

# NEW STORIES OF CHANGE

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The Earth is Beautiful: A pupil-made display at South Farnborough Infant School. Photo © Andrew Aitchison/Ashden.

**Here, David explores how some of the biggest stories are often not seen as such, and how these are the ones teachers most need to know about.**

We need stories, it has been said, because they help hold the beginnings, middles and ends of our lives together. We generally expect stories to be overt, found in a book or on a screen. Other stories however, are hidden beneath the surface of things – not seen as such, but still absorbed. Children in particular pick up cultural stories about what is important, what is okay and what is 'normal'. We pick up messages indirectly from what people around us say and absorb them into our bloodstream as well

as our hearts and minds. Some such stories are handed down from generation to generation, both at home and in school.

## Changing stories

One of the cultural stories we have been brought up on is that of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent great achievements of the twentieth-century. This story is based on the wonders of science and technology, our ability to control people and nature and the inevitability of human progress. It has indeed brought many gifts, although unequally distributed. The sting in the tail is that the fossil fuels that powered this story – coal, oil, gas – have led to the climate change that all of us, including young people, now have to face. This high-carbon story has turned out to be

seriously flawed, it is unsustainable. Fortunately, a new story has also emerged over the last 50 years, one based on respect for people and nature, a questioning of constant growth, respect for the biosphere, an economy that now needs to be powered by clean, safe, renewable sources of energy – sun, wind, water. This low-carbon story looks like the only sustainable way forward we have.

Cultural narratives such as these suffuse everything we think, teach and do. The old high-carbon story has brought us to a very difficult place. Changing climate is a wake-up call for all educators and schools, and geography has a crucial role to play in understanding and exploring key elements of the new low-carbon sustainable story (Hicks, 2014). Is your school committed to a business as usual

story or is it beginning to support the emerging new vision? Where does your school stand now, where could it stand?

## Changing weather

Of course we teach about the weather. How could we not help pupils understand one of the UK's favourite topics of conversation? Do we, however, help them understand how our weather has begun to change? Climate science is now clear: in the UK we are likely to face more difficult and changeable weather, particularly storms, floods and drought, than previously. While adults have a longer timescale against which to assess such changes it is important to recall that the weather we grew up with as children became our norm. Weather that adults may see as more extreme than usual will not necessarily be seen as such by young people; it will become their norm. We have a responsibility, however, to ourselves and our children to be prepared for torrential rain, unexpected flooding and periodic drought. This includes protection of buildings and having appropriate clothing and agreed safety rules.

For children a sense of 'normality' is important – this is what we do in these circumstances, this is why it is important. Of course one may already study flooding or what happens in a heatwave but, rather than this being something that occurs in other countries, we now need to explore what we must do to stay safe in such circumstances ourselves. Nor is it just about what one might explore in geography. Schools as a whole need to know what to do to keep young people safe. The Environment Agency gives advice on floods and flooding, and the NHS provides guidelines on what to do during a heatwave (see web panel).

Where does your school stand on extreme weather and its consequent responsibility for pupils? Where in geography do you give pupils the opportunity to explore what one needs to do to stay safe in different sorts of extreme weather?

## Changing energy

Where does the energy come from for your school? Are you modelling the old, dangerous, high-carbon story or the new, safe and renewable low-carbon story? I'm always impressed by schools that enter for the Ashden Renewable Energy Awards (see web panel). Home Farm School in Colchester was the first in Essex to gain a Grade B rating in its Energy Performance Certificate. A very active eco-committee, backed by the Head teacher and School Business Manager, succeeded in reducing the school's energy consumption by 61%. This was achieved through the installation of rooftop solar panels,

the implementation of a new building management system and the enclosure of a central courtyard. The school is now virtually self-sufficient in energy.

Another award-winning school is Thornhill Primary in Cardiff, whose crack squad of student eco-warriors keep energy wastage to a minimum with their spot checks on whether lights and appliances have been left on in the classrooms. Thornhill School's willingness to trial new ideas and share the results with others, along with its determination to reduce carbon emissions to the absolute minimum, is what makes it the first Welsh school to be a finalist in the Ashden Sustainable Schools Awards. Solar PV, LED lighting, a building management system and more efficient IT facilities mean that electricity consumption has reduced by over one-third since 2011–12. Little wonder that Cardiff City Council use Thornhill as a case study of best practice in carbon reduction.

By using energy more sustainably, schools reduce their fuel bills and cut their carbon emissions while at the same time helping to build a stronger sense of community. The Ashden website has detailed examples of sustainable energy programmes in schools, including advice for heads, governors and managers on how to change their energy story from a high to a low-carbon one. Ashden runs a LESS CO2 programme to support schools. Where does your school stand on this? What story do pupils in your school explicitly and implicitly learn about energy?

## Changing food

Today food is shipped from all over the world by sea, air and road, guaranteeing a high number of 'food miles' and an equally high carbon footprint. The length of such journeys, together with the manufacture and disposal of wasteful over-packaging, adds to the footprint. Farming has long been dependent on a wide range of herbicides, pesticides and other practices derived from by-products of coal and oil. Producing food and eating unthinkingly in this way is also embedded in the old high-carbon story. The new story in relation to food is not only about the need to eat more healthily and avoid obesity, but also about reducing the carbon footprint of our food and farming. One of the reasons why people have become more interested in where their food comes from relates to food miles.

Many farm shops and food suppliers now source their produce as locally and organically as they can. Another award scheme, Food for Life (see web panel), provides an excellent opportunity for schools to move towards a more sustainable and interconnected view of food and farming. Whole-school activities encourage pupils to improve soil,

participate in growing and harvesting food on the premises, and learn how these foods should be cooked and prepared for quality school lunches. It also encourages parents to be involved in this process. Where does your school stand on such matters? What do pupils explicitly and implicitly learn about sustainable food and farming?

## Changing schools

In light of the above, consider the story your school tells. As with all of life much of this will be implicitly conveyed by what is said and what is not said in and outside the building. The shift from fossil fuels and all that goes with their use to an economy based on clean and renewable energy will be one of the great cultural shifts in history. The signs are already all around us if one begins to look carefully (Hicks, 2012; SEED – see web panel). Such a shift requires that all sectors of society take their share of responsibility for the changes that are needed. Will primary teachers, geographers and educators help more widely by taking on this task? Will you and your school be able to say at some future time, 'Yes, we did help establish the new sustainable low-carbon story and in so doing prepare our young people for a very different future from today'?

## References

- Hicks, D. (2012) *Sustainable Schools, Sustainable Futures*. Available online at: [www.teaching4abetterworld.co.uk/docs/download18.pdf](http://www.teaching4abetterworld.co.uk/docs/download18.pdf) (last accessed 5 January 2016).
- Hicks, D. (2014) *Educating for Hope in Troubled Times: Climate change and the transition to a post-carbon society*. London: Institute of Education Press.

## WEB RESOURCES

- Ashden Sustainable School Awards: [www.ashden.org/awards](http://www.ashden.org/awards)
- Environment Agency: [www.gov.uk/browse/environment-countryside/flooding-extreme-weather](http://www.gov.uk/browse/environment-countryside/flooding-extreme-weather)
- Food for Life: [www.foodforlife.org.uk/school-awards](http://www.foodforlife.org.uk/school-awards)
- NHS heatwave advice: [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Summerhealth/Pages/Heatwave.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Summerhealth/Pages/Heatwave.aspx)
- Sustainability & Environmental Education (SEED): <http://se-ed.co.uk/edu/>

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