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## **Beneficial or detrimental? The relationship between Sustainability, Eco-schools and Ofsted reports.**

### **Abstract**

The article addressed the relationship between sustainability, Eco-schools and primary school Ofsted (Office for Standards in education) reports in England. The article examined the presence of education for sustainability in primary schools' Ofsted reports and their webpages. The primary schools selected were schools that had gained the title of Eco-Ambassador schools because they had reached the ultimate distinction in the Eco-school approach (held a Green flag). The study followed an exploratory approach employing qualitative content analysis of primary schools' Ofsted reports and their web pages. Overall, the findings indicated that neither the schools nor their Ofsted reports capitalized on the work they had invested towards sustainability and the Eco-school approach; also the relationship between the primary schools' work/ethos and their Ofsted reports is not an interactive one.

Keywords: eco-schools, sustainability, Ofsted, sustainable development goals, primary, environment.

### **Introduction**

This article aims to see the synergy between Education for Sustainability (EfS), Eco-schools and Ofsted reports in England. Hence, it is important to briefly discuss these three aspects and explain why this synergy is important to be explored.

*Education for Sustainability (EfS).*

Education for sustainability (EfS) has acquired momentum in the last 15 years and its importance has been highlighted for early years as well as for primary, secondary and tertiary education. The main aim of EfS is to bring forward the three pillars of

sustainability, namely environment, society and economy. In this respect EfS needs to be seen as a 'pedagogic platform' that teachers can use to deliver the National Curriculum (NC) and its subjects in a manner that links between the three pillars mentioned above can be made and thus pupils acquire a holistic understanding of the topics and issues they are taught. The importance of EfS in primary schools and the barriers that teachers face have been discussed by many scholars (Green and Sommerville 2014, Gayford 2003, Scott 2013, Vare and Scott 2007, McNaughton 2012, Beltran et al, 2013). Some significant issues/barriers these scholars have highlighted relate to teachers' limited training, knowledge and skills in EfS. Other barriers include the way policy documents have addressed EfS without making clear links to predecessors of EfS such as environmental education, developmental education, etc. that could have helped teachers' school practices (Chatzifotiou, 2018).

#### *Eco-schools in England.*

The Eco-school initiative is an international initiative and in the UK is managed by the organisation Keep Britain Tidy. Eco-schools aim to help schools organise activities and projects in order to promote environmental and sustainability practices. They provide schools with nine topics, namely: energy, water, biodiversity, school grounds. Healthy living, transport, litter, waste and global citizenship. Working on these topics schools can reach three different levels of achievement; the silver, the bronze and the green flag status (the ultimate level). The initiative also indicates steps that school can take to work on this topics. For instance, they have to register with the Eco-School, they have to form an Eco-committee, conduct an environmental review of each topic and then draft an action plan. It is up to the schools to decide the frequency and intensity with which they choose to work on these topics. A number of schools that had reached the Green Flag status, they were also given the title of the Eco-Ambassadorial school

because of their work on sustainability issues. There was a limited number of primary and secondary schools in England that had been identified as Eco-school Ambassadors for a period of two years (2014-2016 and 2016-2018) within the Eco-school initiative.

The term 'Eco-school Ambassador' reflects schools that have managed to be 'judged' as such based on their commitment to education for sustainability. At the time of my research the Eco-school English webpage did not mention any other particular criteria used to determine a school as an Eco-ambassador school. On that note, Scott (2013) has highlighted the tokenistic approach taken by schools towards education for sustainability while Chatzifotiou and Tait (2017) showed that primary school teachers' and early years practitioners' understanding of the term 'sustainability' was simplistic and focused mainly on educating pupils about the physical environment.

Other efforts to help schools promote sustainability in their practices include the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) produced by UNESCO in 2015 and adopted by all United Nations members in order to promote knowledge and understanding of sustainable development by 2030. Marco Rieckmann (2018) highlighted the importance of these goals in setting the topics/content for developing competences relevant to EfS. Such competences need to reflect and employ an action-oriented transformative pedagogy and a specific content as described by the SDGs. While these goals were not used as criteria for the Eco-Ambassadorial schools, they offered this project an interesting mapping tool to describe aspects where the Eco-school approach and the SDGs meet. This exercise can offer further insights into the schools' approaches to sustainability.

#### *Ofsted reports.*

The current project saw this 'ambassadorial role' that schools held as an excellent indicator to reflect 'hands-on' evidence of pupils' learning on sustainability. This

evidence can be conceptualized both in terms of factual knowledge and in terms of skills and attitudes; all of which are reported in one way or another in an Ofsted report. Evidence on these (knowledge and skills/attitudes) should also reflect wider curriculum issues current in contemporary discussions including:

- a. planning and development for school curricula in general; an element that is highly valued by Ofsted reports, and
- b. curriculum planning and development for sustainability in particular, taking into consideration the schools' and teachers' interests.

Both aforementioned issues are important. In October 2017, Amanda Spielman (Ofsted's Chief Inspector) argued that it is one of her aims as Chief inspector to identify and support what is best in curriculum design, development and implementation. Even though she did mention that the particular interest would be in the National Curriculum subjects, education for sustainability as practiced via the Eco-school dimension does offer a good opportunity for schools and teachers to demonstrate curriculum planning, development and implementation within the National Curriculum subjects and beyond. In that same speech, Amanda Spielman also highlighted the importance of discussing how the curriculum should be developed and implemented, implicitly emphasizing the role of the teacher saying: *"Little attention is given to developing more rounded curriculum knowledge. Indeed, a couple of head-teachers indicated that they could divide their staff into those who were strong in curriculum planning – those who trained a fair time ago- and those who were not."* Ofsted has shown an interest in education for sustainability in the past; in its 2009 report 'Education for Sustainable development – improving schools, improving lives' an important aim was to explore whether education for sustainability had an impact on improving the broader life of the school. Aside such a generic report though, it is interesting to explore whether EfS is an issue that Ofsted

takes an interest in its individual school reports, especially in schools where they have such interests and commitments.

In light of all aforementioned aspects, this article addressed primary schools' Eco-ambassadorial role in relation to sustainability as demonstrated in their webpages and Ofsted reports.

### **Methodology and conceptual framework**

This is an exploratory, qualitative study that used the web-pages of six primary schools and their corresponding Ofsted reports. Its aim is to investigate how schools themselves (via their web-pages) and their Ofsted reports include sustainability and how they use it (as a pedagogical tool) that can enhance their curriculum and potentially lead to a better Ofsted rating.

The six primary schools were identified via a list of schools (which included both primary and secondary) that contained schools that had been qualified as 'Eco-Ambassadorial schools'. This list was found originally on the English Eco-school webpage.

The primary 'Eco-school Ambassadors' in this study were all state schools that have to follow the National Curriculum but at the same time they would have to design, develop and implement the eco-school dimensions as well. Between 2014-2016 there were 11 schools (both primary and secondary) that had been awarded this ambassadorial role. From these 11 schools, four were primary schools; two of these schools had been inspected in 2017 (that is, the year after their ambassadorial role had expired), one had been inspected in 2015 (during the time of their ambassadorial role) and the other one was inspected in 2018 (two years after their ambassadorial role). Between 2016-2018 there were 5 schools altogether that had been awarded this ambassadorial role; three

were primary schools and the other two were secondary. From the two primary schools, only one had a recent Ofsted report which was in 2016 (that is the year that their ambassadorial role started). Thus, six primary schools in total were used for the project, focusing on their webpages and Ofsted reports. The timing of these Ofsted reports should reflect the work that schools planned and conducted on developing curricula that support and go beyond the National Curriculum in terms of subject knowledge and skills (as prescribed as well by the Eco-school approach).

The method employed to collect data was content analysis. Content analysis was applied to the actual Ofsted reports which were relevant to the time period the schools had been qualified as Eco-Ambassadorial schools. Content analysis was also applied to collect data from these schools' web pages. Content analysis is a method applied to texts. Its main aim is to identify and in many instances count as well, response categories that can help researchers understand better the topics they set to investigate (Matthews and Rose, 2010). Different scholars have discussed the use of content analysis as more pertinent to a quantitative approach (Neuendorf, 2005) but other scholars have highlighted that content analysis can also help researchers make inferences by identifying specified characteristics in the texts (Holsti, 1969). Mogra (2016) in his analysis of 21 Ofsted reports aiming to explore how the word radicalization appeared in them, used content analysis based on a 'key-words-in-context' method to study key words found in the reports.

Similarly, the current project used content analysis of the Ofsted reports in order to identify the presence of words/issues relevant to sustainability so inferences could be drawn on whether education for sustainability is present in the Ofsted's remit and whether it is seen as an indicator of a pedagogic tool for enhancing these schools' practices. The words that were deemed as appropriate to look for in the Ofsted reports

and schools' web-pages were words that related to the Eco-school literature such as: eco-school team, sustainability and of course the eco school topics which included: Biodiversity, marine, energy, litter, water, healthy living, school grounds, global citizenship. These terms and topics are the immediate and clear references within which EfS can be discussed and they could be readily detected both in the schools' webpages and Ofsted reports. Furthermore, these eco-school words and contexts were also seen in relation to the SDGs aiming to further infer on knowledge and skills about sustainability.

Content analysis of webpages is somehow different to traditional texts. However, scholars like Krippendorff (1980) have addressed its value when he discussed such advantages like being unobtrusive, able to cope with large amount of data and focusing on the artefact rather than the individual directly. Other researchers as well like Kim and Kuljis (2010) have discussed the possibility of conducting content analysis on web-based content. They have discussed that both quantitative and qualitative content analysis is possible on web-based content. They claimed that: *“Typically based on an individual's perspective, qualitative content analysis is similar to textual analysis in that it is primarily interpretive in nature, and often does not utilise statistics for data analysis.”* (p. 370). The current project employed a qualitative content analysis to both Ofsted reports and schools' web pages.

There are a number of issues though that the literature has identified as potentially problematic when applying content analysis to web-based contents. These include issues like research going out of date because of the changing nature of the webpages sampling procedures, size and potentially being devoid of a theoretical context because the focus may be on what is measurable (Seale 2018, Kim and Kuljis 2010). The current project has used the web pages of schools that had been identified as Eco-

Ambassadorial schools so in this respect the sampling reflects a purposeful sampling as it is known within the qualitative tradition. In terms of time lapse, the current project collected data from the web-pages of these schools during June – July 2018. Thus, the web-based content analysis reflects that particular time period only; it is important to stress though that even though the web-based data reflect one particular point in time, this point needs to be seen in relation to the fact that these schools had been identified as Eco-Ambassadorial schools the periods between 2014-2016 and 2016-2018. Hence, for the aims of the current project, the snapshot that these web pages provided in one particular time (June-July 2018) is important in relation to sustainability because of all the ‘Eco-school’ work that the schools had delivered or were in the process of delivering.

### **Ethical considerations**

None of the schools’ details (e.g. names, location, etc.) have been mentioned. Primary schools’ names have been replaced with Alphabet letters (e.g. Primary school A, B, etc.). Also, the actual schools’ Ofsted reports used for this project are not referenced because they could act as identifiers of the schools.

### **Findings**

#### ***Eco-school Ambassadors between 2014-2016***

This section will present the findings from the relevant Ofsted reports of the schools and their web pages that had been identified as Eco-school Ambassadors between 2014-2016. The data collection from the schools’ web pages included all possible domains a school’s webpage has (e.g. ‘Home’, ‘About us’ ‘Newsletters’, information pertinent for

different year groups, etc.). The actual headings contained in the schools' web pages were similar but not all schools used the same terminology headings.

### ***Primary school A***

This primary school converted to an academy in April 2015. Its last Ofsted report (2013) before it became an academy was 'Good'. The first Ofsted report after converting to an academy was in 2018, two years after their Eco-school ambassadorial role had expired. The actual 2018 Ofsted report concluded that the school required improvements in all categories (effectiveness of leadership and management, quality of teaching, learning and assessment, outcomes for pupils and early years provision) but one; the school was judged as good for the category 'personal development, behavior and welfare'.

The 2018 Ofsted report had nothing relevant either to the Eco-school or to sustainability education. There are two comments that touch upon elements of education for sustainability and in this respect can be seen relevant to mention:

*"The school provides a generally broad and balanced curriculum. Enrichment activities and extra-curricular clubs complement this. Staff ensure that pupils' spiritual, moral social and cultural education is generally effective. The school prepares pupils positively for life in modern Britain. However, leaders are aware that pupils' understanding of different religions and some aspects of British values is not as secure as it could be."* (Primary school's A Ofsted report, p.3) And:

*"Pupils are very reflective and understand the importance of respecting others. Some pupils, however, were not as secure as they could be in their understanding of the British values relating to democracy and the understanding of different faiths and religions."* (Primary school's A Ofsted report, p.6)

Even though these two statements/comments are quite general, vague and without any examples, they indicate the school's interest in helping pupils develop good notions of citizenship and understandings of how a society functions. Democracy and social justice are strong features included both in the National Curriculum and in education for sustainability (as reflected in 'SDG16-Peace, justice and strong institutions'). Considering that this school had been identified two years before with high commitment to education for sustainability, it is rather disappointing to see that nothing seems to have left from that legacy – according at least to its 2018 Ofsted report.

Similarly, there is nothing in the school's webpage to indicate any connection with the Eco-school initiative, not least its commitment to the notion of sustainability in education.

### ***Primary school B***

This is a junior school (ages 7-11) and its latest Ofsted report was in 2017 a year after their ambassadorial role had expired. The report judged that the school required improvements in the following categories: overall effectiveness, quality of teaching, learning and assessment and outcomes for pupils; while the school was judged as Good in two categories, namely: effectiveness of leadership and management and personal development, behaviour and welfare.

Similarly to Primary school A, neither the web page of the school nor its Ofsted report made any claim on education for sustainability or provided examples where one can see whether education for sustainability is practiced. There were no links made to its Eco-school ambassadorial role. The webpage and the Ofsted report mentioned issues like British values for instance; the Ofsted report also acknowledged that the pupils in the school enjoy a wide range of extra-curricular activities but it did not provide any specific information on the kind of such activities. There are three comments in the

Ofsted report that could be linked to education for sustainability. These are: *“Pupils have many opportunities to become involved in the school community, for instance serving as an elected member of the school council or working as a library monitor. Pupils learn about caring for others through these opportunities, which contribute positively to their personal development.”* (Primary school’s B Ofsted report, p. 6). Plus: *“Pupils take pride in their school. They keep the school environment free from litter and readily to help to tidy up.”* (Primary school’s B Ofsted report, p.7). And: *“Leaders strive to engage families so that they see the value of sending their children to school.”* (Primary school’s B Ofsted report, p.7). In these aforementioned quotes various goals are reflected; for instance, the involvement in the school community and being an elected member of the school council reflect ‘SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions’; keeping school free from litter reflects ‘SDG15 – Life on land’; while the statement on engaging families to see the value of education reflects ‘SDG10 – Reduced Inequalities’.

Similarly to primary school A, one can see that in this school as well, a year after their Eco-school ambassadorial role had expired, not much from this legacy has survived. Some elements of education for sustainability that seem to be present and to have made it into its Ofsted report are issues like democracy and citizenship.

### ***Primary School C***

This primary school had a short inspection carried out in February 2017. Before 2017 its latest report was in March 2012 when the school had been judged as ‘Good’ overall. The short inspection suggested that the school is still ‘Good’. There are no special mentions about being an eco-school or an eco-school ambassador for that matter. The 2017 report acknowledged that curriculum planning was an area that the school had to improve since the 2012 report and to this end the report said:

*“Over subsequent years, previous leaders in the school achieved this necessary improvement to offer pupils more opportunities to be creative, for example, by making sure that the well-developed school grounds are used frequently in teaching”.* (Primary school’s C Ofsted report 2017). Thus, one can see that the school grounds (outdoor education) are presented as a good framework within which pupils can be taught the National Curriculum. The Ofsted report contained another element as well that said:

*“Staff now give pupils much more worthwhile reasons to write, for example to contact the school you link with in Uganda.”* (Primary school’s C Ofsted report 2017). Here, a global dimension is clearly laid out – even though with not much further clarification – but the global dimension does constitute a feature of education for sustainability. It is reflected in ‘SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions’; social justice is a key concept both for global learning and education for sustainability.

This school’s webpage had a clear mention to the Eco-school Ambassadorial role. It highlighted the school’s role as an eco-school Ambassador that offered training to other schools on outdoor education. Here, the eco-school approach is heavily equated with outdoor education. In the section ‘About us’ of the school’s webpage there is a heading for ‘Eco-school’ where one can see a crest (the school had acquired the Green Flag status some time ago; it was mentioned in their 2012 Ofsted report), and there is a video link that unfortunately did not seem to work. Apart from these instances, there were a number of newsletters as well that the school had produced. In the June 2018 newsletter it was mentioned a ‘Taste of Uganda’ talk; an event for which parents needed to buy tickets which would sponsor *“...water harvesting systems for the families who attend their twin schools in... [Uganda].”* This further illuminates the Uganda mention in the 2017 Ofsted report and does highlight more the global dimension that the school had introduced to its curriculum. Also, the above statement reflects both ‘SDG11 –

Sustainable cities and communities’ and ‘SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions’. In these newsletters (that range between January 2017 to June 2018) one can find other such events; for instance, in the February 2018 newsletter, there was another funding activity for their twin schools in Uganda; in the December 2017 newsletter there was announcement made about 100 saplings they had received from The Woodland Trust to plant; in the June 2018 newsletter, it was announced that the World Environment Day would be celebrated by the school on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June.

All these practices are mentioned briefly (as one would expect as well in a newsletter format) but have not been discussed in relation to the National Curriculum features of the school’s practices and experiences offered to pupils.

### ***Primary School D***

This school has been judged ‘Good’ by Ofsted in 2016; the year when their Eco-school Ambassadorial role expired. The Ofsted report did not make any reference to the eco-school dimension or to the school’s interest in sustainability. All comments were about the school’s performance in reading, writing, mathematics, etc. In that respect, there was hardly any mention on any kind of curriculum building and planning outside the National Curriculum’s strict remit.

The school’s webpage contained some information relevant to the eco-school. Firstly, the Eco-school logo is on the school’s webpage. Under the heading of ‘Curriculum’ and the sub-heading of ‘Humanities’ there is a picture of few pupils in a woodland area that is reminiscent of a forest-school approach that is not explicitly discussed as such though in the webpage. Then there have been few references in the school’s newsletters that are relevant to the outdoor environment and to the eco team’s activities. For instance, in the October 2017 newsletter there is a reference to a visit (of one class) into the nearby woods in order to “...*become one with nature*”. It is a small paragraph of eight lines (the

whole newsletter is 2 pages long though) where certain features of this activity were highlighted such as developing collaboration skills and using natural materials.

The November 2017 newsletter mentioned a number of fundraising activities (reflecting ‘SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions’) where pupils were involved in order to help towards all sorts of different needs the school had, such as procuring for art supplies or improving the outdoor area. The February 2018 newsletter made a very brief reference to the school’s Eco-team when it mentioned that the school was planning the installation of a vegetable patch (reflecting ‘SDG15 – Life on land’) for the Eco-team and another class (first time the term ‘eco-team’ is mentioned). Similarly, in the April 2018 newsletter it is mentioned that new planters had been installed for the Eco-team to plant a range of crops (second time the term eco-team is mentioned).

In the last newsletter on the webpage -May 2018- the term ‘sustainability’ appears once. The newsletter states that one class wanted to start a ‘*sustainability project*’ - the project was about improving the outside area using ‘*sustainable means*’ and to this end they were asking for such things like old plant pots, old wellies, paint brushes, watering cans, etc. The whole reference was contained within a very short paragraph without any more insights into the term ‘sustainability’. Hence, ‘SDG11 – Sustainable cities and communities’ is reflected even in a nominal manner.

Finally, the school had also on their webpage a SIAMS (Statutory Inspection on Anglican and Methodist School) report produced in 2016 as well. This report focused heavily on Religious Education, as expected, but it contained one reference that is relevant to the school’s eco-dimension. This reference – which reflects ‘SDG15 Life on land’ and ‘SDG16 Peace, justice and strong institutions’ - stated that: “*The school clearly celebrates the diversity of God’s world through its ecology work and by enhancing pupils’ multi-cultural understanding.*” That is, the report acknowledged the

school's work on ecological issues; the term 'ecology' refers to the natural environment such as outdoor education, use of wooded areas, etc.

### ***Primary school E***

This school had its latest Ofsted report in 2015; the year in between its ambassadorial role (2014-2016). The school has been judged as Good, while its previous Ofsted report was Excellent. All categories were ranked as good (e.g. leadership and management, quality of teaching, achievement of pupils, early years provision) and one category was judged as Outstanding (behaviour and safety of pupils).

The actual 2015 Ofsted report does not make any particular reference to the Eco-school approach. The Ofsted report highlights in few instances elements that pertain to the Eco-school approach and to EfS. Thus, one can see that in the summary of key findings a global dimension is mentioned (e.g. the school has links with a school in Spain – reflecting 'SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions') and there is a mention of the school grounds (wild school area, secret garden – reflecting 'SDG15 – Life on land') and how these are used as an effective tool for learning. In the actual report and under the category 'Leadership and management' it is further highlighted that the links with the Spanish schools contribute to pupils' awareness of other cultures and that the school's '*extensive grounds...widen pupils' experiences extremely well*'. In the category 'Quality of teaching' the aforementioned statement is further qualified when the report highlights that a Year 2 class observed the signs of spring in the outside area and that was the stimulus for writing poetry.

The school's webpage contained more and relevant information on the Eco-school approach. Thus, on school's home page – under the heading 'latest news' (where a teacher keeps a blog) it is mentioned that in the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2018 the school had been re-assessed for its 6<sup>th</sup> Green Flag award and pupils showed the assessors around.

Further, there are more explicit references to environmental topics. Hence, in school's 'Values' (under the heading 'The (school's name) way' it is stated that: "...*make the most of the grounds and the local environment. They will have developed an understanding of and respect for the natural world and their place in it*" and "...*have developed an awareness and appreciation of their own culture and heritage and that of the wider world...respectful of other races, religions and ways of living and **mindful of an eco/sustainable way of life***" (my bold – reflecting 'SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions'). Under another heading, that of school's history one can read that: "...[the school] *boasts a superb environmental forest school area with large pond, meadow area, bird hide, outdoor museum, fire circle, eco-shed, mud kitchen and outdoor classroom.*" The role of the forest school approach -which is different to the Eco-school dimension- is further highlighted in the webpage as a prominent tool for teaching and learning because this primary school was part of a group of rural primary schools that are increasingly taught through the Forest school approach.

The school's webpage has a teacher's blog (that functions as a newsletter) and parents can learn about all kind of activities that the school does. Thus, in the February 2018 blog we read that an apple tree had to be cut because it was rotten and pupils decided what kind of tree wanted to plant. In the same blog/newsletter, it is mentioned that two pupils had raised money for Syrian refugees via a particular activity (reflecting 'SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions'). Similarly, other activities that were mentioned in the blog include a fair trade week run by the school council (reflecting again 'SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions'). The January 2018 blog talked about a British Bird event and fundraising activities for McMillan Cancer. The October 2016 blog/newsletter congratulated Year 6 pupils for completing a Bike-ability Course. The April 2016 blog highlighted the school's 5<sup>th</sup> re-assessment for the Green Flag Award

and this time it is stated that the assessor: “...*can see how well our eco-work is embedded into our school.*” This is an interesting but yet vague statement that is neither further enriched with any particular examples nor it had been identified by their Ofsted report. In the December 2015 blog/newsletter it is mentioned that during this time the emphasis/attention had been on how to save energy; this is another topic of the eco-school that needs to be addressed by schools in order to satisfy the assessors for any of the Eco-school awards but it also reflects ‘SDG7 – Affordable and clean energy’. The blog states that the children were involved in a lesson all about energy and thought how to save energy at school and home. Again, the reference is rather descriptive and general, without giving any insights as to how this lesson on energy was conducted. Admittedly though, the blog/newsletter does not provide the proper space to do so.

Finally, under the heading ‘Learning Journeys’ there are two topics, one for forest schools and another for Eco-Ambassador school. Both give a brief description of what these are about; thus, for forest school we read that pupils have the opportunity for a term to benefit from a series of forest school sessions and there are a number of pictures where one can see pupils in such forest schools sessions. For the Eco-Ambassador school we read the Eco-Gate ways/topics that schools need to address (e.g. healthy living, energy, water, transport, litter, improving our school grounds, biodiversity, waste, pupil participation global citizenship). It is in this section where the term ‘sustainability’ emerges for the second time. It is stated that the school is: “...*committed to embedding sustainability throughout [its] community*”; this reflects ‘SDG11 – Sustainable cities and communities’ but in a nominal manner. There is also a link in this space as well that takes the reader to another page where there is a ‘pledge’ – an acronym that is used to convey all kinds of environmental messages (e.g. Eat healthily,

Recycle, Reduce, Reuse, etc.). See Table 1 for an overall picture of the findings for schools between 2014-2016.

[Insert table 1 here]

The last column in Table1 shows just the SDGs that have been reflected in the schools' web pages and school reports. The table does not show the frequency with which these goals are reflected. The reason is that in most cases there was rather a nominal reference that was surmised to indicate a particular SDG at a time, rather than a more comprehensive one; thus, the table shows which SDGs had been reflected.

### ***Eco-school Ambassador between 2016-2018***

#### ***Primary school F***

This school has been designated as an Eco-school ambassador for the period between 2016-2018. Its latest Ofsted report was on October 2017, that is the year in between its ambassadorial role. The school's overall effectiveness has been deemed as 'Good'. The October 2017 Ofsted report was short inspection.

The Ofsted report did not make any explicit comments or references to the Eco-school approach. It mostly highlighted aspects relevant to literacy, numeracy and safeguarding as one would expect, with hardly any other comments about what else/more the school is doing for its pupils like for instance the eco-school approach.

There was a SIAMS (Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools) report from April 2015 that had judged the school as 'Outstanding'. The SIAMS report mainly commented and highlighted the school's religious work with pupils, their parents and the community.

In its webpage, the school does not make any explicit reference to the Eco-school approach, to its 6<sup>th</sup> Green Flag Award or to its Eco-ambassador role. There have been a number of instances though where one can see some aspects relevant to sustainability

education. For instance, under the different subjects' headings one can see such references; under science there was a document – 'Waste Week' – which highlighted the Eco team's effort to remind fellow pupils and staff to reuse and recycle (reflecting 'SDG15 – Life on land'). The term 'eco team' belongs to the eco-school approach but it is not explained in the webpage who this team is and what is its role. In that respect, someone who does not know about the Eco-school approach would have hard time figuring out the role of such a team. The information provided in these documents on the webpage focuses on activities like pupils having recycled cloths (reflecting 'SDG12 – responsible production and consumption') or in the 'Zoo Lab' document where pupils have learnt about different creatures and how these creatures live (e.g. a Giant African land Snail, Tallula the tarantula, etc.). In the subject of Geography one can see attached a number of documents that show for instance a Rainforest display or a picture of the water cycle, etc.

The topic 'Healthy Schools' (reflecting 'SDG3 –Good health and well being') has three attached documents which contain the most relevant information regarding the Eco-school and issues of sustainability. The first document entitled 'Food 4Health Award' contains a picture with a short commentary congratulating the school for being awarded the Gold level of Food 4Health award. The second document is entitled 'Environmental work at [name of the school]'. This document presents a long, ongoing report of activities since September 2012. Its main focus is on the Gardening club and the many and different plants, trees, vegetables, fruits they plant with pupils. The document also contains a number of pictures where one can see the different constructions made around their outdoor area (e.g. raised beds, poly-tunnel, nesting boxes, bug hotels to name but few). It is mentioned the help and support they receive from grandparents and the school governors which shows an element of wider community involvement.

Furthermore, in this space there are also links to the NC subjects (e.g. Numeracy – working out prices of seeds, PSHE – working together as part of a team, Literacy and ICT – looking up in books and the internet for information). Finally, the document contains a statement that could display strong ‘sustainability’ links when it said that they supplied the school kitchen was with seasonal fruit and vegetables (reflecting ‘SDG12 – Responsible production and consumption’).

The third document under the heading ‘Healthy schools’ is entitled ‘Walking to school initiative’. This is a short document that highlights how the school in its effort to minimize congestion outside school and surrounding roads has introduced a scheme where parents who live afar from school and need to drive, can park their car in a designated area (reflecting ‘SDG15 – Life on land’ and ‘SDG3 – Good health and well being’). From there two teachers had volunteered to take the children to school through a safe route.

In a different space in the webpage there is another heading entitled ‘Gardening Club and Eco’. In this area one can see once more the term ‘eco team’ but still there is no further explanation as to what is its role and how is compiled. The eco team has participated in two activities; one was ‘Bird Disturbance Survey’ and the other activity was ‘Plastic pollution and the impact it is having on the environment’. Both these activities are presented in a very short manner highlighting basic features; for instance, for the second activity we read that pupils did not find any plastic in the beach. The beach was very clear indeed.

Under the ‘Gardening Club and Eco’ there are also a number of documents entitled with dates (e.g. October 2017, September 2017, etc.) where again the main focus is on the garden and the produce they had. The October 2017 document talked about the money the school raised from selling their harvest; money that went to charity, to support

children in Africa (reflecting ‘SDG12 – Responsible production and consumption’ and ‘SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions’). The eco team is mentioned again, along with the Gardening club team, to be congratulated on their hard work – actually, a small party was going to be held for the eco team in order to celebrate the 6<sup>th</sup> Green Flag award. This is one of the few times in the webpage where we can see an element of the Eco-school approach but again it is not presented in a context relevant to education for sustainability. Finally, in the same space there is another document that talks about the school’s overall win of the 2017 ‘Northumbria in Bloom Growing together for Schools’ – the school also received Gold for ‘Educational Value’, for ‘ Horticultural quality’ and for ‘ Environmental understanding’. Table 2 below presents overall findings of this school.

[Insert Table 2 here]

## **Discussion**

On the first instance, one can argue that the above findings are not really encouraging when it comes to the presence and role of EfS in primary schools whose commitment to sustainability had been assumed rather high (due to their Eco-ambassadorial role). However, here it is also important to acknowledge a limitation of the study. Education for sustainability was explored by proxy; that is, the primary schools’ involvement and commitment to the Eco-school approach was perceived as a good indicator of involvement and commitment to EfS.

The actual presence of EfS does come out stronger in terms of actual knowledge rather than in terms of a pedagogic tool/platform which teachers can use to develop curricula. The Eco-school approach has certainly given these schools an opportunity to address a range of issues relevant to sustainability; this became clearer as well by the fact that a number of statements included either on their Ofsted reports and/or webpages indicated

a link to the SDGs. ‘SDG 15 – Life on land’ and ‘SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions’ were the most commonly reflected goals. The former includes topics that highlight knowledge on issues of forests, deforestation, protection of flora and fauna, biodiversity, etc.; while the latter includes topics that highlight attitudes such as inclusion, migration, policies for promoting all peoples; voices, etc. On the one hand, it is encouraging to see that such issues had a presence if only (or mainly) in these schools’ web-pages; on the other hand though, there were hardly any references in the Ofsted reports. ‘SDG 15 -Life on land’ may have been reflected more than other goals because it focuses on ‘tangible’ aspects like gardening, planting, healthy eating, etc. ‘SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions’ that was also quite popular entails skills like critical thinking, systems thinking, problem solving etc. that may be seen as ‘harder’ to achieve. For these ‘harder’ to achieve skills, there was not much reference or discussion in relation to pupils’ learning. Admittedly, such links between pupils’ learning, development and EfS would have been better explored if interviews and questionnaires were conducted with teachers in these schools.

The most striking element emerges from Primary school D (2014-2016) and Primary school F (2016-2018) whose Ofsted reports came in at a time when their Eco-ambassadorial role had just expired or were in the process of developing and implementing the Eco-school approach. One would expect that the report would have commented on their work but both schools’ report had not made any mention to the Eco-school or to any other aspect of it. These schools’ webpages on the other hand included significant information about their Eco-school activities. This discrepancy between the Ofsted report and the school’s webpage indicates that inspectors did not seem to spend any time on the schools’ web page or if they did, they did not find any of

this information relevant or significant enough to discuss and include in their reports for the schools' work and ethos.

It is interesting and surprising to see that even though all Ofsted reports examined were close to the time periods when these schools were heavily involved in the Eco-school approach, not much was mentioned both in their web-pages and in their Ofsted reports. That is, in some cases neither the schools themselves nor the Ofsted seemed to value the work and time that schools have invested in the Eco-schools approach. It is hard to explain why this is the case, considering that Ofsted has shown interest in EfS in the past and more recently expressed an intention to identify and support curriculum design. For schools on the other hand, that have invested time, money and effort on the Eco-school approach but they do not seem to capitalize enough on the investment (some schools hardly mentioned anything in their web pages), this can indicate that the Eco-school approach is an initiative that rests mainly with the interests of particular teachers within these schools; this means that if these teachers stop working on the initiative, then the initiative stops as well. Other studies have shown that teachers and early years practitioners viewed the Eco-school agenda as an 'add-on' rather than as a 'built-in' aspect of the curriculum and hence this can also explain the apparent lack of capitalizing on their investment in the Eco-school (Chatzifotiou and Tait, 2017).

If schools themselves do not include their work and achievements in their web-pages, it is not that surprising after all why Ofsted reports did not do so either. Schools and Ofsted reports should 'feed' each other. This has not been the case in this project. More worryingly, this was not the case even with schools that did give their Eco-school status and consequently EfS, a good presence in their web-pages. Considering that one of the main purposes of Ofsted is to help schools become better and contribute to higher standards (Woodhead, 1999), it is rather disappointing to see that their individual school

reports cannot seem to accommodate wider aspects of a school's life and ethos. The literature supports the above claim. Alan Cross (2000, p.171) concluded that Ofsted inspections for non-core subjects '*...has a hit and miss element...*' while other researchers (Case, et al. 2000) have showed that teachers from successful schools (according to their Ofsted reports) did not contribute their effectiveness or success of their pupils to Ofsted inspections. Furthermore, Jones and Tymms (2014) highlighted the lack of evidence in the literature on the impact of inspections upon school improvement. While Perryman (2009) claimed that there is not much space for initiatives or schemes that are not directly relevant to the Ofsted agenda.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, this project aimed to describe and discuss the presence of EfS in primary schools that had been judged as Eco-ambassadorial schools; this was exploration by proxy due to time, financial and logistical limitations. The study showed that EfS is 'referenced' in the Eco-school approach in terms of knowledge on certain issues. These references though can be taken as tokenistic because few of these schools have capitalized on them. These findings cannot be generalised since the project was small and relied solely on texts whose original remit did not necessarily address EfS in the first instance.

The project also offered strong indications that the relationship between schools' work and Ofsted reports does not seem to be an interactive one where both parties contribute accordingly in order to enhance practices that can be reflected both in the reports and the community; this finding seems to reflect a wider literature in the field. A possible way forward to address the above in relation to EfS could be for Ofsted inspectors to include the SDGs as part of their schools' review. The SDGs were reflected in the work

of these Eco-Ambassadorial schools and most certainly should be reflected in other schools that follow similar approaches (e.g. forest schools, outdoor education, etc.).

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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**Table 1.** Eco-Ambassadorial schools and the content of their Ofsted reports and web-pages between 2014 - 2016.

<b>Primary – Eco ambassadorial schools in 2014-2016</b>	<b>Year of Ofsted report</b>	<b>Content of Ofsted report in relation to sustainability</b>	<b>Content of web-page in relation to sustainability</b>	<b>Reflected Sustainable Development Goals</b>
A	2018 (2 years after the Eco-Ambassadorial role expired)	Very general comments on British values that can reflect issues of democracy and social justice	Nothing	SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions
B	2017 (1 year after the Eco-Ambassadorial role expired)	Involvement in school’s community, keep school environment free from litter	Nothing	SDG10 – Reduced inequalities SDG15 – Life on Land SDG16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions

C	2017 (1 year after the Eco-Ambassadorial role expired)	Short mention of the use of school grounds in teaching	Clear mention to the Eco-Ambassadorial school role, outdoor education, global dimension.	SDG 4- Quality education SDG15- Life on Land SDG16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions
D	2016 (the year that the Eco-Ambassadorial role expired).	Nothing	Clear mention to Eco-school, fundraising activities, eco-team doing a planting activity, mention of the term 'sustainability' for a project on improving the outside area.	SDG15- Life on Land SDG16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions SDG11 – Sustainable cities and communities
E	2015 (in between its Eco-	Short mention of the school's links with a	Local environment, natural world,	SDG11 – Sustainable cities and

	Ambassadorial role)	school in Spain (global dimension), Use of outdoors.	culture and heritage, eco/sustainable way of life, forest school area, fair trade week, fundraising, Bike-ability course, Green Flag Award, save energy, Eco-Gate ways/topics.	communities SDG15- Life on Land SDG16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions SDG7 – Affordable and clean energy.
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**Table 2.** Eco-Ambassadorial school and the content of their Ofsted report and web-page between 2016-2018.

<b>Primary – Eco ambassadorial schools in 2016-2018</b>	<b>Year of Ofsted report</b>	<b>Content of Ofsted report in relation to sustainability</b>	<b>Content of web-page in relation to sustainability</b>	<b>Reflected Sustainable Development Goals</b>
F	2017 (in between its Eco-	Nothing	Eco-school approach, 6 <sup>TH</sup> Green Flag	SDG3 – Good health and well-being

	Ambassadorial role)		Award, recycle, eco-team, Zoo lab, rainforest display, 'Healthy schools', environmental work , gardening club, 'walking to school initiative, 'Bird Disturbance Survey', 'Plastic pollution and the impact its having on the environment', fundraising.	SDG12- Responsible production and consumption SDG15- Life on Land SDG16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions
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