

# Becoming Otherwise: The Fragility of Whole School Approaches to Transformative Sustainability Education

By Simon Lightman<sup>1</sup>

## **ABSTRACT:**

This article examines how a UK independent school sought to embed sustainability through a Whole School Approach (WSA). Semi-structured interviews with eight staff and analysis of institutional documents were interpreted using reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: sustainability was framed as both moral value and strategic necessity; leadership was committed yet constrained; structural mechanisms created coherence but translated inconsistently into pedagogy; student agency was celebrated rhetorically but rarely institutionalised; and teachers carried significant emotional labour in response to students' climate anxieties.

Taken together, these dynamics show how WSAs generate surface coherence when structural instruments are not coupled with cultural and relational depth. Interpreting the case through an ontological lens frames transformation as a question of who learners and institutions are becoming in relation to human and more than human worlds. Recent work on leadership for flourishing sharpens this analysis by identifying dispositions of trust, attentiveness, courage, and co-creativity.

The article proposes a mid-level model linking structural instruments to cultural levers; leadership as ethical discernment, epistemic justice through student co decision, and ethical atmospheres that integrate affect. It positions WSAs as fragile yet necessary experiments in institutional becoming and argues they should be judged by their capacity to cultivate conditions of flourishing rather than by structural coherence alone.

*Keywords: transformative sustainability education; whole school approach; flourishing leadership; ontology; epistemic justice; affect*

## **1. Introduction**

Contemporary education is unfolding in the midst of what many describe as a polycrisis. Climate instability, biodiversity loss, widening inequalities, and epistemic fragmentation intersect and destabilise social and ecological systems simultaneously (Albert, 2024). For young people these conditions are not abstract. They shape their daily lives, their sense of identity, and their experience of agency. In classrooms, this often manifests through the intensity of climate-related emotions, from grief to determination (Pihkala, 2020). These conditions complicate the purpose of education. Schools can no longer plausibly present themselves only as sites of preparation for employment or

<sup>1</sup>King Edward's School, Witley, UK. UCL Institute of Education, University College London, UK.

adaptation to technical change. They must also grapple with questions of formation and relation: who learners are becoming, how they connect with human and more-than-human worlds, and which futures they are invited to imagine and enact (Biesta, 2013; Bonnett, 2002).

Policy frameworks have begun to register this urgency, but their reach remains limited. UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development for 2030 Roadmap calls for agency, reflection, and responsibility (UNESCO, 2020, 2023). The United Nations' *Our Common Agenda* frames education as a lever for reimagining collective futures (UN, 2021). In the United Kingdom, the Department for Education's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy requires schools to embed sustainability literacy across provision (DfE, 2022). These frameworks signal a shift from optional enrichment to systemic expectation. Yet their emphasis remains largely instrumental. They prioritise skills, literacy, and behavioural change, which, while valuable, do not resolve how education itself might be reconfigured in its purposes, relations, and orientations.

Research in sustainability education confirms that this gap between instrumental and transformative framings is persistent. Schools frequently introduce sustainability content or initiatives, but these rarely penetrate to the level of cultural depth or institutional purpose. The critical challenge is therefore not to add sustainability to education, but to ask whether education itself can be reconfigured as a practice of *becoming otherwise*. This framing insists that sustainability is not merely a topic to be taught, but an orientation of attentiveness, responsibility, and care that shapes how institutions and learners inhabit the world.

WSAs have been promoted as one route toward this aim, embedding sustainability across curriculum, pedagogy, governance, operations, and community life. In principle, they offer a pathway beyond isolated projects, however, in practice, they often remain fragile, generating visible structures but failing to alter the culture of classrooms or the orientation of institutions. The task, then, is to understand under what conditions WSAs might move beyond procedural alignment and enable transformation at the level of being and relation.

This article explores that question through a qualitative case study of a UK independent school that sought to embed sustainability through a bespoke diploma framework. It interprets the case through an ontological lens, framing transformation as a question of who learners and institutions are becoming in relation to human and more-than-human worlds. Recent scholarship on flourishing leadership strengthens this analysis, identifying dispositions of attentiveness, trust, courage, and co-creativity as the cultural conditions through which transformation can be sustained. The study argues that WSAs should be understood not as fixed frameworks but as fragile institutional experiments in becoming otherwise, whose promise lies in the cultivation of cultural and relational depth rather than structural alignment alone.

## 2. Education, Sustainability, and the Work of Becoming Otherwise

### 2.1 Transformative Sustainability Education

Sustainability education cannot be reduced to the addition of new content or the adjustment of student behaviours. The deeper question is whether education can reorient its purposes and relations so that learners and institutions inhabit the world differently in response to ecological and social crisis. This has often been framed through the distinction between instrumental and transformative approaches. Instrumental approaches emphasise knowledge transfer and measurable behavioural outcomes, while transformative approaches foreground reflection, participation, and critical agency (Vare & Scott, 2007). The distinction remains useful, yet it does not capture the scale of change demanded by the polycrisis. Incremental reform cannot unsettle the structural and cultural logics that sustain unsustainable systems.

Sterling's typology of educational change sharpens this point. First-order adjustments add new content to existing structures, while second-order reforms modify systems without altering underlying assumptions. Only third-order change involves reorientation at the level of worldview and purpose (Sterling, 2001, 2024). At this level, education is redefined not only in its organisation but in its very purpose. Bonnett (2002) extends this view by conceptualising sustainability as an orientation of attentiveness and care, shaping what educators and learners notice and value across the life of schools. When sustainability is reduced to compliance or delivery, its openness and uncertainty are suppressed, and the possibility of transformation is diminished (Jickling & Wals, 2008). Transformation therefore requires education to be reconfigured not as an additive project but as a cultural and relational practice that reshapes institutional identity.

The transformative learning tradition strengthens this claim by drawing attention to dimensions often ignored in instrumental framings. Deep change is not confined to cognition or rational reflection; it also involves imagination, emotion, and the unconscious (Dirkx, 2012; Cranton & Kasl, 2012). These dimensions extend learning beyond information processing, enabling learners to confront and reconfigure the assumptions through which they experience the world. Harmin, Barrett, and Hoessler (2017) describe this as epistemological and ontological stretching, a process in which frames of reference are expanded through engagement with multiple ways of knowing. Indigenous epistemologies provide a particularly significant example. Their emphasis on reciprocity, kinship, and gratitude illustrates how knowledge can be lived as a relational ethic rather than as a resource to be extracted (Kimmerer, 2013). Such orientations demonstrate that transformation requires not only new content but a shift in how learners relate to knowledge, to one another, and to the more-than-human world. Without this reorientation, sustainability education risks reproducing the very patterns of control and exploitation that sustain unsustainability (Harmin et al., 2017).

A further distinction lies between *education about sustainability* and *education as sustainability*. The former treats sustainability as a discrete topic, while the latter frames it as an ethos shaping how all learning is approached. Education as sustainability demands integration at the level of institutional purpose and pedagogical practice, where teaching

becomes an enactment of care and responsibility rather than the transmission of facts. This distinction resonates with ongoing debates about competencies and capabilities. Competency-based approaches specify discrete skills for sustainable living, whereas capability approaches emphasise the enabling conditions through which learners act with freedom, agency, and responsibility (Sen, 1999; Balarin & Milligan, 2024). By situating agency within relational and ethical contexts rather than individualised skillsets, the capability approach aligns more closely with the ontological project of transformative sustainability education (TSE).

Taken together, these insights suggest that TSE cannot be understood as a curricular upgrade or a pedagogical adjustment within existing purposes. It requires an ontological reorientation in which schools themselves become different kinds of institutions. The central question is not whether students learn more about sustainability but whether schools cultivate new orientations of relation, responsibility, and care that reshape how education is lived in practice.

## 2.2 Whole School Approaches and their fragility

WSAs are often presented as the practical mechanism through which TSE might be achieved. Their ambition is to embed sustainability across curriculum, pedagogy, governance, operations, and community partnerships, making it part of institutional identity rather than an optional project (Tilbury & Wortman, 2004; UNESCO, 2017). This ambition matters because it signals that sustainability is not an enrichment activity but a core purpose of education.

In practice, however, WSAs have often struggled to realise this ambition. Research across Europe has shown that policies, audits, and committees frequently generate the appearance of transformation without altering classroom teaching (Mogren, Gericke, & Scherp, 2018; Verhelst, Vanhoof, & Van Petegem, 2021). Similar findings have been reported in Australia, where environmental audits provided strong visibility while pedagogy remained largely unchanged (Eames, Cowie, & Bolstad, 2010). International reviews of sustainable school programs highlight similar challenges, where initiatives driven by external agencies achieved short-term coherence but lacked internal cultural ownership (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004). Latin American cases also highlight the gap between structural ambition and cultural depth, with WSAs constrained by accountability regimes that prioritise measurable outputs (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020). Across these diverse settings, the pattern repeats: structures alone are insufficient to deliver transformation.

Sterling's typology of change again helps explain this fragility. Many WSAs stall at first- or second-order adjustments, introducing sustainability content or modifying school processes without reorienting deeper assumptions about educational purpose (Sterling, 2001, 2024). The result is what can be described as *fragile coherence*: institutions appear aligned but do not embody new orientations of being. Mathie and Wals (2022) argue that this fragility reflects broader systemic pressures. Inspection regimes reward procedural compliance, philanthropic funding often emphasises visibility, and school leaders face

reputational pressures from parents, governors and wider society. Under such conditions, WSAs risk being absorbed into managerial logics rather than sustained as transformative practices.

Flourishing leadership sharpens this analysis. If WSAs are to move beyond this fragile coherence, they require leaders who can hold uncertainty, resist performative pressures, and create atmospheres of trust where experimentation is possible. Without such leadership, structural instruments are easily repurposed toward reputational gain or managerial efficiency. With it, frameworks can become scaffolds for cultural change, connecting policy with practice and coherence with depth. WSAs should therefore be understood not as static blueprints but as precarious processes of renewal, animated or undermined by the dispositions and practices of leadership.

### **2.3 Ontology and becoming otherwise**

If WSAs are to move beyond this paradigm of fragility, they must be understood not only as frameworks for coordination but as processes that shape who schools and their learners are becoming. Transformation is ontological in this sense: it concerns ways of being, relation, and responsibility rather than only the acquisition of knowledge or the management of behaviour.

This ontological character has long been recognised in critical traditions, even if often obscured in policy framings that reduce education to measurable outcomes. Freire framed education as a practice of freedom, enabling learners to cultivate critical consciousness through reflection and action (Freire, 1970). Biesta emphasises education as subjectification and as a world-centred encounter, where learners come into presence in response to a shared world (Biesta, 2013, 2021). Bonnett extends this by introducing an ecological dimension, treating sustainability as attentiveness and care toward the more-than-human (Bonnett, 2002). Together, these perspectives deepen the point: education is ontological because it forms who people are becoming and how they relate to others and their environments.

To speak of becoming otherwise is to emphasise that transformation is not achieved by adding sustainability to existing practices but by cultivating new orientations of relation and responsibility. This involves reconfiguring how schools understand their purposes and how learners experience their agency. Becoming otherwise is not a single event but a continual process of renewal in which institutions rehearse alternative ways of inhabiting the world. It is less about producing outcomes than about cultivating the conditions in which new beginnings are possible.

This orientation has practical implications. Schools enact ontological becoming not through policy documents but through everyday rituals, pedagogical encounters, and collective practices. Staff meetings, lesson design, and assemblies can either reproduce existing logics or open spaces for attentiveness and care. When institutions legitimise uncertainty, integrate emotion, and share authority, they enact forms of education that differ qualitatively from compliance-driven models. Ontological transformation is

therefore both a philosophical claim and a practical ethic, embedded in the textures of daily life. The challenge, therefore, is to identify the cultural levers that enable this ethic to take root.

Taken together, these three dimensions show that the fragility of WSAs is not evenly distributed but concentrated in the practice of leadership. Leadership functions as the hinge that determines whether epistemic justice and affect are sustained or sidelined. Student co-decision requires leaders willing to redistribute authority; ethical atmospheres depend on leaders who legitimise emotional engagement rather than suppress it. When leaders succumb to performative pressures, both agency and affect are reduced to peripheral gestures, leaving only fragile coherence. When leaders enact discernment, humility, and courage, they create conditions in which student agency and emotional engagement become integral to institutional life. Leadership for flourishing therefore emerges not as one lever among others but as the through-line that connects structural alignment with cultural depth.

## 2.5 Synthesis

The discussion so far establishes three points. First, sustainability education cannot be understood through instrumental framings of knowledge acquisition or behavioural adjustment. Transformation demands reorientation of educational purposes and relations so that institutions and learners inhabit the world differently. Second, WSAs provide a structural scaffold for this work, but when they remain procedural they produce only fragile coherence—visibility without depth. Third, an ontological perspective clarifies that transformation must be judged by whether schools cultivate new orientations of relation, responsibility, and care, rather than by the presence of frameworks alone.

This reframing directs attention to the cultural levers that animate or hollow out structural instruments. Leadership, epistemic justice, and affect together determine whether WSAs become vehicles for institutional becoming or revert to compliance. Leadership is pivotal because it mediates whether uncertainty is legitimised, whether students are granted genuine authority, and whether ecological emotions are acknowledged as constitutive of learning. These are not abstract ideals but practical questions about how schools organise governance, pedagogy, and professional life.

The case examined here is therefore approached not as a test of whether a WSA “worked,” but as an experiment in whether structures and cultures could interact to move beyond fragile coherence. The analysis that follows explores how sustainability was framed, enacted, and contested in one school’s attempt to embed it institutionally, and what this reveals about the conditions necessary for transformation.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

A qualitative single-case design was used to examine how structural, cultural, and relational dynamics interacted within one school attempting a WSA. The purpose was analytic rather than statistical generalisation, aligning with traditions that value depth and

thick description to surface mechanisms (Geertz, 1973; Yin, 2018). The case was selected for its explicit, public commitment to a WSA and the availability of documentary and interview data that illuminated institutional framings and practices. The intention is not to claim representativeness, but to offer conceptually transferable insights that may resonate across comparable contexts.

### **3.2 Participants and sampling**

Eight members of staff participated, selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in role, responsibility, and proximity to decision-making. The group included three senior leaders with strategic responsibilities, three middle leaders with oversight of pastoral or co-curricular domains, and two classroom teachers directly engaged in sustainability projects. All had some level of involvement with the diploma. This balance of perspectives was designed to surface both strategic and operational viewpoints, aligning with qualitative traditions that value depth of insight over breadth of coverage (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **3.3 Data collection**

Two primary forms of data were generated: semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. Interviews were conducted between March and June 2025 and ranged from 45 to 70 minutes in length. Prompts invited participants to reflect on their understandings of sustainability, their experiences of the diploma, and their views on enablers and constraints. Attention was also given to how sustainability intersected with wider aspects of culture, pedagogy, and governance. The semi-structured format provided consistency while leaving space for participants to pursue issues they considered most important.

Documentary data included policies, strategic plans, committee minutes, audit reports, and publicity materials. These documents were treated not only as sources of factual information but as artefacts of institutional narrative, revealing how sustainability was represented, justified, and embedded in practice. Interviews and documents were therefore analysed together to situate personal accounts within the wider organisational landscape. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymised to protect confidentiality.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which conceptualises themes as interpretive patterns generated through the researcher's active engagement with the material rather than as latent entities waiting to be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The process involved repeated immersion in the transcripts and documents, followed by open coding to capture both descriptive and conceptual elements. Codes were then iteratively clustered into candidate themes, which were reviewed for coherence and distinctiveness. Particular attention was given to how themes related to the conceptual framing of fragile coherence, ontological transformation, and flourishing leadership. NVivo software was used for data management, while analytic memos documented reflexive insights, tensions, and emerging lines of interpretation.

### 3.5 Researcher positionality

The researcher's insider role offered access and tacit knowledge but also risks of role conflict and normalisation. Reflexivity was therefore integral: a memo journal recorded assumptions, power dynamics, and interpretive choices; codes and themes were iteratively questioned for confirmatory bias. Member-checking was deliberately avoided because, in this organisational context, it risked reproducing dominant narratives and constraining dissent. Instead, credibility was supported through triangulation of interviews and documents, thick description, prolonged engagement, and transparency about analytic decisions (Mercer, 2007; Tracy, 2010).

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

The research followed the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines. Participants received information sheets, had the opportunity to ask questions, and provided written consent. Pseudonyms were used for both individuals and the school, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reporting. Participation was voluntary, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point before analysis began. Particular care was taken to avoid implicit coercion, given the researcher's dual role as colleague and investigator. Ethical approval was granted by the university ethics committee.

### 3.7 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was assessed using the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985) together with Tracy's "big tent" framework (2010). Worthiness of the topic was evident given the urgency of sustainability in education. Rich rigour was pursued through triangulation across interviews and documents and by sampling across hierarchical levels. Sincerity was supported by continuous reflexivity. Credibility was fostered through thick description and theoretical triangulation. Resonance was sought by situating findings within international debates and articulating practical implications. Contribution lay in conceptualising WSAs as institutional processes of becoming. Coherence was ensured by maintaining alignment between ontological framing, research design, analysis, and interpretation.

### 3.8 Limitations

The single-case design necessarily limits generalisability. Insider status created risks of bias that reflexivity could mitigate but not entirely remove. The small sample size, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, did not capture the full range of staff perspectives. Student voices were not included, an important epistemic-justice limitation, which future work should address through student-centred, multi-site designs capable of testing whether the mechanisms observed here persist across different governance contexts.

## 4. Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis generated five interconnected themes: (1) sustainability as moral value and strategic imperative, (2) leadership under constraint, (3)

integration and its limits, (4) youth voice and epistemic justice, and (5) emotional labour and ethical commitment. These themes illuminate how structural instruments interacted with cultural conditions, and whether they enabled the school to move beyond fragile coherence toward ontological depth.

#### **4.1 Sustainability as moral value and strategic imperative**

Participants consistently described sustainability in dual terms: as an ethical responsibility and as a strategic necessity. Senior leaders spoke of obligations to young people and the more-than-human world, while also acknowledging reputational expectations in the independent sector. Institutional documents reflected this tension: strategic plans aligned the diploma with inspection frameworks, while publicity materials emphasised moral purpose and preparation for global citizenship.

This dual framing created both opportunity and risk. On one hand, strategic imperatives provided legitimacy and resources, enabling coordination across departments. On the other, they risked narrowing sustainability to what could be measured and showcased. A middle leader explained that “outputs are important for inspection, but they can pull us away from the deeper conversations.” A classroom teacher expressed concern that branding was outpacing practice: “We look good on the website, but I am not sure we are changing what happens in lessons.”

These dynamics illustrate how institutional framing can either scaffold or hollow out cultural depth. Where clarity of moral purpose was foregrounded, staff felt able to use strategic tools as means to support transformation. Where strategy dominated, sustainability risked being reduced to performance. This tension underscores the importance of leadership dispositions of discernment and attentiveness: without them, frameworks can become instruments of compliance rather than catalysts for becoming otherwise.

#### **4.2 Leadership under constraint**

Leadership emerged as visible, committed, and relational. Senior leaders established oversight committees and embedded sustainability in public messaging. Teachers emphasised the value of modelling: “When I saw a senior leader changing their own routines, it gave me permission to experiment.” Another teacher noted that when leaders openly acknowledged uncertainty, it created space for staff to try new ideas without fear of reputational damage.

Yet these relational strengths were constrained by structural pressures. Examination timetables left little room for interdisciplinary work. Governors and parents were perceived as prioritising stability over experimentation. Committee minutes captured this tension, recording enthusiasm for integration alongside concerns about workload and reputational risk. One senior leader described the role as “walking a tightrope between pushing forward and holding the system steady.”

Leadership therefore appeared not as straightforward management but as ethical discernment under constraint. Leaders had to balance continuity with change, accountability with experimentation, and stability with risk. This aligns with flourishing leadership paradigms, which emphasise humility, courage, and the capacity to hold paradoxes. The findings suggest that leadership is a pivotal site of fragility: where leaders could embody these dispositions, transformation was nurtured; where pressures dominated, fragile coherence prevailed.

### **4.3 Integration and its limits**

The diploma created visible structural coherence. Policies designated sustainability as cross-cutting, audits tracked procurement and energy use, and co-curricular projects aligned with diploma outcomes. Departments were encouraged to map disciplinary connections, and publicity highlighted student projects. Sustainability was therefore institutionally prominent.

However, translation into pedagogy was inconsistent. Several teachers reported that everyday lessons looked unchanged, with integration depending on individual enthusiasm. Colleagues sceptical of sustainability's relevance to examination outcomes tended to disengage. Documentary analysis reinforced this: audits emphasised environmental metrics but offered little on pedagogy. Curriculum documents encouraged integration but gave minimal guidance on how to move beyond superficial connections.

Participants expressed both frustration and hope. Some feared that “form was being mistaken for substance.” Others argued that structures could scaffold deeper change if linked to collaborative planning and professional development. A middle leader described workshops where teachers co-created lessons, noting that these fostered agency and a sense of shared responsibility.

This theme highlights the fragility of integration when structural coherence is not coupled with cultural levers. Without investment in professional agency, sustainability risks being visible but shallow. With such investment, frameworks can provide scaffolds for ontological reorientation, enabling teachers to explore how sustainability reshapes disciplinary purposes and pedagogical relations.

### **4.4 Youth voice and epistemic justice**

The school celebrated student energy and initiative. Assemblies and newsletters regularly showcased student projects, and staff praised learners for their creativity. Yet interviews revealed that students exercised little authority over curriculum or governance. One teacher observed: “Students can suggest things, but they cannot change what is taught.” Another added that student campaigns shaped operational practices like recycling but rarely influenced deeper institutional decisions.

Staff recognised the limits of this arrangement. Several argued that consultation was insufficient and that genuine agency required structural redistribution of authority.

Suggestions included granting students voting rights on committees or co-designing modules with negotiated assessment criteria. These proposals were viewed as feasible but dependent on workload recognition and clear protocols.

The gap between rhetorical celebration and structural redistribution illustrates the importance of epistemic justice. Recognition without redistribution risks tokenism, leaving students “able to speak but not to decide.” Treating students as co-creators of knowledge disrupts this pattern and embeds agency institutionally. From an ontological perspective, this is more than a procedural adjustment: it acknowledges students as subjects capable of shaping shared worlds, not simply objects of provision.

#### **4.5 Emotional labour and ethical commitment**

Teachers described the intensity of emotions that sustainability issues brought into classrooms. Students voiced fear, grief, and anger about climate futures, often in response to news events. One teacher explained: “Sometimes lessons get overtaken by the mood in the room—you cannot just ignore their anxiety.” A senior leader observed that staff were “carrying heavy ethical burdens without guidance on how to handle them.”

Institutional documents were largely silent on affect, focusing on knowledge and skills rather than emotional engagement. Professional development on handling emotionally charged topics was limited, leaving staff to improvise. Some felt confident, while others expressed exhaustion: “It feels like you are on your own when the emotions come up.”

These accounts reveal what can be described as an affective gap between institutional frameworks and classroom realities. Teachers continued to engage out of ethical commitment, but uneven support created risks of burnout and inconsistency. Ontologically, affect is not a distraction but a constitutive part of learning. When legitimised and linked to meaningful action, emotion can become a resource for sustained agency. Without recognition, it remains a hidden burden that undermines both staff wellbeing and educational depth.

#### **4.6 Synthesis of findings**

The five themes together present a picture of promise and fragility. Sustainability was framed simultaneously as moral and strategic, yet this duality risked privileging visibility over depth. Leadership modelled commitment but was constrained by cultural and structural pressures. Integration created coherence but relied heavily on individual initiative. Student agency was celebrated rhetorically but lacked structural authority. Emotion was pervasive but insufficiently integrated, leaving staff to carry ethical burdens without systemic support.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how WSAs often generate fragile coherence: institutional alignment without ontological transformation. At the same time, the case suggests that fragility is not inevitable. When leaders enact dispositions of discernment, courage, and trust; when epistemic justice redistributes authority so that

students become co-decision makers; and when affect is legitimised as constitutive of learning, WSAs show the potential to move toward cultural and relational depth. In this sense, the fragility observed in WSAs is often the fragility of leadership itself—whether leaders can hold open the conditions for alternative ways of being and relation to take root.

These findings therefore highlight the need for cultural levers that can animate structures and move WSAs beyond procedural alignment. The discussion that follows elaborates these conditions, situating them within the wider literature on transformative sustainability education, flourishing leadership, and ontological becoming.

## **5. Discussion and Implications: From Fragile Coherence to Ontological Depth**

The findings confirm what much of the literature has already suggested: WSAs are fragile. They produce coherence at the level of policy and procedure, yet they often fail to alter pedagogy, redistribute authority, or integrate affect. What this study adds is a specification of *why* such fragility persists and what conditions might allow schools to move beyond it. The argument advanced here is that WSAs should not be understood simply as frameworks for alignment but as fragile institutional experiments in becoming otherwise. Their effectiveness depends on whether structural instruments are animated by cultural and relational levers.

### **5.1 From structural coherence to ontological depth**

The case illustrates how structural instruments—policies, audits, committees, and frameworks—can generate coherence without producing transformation. This pattern corresponds with research documenting the risk of surface-level alignment (Mogren et al., 2018; Verhelst et al., 2021; Sterling, 2024). At the same time, findings also indicate that structures can act as scaffolds when coupled with cultural levers. For example, lesson design workshops gave staff space to connect structural expectations with pedagogical experimentation. This suggests that structural mechanisms should not be dismissed as superficial but recognised as necessary yet insufficient: their transformative potential only emerges when animated by cultural depth.

Ethical atmospheres where uncertainty, emotion, and responsibility are acknowledged are not abstract ideals but enacted through ordinary routines. Examples include collaborative lesson-design cycles, protected spaces for reflective inquiry, and structured discussion of climate-related emotions, scheduled within timetables and linked to governance processes. Embedding such routines legitimises affect while preserving accountability: responsibilities remain clear, but staff and students are permitted to feel, deliberate, and act together. In this way, structures become scaffolds for cultural depth rather than markers of surface compliance.

### **5.2 Leadership as discernment and flourishing**

Leadership emerged as the most decisive factor in mediating between fragile coherence and ontological depth. Leaders modelled commitment and created trust, yet they were constrained by accountability regimes and reputational pressures. Their task was

less about technical management and more about ethical discernment: knowing when to push, when to hold back, and how to protect staff from exhaustion while sustaining momentum.

This resonates with flourishing leadership paradigms, which reject performative models of control and emphasise dispositions such as humility, courage, attentiveness, and co-creativity (Granville-Chapman et al., 2024; Mountbatten-O'Malley & Morris, 2025). Leadership for flourishing is not about delivering outcomes but about cultivating conditions in which others can thrive.

The findings also show, however, that leadership does not operate in isolation. It functions as the hinge that determines whether epistemic justice and affect are sustained or sidelined. Student co-decision requires leaders willing to redistribute authority; ethical atmospheres depend on leaders who legitimise emotional engagement rather than suppress it. Leadership should therefore be reconceptualised as the linchpin of TSE: it provides the relational conditions through which cultural levers can take root or, conversely, collapse into fragile coherence. This insight has practical implications for leadership development: schools must prioritise cultivating discernment, ethical responsibility, and relational trust as core competencies for sustainability.

### **5.3 Student agency and epistemic justice**

The findings reveal a gap between the rhetorical celebration of youth voice and its institutional reality. Students were invited to speak but not to decide, echoing Fraser's (2000) warning that recognition without redistribution is insufficient. Sen's (1999) capability approach underlines the point: agency requires enabling conditions, not just symbolic gestures.

Embedding epistemic justice requires more than consultation. It involves redesigning governance so that students hold voting rights on committees, co-design curriculum modules, and have their knowledge production formally recognised. These measures may be ambitious, yet without some form of structural redistribution, student voice risks becoming tokenistic. By institutionalising co-decision, WSAs can embody epistemic justice, linking transformation to deeper shifts in power and legitimacy. From an ontological perspective, this matters because it affirms students as subjects in relation, not objects of provision.

### **5.4 Affect, eco-anxiety, and ethical atmospheres**

Emotional intensity was a consistent feature of sustainability education in this case. Students brought grief, anxiety, anger, and hope into classrooms; teachers carried the ethical burden of responding; and leaders were confronted with reputational anxieties tied to how the school engaged with such issues. Yet institutional frameworks largely ignored affect, leaving individuals to navigate these emotions alone. This produced an affective gap that mirrors broader findings in the literature (Pihkala, 2020).

From an ontological perspective, affect is not a peripheral concern but a constitutive part of institutional life. It shapes how students, staff, and leaders attend to the world and how they act within it. Research shows that when emotion is legitimised and connected to meaningful action, it sustains agency rather than producing paralysis (Pihkala, 2020). Ethical atmospheres that integrate affect are therefore central to transformative sustainability education. Their absence signals why WSAs remain fragile; their presence provides one of the strongest indicators of depth.

### 5.5 Independent schools and the politics of sustainability

The independent school context shaped both opportunities and constraints. Autonomy enabled rapid innovation and bespoke frameworks such as the diploma. At the same time, market dynamics introduced reputational pressures that incentivised visible outputs, sometimes at the expense of cultural depth. The dual framing of sustainability as moral and strategic was therefore deeply tied to the politics of the independent sector.

This highlights the need for independent schools to align autonomy with ethical responsibility. Publicity should follow from practice rather than drive it. Otherwise, structural instruments risk being co-opted into market logics that reinforce instrumentalism. While these dynamics are specific to the independent sector, similar pressures of performativity and marketisation are evident in schools globally. The case therefore illustrates both the promise of autonomy and the fragility of leadership under pressure to perform.

### 5.6 A mid-level model: from frameworks to formation

The analysis suggests the need for a mid-level model that connects structural coherence with ontological depth. This model has three interrelated components:

1. *Structural instruments*: policies, committees, audits, and frameworks that provide visibility and coordination.
2. *Cultural levers*: practices that animate structures, including:
  - Leadership as ethical discernment, where leaders hold paradoxes, protect staff, and model care.
  - Epistemic justice, where students are granted authority as co-creators of knowledge.
  - Ethical atmospheres, where affect is legitimised and linked to action.
3. *Indicators of depth*: observable practices that signal transformation, such as redesigned schemes of work, co-decision mechanisms, and pedagogical routines that foreground attentiveness and care for the more-than-human.

This model reframes WSAs as dynamic processes rather than fixed designs. Structural instruments alone create fragile coherence; when coupled with cultural levers, they can scaffold ontological transformation. The model also has diagnostic value: where coherence is high but depth is low, cultural levers should be prioritised; where cultural practices are emerging but fragile, structures can protect and resource them.

### 5.7 Implications for theory

Theoretically, this study bridges TSE with flourishing leadership. It extends Sterling's (2001, 2024) call for epistemic learning by showing how leadership dispositions activate cultural depth. It enriches Bonnett's (2002) account of sustainability as a frame of mind by demonstrating its institutional implications, and it connects Biesta's (2013, 2021) world-centred education with leadership practices that cultivate attentiveness, trust, and courage.

This synthesis advances the field by specifying mechanisms through which WSAs can move beyond fragile coherence. It positions WSAs as fragile but necessary experiments in institutional becoming, not as static frameworks to be adopted.

### 5.8 Implications for practice

Practically, the study suggests five priorities:

1. *Couple structures with culture*: every policy or audit should be linked to professional learning and collaborative design.
2. *Develop leadership dispositions*: embed coaching focused on reflective inquiry, run leadership labs to rehearse redistributing authority to students, create shadowing opportunities with leaders who model humility and care, and integrate these practices into ongoing professional learning and appraisal.
3. *Redistribute authority*: embed student co-decision in governance, curriculum, and assessment.
4. *Integrate affect*: provide staff training and routines that legitimise emotion and connect it to meaningful action.
5. *Align autonomy with ethics*: ensure that reputational benefits follow from depth, rather than driving practice.

### 5.9 Implications for policy

Policy frameworks should broaden their indicators of success. Inspection regimes could assess cultural levers such as student co-decision, evidence of collaborative curriculum design, and practices that integrate affect. Funding models should protect staff time for reflection and collaboration. Without recognition of these cultural dimensions, policies risk reproducing fragility by incentivising surface-level outputs.

### 5.10 Implications for research

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to trace how procedural coherence does, or does not, develop into cultural and ontological depth, especially through leadership transitions and shifting accountability regimes. Comparative studies across public, private, and international schools can clarify how governance and funding structures shape fragility or resilience. There is also a need to operationalise indicators of ontological depth (e.g., redesigned pedagogical routines, shared decision-making structures, and the legitimisation of ecological emotion) so that TSE can be evaluated systematically.

### 5.11 Synthesis

The discussion makes clear that WSAs cannot be evaluated only in terms of structural coherence. Their significance lies in whether they foster conditions through which cultural and relational depth can emerge. Leadership, epistemic justice, and affect are the decisive levers, yet leadership functions as the hinge: it is leaders who legitimise or suppress uncertainty, who redistribute or retain authority, and who either integrate or neglect the affective dimensions of learning. Fragility therefore often reflects the fragility of leadership itself, while depth becomes possible when leaders cultivate trust, attentiveness, courage, and co-creativity.

WSAs should be understood not as static frameworks to be implemented but as institutional processes of becoming—partial, precarious, and unfinished, yet indispensable in times of ecological and social crisis. Their promise rests less in the visibility of structures than in the cultivation of atmospheres where new orientations of relation and responsibility can take root.

### **5.12 Postscript: A departure within**

The fragility of leadership highlighted in the case was reinforced by the researcher's subsequent decision to step down as coordinator of the diploma. This departure was not the result of disaffection but an act of fidelity to the Diploma's transformative aims. Remaining in post would have meant accommodating pressures to streamline, brand, and perform, thereby hollowing out its original vision. Stepping aside was therefore a form of ethical discernment: a refusal to compromise integrity in the face of institutional constraint. In this sense, resignation became a leadership act, demonstrating that sustaining transformation sometimes requires the courage to relinquish formal authority rather than preside over its erosion.

### **5.13 Beyond the case: the redirection toward Young Enterprise**

After this departure, the Diploma was reshaped around the Young Enterprise scheme. While a global citizenship strand was retained, this was confined to one module in the second year and reduced to student presentations on topics of their choice. The reconfigured programme reinstated logics of growth, competition, and consumption that stand in tension with the relational and ecological orientation the Diploma had originally sought to cultivate.

This redirection exemplifies how transformative initiatives can be absorbed into market logics in which visibility and competitiveness outweigh cultural depth. Similar patterns are noted in broader critiques of performativity in education (e.g., Wals & Benavot, 2017). In the absence of leadership capable of resisting reputational pressures and protecting ethical commitments, frameworks are readily repurposed as instruments of branding rather than formation.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study examined how a UK independent school sought to embed sustainability through a Whole School Approach centred on a bespoke diploma

framework. Analysis of staff interviews and institutional documents generated five themes: sustainability was framed as both moral value and strategic necessity; leadership was visible but constrained by cultural pressures; structural integration created coherence but did not consistently transform pedagogy; student agency was celebrated but remained limited in governance and curriculum; and emotion was pervasive yet under-integrated.

These findings confirm that WSAs are fragile. Structural alignment can generate visibility without cultural depth, producing the appearance of transformation while leaving everyday practice and underlying purposes unchanged. Yet the study also shows that fragility is not inevitable. When structural instruments are coupled with cultural levers—leadership as ethical discernment, epistemic justice institutionalised through co-decision, and affect integrated as constitutive of learning—WSAs can move from procedural coherence toward ontological depth.

The reflexive postscript reinforces this conclusion. The researcher's resignation from leading the Diploma was not an act of disaffection but of fidelity to its transformative aims. Remaining would have meant accepting its hollowing-out under performative pressures. This decision illustrates that leadership in sustainability education requires the courage to step back as well as the capacity to advance, since integrity sometimes demands refusal. The subsequent redirection of the Diploma toward Young Enterprise further demonstrates the fragility of WSAs. Once cultural and ontological commitments weakened, the framework was repurposed toward growth and consumption logics, with only a residual strand of global citizenship retained. Without leadership dispositions of attentiveness, humility, and co-creativity, structural frameworks are vulnerable to capture by instrumental agendas.

The broader implication is that sustainability in education must be understood as an institutional process of becoming. Transformation concerns who schools are becoming, not only what they deliver. Leadership is decisive in this process, since it provides the relational and ethical conditions under which schools can inhabit sustainability differently. To frame WSAs ontologically is therefore to insist that their value lies not only in their visible outcomes but in their cultivation of dispositions—trust, courage, discernment, and care—that allow both staff and students to flourish in conditions of uncertainty.

For practitioners, this means building deliberate spaces where cultural levers are activated: collaborative planning time, co-decision structures for students, and reflective routines that hold emotion as part of learning. For policymakers, it means recognising these cultural and relational practices as legitimate outcomes, not peripheral activities. For researchers, it points to the need for comparative and longitudinal studies that trace how leadership practices sustain or undermine ontological depth.

The central contention is that WSAs are fragile yet necessary experiments in institutional becoming. Their promise lies not in perfect frameworks but in the cultivation of atmospheres where new relations can be rehearsed and sustained. In the face of ecological and social distress, the task of education is not only to inform or prepare but to

hold open spaces of becoming otherwise, where the seeds of a more just and sustainable future can be sown.

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