my GCSEs and I don't remember anything I learnt.
- We learn better when we experience it.
- I don't question enough nowadays because I'm not asked to.
- When you are motivated you forget you are tired.
- It is rare for us to be able to speak in school and share what we think.
- Feedback on what works or doesn't work is really important.
- Caring is not seen as cool.
- Learning is not seen as cool because we are being told what to do.

***What students think about education for their future:***

1. Education in school is segregating by ability and is based on ability to regurgitate.
2. Education should be about problem solving.
3. Education is about helping someone to understand how to live their life.
4. It's about how to be happy.
5. It's about allowing the truth of someone to come out.
6. Teaching should be about explaining different ways of going about life.
7. Education should show you a pathway.
8. The best thing is for children to want to do something and then being able to do it.
9. We've never been told we could do it another way (about finding a livelihood without worrying about grades).

Based on these findings, Quince has now developed a weekend residential leadership course called New Generation Leaders in Sustainability, for teachers and students enquiring together. Our shared learning continues to evolve, as does our sense of what Quince can do. We now call ourselves radical educators for an ecological world view, though each of us would probably define that world view slightly differently. From my perspective, I have a self that functions within an ecological world view when I see all life as interconnected and take responsibility for my actions in my local ecological and social systems. It's the part of my self that connects with the natural world and allows me to experience an expanded being that is much greater than my small self with its immediate needs. Arne Naess called it the part of us that awakens to and connects with the sacredness of nature. The challenge now is to bring this awareness into mainstream education.

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