

Bodhi Learning Web

At the Wiston weekend in October 2007 the Education Group made a presentation about our thoughts so far. We presented our idea of a Bodhi Learning Web, which was met with interest and enthusiasm, and a lot of 'green lights' to explore and develop this further.

Paula Cowie spoke about her longing to be part of a community where people truly care for and support each other.

I'm very curious about how people will live and relate to each other in the Bodhi eco-village. I live between 2 towns with a total population of around 8000 people. I probably know around 25 of them for more than a quick hello on the street and "how are you today?". Some of them are friends Ollie and I play with, some of them are good neighbours that help us as we help them. I'm probably lucky in that the little bit of the street I am on I know everyones names and we all say good morning to each other. Most people today don't know their neighbours, and walk down their streets as "strangers".

The reason I want to live in a community is to live differently to that. My vision for Bodhi is that of mutual support between residents. Mutual caring and valuing. A unspoken knowing that we are there to help each other, both when we need it, and when we want to offer it anyway. Not only for the children and the elderly, but for everyone.

If that is the case, I'd consider children growing up as Bodhi children lucky. The world is getting harder to live in. Climate change is a reality. Future generations need different skills to survive, and to have a better quality of life. Children growing up in a caring community where people support each other without question or obligation are children that will cope better when things get really difficult. Children that can look after themselves emotionally, physically, spiritually and intellectually are children that will carry the human race forward. I believe this is crucial in our survival as a species.

I think we need to learn how to look after ourselves better before we can look after our home, the Earth. I hope people who want to live in the Bodhi eco village want to be people who can help each other do that and share their time, energy and/or skills with the children. Children are the future of the world, we adults are the ones who can help them through into that future by being open, receptive and sharing.

I think of Ollie's education as one that gives him the opportunity to learn what he needs to learn for his journey through life. A journey that he creates, even in these early years as much as I do. I wish for him, and all children, that education is "what they chose to receive from those that are willing and able to give it". I hope that's not too woolly!

I want Bodhi children to know in their bones that everyone matters, the people around them and those far away. That everything is to be valued because it will run out!

To share a personal experience with you that sums all of this up for me – at the Earthship Summer Fair this year a 6 year old boy, who had been mulling over for quite some time with his mum what he would be when he was older, said to her, "Can I do Paulas job when I'm older please Mum?!". He was inspired to learn, he was excited, and he cared (even if only for a day!). The "prize" for me in that was I was simply being me and doing what I do, but I felt nourished and full of hope for the future.

Eva Schonveld spoke about her experiences of how education can be different.

Most of us were educated in schools of one sort or another. And our experiences will have been varied – even for one person, school can be fun and engaging one year – and a boring drudge or worse another. At school we learn the syllabus, which varies over time depending on the prevailing educational thinking, but we also learn a huge amount of other things – many of which we absorb silently and often unconsciously – on a bodily level - just making sense of the world around us and coming to conclusions based on our observations and experiences. Often the things we learn in this way never become fully conscious – they are absorbed into our sense of 'this is just how things are' and are only questioned when our assumptions are radically challenged.

One of the main things that most of us have unconsciously learned at school, is that education is something that teachers do to children: that we have to be taught things in order to be able to function properly in the grown-up world. It can be quite a challenge to recognise that this isn't necessarily true. We have a culture where the idea of 'teaching' is seen as a necessary part of learning, but other cultures, like the Mbuti of the Central African rainforest (who I visited about 10 years ago), and many other traditional cultures, don't have

a concept of teaching at all.

What I saw amongst the Mbuti, were very competent little children, displaying many of the same skills as their parents, who were basically left to get on with what they wanted to. On the whole, they would hang out in a gang at one of the granny's houses, playing with one another in a non-age related group. One very little boy (he looked about 5 or 6) didn't do this. He had his own hunting net, and hung out with the men and went out on hunts with them. No one ever seemed to show these children how to do things – they just did them, and they learned, in this unconscious, bodily way – all the skills they needed to be part of a group of Mbuti living in the rainforest; a way of life that left me feeling as un-skilled as I ever have in my life!

But I have also experienced this kind of thing home educating my kids, which I did until recently. I didn't teach my eldest son to read – he did. I played games (which he instigated) over a number of years; making up lists of animals beginning with each letter of the alphabet; reading shop signs on the way past on the bus. It took him several years after he was confident with the letters of the alphabet, to actually put them all together. He wouldn't read until his skill with 'decoding' caught up with what he was interested in reading about. He was 7 and a half. He's now in the top reading group in his class at school. But no one taught him to read. He was around me and his dad reading, and valuing books – and he began to see why it might be useful to be able to read. When it made sense to him, and his skills allowed, he was just able to do it. This isn't unusual: it's seen as normal in home educated children.

But my kids are in school now. I have very mixed feelings about this. It was Saul's choice to go, he wanted to see what it was like, and underneath that wanted a safe, flexible way to begin to move out from the close family circle, into the world. His experience has been mixed – very challenging to begin with, then increasingly enjoyable, as he was blessed with a very inspired teacher. Now, however he's unhappy, bored and feels liable to getting into trouble easily with a new teacher who he doesn't like. Unfortunately for him, our family situation has changed, and for the moment, coming out of school is no longer an option (something that made the whole process easier for him was the sense that it was optional), as I need to find work for financial reasons. So Blue too was told he had to go to school. At the moment, after a bit of a rocky start, he's doing alright – again a lovely teacher is helping a great deal! For him, being part of the 'scene' is really important – so even though he may feel bored and constrained at times, school's important to him because that's where all the other kids are.

It has been very interesting to go through this process of entering mainstream education. One of the main things that I've noticed is that it's enabled me to become much more part of my local community – it's what all the other families round here are doing. But many of them are unhappy with quite a large part of their children's experience of school.

From conversations I've had, parents are concerned about how, by necessity, the kid's time is structured for them – there's almost no way for them to take initiative and decide for themselves what they want to do, when and how. Far from being the prerogative of a 'spoiled' child, this is one of the main skills they need to nurture (not to learn, as I think given the space, it's innate) if they are to become competent adults. Of course you have to know how to fit in and adapt what you want to what other people, or the task in hand demands, but I think that this learning is part of the natural process of growing up. So there's a concern that their ability to listen to themselves, trust their intuition and their ability to set their own agenda is being eroded. Again, they are coerced into doing what the teacher wants through a number of carrots and sticks; merit points; star of the week; competition; the 'black cloud'; extra homework: all often undermining work parents have done around equality, and the need for co-operation.

At the moment, most people only have a very limited range of options when thinking about what their kids are going to spend their time doing. They can go to mainstream or private school, most of which operate within broadly similar agendas, or they can home educate them. This normally means that there is no external support in terms of childcare, and unless you live in one of those places where home ed is common, your children are likely to feel at one level or another that they're 'outside' of the community they live in.

In Bodhi we will have to decide how we interact with our elder members, and those of us who become sick or disabled – and with our youth. We are suggesting that in all of these cases, we step out of the cultural paradigm in which we are currently living, where we put these groups out of the way of the 'main' able bodied, productive adult world, unless they're belong to our immediate family. We are suggesting that (though each of these groups obviously has its own particular needs, and might require special contexts at times) we think of them as fully part of the 'main event' of our living. That we expect to make meaningful relationships with them, whether they're in our family or not – that we care for them in a range of ways, and that we accord them an equality of status (not the same as role), which has far reaching, and potentially deeply life enhancing implications for them and for us.

In the case of children, this means that we take the time to get to know them as individuals; that we open ourselves to learning from their playful, open and inquisitive natures; that we offer to share our skills and interests if they're willing; that we invite them to get involved with and learn about the work that we do, if they want to and are ready to take it seriously; that, in the case of youth, we honour their discerning honesty, and give them a meaningful role in moving us on from entrenched social habits.

So in some societies, like the Mbuti – learning is not thought of as something that necessarily needs active facilitation. If it's thought about at all, the assumption would be that people pick things up by being around them and seeing their possibilities. Such a system needs the active participation of a large section of the community – people with skills have to be prepared to share them. They do this without thinking seeing it as just 'how things are'. They don't expect to be paid for what they do, and they don't expect to carry any passengers either. If we think about the role of the apprentice, we get a better idea of the relationship involved.

Leilani van Koten outlined what this learning web could look like in practice.

As has been mentioned earlier, the essential skills set for living is going to be radically different in the near future and in Bodhi we have a chance to grow a generation of children into adulthood with the skills that will be needed. My part of this presentation is to look at what this idea could actually be like, in practice and, to do that, what I would like to do is to look at how parts of this picture are already happening for us as a family in small ways. In doing this, it's also like an active prayer – focusing on and valuing the things in my life that I would like more of, and drawing the energy there, to build and grow.

One picture of how it could work in Bodhi is a kind of learning network: a combination of a learning centre, or hub, for children and adults, at the centre of a web of connections and opportunities throughout the village and wider community.

For the little ones, in the neighbouring village to ours there is the Secret Garden outdoor woodland nursery and following requests from local home educating families, Cathy, who runs it, now has a session for older children as well. So, Bodhi could have a woodland playgroup for the wee ones.

As my seven year old son, Samadi, has become a bit older, he is really benefiting from chances to learn from other adults. For instance, he got interested in clay last year and after talking to folk the upshot of it is that a room has been cleared out in the Monimail community hut near us; a potter's wheel has been found; Alison, another local home educating parent who is a potter is doing weekly pottery workshops with the children and is also now teaching some of the local adults how to use the wheel as well. We have a kiln and the children have been firing and glazing their work and Samadi and his friend Stella recently had their own pottery stall at a Medieval Fair at the Monimail community – sold everything and made a fair bit of money!

So Bodhi could become a network of people who are developing their own skills for sustainable living, and who are invested in sharing these skills with other people in the village, children and adults. And if, for example, Samadi's interest in pottery continued, in the Bodhi model, a part-time apprenticeship could be arranged for him to develop and deepen this skill.

Another neighbour of ours, Becky, recently did share her skills with the local community by volunteering her expertise as a builder and putting on a three day lime-masonry training course for repairing the historic walls at the Monimail community. There were a number of families with kids there and Cathy Bache, from the Secret Garden, provided a creche, which took care of most of the younger ones, and then two or three of the older ones (6 and 7 year olds) decided that they wanted to participate in the course some of the time. Once we had addressed the site safety issues this really worked, with kids working alongside a named adult for periods of time. What also helped was that there were a couple of adult non-parents who really took to do with the kids and positively enjoyed the chance to work alongside them and help them.

So I would like more of these kind of things to be happening in my life. There is one other element that at present I provide for my kids in my home, which is a facilitated learning space. This is something that I would value having available in a dedicated space for a larger number of people – some form of learning centre – the hub at the centre of the web. This space could have adults there as learning facilitators to support children and other adults in learning through exploring their interests.

As Eva has said, in tribal cultures children absorb what is around them, and the opportunities to do so are offered freely, as it is so clearly in the interests of the tribe as a whole for these skills to be passed down. In Bodhi being involved in this learning network through offering time and skills could become a valued way of

contributing work to the community as a whole and this is a new culture that we can choose to grow and foster Perhaps this could be called sustainable learning – where the community as a whole is gathering the skills for sustainable living, and living in a way that ensures these skills are shared and passed on.

Let's start building the Learning Web!