Giving a voice to young people: the creative use of poetry and song by schoolchildren as a means of promoting effective global citizenship

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Abstract
Schools in Ghana and the UK participated in environmental citizenship projects in which they surveyed sensitive areas of their coasts and then made recommendations for their sustainable management. They exchanged information with one another on an international basis, giving them opportunities to consider their own local findings in a global context. A key recommendation in these studies was the need to raise awareness of coastal issues in the general public. School open days were one way that was used to convey messages to wider audiences. However, more significantly, children used the creative arts as means of expressing their deeply-held views on environmental issues, doing so with more feeling and emotion than is possible by means of a formal scientific report. They composed, performed and video-recorded their own poems and songs, including some in rap, to express views on issues such as: our shared responsibility for managing the environment; man’s destructiveness of nature; and the need for people to recognise their environmental responsibilities. It is suggested that
the creative arts could provide a powerful mechanism whereby young people can make the general public more aware of their environmental responsibilities.

Keywords
creative arts, citizenship, environmental education

Introduction
There have been repeated calls for lay citizens to become more involved in environmental management processes (e.g. DEFRA 2002) but there are few signs that the general public is ready to take on these citizenship responsibilities. One barrier is that lay people possess poor environmental knowledge and awareness (Dixon, Birchenough, Evans & Quigley, 2005; Kaplowitz and Levine, 2005). Some aspects of this knowledge are inadequate in trainee biology teachers and even some practicing teachers (Bebbington, 2005) which is alarming considering their roles in equipping future generations to take on these tasks. There have been few signs of a better informed public since Holdren & Ehrlich (1971) complained of the monumental failure of biological education in influencing the opinions of politicians and industrialists on environmental issues, and Gigliotti (1990) commented that we seem to have produced a citizenry that is emotionally charged but woefully lacking in basic ecological knowledge.

Not surprisingly, there have been repeated calls for educational reform and school subject curricula have come under close scrutiny worldwide. Not only has citizenship become a school subject in its own right but there have been repeated calls for a strong citizenship basis in environmental (Chatzifoiou 2002; Dillon, Rickinson, Sanders, & Teamey, K. 2005; Varnham 2005; Barratt Hacking, Scott & Barratt, 2007) and science education (Roth & Lee, 2004; Bourn 2005; Barton, Koch, Contento & Hagiwara, 2005; Lewis 2006; Miller 2006; Holbrook & Rannikmae, 2007). The events of 11 September 2001 have influenced the citizenship debate by shifting the emphasis towards social issues, such as democracy, peace, conflict, poverty and justice (Osler & Starkey 2006; Pigozzi 2006), but concern for the environment is still paramount, especially in young people (Hicks & Holden 2007).

The programme *The North Sea: Our Joint Responsibility* is one initiative in environmental citizenship education. It started in the mid-1990s and has been run by scientists based at the Dove Marine Laboratory (Newcastle University, UK). Community groups, ranging from sea-anglers, SCUBA divers, wildlife organisations to schools, are given the opportunity to
participate in environmental decision-making processes in real situations, concerning their own local environment (Evans, Gebbels & Stockill, 2008a; Evans, Gebbels & Stockill, 2008b; Evans, Gebbels, Green & Stockill, in press). Groups work with expert ecologists on particular environmental issues or habitats that are of conservation importance, such as nature reserves. Most projects involve, not only ecological surveys, but also literature and archival searches, including, for instance, investigations of the cultural and social significance of the study area or issue. However, the notable feature of these projects is that the community groups make their own independent recommendations for the management of the area or issue. The recommendations are then submitted to relevant environmental managers. They are invariably well-received and there are now several examples in which sponsorship from industry, local authorities or charitable organisations has funded specific recommendations. These include: publishing information leaflets, creating nature trails, providing opportunities for recycling plastic wastes and carrying out habitat remediation (Evans, Green & Ling 2007; Evans, Gebbels & Stockill 2008a; Evans, Gebbels & Stockill 2008b; Nunoo & Evans 2007).

Despite its success, the Joint Responsibility programme has been limited in two ways. First, projects have been concerned primarily with local environmental issues when many problems, such as climate change and pollution, are global. Second, adults who have been involved in projects are mostly committed enthusiasts. Unlike most of the lay population, they are already well-informed on environmental issues and are therefore unrepresentative of the public as a whole. Consequently, projects have only limited impacts in raising environmental awareness in wider audiences. This paper examines the potential of two further (and ongoing) initiatives that build on to the Joint Responsibility programme and address these limitations. First, it considers the effectiveness of international schools’ partnerships as means of promoting global citizenship in young people by enabling them to consider their views on environmental issues in a world context. Second, it investigates the extent to which pupils within such partnerships could use the creative arts as powerful means of expressing views on the environment. It also considers the possibility that the creative and performing arts can offer a voice whereby young people can make significant contributions to raising environmental knowledge and awareness in the adult population.

A Global Schools’ Partnership

The schools’ partnership involved Epinay Business and Enterprise School in Jarrow (South Tyneside) in the UK and two Ghanaian schools, St. Mary’s Girls’ Secondary School, Accra and the University of Ghana Primary and Junior High School in Legon. Pupils from Epinay
School were 11 – 13 years old and those from the Ghanaian schools were slightly older, 13 – 14 years old.

Pupils in the participating schools conducted brief field surveys of areas of the nearby coastlines of Accra and South Shields in their respective countries. These were made in collaboration with their own teachers and scientists from the Department of Oceanography and Fisheries, University of Ghana and the Dove Marine Laboratory. The chosen areas of coast are both of considerable importance. Accra’s coastal zone is characterised by sandy bays with several (potentially biologically-rich) lagoons and wetlands that range from clean to severely polluted. The study area supports a huge human population and includes a fish market and harbour, where there are literally hundreds of traditional wooden dug-out canoes which form the basis of the region’s artisanal fishery, heavily eroded cliffs and a palm- and mangrove-fringed leisure beach, lined by expensive western-style hotels. The South Shields’ coast is also biologically rich. It consists of sandy bays backed either by limestone cliffs or sand dunes. Cliff erosion has left impressive stacks and arches along the shore and caves that harbour tales of smugglers and ghosts. Cliff faces support huge colonies of breeding seabirds in early summer and the cliff-tops have a unique flora. An impressive arching sandy beach is the centre of leisure and recreational activity but the sand dunes behind it have become severely trampled and degraded. Sand is no longer bound by natural dune vegetation and quantities of it are blown over adjacent roads during winter’s gales. The study area included the mouth of the estuary of the River Tyne, which is still a regional centre of maritime industrial activity, including what remains of a once thriving fishing industry.

Pupils debated management issues relating to their local coasts in their classrooms without input from adults. Although their recommendations for managing them were occasionally over-stated, they were largely mature and sensible (Table 1). Pupils realised that, despite differences in scale, coastal zones face similar environmental problems in both countries. This was certainly a surprise for some of the Ghanaians who, before the start of the project, had commented that the UK was a rich and very clean country with few environmental problems. Epinay children were less informed about Ghana so that the extent of poverty and pollution in its coastal areas was new information for them. Exchanging knowledge enabled children in both countries to appreciate that their generation now has the responsibility for the future custody of the coastal and marine environment – negating the careless misuse by older generations. They recognised that the coast, indeed the natural environment as a whole, is a responsibility that they must accept and share with young citizens throughout the world. A school pledge, showing personal commitment, was adopted by the students at St. Mary’s School:
“I promise on my honour to save and protect the coastline of Ghana. I pledge myself to the maintenance of the coast with all my strength and all I have. I promise to hold in high esteem everything concerning the coast. Through the hard work of my brothers and I, I pledge to make the coast a better place for now and for future generations. Thank you.”

It was also realised by pupils that both the Ghanaian and English public was poorly informed, and therefore lacked motivation, on environmental issues. Many problems demand immediate action but, without public support and involvement, this is an unrealistic expectation. There were, therefore, urgent needs for educational initiatives to improve public environmental awareness and knowledge.

Table 1. A summary of coastal management recommendations by schoolchildren from the UK and Ghana

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epinay School: South Shields coast:</th>
<th>University of Ghana Primary and Junior High School / St. Mary’s Secondary School: coast of Accra:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational</strong></td>
<td><strong>Educational</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Educate people</td>
<td>1. Educate people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Write letters to the local people explaining why it is important to preserve the dunes and links.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Design a nature trail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Employ a coastal warden.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Litter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Provide information signs about the hazards of dropping rubbish and the financial consequences of doing so.</td>
<td>2. Arrest people who drop litter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Put more litter bins along the coastal footpath.</td>
<td>3. Provide litter bins at vantage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Employ some council cleaners.</td>
<td>4. Send litter for recycling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Habitat protection</strong></td>
<td>5. School children could clean beaches during their school holidays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Build a fence to exclude people from parts of the dunes.</td>
<td>6. Protect areas by fencing them off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Introduce planting schemes to create</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### The coasts and seas as inspirations for creative art

Children were asked, as part of these environmental projects, to consider the use of different art forms as means of communicating their views on the coast and seas. More than two thirds of the Ghanaian classes responded, either singly or in small groups, by producing their own poems, songs, pieces of creative writing, drawings or paintings. Epinay pupils also engaged themselves in these tasks, although their efforts were primarily classroom-based. Poems and songs were particularly effective in communicating clear, and often passionately held, messages about the environment. Four examples, one from Epinay School and three from Ghana, are chosen here as illustrations.

Pupils from both countries were keen to convey the message which underpins the *Joint Responsibility* programme: that the marine environment belongs to each and every one of us and, implicitly therefore, we all share the responsibility for caring for it for the benefit of future generations. ‘**Mine is the sea**’ is a poem composed by Epinay children under the guidance of guest teacher, Mrs. Anne Curtis:

\[
\text{Mine is the cool wind} \\
\text{Mine is the whisper in the wind} \\
\text{Mine is the gull that gently hovers in the wind} \\
\text{Mine is the storm sea} \\
\text{Mine is the bobbing boat on the storm sea}
\]
Mine is the prayer for sailors on the storm sea

Mine is the bright seashell
Mine is the emptiness of the seashell
Mine is the ghost of the creature that lived in the seashell

Mine is the towering cliff
Mine is the cave within the cliff
Mine is the echoing call of the kittiwake on the cliff

Mine is the sunset
Mine is the golden hue of sunset
Mine is the end of the day framed by the sunset

What is mine is everyone’s.

Aaron Poku, who was 12 years old and attended the University of Ghana Primary and Junior Secondary School, used his song in rap ‘It’s my Beach’ to convey the same message:

The beach is a nice place to be
But when polluted you cannot sit to eat.
Nor even breathe nor sleep
That’s why you should always keep it clean.

It’s my beach,
It’s your beach,
It’s his beach,
It’s their beach.
We have to keep it clean
That’s true if we want to be neat.

Fourteen-year-old Brenda Bossman of St. Mary’s School relied on her own experiences and innocence as a younger child in writing the poem ‘Destructive Man’. She leaves no one in doubt about the scale of environmental damage on some of Ghana’s shores and on whom the blame must rest:

When I was young
I took a walk down the beach
What I saw was impossible to say
The coconut trees lying on the beach
With rocks in between them
I squirmed my feet in the sand
And chased crabs into their hiding place
I picked sea shells and listened
To the sound of the waves
I looked at the blue green sea
With the waves splashing against the rocks
Ships of various sizes floating gloriously to their destination

Years later
I took a stroll down the same beach
The coconut trees were gone
What was left of them were just stumps
I gazed at the beach
And all I saw was rubbish
I felt no sand, I gaped at the sea
I saw droplets of oil at the surface
I watched a big truck deposit human excreta and wastewater into the sea
The blue green seas had turned brown
I looked at all this and wept
For the beautiful beach that is no more
I just stood there and stared
As I walked away I mumbled to myself
Man you are indeed destructive.

The song ‘Let us save our life’ was composed by students from St Mary’s School and performed at their open environmental day. It was adopted as the anthem for a school Environmental Club that was born as a result of the project. Again, the message is clear: we must act now if we are to reverse the processes of environmental degradation. It begins as follows:

Awake! Awake!
Let us save our coastlines
Everybody let us work hand in hand
Awake! Awake!
Let us save our coastlines
Everybody let us work hand in hand.

We wanna save our beaches
We wanna save our fishes
So all should join this team
To see this dream come true

We wanna save our beaches
We wanna save our lives
To develop this nation
We need to save these lives.

**Actions: getting the message across**

Management recommendations made by the Epinay School class were well-received at an open day for the rest of the school and guests, including the Mayor of South Tyneside, parents, representatives from industry and school governors. The Mayor invited the class to make a further presentation to her councillors, and the media, which were also in attendance, covered the project on TV, local radio and in the regional press. Open days at the Ghanaian schools were equally successful. Classes shared their findings with the entire school, teachers and school governors. They were also well covered by press and radio.

However, while at this stage the evidence is anecdotal, there is no doubt that performances of songs and poems had marked impacts on those attending school open days. They were clearly impressed by the enthusiasm and passion with which young people expressed their deeply-held views to the audiences. A quotation from the Honourable Ms Christine Churcher, (then) Ghana’s Minister for Education and Science, at St. Mary’s School’s open day reflects an opinion that was probably held by everyone there:

“Any activity with the capacity to change perceptions and attitudes towards the fragile and sensitive coastal environment, such as this one, always gladdens my heart.”

Songs and poems produced by St. Mary’s students now form part of an educational package that is being used in three pilot schools in Accra, in which a wastes’ recycling initiative has
been launched, and is being shown in schools and to adult audiences in the UK. Similarly, Epinay School’s poems and other artwork are included in an illustrated booklet on the South Shields coast which is based on the pupils’ studies (Evans 2009). It was published through a Heritage Lottery ‘Awards for All’ grant and is intended to raise awareness of the ecology of the local coastline in local schoolchildren and adults.

Discussion

The approach to citizenship education that has been adopted in The North Sea: Our Joint Responsibility programme is undoubtedly successful in engaging groups effectively with environmental management issues. It empowers community groups, including those from primary and secondary schools, to make real differences to environmental issues of local importance (Evans, Garside, Gebbels, Stockill & Green, 2007; Evans, Green & Ling, 2007; Evans, Gebbels & Stockill, 2008a; Evans, Gebbels & Stockill, 2008; Evans, Gebbels, Green & Stockill, in press; Nunoo & Evans, 2007).

Experiences in the Ghana-UK schools’ partnerships add another dimension to the schools’ programme because participants considered their findings and interpretations in a global context. These links also gave young people the opportunity to express their own views. Their positive and enthusiastic use of the creative arts may also tell us something about communication techniques that will succeed in getting messages across to the adult public. While this is a largely unexplored field, there is no doubt that young people can influence environmental attitudes and behaviour in the older generation (Evans, Gill & Marchant, 1996; Ballantyne, Fien & Packer, 2001; Liu & Kaplan, 2006). As Ballantyne et al. (2006) have stressed, once equipped with specialist knowledge, students have the potential to become educators of the adult population on environmental issues. The performing arts may provide particularly effective ways of exploiting this potential. Traditionally, they have always been used as means of disseminating political or social messages to communities. Within the African context for example, Rwangyezi & Woomer (1995) describe them as the great books of the continent. Information was stored and disseminated through songs, stories and ceremonies enacted in theatrical styles. This function has evidently diminished in the modern world but there are still many examples in which public performances are used to convey messages on health, agricultural or social issues (Yarrow 1997; JOICFP News 2000; Ghosh, Patil, Tiwari & Dash, 2006; Daykin, Orme, Evans, Salmon, McEachran. et al. 2008; Heong, Escalada, Huan, Ba, Thiet, & Chien, 2008).
The take home message from the Joint Responsibility programme thus far is that the voices of young people should be listened to more carefully. Some might argue that schoolchildren lack the knowledge and experience to act either as educators or as consultants in environmental planning processes. However, this view is by no means universally-held. Some enlightened educationists have always expressed a concern that society undervalues young peoples’ knowledge and experience. Put succinctly by Palmer (2003), “they are capable of teaching us as much as we teach them”. Traditionally, we have relied on scientists to lead and inform us on environmental and other scientific issues but, with a few notable exceptions, they have been notoriously bad communicators (House of Lords Select Committee 2000). Perhaps the time is ripe to recognise that young people deserve a greater say both as educators and environmental managers in a world in which natural resources are exploited at increasingly unsustainable levels?

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