

## III Synthesis & Closing remarks

### Synthesis

In synthesising the exemplary school cases highlighting a WSA to Sustainable Development, we can ask some critical questions:

- **How do we ensure a WSA is inclusive and not off-putting in its scale, while still instilling the complexity of moving towards a ‘whole system re-design’?**
- **What can we learn from different schools’ experiences with engaging in holistic integrated sustainability-education?**
- **While a lot remains contextual, what similarities/trends can we see emerging and how can this influence shifts in top-down school policy?**
- **How can the wider policy contexts and frameworks in which the cases are nested support a WSA?**

The exemplary cases reveal some striking similarities as well as noticeable differences with regards to these questions. The similarities lie in the commitment of staff in providing education that is relevant to the students and today’s challenges, but also in practising education that is responsible in its aim to contribute towards a more caring, healthier and sustainable world. Such education typically implies boundary crossing between disciplines, school and community, perspectives, timescales (past-present-future), and spatial scales (local-regional-global). All schools emphasise the importance of students’ agency, their ability to make change, and of their participation in decision-making. Many of the schools also mention benefiting from some kind of supporting framework and/or network like Eco-Schools.

There are also differences. Some of these are a result of the context in which schools are nested, which varies; from more rural to heavily urbanised; from more privately funded to more publicly funded; from being nested in a healthy policy-environment conducive to a WSA; to being deprived from any policy-support, some are even hindered by educational policies. Instead, they are working on their own, with the support from NGO’s, networks and others, relying heavily on internal assistance and the support of the local community. Other schools work on a small scale from the ground up, while others work on a much bigger scale

nested in a long school tradition that create both top-down accountability and bottom-up commitment.

In this closing section we will first distil some key overarching ‘lessons learned’ and touch stones for each of the six strands of the WSA flower, as depicted in the introduction of this report.

**Vision, Ethos, Leadership & Coordination** • In firmly established schools, introspection and recognising that it is important to become ‘unstuck’ and to ‘unlearn,’ are important steps in realising a transition in the school. This allows for new forms of teaching and learning, and a regeneration of school-community relations. Continuous or frequent dialogue between different stakeholders (students, teachers, managers, parents, local organisations, etc.) needs to take place in regard to what is important, how people can contribute, obstacles, what can be done to overcome challenges, etc. Having systems in place that provide some continuity, for example monthly professional development meetings, regular dialogue meetings, local community stakeholder meetings and even networking events, is vital to counteract issues that arise. Creating space for dialogue also implies that teachers’ daily schedules need to provide time for this.

Active and interested parents, along with a nurturing local and or regional government seeking to realise its own policy objectives in relation to health, citizenship, climate action, etc., can create a healthy environment for a WSA to sustainability. An ethos that allows for strong school-parent relations is important to this. Some of the schools also have a school ethos and vision deeply rooted not just in the community’s day to day life, but also in culture and history.

It is evident that for a WSA to be fully realised, schools need both the financial and structural support, and that different actors, with a similar vision, benefit from working and co-supporting each other. School leadership must recognise that working in more open, localised, place-based, interdisciplinary, and action-oriented ways is often new and intensive and there is always a risk of teacher and staff burn-out. Inspirational, visionary, caring and nurturing leadership can be one key success factor in realising a WSA to sustainability. In addition, providing support by means of a school sustainability coordinator who can provide extra support is crucial.

**Curriculum** • Connecting the curriculum to the UN SDGs, not only provides legitimacy, but also offers an opportunity for inquiry-based learning, systems thinking, making connections between local and global issues, and for studying contradictions, tensions and ambiguities. The SDGs can also act as a catalyst for inter and transdisciplinary work where the different subject areas need to be connected. Finally, the SDGs can provide a school and their local community with meaningful action-oriented activities that combine multiple forms of learning and utilise the outdoors. At the same time, we also see schools do this without using the SDGs in an explicit way.

Some schools successfully focus on circularity, closing cycles, and creating very practical local 'micro economies' that generate funding for future sustainability efforts. Harnessing and harmonising with the local ecology, cultures and history can help reveal and acknowledge both negative and positive practices and approaches to help create a more sustainable and community orientated curriculum that meets the needs of both the people and planet.

While sustainability can be embedded in different courses, many schools also opt for the organisation of highly visible special curriculum activities – like a sustainability project week – that include all teachers and all students, but also invite outside experts and stakeholders from the local community. Many schools engage in, what might be called, a holistic integral curriculum design that involves the land and place in which a school is situated, bringing in craft work and arts-based approaches, and utilising sustainably sourced and local materials where possible. This encourages situated and embodied learning for the whole human being and the whole community.

It must be recognised that the establishment of a more localised curriculum, as well as the introduction of new forms of teaching and learning (see next section), is often unfamiliar to most new students. It takes time to build agency, confidence and trust in these new approaches, also among the parents. Often, the more open and localised curriculum can also be frightening for teachers who like to maintain control and want to know exactly in advance what will happen and what is learnt. They will need to have more faith in the abilities of their students, the power of 'letting go' and providing space for emergence. Here also lies a challenge for teacher training and professional development.

**Pedagogy & Learning** • A common thread is that schools highlighting a WSA tend to use a broad range of learning grounds, strategies, multiple intelligences and diverse perspectives to tap into student strengths and interests. Schools point out that a shifting from being a "teacher of content" to being a "facilitator of learning" changes

engrained power dynamics with students, as well as approaches to lesson planning: Students' voices need to be taken more seriously and the design of a lesson, activity or project, needs to allow for surprise and deviation. One way some schools do this is to start learning for sustainability with very basic localised and existential questions like: "What's going on out here?" They think about the curriculum together, become aware of every-day issues, some explicitly present, others more implicitly, ask questions including uncomfortable ones, find community organisations involved in sustainable practices and partner with them in a concrete project that is co-shaped by the students.

Vocational schools have a lot of experience with embodied, hands-on, activity-oriented forms of learning that utilise the local environment and require working with local stakeholders. Non-vocational schools can benefit from the way these schools work.

Many schools combine multiple forms of learning (inquiry-based, action-oriented, investigative, etc.), utilising the outdoors or the out-of-school environment as a living laboratory where students can experiment with making change and trying to have a positive impact. Essentially, a WSA opens the possibility of the world becoming our teacher, where the craft process can reveal and meet both our challenges and potentials through an active dialogue between individual and world. Some schools provide time and space for mindfulness, yoga and meditation as critical for achieving, what might be referred to as, 'inner sustainability'.

Many schools point at the importance of giving students a voice and listen carefully and attentively to their needs; what they want to change, how they envision their school and their community in the framework of sustainability. It must be recognised, however, that students often enter the school with years of training in a more traditional "banking" model<sup>173</sup>, where they are not required to participate, and where test grades are the primary measurement of success. As a result, it will often take time to cultivate another mindset in relation to education and learning.

Some schools point at the mismatch between what national exams ask for and what students need. As a result, space for innovation in pedagogy and learning but also in developing alternative forms of assessment, is limited. Alternative forms of monitoring, research and evaluation, e.g. action-oriented research projects that seek to address the policy-practice contradiction that exists between school commitments and regional and national curriculum requirements, are highly necessary in many cases.

**Community Links** • Partnering with community organisations with a sustainability focus makes learning

authentic, rich, deep and meaningful. It helps when the local community fully supports the school's WSA to sustainability. In making community connections, developing new forms of learning, using the school and the community as a resource for teaching and learning, collaboration with an NGO with expertise in, for instance ESD and the WSA, can be instrumental. Many schools featured in this report, have the benefit of working closely with a network and framework such as EcoSchools. Some schools have identified learning places and spaces as well as local organisations that together create alternative learning environments for students. There are various places in the community where students can learn beyond the framework of the school. This is very important so that the school does not have to take on everything. Collaborating with the local community and various stakeholders, including those representing the private sector, is vital in both its implementation and impact. Peer-learning and establishing networks of collaboration between neighbouring schools strengthen the idea behind WSA. It can increase the motivation and joint learning between schools needed to root and strengthen a WSA to sustainability. Collaboration with local or regional universities, especially with teacher education and educational design research programs, can support such partnerships.

**Capacity Building** • Transitioning to a whole-school, project-based learning model can be difficult and time-consuming for teachers and staff. It is important for teachers to feel that they are not obliged to implement sustainability or ESD. They must be self-motivated in order to engage actively. Supporting them in this direction is a critical factor for their empowerment and motivation. The unpredictability of a project-based environment can be unsettling and physically draining for unaccustomed teachers. It is essential to build in supports such as mentoring sessions, extra planning time, and ongoing professional development.

Working in partnership with other schools in the region to allow for peer-to-peer inter-school learning between teachers but also between school leaders is vital. Peer-learning and establishment networks of collaboration between neighbouring schools strengthen the idea behind WSA, which sees schools as an open community of sustainability-oriented learning. Providing a structure for long-term multistakeholder partnerships locally and or regionally which support a WSA can deepen and broaden its impact.

**Institutional Practices** • Most schools featured in this report have been operating for many years, and therefore it can be a challenge to alter deeply ingrained and resilient patterns, structures and routines. In turn, the new or recently established schools have the luxury of starting

from scratch, with a high level of freedom and ample opportunity to bring in multiple voices in the design of the school and the shaping of its practices.

Scale also makes a difference. A smaller school can be more agile and responsive as lines are short and relationships can be established more easily. Bigger schools place high demands on organisation, structure and management, and therefore the question is posed: How to create intimacy, distributed leadership, and ownership in bigger schools? In bigger schools, some form of coordination through an eco-committee or an ESD-focal group can help in realising this. Commitment from school management is critical, especially for giving change agents – like passionate teachers or students – the freedom to initiate and experiment. In experimenting with a WSA, failure is bound to happen, in that not all the changes made will succeed, so there needs to be a culture which responds positively to failure.

It helps when budget and other resources are allocated for the professional development of staff, greening the school building and school grounds, and for community engagement and outreach. It is through the local surroundings becoming an extension of the traditional classroom that a WSA, especially 'walking the talk' comes alive. In addition, time, patience and perseverance are other important factors. In all the featured cases, there is commitment to a WSA, but often there is still a long way to go to embed a WSA in the whole organisation involving all staff and students. Making progress visible – for instance, by looking back every-now-and-then and having a monitoring system in place – can help keep energy levels and motivation high.

All schools seem to highlight the 'walking the talk' component of a WSA to SD. Many examples are provided of schools working on energy, food, health, greening, inclusivity, democracy, creating outdoor classrooms, school gardens, and much more.

Some schools have a participatory approach in deciding what to focus on and how by encouraging students' active engagement in the developing of a school action plan. It's important to give them a voice and listen carefully to their needs, what they want to change, how they envision their school and their community in the framework of sustainability. It is crucial for schools not to just develop and implement a school action plan, but also to identify measures that will sustain the actions and that will provide feedback, also in terms of what successes are achieved.

Still, it is noted that inconsistencies remain present in terms of sustainable 'actions' and policies not always matching up with what is being taught.

**Creating Healthy Policy-Environments for a WSA to SD**

Perhaps a missing strand in the WSA flower is one that refers to the policy environment in which a school is nested. This policy-environment can be a barrier or a lever in creating sustainable schools. Efforts can be seen throughout the world in curriculum reforms and school policy changes supporting a WSA. Terms like a Whole Government Approach to Sustainable Development are found beyond education institutions, such as The European Commission’s 2019-2024 policy for the 2030 SDG agenda<sup>174</sup>. However, many schools highlight the constraining effects of a national curriculum, where the focus is on testing and measurement of mainly cognitively oriented learning goals, a culture of accountability, lack of time for experimenting and doing research, to name a few. The schools featured in this report have either found ways to overcome such constraints, or they have the fortune of being in a policy environment that encourages multiple forms of learning, engagement in community, doing research as a part of professional development and creating a more localised curriculum.

In figure 2 below we have added this policy-environment as a wider circle in which a WSA is nested, highlighting some of the key points the exemplary cases reveal.

**Closing remarks**

What is striking and encouraging is that the cases presented are only a small selection out of a range of other examples. The response to the rather short call for exemplary practices (there was only about two weeks to respond) was overwhelming and a more systematic call using even more well-established networks would undoubtedly have yielded more cases. The WSA seems to be moving from the margins to the mainstream of education. These cases represent niches that, when combined, can become a movement which can transform the wider education system. There might be a tipping point where the ways these schools live and breathe sustainability, while maintaining a critical and flexible mind, becomes the new normal in our schools.



Figure 2: Healthy policies for enabling a Whole School Approach, adapted from Wals & Mathie (2022)



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