

# A different class

We need to radically change the way we teach sustainability in schools, says **Ann Finlayson**, in conversation with Huw Morris

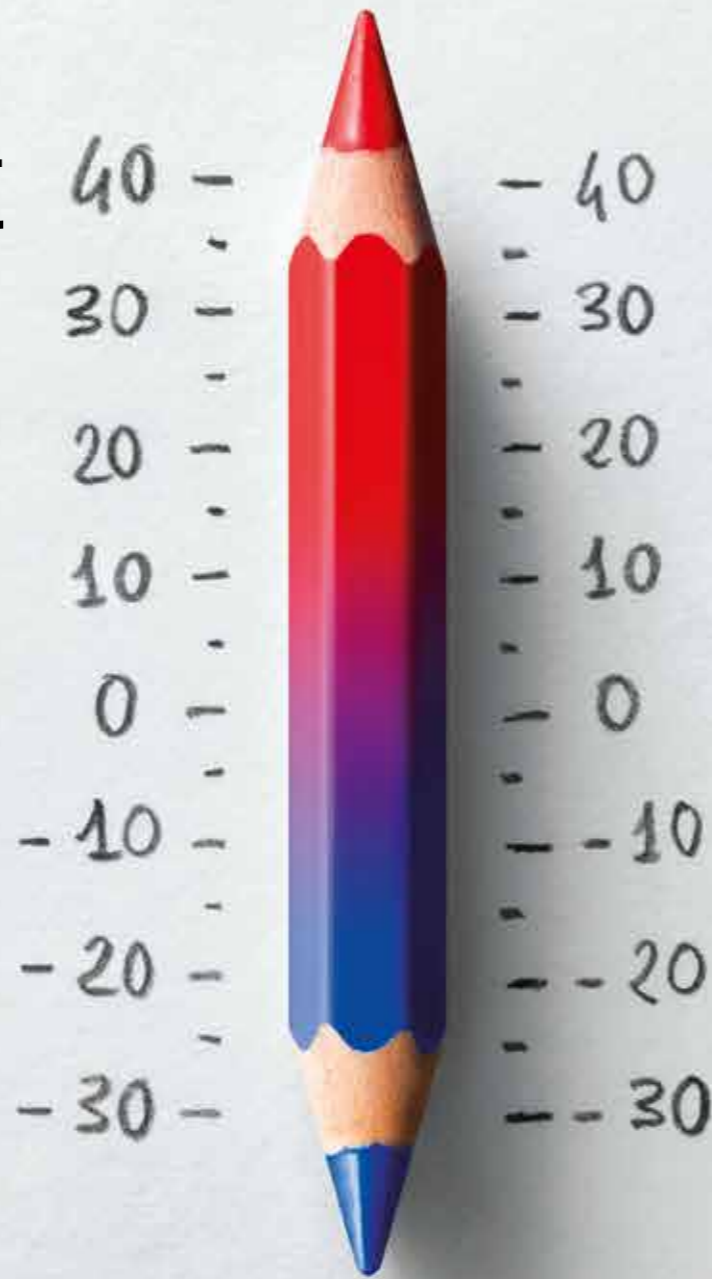
**A**nn Finlayson was training to be a ranger with Scottish Natural Heritage when she had an 'aha' moment about how people learn. Her formal education had included a PhD in afforestation and ecology at the University of Strathclyde – but the revelation did not involve lectures, textbooks or PowerPoint presentations.

"You learned heuristically and developed your own understanding of being a ranger, what the issues were and how to deal with them," she says. "I had been successful in formal education but had never felt my brain be so open and learn so much. That set me on the journey of how we learn."

It turned out to be an odyssey. The next 16 years involved training teachers, museum staff, park interpreters and even white-water rafters in Papua New Guinea, Australia and Canada, before joining WWF-UK in 2002 as head of education and, later, social change. In 2005, Finlayson became the commissioner for education and capability building at the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), before restarting the Council for Environmental Education in 2008. This morphed into Sustainability and Environmental Education (SEEd) in 2009, where she is still chief executive.

## Understanding behaviour

"The one thing I've learned is that people don't understand change, they don't understand human beings or how individuals and groups change or think differently," Finlayson says. "I've spent the past 20 years trying to battle this myth that all you have to do is give people the right information and they will then do the right thing. That is completely untrue and has never been proved."



Her roles at WWF-UK and the SDC offered an eye-opener on how government works. One bugbear was the ending of the Sustainable School Initiative in 2010, which she describes as a "big blow". Her impression of Whitehall is "a lot of talk about evidence-based policy when so little of that happens".

"People respond to different motivations," she says. "If the evidence fits what they want, they'll use it, but if it doesn't fit what they want, they don't. That's all of us – not just politicians."

"We are complex beings. We don't understand very much of our cognitive processes and therefore we do have to consider how the brain works. So many people want things to change with the environment, but have no idea how to go about doing it. We are not as rational as we think we are."

"As a Western culture we believe the front logic of our brains is the only bit working, when 75% of the work happens at the back of the brain – and often we're not aware of it. When people say they had an instinct or *déjà vu*, it's the back of the brain working really well, processing much faster than the front of the brain."

## Empowering change

Finlayson admits some frustration at having to explain "for what seems like the millionth time what education for sustainability is". She wants to see the plethora of organisations in the field develop a common narrative that works towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. The starting point is UNESCO's definition of education for sustainable development – empower people to change the way they think and work towards a sustainable future.

She fears that the next decade will see valuable time and money squandered on awareness-raising and communication campaigns if the teaching of sustainable development is not transformed. Such campaigns do not lead to action, she argues. "The educational and societal culture has embedded this myth that you raise awareness and change will happen."

This is demonstrated in SEEd's annual surveys of teachers and students on their understanding and attitudes towards sustainability. The latest found 64% of pupils citing recycling, ocean or single-use plastic and deforestation as the big three environmental issues.

"They talk about an issue as a separate idea, rather than the system that has created that problem."

The adults understand the system, so there is a disjoint between what they know and what they are prepared to teach young people – and that's fundamentally because they don't feel comfortable with it. They worry about Ofsted and what the government thinks, with education being in a political dangerous area."

The answer, Finlayson says, is to encourage critical thinking. One example would be asking who decides to wrap a head of broccoli in clingfilm. Key to this is thinking about how the myriad systems that impact the environment function, and how they can be changed in the future by effective action.

"You don't want it to be doom and gloom for young people, but get them to ask: 'what if we did things

Finlayson argues that children should be taught about the systems creating environmental problems, not just the problems themselves

differently, what could it look like, what else could we do?' That's a very different way of thinking."

This is reinforced by the SEEd's accompanying survey of teachers. Most still think they have to teach about climate change, not a sustainable way to live in the future. "Part of me worries that schools and teachers are not trained for this," Finlayson says. "Pupils are not really being taught. We have a teacher training system that doesn't train teachers in these things either, so there's a gap."

## The purpose of education

One of SEEd's *raison d'être* is for sustainability to be included in section 78 of the Education Act 2002 – a move supported by the Sustainable Schools Alliance, of which it is a founder member and lead organisation. This would legally "instil an ethos and ability to care for oneself, others and the natural environment, now and in the future". Other countries, including Malta, Italy, Cyprus, Wales and Scotland, have taken big steps to embed sustainability within their education systems – but not England.

"Fundamentally, we should be asking: 'what is the purpose of our education system?' People go on about the national curriculum as though that changes what schools do, when it doesn't. It's not even compulsory, it's not statutory, and academies don't have to do it. Sex education is statutory, unless the parent wants to remove the child, but we don't have learning about the environment as statutory. That's outrageous."

She admires the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and the recent wave of school strikes in the UK and abroad. This has not just given teachers and parents pause for thought – it is forcing them to rethink everything.

"They suddenly understood that young people are very worried and have been for some time. Young people want to know how to live sustainably and want to know what to do."

"It is still going to be an uphill struggle. We still have a very top-down school system which thinks children are empty vessels that need to be filled up with stuff to be ready for the world. But I wouldn't keep doing this if I wasn't hopeful."

**HUW MORRIS** is a freelance journalist.

"The educational and societal culture has embedded this myth that you raise awareness and change will happen"

