

Schools in Transition: Interviews with teachers from Wellington College and Crispin Academy

Schools in Transition (SiT) was piloted from 2012-2014 with four very different UK secondary schools (Crispin Academy School in Street, Somerset, Wellington College in Crowthorne Berkshire, Wellington Academy at Tidworth in Wiltshire and KEVICC Co-Operative Trust school in Totnes, Devon). This training and action programme for was designed to last for a year, but Wellington College and Crispin Academy enjoyed the experience so much that they repeated it for a further year. In the second academic year starting in October 2013 Wellington brought its sister academy school along too. 2013 was also the year that KEVICC took part (see *Schools in Transition case study: KEVICC Watershed Day*). This document is an interview with teachers Sean Farrell from Wellington College and Frances Thomson and David Warrell, then at Crispin Academy, prefaced by an explanation of the thinking behind the programme by Isabel Carlisle who designed Schools in Transition. The interviews took place the summer of 2014.

Introduction

Those now being educated will have to do what we, the present generation, have been unable or unwilling to do: Stabilize world population; stabilize and then reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, which threaten to change the climate, perhaps disastrously; protect biological diversity; reverse the destruction of forests everywhere; and conserve soils. They must learn how to use energy and materials with great efficiency. They must learn how to utilise solar energy in all its forms. They must rebuild the economy in order to eliminate waste and pollution. They must learn how to manage renewable resources for the long run. They must begin the great work of repairing, as much as possible, the damage done to the earth in the past 200 years of industrialisation. And they must do all this while they reduce worsening social and racial inequities. No generation has ever faced a more daunting agenda. David Orr¹

Schools in Transition was designed to sit within the social activism and experimentation of Transition Network, the international movement supporting communities to respond creatively to the challenges of the end of cheap fossil fuels, climate change and economic contraction. Learning that leads into action was a key feature of the programme, empowering young people and their teachers to know they can make a difference. We were aiming for whole systems change, thinking about schools as communities. We explored how to get sustainability into the school values and the curriculum as well as school clubs and infrastructure like heating systems or new kitchens. We were also seeking ways for schools and Transition communities to connect, but this proved more problematic. Either participating schools had no Transition group nearby or could not find a way to connect with them.

The schools sent teams of one or two teachers and around five pupils to the opening residential weekends which were held at Sharpham House outside Totnes in Devon In October 2012 and 2013. We started each weekend by asking questions about the wider issues underlying sustainability and how to make it real in our own lives, what leadership looks like in this context (collaborative rather than command and control) and what was already going on back at school and could be built on. Teachers stepped back from any kind of leadership role and swapped their experiences of moving their schools towards sustainability.



The Green Dragons Den at the end of Saturday to which the teams of pupils presented their project proposals

Students meanwhile were challenged to find solutions to real issues on the estate such as implementing rain-water harvesting in a barn development, creating a sustainable food strategy for the whole estate or building an eco camp site with potential to generate revenue. Sharpham staff acted as facilitators, leading the pupils out of doors and onto the land where they could see the issues at first hand. Facilitators were briefed to ask questions, but not to give too many answers, and there were points throughout the weekend for pausing and reflecting not just on what we were learning, but how we were learning and the quality of the learning experience.

As the school teams formed on the Saturday (frequently made up of pupils who had not worked together before), individuals came to grips with the reality of collaborative working and learnt how to get their unique contribution valued. The Green Dragons Den at the end of Saturday, where solutions to the challenges were pitched to a panel of adults, raised the bar on the level of professionalism demanded of the students in presentation skills. Through the 48 hours of dialogue, community singing, humour and systems games we moved to a deeper understanding of how all sustainability issues are interconnected, and what is required for us to take action. By Sunday lunch-time each school team had an action plan ready to be tried out back at school, which the residential leaders had helped them set timed goals for. Invariably the participants left feeling energised, saying time spent together in nature was one of the top take-aways.

Following on from the Sharpham weekend each school had two days of mentoring or workshops to draw on as they chose. Crispin School held a Big Green Gathering in December 2012 to pull together all the school clubs that had a connection with sustainability and create an overarching message that the School Council could sign up to. Wellington College partnered up with a local organic farm and now helps to sell veg boxes around the school, additionally choosing to making sustainability more visible through good communications and pupil voice. The programme is continuing at Wellington, with Sean Farrell holding a new role of Head of Academic Music as well as leading on sustainability, while a set of priorities that marginalises sustainability has come into place at Crispin, meaning twenty years of good work by outstanding teachers is undone.

In Schools in Transition, learning for sustainability means connecting to place and community, designing new learning processes with and for young people based on ecological thinking, and being clear about our values and embodying those values. We were not interested so much in influencing the curriculum as in encouraging teachers to see that they have agency in what they choose to teach within the curriculum, and how they teach. The one-planet vision of pedagogy that we were experimenting with is holistic, influenced by ecological, psychological, philosophical and sociological perspectives on education as well as by scientific and political content.

A one-planet pedagogy oriented toward practical outcomes related to sustainable, just, living seeks actively to give all young people experiences of enquiry, being still, leading, taking informed and responsible action, consulting others, listening and feeding back, reflecting on action and dealing with setbacks, frustration and failure. The development of this pedagogy was a collaborative process that took place within the Quince community of practice between 2010 and 2012. [The Quince group is an English community of radical educators for an ecological world view]. This approach to learning was further shaped by being used as the launch for secondary Schools in Transition. Now that we have proven the success of this approach we are offering it to teacher training, most recently working with Exeter University PGCE students.

Interview with Sean Farrell, Head of Academic Music and head of Sustainability, Wellington College

[Wellington College](#) in Berkshire is one of the leading independent secondary schools in the country. This means that it is not beholden to the National Curriculum but able to create its own curriculum, some of which uses the International Baccalaureat. This made it easier to weave the work that was started at Sharpham into the Wellington curriculum, across a number of subject areas. Schools in Transition directly reached 300-350 pupils who were involved on a regular basis during the academic year 2013-2014. Indirectly, two-thirds of the 1040 pupils in the school were and continue to be engaged.

In response to Schools in Transition Wellington set up "Farm 104", a not-for-profit business run by students with the aim of creating resilience in the local economy. In partnership with a local farm and other producers of food and drink a weekly market is now available on the school site, reducing the community's food miles and encouraging awareness of seasonal, unforced growing patterns. Sean Farrell, the teacher in charge, also revitalised the school allotments and introduced hens and goats as well as introducing friendly competitions for reducing energy use. - See more [here](#)

"What I personally was aware of more than anything else, leaving Sharpham, was a sense of positivity and that there were people who were like-minded or cared about the same things. So I felt that if I came up against a brick wall there was somebody to turn to or somewhere to go to get a bit of inspiration. I found it very refreshing: it was like a mixture of CPD [continuing professional development] and going on a retreat. I think the ability to come to this area (south Devon) and for people to be out of their usual school groups and positions of authority, so the pupil-teacher relationship is dissolved, and it's fine because you are not in the social group in which you normally operate, was very refreshing.

Back in school it made me feel that it was OK just to keep giving things a nudge rather than having to drive things at a speed that was unsustainable. And sometimes just to have conversations with people every few weeks or months to remind them that there is an agenda to which we need to keep working, and that if we lay that agenda out alongside all the other ones it becomes part of the whole school approach.

The students certainly went back with a sense of purpose, particularly the second group who were younger (Year 11). They knew there were goals that they wanted to work towards and said: "We want to know these things are happening even if we are not directly driving them ourselves". And I think that in itself made them set quite smart targets, achievable without being too easy. We have achieved those targets and one of the reasons we have achieved them is that there was a synergy between the way we were thinking and the needs we saw in the school, and the needs that were seen by colleagues who look after estates and catering and so on. So without there being specific campaigning and discussions we found that people were beginning to address the same issues.



Water tasting by Sean Farrell and Wellington students

The group that came to Sharpham in 2013 managed to do a presentation to governors last Christmas (December 2013), which was the first time that had ever happened. And the governors were very impressed, not only by the way they were approaching the sustainability of the school but their very moderate approach to it. Not saying 'we must have this, and we must have it now', but 'we are very proud of our school, we want to go on being proud of it and we want it to be here for future generations to be proud of as well. So these are the things we would like to encourage the student body to be aware of and we would like your help with this, that and the other'. And that went down very well with the governors. One of them, who is chief executive of a house-building company, said 'I don't have more governor time I can give to you, but I do have a member of staff I can lend you, to help you look at the things you might want to achieve'. The student went away from that feeling that the subject was taken seriously by the governors, that they were already addressing those issues in the big decisions they were making, and therefore that the values of the school were being lived out rather than just preached.

The school recently underwent a complete kitchen refit, and Sodexo were fabulous about incorporating the latest sustainable technologies into the plans, giving us an on-site source of compost (no more food waste taken off-site) and dramatically reducing our energy footprint. I worked with them to see if we could use Eco-driver software to run a comparison energy audit between the temporary kitchen and the new fit. Energy monitoring is still a slow process to move forward, but this might be the project to get it, finally, into the school. Mostly it has been little things that are ongoing, as much as anything to get the staff involved. I had a lovely email yesterday from someone who has just taken on chicken-feeding duty saying 'this is so much fun can I now sign up for lots more days'. So targets set at Sharpham are pretty much on track to complete. There is something so wonderfully common sense about the targets SiT helped us set, and the way in which you learn to present them as a win-win outcome, that it would be someone very bloody minded who set out to de-rail them.

The challenge is that there is not much user-friendly material at secondary school level. One of the hoped-for outcomes from SiT was that we would be able to start building a bank of resources on line. It needs to be something that will excite teachers and get them to embrace these things as ways of teaching the things they are required to teach. It was very positive that Wellington is a learning community already, so we already had that concept present. For day schools it requires a head who sees the school as being at the heart of the community around it. Then you have your mapping tools to help people see the impact of the school on the community. Hands-on learning, real-life learning and group learning are all things teachers are encouraged to do, both in and out of the classroom. It becomes about presenting a number of ways in which people can have that experiential learning and tackle the issues at the same time.



What has made me particularly happy is that the sustainability agenda at Wellington is not something that is seen as lefty or marginalized but when people ask certain questions such as “would it be possible to do this, that or the other?” there is now an automatic sense that “we should involve Sean in this discussion” with a view to what the knock-on effect might be for various things. And there seems to be an incredible sense of positivity among members of staff. So to have turned sustainability from something that was deliberately quite subversive and a bit of a worry factor into “look, if we just did this, wouldn’t this be nice, and make us work as a community better”, with a positive spin rather than a negative one.... has got people on board. We have been offering things that actually make people feel better, whether it is spending half an hour a week with the ducks and the goats and being able to forget about everything else so people chill out, to asking “where does our food come from?”, and how much we need to manage food resources to be sustainable, or how much can be organic.

Mind map made by students on the nature of leadership for sustainability

Sean added: “Everyone has been aware of some of the fruits of Sharpham and Schools in Transition. Indirectly, including the curricular work, the number of pupils that took part was around two-thirds of the school, out of a total of 1040 pupils. In some respects everybody has been affected because of the way we have continued to work with the house systems as little communities.” *In reflecting on how to get sustainability into a school system Sean said:* “The two most important things are curriculum and core values. If the core values come from the student body you’ll find that a lot of the right factors are there. The head also becomes very important, not that they have to drive it, but they do need to allow it to be driven or just allow it to flow.”

When thinking about whether the drive for higher grades can push sustainability to one side, Sean’s response was: “It can do, but it need not. There is no reason why geography, history or science cannot be taught around issues to do with sustainability. The question is if it is not being taught, why not? Is it because society still doesn’t see it as sufficiently important?”

He ended by saying: “The most challenging thing I have found at Wellington, which is a fast-paced school, is that this is a slow journey. But in the musical part of my career I am used to slow journeys: things need to be worked on slowly. There are sometimes tipping points when things seem to happen fast, but what you are doing is putting another buttress in place and building it up bit by bit. Keeping positive and recognizing the steps is important. Even if the thing you have been campaigning for doesn’t come to fruition it is likely that something else does happen as a result. We tend not to hit the buffers but take a different route. The targets are all very small and achievable. It’s like walking up a hill. You get to see one summit, and the next one and the one beyond that, stretching into the distance, and eventually you get to stand on the top and think “what can I do next?”, and stand there and look at how marvelous it all is.”

Interview with David Wrathall (former science teacher at Crispin Academy) and Fran Thomson (former Deputy Head and head of sustainability at Crispin Academy)

[Crispin Academy](#) is in Street, Somerset, and over the last twenty years has built up an outstanding reputation for ESD [education for sustainable development] both within and outside the curriculum. At Crispin all 1,100 pupils were involved in the Schools in Transition programme. Everybody knew about it and participated in events that were created as part of SiT. When Isabel first came to visit in 2011 the school was working with Oxfam, WWF, Action Aid and the National College for School Leadership.

Fran: “When I met you Isabel, I had listened a few years ago to a talk by Rob Hopkins who had come to speak to the Glastonbury Transition group and I immediately reflected on the fact that a school is big enough to be a Transition community. I thought about what we would need to address and I did get some targets like energy reduction into the school development plans, and to do with the school campus. Then the opportunity to work with you was an exciting one because we had found it so difficult to move on in those areas. We had lots of partners to help us with our thinking and development and some very inspirational local people.”



Crispin pupils present their in-school activities at Sharpham

we then used as a model for all our cross-curricular days. It was good to see that in that context. And using experts to lead the learning, not necessarily the teacher. I learnt a lot on those days about being a teacher (agreement from David) and leading communities.”

David: “I think it was wonderful for the children to see that leadership was not somebody telling them what to do. It was something that they could step up to and influence and do. I benefited from it enormously too and I thoroughly enjoyed those days and have got some great memories of them. And I think that it is a great model for development planning and collegiate learning which seems less and less prevalent in schools these days. A collegiate approach to schooling cannot be measured so easily whereas splitting and dividing teachers and subjects into discrete chunks makes them more measurable. It was very much collaboration over thoughts and ideas and working through with them rather than taking a confrontational, didactic approach. Seeing how an idea would work out in practice.

David: “We were looking for a bit more cohesion and framework, and a link to Transition towns that would give a different dimension to what we were doing. It was an exciting meeting, the future was exciting at that time, with lots to look forward to.”

Fran: “We got the pupil’s Green Committee to be very definite in different areas so we had an energy group, a waste group and a food group for example, and we had teachers to lead the different groups. You helped us work with the children so that instead of having separate identities they saw themselves as a coherent whole.

I found it very valuable for me personally. First, to meet with Wellington College because I gained those contacts. I also benefited from the community that we created on the Sharpham weekend, as did the young people from having time to discuss and sing together, eat together and just have a community life together which you don’t particularly have in a mainstream secondary school. I found that particularly enjoyable and it reminded me very much that ‘these are experiences that all children should have really’, not just a few children. Going off and having camp fires, that whole experience of just being with them as well as introducing new learning all the time through the singing and games. The experiential problem-solving that we did there

It's very hard to measure the value to the pupils. But I'll give you an example of one of the lads who went on the most recent one. Some would say he is quite disaffected and found it difficult to engage at times but he found the weekend really special. It's a pity he didn't have more opportunities to work in that way. It was shown to him so clearly how his actions impacted on different people and how people were so accepting of him. No matter what he did, he was still accepted. His behaviour was not always judged to be ideal but as a person he was important, and he could be part of a community. I think he valued that enormously. Getting outside with hands-on problems and really experiencing the environment in which the problem is set is enormously beneficial, rather than some abstract concept that we bring into the classroom and try and get a small group of children to try and solve within an hour."

Fran: "From the perspective of value to the school in general we did a lot as a result of that. We had the Great Green Gathering in December 2012. I changed my job. What I did for twelve months after the Sharpham October 2012 weekend was that I tried to include all children as often as possible in sustainability issues so that every Friday we used to have the What's Cooking session in the Environment Area and we got all the children in so we used the old Lorian stove or the pizza oven and we might make a big pot of *dahl* or soup or all sorts of things. Every week you would have youngsters coming to have a bit of lunch there and have chats. There was the Fairtrade area and the community open day that the children organized. That was on top of cross-curricular activity for both teachers and pupils. That was through trying to include everybody because when we were at Sharpham the children were saying 'but we haven't got everybody on board' so we tried to include everybody in a non-threatening way. There were a lot of barriers to break down in terms of people seeing sustainability only in terms of hard environment, rather than it being people and environment and community. More linear thinkers want to see it in terms of trees and solar panels instead of everything."

David: "Over the last twelve months (from October 2013) the successes were less than I would have liked, partly because I was the only person pushing this agenda. We did do the climate change survey for every child. It was wonderful to get everyone together to process those results. So many children worked so hard to get all those results in. I got them together to agree on the wording for the survey and then I got them to help with putting it into registers and getting it out and then when they had done the surveys we spent a long time processing them and getting all the results into a spread sheet, which lots of different students helped with. And then, after that, they helped produce a presentation that could be shared with the rest of the school. Mostly people thought that climate change *was* a problem and for each question there was an awful lot of 'don't know', 'not sure', that was usually the most significant group. People were particularly concerned about endangered plants and animals, I think because it is not directly threatening to them. It's an easier idea to work with and be concerned for."

If we take the students who came to Sharpham or the enrichment days and encourage them to apply the skills that they learned there then they will say 'oh, right, I really enjoyed that', but their 99.9% framework of learning is not like that. Outdoors, at Sharpham, they are learning in a way that they don't perceive as learning, although it is more valuable than anything they do in the classrooms. I think is where our biggest benefit has been. I see so many children who, if they hadn't had those opportunities, would be nothing like they are now. The individuals who I am thinking of will be richer, more rounded, more capable, more emotionally sensitive persons now. So many have had to struggle and get things wrong in order to grow and develop. It is unquantifiable how the children were impacted, but I am sure it was enormously valuable to them. It's about a whole child, it's not about something you can easily put a figure on. I'm not sure we should even be trying to measure things like that."

Fran: “I think another thing that we did after Sharpham was to set up two forward-thinking groups. One that was very much about trying to embed enrichment days in the curriculum. And the systems-thinking map came out of that. And we also worked on the PSHE programme. We worked on plenary questions like ‘why does this lesson matter to you in the future?’ or ‘what has this learning meant for you?’ I use that tool of widening out to the big picture in my practice as a teacher now. And I bring some plenary questions into every lesson. For sustainability to become really embedded in a school the curriculum, the values and pupil and teacher engagement are all important, with the head teacher as the absolute key. If the head can just let it happen that may be enough. If the head teacher does not have a collegiate approach to running the school then it is very difficult to enable teachers to do their jobs well and for new things to happen.”

Community singing on the Sharpham staircase



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¹ David Orr, *Earth In Mind*, p,26 (Island Press, Washington, Covelo, London, 2004, 10th ed.)