

Learning from the children?

Lydia Meryll

In the UK we have had the Climate Change Act since 2008 where the Government gave powers to local authorities and public bodies to reduce carbon by setting timed carbon budgets and phasing out carbon intensive technologies, including the over use of fossil fuels. We now have the Paris Agreement 2015. All citizens are encouraged to contribute to reducing their production of global warming gases, to use low carbon sustainable energy and transport, to look at the carbon miles embedded in the food we eat and to buy locally produced products. We are all in transition – globally.

However, many adults are happy to adopt a 'sceptic' position and defend their life style in the face of the evidence from climate scientists, the extreme weather, the desertification of sub-Saharan Africa, Syria and parts of the USA and the damage done locally and globally by flood water and rising sea levels. Youth workers are able to access information like the reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007) and they can also assess the knowledge and anxiety levels of the young people they work with. They can access the local and national campaign activists and progress informal learning. They can do this on their own, but they can also work with other agencies, including schools, to provide positive learning and a critique of climate injustice when it comes to the damage continuing to be done by the 'Developed World'. I present two case studies of work carried out recently by a small educational charity, using youth work methods, to encourage intergenerational learning about climate change and to generate positive solutions with young people.

Case study 1: Wangari Maathai Peace Garden Project

In 2015 three schools and one youth project opted to take part in a programme of tree planting, to make four local Peace Groves, celebrating the work of the Green Belt Movement (1) and the role of an astonishing woman, Wangari Maathai, who was the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace

Prize for her work with women in Kenya. She used community work techniques to use the propagation of trees in drought-threatened areas as ways of empowering groups of women and enabling them to understand the importance of re-afforestation for their livelihood. This meant having to confront the vested interests of men in powerful positions, with armed militias who wanted to force through urban development programmes. She is an important role model in many ways. She achieved the first PhD qualification of a woman scientist in Africa and became a minister in the government of Kenya.

Manchester Environmental Education Network (MEEN) invited local adults who were also environmental activists to meet the young people to share what they knew about climate change and to help with the planting. The three schools all had active Eco Teams with a dedicated member of staff, one a deputy head and two were teaching assistants. The groups met once before the planting of the Peace Grove to watch a video and to discuss the work of Wangari and the moral principles of agency and doing our small best (2). The young people reflected on what they meant by 'peace'. Many thought it was a safe space where there was no violence. 'Somewhere where my big brother can't get me!' They were offered public planting spaces and tree saplings which could adapt to the terrain – such as a horseshoe of different types of willow that one group then planted on a swampy part of their local park. They were determined to look out for this area and made visits with their parents. They talked about trees producing oxygen and eating up carbon dioxide. Trees took on a new significance and they became far more confident and assertive in defending the need for green space. They learned a great deal of new technical language including pollination and propagation. The discussions with the activists varied, but where the adults were themselves confident, the young people seemed to appreciate their input.

The Youth Project involvement was, however, headed by the Chair of the Board of Trustees. As it turned out the youth worker was not convinced that the project was of interest to the groups she worked with. Indeed, at the introductory session where the

films about Wangari were to be shown to the young people, none turned up and the worker said that planting trees in an area like theirs was only a middle-class preoccupation and they were not interested in 'gentrification'. 'Our job is consciousness raising about racism.' (Indeed she was currently working with a group of Muslim young women on a film about their diversity and rights to be assertive in an Islamophobic community.)

So this part of the story could have been one of failure; or a chance to consider wider informal education issues. It led to the children of the local Saturday School getting involved in naming the trees which had been planted and selecting images of Wangari which they thought people in the area would like to see as an example of how Black women can be real achievers. They wrote down and discussed what aspects of their environment they were concerned about. But the lack of continuity of volunteer support at the Saturday Club and concerns about safeguarding and parental support for a walk to the Community Garden site prevented the children from actually attaching their Wangari labels to the trees and establishing their sense of ownership for a community facility.

These difficulties led to a seminar with undergraduate students at the local university youth work course. After some embarrassed moments where the students tried to identify what were the issues they themselves were worried about, several of them began to disclose, as if a weakness, that they did not know what is happening to the planet and were very pessimistic or even fatalistic about what can be done to stop climate change. We were in an affective learning situation, almost like a confessional. Fear and depression were not far beneath the surface. Denial might have been a group joke . . . but instead the lead was taken by a sincere young man who felt we could be doing much more, within the youth work curriculum and as inset training. They felt Environmental Education should 'be on the list' and were shocked to hear about the underlying anxiety felt by many young people that adults are 'not doing enough'. They watched the video made by the Eco Team at St Philips Primary School where one child says, 'Why don't they understand that children know more than they do about climate change?' (This film was sent by them to the negotiators at the Paris COP 21 United Nations meeting in December 2015.)

Case Study 2: Carbon literacy project with schools

In 2013 the coalition government tried to eradicate climate change from the national curriculum, but

there was uproar, including a national petition organised by a 15 year old school girl, Esha. The government responded by pointing out where elements of information were scattered through science and geography curricula. They added, 'The Department for Education has also updated guidance on sustainability, and schools are to reflect this in their school curriculum. In particular, schools are encouraged to link action to reduce emissions with the school curriculum, with the guidance stating that "linking what is taught in the classroom to carbon reduction activity underway in the wider school environment can build momentum for change through pupil leadership and involvement' (DFE April 2013).

MEEN worked in 2013 with staff in ten schools, including two high schools, towards some large scale public education events, two in the Cathedral and two in the huge Arndale Shopping Centre. Manchester City Council had a strategic plan to support their carbon reduction targets which included a pledge for all citizens to become 'carbon literate'. The project started with the training of all elected members and went on to work with staff in large companies who provided goods or services to the Council. The work with school children was seen as an important strand of the work where children with knowledge of recycling, walking and biking to school and energy conservation could influence their parents through what was at first embarrassingly called 'pester power'.

The Eco Teams from all the ten schools rose to the challenge. They made posters and banners and devised plays, quizzes and board games, and rehearsed how to explain to sceptical adults. On the days in the Cathedral, they had large audiences of children from other schools, but very few adults stopped to listen. In the Arndale Centre (not a conducive environment for dialogue!), many of the public were seen by the children to be rude and incapable of listening. However, there were several useful discussions with adults and the Eco Champions felt their effort was worthwhile.

One Eco Team, of Junior Youth Club ages – 8-10 years of age, in a Gardening Club for those who didn't seem to 'fit in' or who had attention deficit symptoms, went on to make the film to send to the negotiators in Paris in December 2015 (3). This was facilitated by the museum of Manchester University, which is promoting a carbon challenge programme. It was tweeted on by Christine Figueres, the new executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and circulated round the world. But it left questions - questions where the young people needed an answer. Why did many adults not seem to want to know about climate change? Why didn't

their best efforts result in visible change in adult behaviour? Indeed some adults called them 'cute'!

I worked closely with the school who made the video and where the teaching assistant, charged with doing gardening with the 'difficult' children, agreed we could work with them to do some action research on what adults know. The young people and I discussed the need for a sample and two hunches that older adults / grandparents may know more than parents, and that if they came from a country where there was direct experience of drought, flood and food scarcity they might be more inclined to want to tell the children about how they cope and interested in what the young people knew about the causes. They mapped where their grandparents came from and put in a question about heritage. (This map shows most of the families of this cohort are from minority ethnic communities.)

The Team produced a simple interview schedule with one closed question and four open questions. They piloted the questions (and the scribing technique) on some parents and then on the school secretary, before setting out to do a number of interviews over their half term holiday. They are genuinely interested in finding out and delight in being called the Eco Detectives. This is the language of action research. Each of their questions alters the next set of responses as they are taken more seriously.

These children continue to explore the barriers to adult learning about climate change. The Eco Teams

in three schools are using their ideas about the importance of protecting 'wildlife' to develop more games and learning exercises to help adults to be more aware and careful about endangering species across the planet by polluting the atmosphere with greenhouse gases and damaging the sea and fresh water. This project shows the importance of challenging the top-down transfer of knowledge by demonstrating that generations can share their understanding and skills in dialogue. We welcome evidence of other similar experiments, especially about climate change.

Notes:

1. www.greenbeltmovement.org/
2. www.greenbeltmovement.org/get-involved/be-a-hummingbird
3. www.meen.org.uk/carbon-literacy-for-schools

CAFAS Council for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards

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For further information, contact the Secretary:

Ben Cosin
3 Halliday Drive
DEAL CT14 7AX

CAFAS website: www.cafas.org.uk