

Joining the dots through Scottish crofting education: Rural development, crofting futures and educational opportunities.

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ABSTRACT:

The 'Crofting Connections' (Ceanglaichean Croitearachd) project is described in this article as an exemplar of the prescribed 'Scottish approach' to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Drawing upon the evaluation of this project an argument is made for increased attention to such initiatives that seek to (re)connect children with issues of community, heritage, land and place. In doing so, we also call for a reconceptualization of crofting in academic discourse and in the curriculum. While crofting is a specifically Scottish phenomenon, this may be of interest to readers in other nations with similar small scale agricultural traditions.

Key Words: *Crofting, Geography Education, Sustainable Development, Scotland*

INTRODUCTION

This article reflects the widespread interest in current Scottish approaches to education for sustainable development (ESD) and offers evaluative comment upon a related initiative called 'Crofting Connections – Ceanglaichean Croitearachd'. In doing so it seeks to highlight the potential of such interventions, not only in vindicating and reinforcing the particular approach to ESD within the school's curriculum in Scotland, but also in encompassing issues of community, heritage, land and place and, specifically, the connection of young people to these issues.

The Education for Global Citizenship Unit (EGCU) at the University of Glasgow was commissioned by Crofting Connections to undertake a review of *Crofting Connections Phase 2* and this article draws upon the review, while also seeking to situate it in a broader place-based educational framework. The original evaluation was focused on three points 1) The educational impact of the project on the participants including learners, practitioners, partners, parents and community members; 2) The contribution of the project to a range of curricular and policy initiatives and; 3) The impact of the project on communities in crofting areas. This initiative, and its evaluation, is used here to illustrate the importance of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), not only in the face of global problems, but also in creating, and recreating 'the local' and facilitating the constant renegotiation of person and place. By drawing attention to the findings of this evaluation, the authors hope to encourage similar future programmes which give young people the opportunity to re-imagine their localities. In doing so we also call for a reconceptualization of crofting in academic discourse, and note the potential for further curriculum development around this theme.

Crofting Connections overview

Crofting Connections was a project run by Soil Association Scotland, in partnership with the Scottish Crofting Federation, which enabled children and young people living in crofting communities throughout the Highlands and Islands to learn about crofting past, present and future. Crofting Connections Phase 2 was funded by the Scottish Government, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Heritage Lottery Fund and Bòrd na Gàidhlig, with in-kind support from Scottish Natural Heritage. The remit of the project was to work with up to 160 schools in Argyll & Bute, Highland, the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, as well as the newly designated crofting areas in Moray and the Isle of Arran.

The project's original objectives (phase 1) were to:

- Increase children's and young people's understanding of the connections between crofting, food, health and the environment;
- Support schools and communities to create local food-growing initiatives;
- Promote crofting to young people and encourage new entrants;
- Safeguard crofting heritage and traditions unique to local communities;
- Encourage communities to reduce their ecological and carbon footprints;
- Increase public knowledge and appreciation of crofting;
- Provide high quality volunteering opportunities.

Building on the success of Crofting Connections Phase 1, by extending its geographical coverage within the crofting counties, Crofting Connections Phase

2 included the following additional objectives, working closely within the context of Curriculum for Excellence¹:

- Create clear pathways for progression from Early Years to S6 across all curriculum areas;
- Provide young people with work skills, which are relevant to the economic priorities and opportunities offered by their crofting communities;
- Provide high quality CPD opportunities for teachers and increase their involvement with heritage, science and environmental professionals;
- Create stronger partnerships between schools and community-owned crofting estates, crofting landlords, social enterprises and local businesses.

Phase 2 of the project was rolled out in January 2013 and ran until December 2015. At the time of writing, any further development around this project awaits new funding, despite very positive feedback and evaluation evidence, including from the Scottish Government itself.²

Crofting background and literature

For readers with limited familiarity with the status of crofting itself in contemporary Scotland, it is perhaps worth pausing to acknowledge briefly here the widely recognised value of crofting in maintaining populations in remote rural areas; its contribution to the maintenance and development of culture and language (including Gaelic, and northern dialects of Orkney and Shetland); and its emphasis on sustainable land use, and the protection of biodiversity (see for example the SCF website – www.crofting.org) . The Scottish Government similarly notes that ‘Crofting is a system of landholding which makes a significant economic, social and environmental contribution to remote rural areas ... The Scottish Government is committed to reforming crofting to secure its future, bring new blood into crofting communities and ensure it can continue to contribute to the development of a thriving rural Scotland’.³ This national policy commitment to the support and development of crofting is also translated into regional development strategies under the auspices, for example, of Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE).⁴ The educational, economic and cultural policy contexts, and the associated wide networks of interested stakeholders, therefore provided a potentially positive operational environment for the Crofting Connections project.

Moreover the rollout of the project coincided with major legislative reform⁵ – the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 - which sought to ensure that crofting has a sustainable and profitable future in the 21st century in recognition of its

¹ The main curriculum framework for Scottish education, introduced in stages since 2004.

² See Scottish Government – Evaluation of the Food Education Programme (2012-2015) at: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/03/5495/7>

³ see <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/farmingrural/Rural/crofting-policy>

⁴ see for example <http://www.hie.co.uk/community-support/strengthening-communities-and-fragile-areas.html>.

⁵ Scottish Government: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/farmingrural/Rural/crofting-policy/Act>

multiple economic, social and environmental benefits. This legislation included the following aims: 1) 'Support communities and sustainable rural development through social and economic activity in some of Scotland's most remote and fragile areas' 2) Using farming and food production systems based on low carbon and high nature value principles which protect biodiversity, natural carbon stores and vital ecosystem services – soil, air and water' (Britton and Blee 2015:9).

Given such reforms and the subsequent opening of space for research concerned with the social and cultural aspects of the Crofting way of life, there has been a resultant surge in socio-cultural studies. Recently Robertson and Webster (2016:312) have used photographs to situate crofting as 'heritage from below', and in doing so, have argued that '[r]ecognising that a sense of inheritance from the past is a crucial part of the making of a sense of self'. In doing so they recognise both past and contemporary relationships to place. Likewise, Mackenzie et al (2004) and Mackenzie (2006) have written of the creation of community and the importance of 'place' within that. Opening up the geographical influence of crofting Parman (2005) provides a detailed anthropological ethnography of crofting life and its relationship to wider British and European Society. Continuing a theme of linking crofting outwards is Rennie's (2008) work on human ecology, and the potential links between crofting and sustainable resource utilization. Such observations can apply equally to crofting and to other forms of indigenous small scale/subsistence agriculture in other countries.

The observation can nonetheless be made, that much of the previous academic work on crofting has concerned the relationship of this way of life to migration, community, land use, land ownership law and conservation (Mackenzie et al 2004; MacDonald 1998; Bryden 1987; Moisley 1962; McGregor 1986; Southerland et al 2014; Stewart 2016; Withers 1987; Osgathorpe et al 2013; Hunter and MacLean 2012). There is therefore still a lacuna in academic scholarship with regards to young people and their potential to interact with, and learn from, crofting. Educational based studies therefore have the potential to address this knowledge gap. This article, therefore, calls for existing academic studies of crofting to be complemented by pedagogic discussions. Crofting Connections provides a sustained example of such practice and therefore merits such attention.

Methodology and scope of the evaluation

The evaluation of the Crofting Connections *phase 2* focused upon the following three points.

1. The *educational impact* of the project on the participants, including learners, practitioners, partners, parents and community members;
2. The contribution of the project to a range of curricular and policy initiatives, including: *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)*, *Learning for Sustainability*; *Recipe for Success* and the subsequent consultation *Becoming a Good Food Nation* and the report on the *Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce*;

3. The *impact of the project on communities* in the crofting areas, using information gathered in the first three-year period as a baseline.

The formal assessment was carried out through quantitative (survey based) and qualitative (face to face interviews, school visits and telephone interviews) methods, which sought to capture progress against the objectives of the Crofting Connections objectives, highlighted above. A total of 15 schools were involved in interviews, including 17 pupils, 18 teachers (of whom 10 were senior management representatives; 3 who might be termed 'middle management'; and 5 who were 'class teachers'); 11 Key Stakeholders were also interviewed from interested organizations. The quantitative surveys were completed by 58 staff and 72 pupils in total. Previous evaluation of *Phase 1*, undertaken by Dr Alasdair Lavery (2012) acted as a partial baseline to this work, offering a strongly positive image of the programme as one that had 'exceeded its original targets' and enabled students to obtain 'a greater understanding of the history, culture, economy and future prospects of the communities in which they live as well as contributing to the social and educational development of young people'

FINDINGS

The educational impact

The educational impact of this project was clearly in evidence. The vast majority of the teachers involved felt that there had not only been an overall positive impact on the pupils' knowledge of crofting (94%) but also knowledge of crofting communities was increased (90%), as was knowledge of locally grown food (94%). The latter included not only knowledge of food provenance, but also '*the different stages involved before food gets to the shop*'.

As an early academic response to globalization, David Harvey wrote of the 'myriad social relations embedded in the system that puts it [food] upon our table' (1990: 422) and these issues are no less potent today. It is, however, also of increasing importance that students understand the complex local social relations that exist with regard to food. Given national Climate Change mitigation targets and the Scottish Government's prominent policy agenda regarding food, Crofting Connections was suitably placed to contribute to these agendas at schools level, providing pupils with the tools to make more informed food choices. Although teachers were unclear whether this increased appreciation for the local would impact on pupils' willingness to stay in the region as adults, it is clear that '*crofting has been an excellent vehicle for delivering Gaelic in context*' and through this Crofting Connections was also '*an excellent vehicle for delivering our SIP project, 'Gaelic Through Outdoor Learning''*.

An equally important outcome with regards to learning was that, '*it was also fun*' and '*pupils retain more information by having a real life context for learning*'. Crofting connections therefore delivered a creative learning environment thus providing '*an excellent theme to engage pupils with their learning*'. Teachers reported an 84% positive impact on learning and pupils offered a similar response indicating that 76% thought it had improved their attitudes to learning. In particular, pupils recognized a high degree of participative and collaborative planning (73%), outdoor learning (94%), use of ICT (75%), and working together

(96%). Although students realized that this process was negotiated through their teachers, they also felt that Crofting Connections seemed to be different to other learning experiences in school. One pupil response demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of this issue stating: *'it is a good project which can be adapted to any learning scheme and you could do it anytime but you would still get the same out of it'*.

Pupils themselves identified an increase in their knowledge of crofting (93%); increased knowledge of crofting communities (83%); development of new skills (89%); improved understanding of locally grown food (90%) and 'improved attitudes to the environment' (82%). This last finding is of particular note. Although the outcome of 'improved attitudes' is admittedly vague, any increase in environmental understanding is important at this age. Horton et al (2013: 249) have recently highlighted that there is a considerable volume of academic literature from educational (Hacking and Barrett 2007, Hicks and Holden 2007, Davis 2009), psychological (Koger and du Nann Winter 2010), sociological (Grønhøj 2007, Larsson et al. 2010) and geographical research (Morgan 2006) which indicates that 'childhood and youth are typically crucial periods in the socialisation and (re)production of individual habits, norms, dispositions, values, lifestyles, identities and feelings of care and belonging which can have all manner of complex, enduring environmental, ecological and political consequences' (Horton et al 2013:249).

Moreover, drawing from the work of Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002), Horton et al (2013:249) argue that research on behaviour change suggests that habits, norms and dispositions are produced by the interplay of internal (psychological) and external (social) factors. It is this combination which produces environmental knowledge and behaviour (2013:249). Such theories fit with the results of the evaluation of Crofting Connections and so it is suggested that such early intervention will have an impact on how students develop and practice everyday 'norms'. One student reported that *'it has influenced me to grow my own food'*. Whether this did in fact amount to a change in practice is beyond the scope of this study. However, comments such as the one above suggest that transformative learning was indeed taking place, and there was a corresponding shift from understanding the issues of food sustainability, to taking individual action on the basis of that knowledge.

Teachers also highlighted the inclusive nature of the style of learning created through Crofting Connections. One noted:

'Some of our children have really benefitted from the croft/farm visits where knowledge they have can be shared with others in the class. This has been particularly beneficial for groups of older children who are less academically inclined and have ...[gained]... much in the eyes of their peers but more importantly in their own self-image'

This comment highlights the inclusive nature of much of the learning experienced by participants and suggests that Crofting as a theme lends itself to educational activities that are open to all, and allows young people with different talents to engage and succeed on their own terms. As environmental perceptions

and habits are formed at a young age, such inclusion-driven learning design is imperative in creating effective environmental education.

Malone (2013) noted that a knowledge of place is also integral to a shift from environmental knowledge, to making environmentally aware decisions. The Crofting Connections Steering Group stated that pupils following the Crofting Connections pathway had greater confidence in doing things for themselves and had a broader understanding of the communities in which they lived. One teacher described pupils leaving the project with '*an appreciation of history*' and '*a respect for the land*'. As place is undeniably social, and is constantly performed through 'negotiation' (Massey 2004:6), instilling appreciation at such an early stage is integral for effective environmental appreciation.

Positive feedback regarding the educational impact of this project was also given by participants, including learners, practitioners, parents, community members and key stakeholders, and links were also made to employability. The *Commission for Developing Scotland's Workforce Report* (2014) states 'young people need to make the best transition from a broad general education into a comprehensive range of opportunities which improve their employment prospects' and the research shows that Crofting Connections did indeed provide a firm foundation for this 'broad general education' and consequently was likely to enhance the prospects of employment. One adult interviewee expressed this breadth of knowledge and skills when quoting a young person at a crofting conference, '*When you can do everything, you can be a crofter*' and younger interviewees endorsed this conclusion by recounting their links with local businesses and talking about their understanding of the social and economic fabric of their communities. Pupils from one of the participating schools recalled a striking range of tasks discovered while working on a croft: growing food, cooking, weaving, spinning, knitting, designing and making a school tartan, tending chickens, pigs, cows, boat making and even storytelling. Another class learned to shear sheep, and a further one experienced growing fruit, collecting it, making jam and selling it to a local fayre. It could be argued that all of this contributes to the Commission for Developing Scotland's Workforce goal (2014) of achieving 'a culture of real partnership between employers and education'.

The contribution of the project to a range of curricular and policy initiatives

An additional aim of the evaluation was to consider the extent to which Crofting Connections acted as a context for learning that could be applied across a range of different curricular areas. It was found that there were '*great interdisciplinary opportunities*', as '*it is cross-curricular learning. Many topics involve crofting or farming and from this language, maths, RME and much more can be taught*'. Notably strong responses emerged in relation to a number of subject areas including Health and Wellbeing (90%), Social Studies (92%), Language and Literacy (75%), Technologies (81%) and Science (63%). In terms of Expressive Arts, Music (65%) and Art and Design (76%) had particularly high results. Clearly Crofting Connections was effective in enabling teachers to achieve interdisciplinary learning. One head teacher appreciated its cross-curricular nature, noting, '*it ties subjects together*' and as it was '*open ended and the school*'.

had control over it; the project allowed for a variety of approaches to learning, and had the capacity to promote cohesive, interdisciplinary learning.

In relation to the pedagogies associated with Crofting Connections, the pupils followed a very similar response pattern to the teachers in recognizing a high degree of participative and collaborative planning, as well as outdoor learning, use of ICT, and working together. Amidst this, the pupils recognized that this had been a process of negotiated learning with their teachers, and they also felt that Crofting Connections seemed to be different to other learning experiences in school. One subject area that was less prominent, however, was Religious and Moral Education yet here there might conceivably be scope for growth through additional resources or activities that look at the cultural, spiritual and ethical dimensions to crofting and sustainable development more generally.

There is, therefore, compelling evidence that Crofting Connections contributed greatly to a range of policy initiatives including *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)* (Scottish Executive Education Department (2004), *Learning for Sustainability* (Scottish Government 2012); *Recipe for Success / Becoming a Good Food Nation* (Scottish Government 2014) and the report on the *Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce* (Scottish Government 2014b). Crofting Connections also provides a framework and rationale for the Experiences and Outcomes of the Curriculum for Excellence and facilitates teachers in addressing the purposes of the curriculum. A sense of positive learning was prevalent during the pupil interviews and, when asked about their learning, they found it '*challenging and enjoyable*', consistent with the Principles of the Curriculum for Excellence. They liked linking up with other schools and had met with, and learned from, a wide range of people in the community including teachers, classmates, other young people (these were termed 'The Gatherings') and notably, people from within their crofting communities. These had been discursive, active and experiential learning opportunities, and involved less of a didactic approach. Moreover, these experiences brought not only pupils but teachers together, allowing as one Head teacher noted, teachers to develop their shared understanding of Curriculum for Excellence. Therefore, within Crofting Connections there was ample evidence of A Curriculum for Excellence being applied and embedded in practice.

Learning about crofting and crofting communities also meets the challenges of today's world as it adds value and contextualizes learning which, in turn, makes learning meaningful and real. As such, as one teacher argued, it had helped to '*unlock the door*' to a broader education, and the development of skills for learning, life and work. As one interviewee argued in sentiments that inspired the title of this article, '*There are lots of dots. The Crofting Connections project is joining them*'. This learning occurred in different ways, including cooperative and collaborative learning, interdisciplinary learning, Outdoor Learning and a focus on Health and wellbeing. There was strong evidence of challenge and enjoyment, breadth and depth, personalization and choice, coherence, relevance and, as the quotes suggest, some progression.

'I really enjoyed the whole project and learned lots of new things'

'It was EPIC'

'I want to do crofting forever'

At the very least, the project provided opportunities for young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors (the four original 'Capacities' envisaged in CfE). To some this amounted to taking control of the learning process itself, as suggested in this open comment: *'The pupils are now learning the learning by teaching the English classes how to plant and look after plants through the medium of Gaidhlig'*. This amounts to peer-to-peer learning, and as Percy-Smith and Burns have recently noted:

[b]y acting as peer educators, young people are taking responsibility for leadership roles in catalysing the spread of learning and action among other young people. This role is neither a research role nor a form of direct action, but rather involves young people in building community capacity by empowering others to also become learners and agents of change' (Percy-Smith and Burns 2013:331).

Thus, Crofting Connections created opportunities for personal achievement, and pupil interviewees displayed a sense of satisfaction, were well-motivated and were developing resilience and confidence. There was evidence of depth in their learning (66%), progression (78%), and a degree of learner autonomy (65%). As the following comment notes, much of the appreciation was derived from the sheer range of learning experiences,

'We all enjoyed the project and especially the outdoor visits. We enjoyed working on the large friezes for our classroom and corridor displays. We enjoyed learning songs and music related to our crofting culture. We all enjoyed the project. It was different as we were out more often and learned such a lot'.

The pupils also *'learned a lot'* about food. A notable and recurring issue was reference to food miles and this is consistent with Scottish Government Policy. Richard Lochhead, the Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for this area at the time, noted in the Foreword to *Recipe for Success* (Scottish Government, 2014): that 'Scotland continues to have an uneasy relationship with food. We have one of the poorest diet related health records globally; we waste a fifth of the food we buy and we remain disconnected from where our food comes from and how it is produced'. He argued that more needs to be done to 'improve our food culture'.

Crofting Connections encouraged pupils to be more aware of, and to eat, locally grown food. As a result of their experiences, some intended to grow food in the future and many had a greater understanding of the food economy, having in some instances, taken sheep to market and, even learning *'not to smile when negotiating a price'*. This latter remark suggests a growing understanding of specific cultural dimensions to agriculture that would not be acquired through more conventional educational approaches.

There is also evidence to suggest that Crofting Connections enhanced learning about biodiversity and sustainability. Pupils had the opportunity to talk to a range of people and to learn about animal husbandry, how to construct dry stone dykes and how to cultivate the land. This resonates with key government priorities and

is articulated in the *Learning for Sustainability* (LfS) report (Scottish Government, 2012) which recommended that this become an entitlement for all pupils – subsequent Ministerial responses endorsed this demand. The report states that ‘themes relating to sustainable development education, global citizenship and outdoor learning were firmly embedded within Curriculum for Excellence and feature prominently in the experiences and outcomes (p6). As one Stakeholder noted, pupils were operating in ‘*a real life context*’, planting and growing food, and working across the curriculum. She noted that pupils had worked in gardens, planted trees and learned to understand and make connections to the land. This, she believed, had led to improved skills of attainment, confidence and critical thinking skills. Environmental writer, George Monbiot, would no doubt endorse such connections as he is a vocal advocate of ‘rewilding the child’, and including education outwith the classroom where those who do not excel in the class setting, can often thrive. He argues that ‘[i]f children lose contact with nature, they won’t fight for it’ (2013:n.p) and it is exactly these hazards that initiatives such as Crofting Connections can ward against.

In addition, LfS is now evident, beyond schools, in teacher education and in the national Standards for the profession. The General Teaching Council for Scotland states that teachers must actively embrace and promote ‘principles and practices of sustainability in all aspects of their work’¹ and Learning for Sustainability Scotland defines LfS as ‘the process of learning to live within the environmental limits of our planet and build a society that is inclusive, equitable and peaceful.’ Crofting Connections allows teachers to do this and the responses from teachers showed considerable knowledge of LfS. Among these particularly knowledgeable practitioners, Crofting Connections was seen as ‘*not an add-on, it fits with the ethos and community links that the school is seeking to foster*’. Teacher interviewees often concluded that Crofting Connections provided them with a clear and distinctive pathway to support them in developing exactly these capacities and dispositions. The importance of this finding cannot be underestimated, LfS is a key policy of the Scottish Government, but may require a similarly sustained and focused approach in order to be realized across all schools.

The impact of the project to date on communities

The success of this project was built upon community partnerships. From the survey conducted it was evident that a range of community volunteers and external partners had played key roles in the Crofting Connections process. While there was some variability in this engagement, overall 80% of participants had met directly with a crofter; 30% with a scientist; 54% with an environmentalist; 66% with a crafts person; and 41% with a local historian. Open comments mirror these statistics.

“For many of our pupils the crofting connections link has been a truly beneficial experience giving the opportunity to meet young crofters from a diverse range of

¹ This is embedded in the national Standards for all Teachers in Scotland. See: <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-standards/professional-standards.aspx>

areas and backgrounds and has added to their social development almost as much as to their knowledge of crofting issues.”

“We live in a crofting community but lots of incoming families did not have these traditions. It has helped bring members of the community together.”

Notably, this connection with the community was a two way process that brought individuals from outwith the school system into schools, as well as strengthening the outward bonds of young people with the wider community. There were high frequencies reported of working with parents and carers (74%), as well as older members of the community (73%). This degree of community, intergenerational and parental engagement emerged as a notable and distinctive feature of this project which might be replicated in similar future endeavours where sufficient emphasis is placed on place/locale.

The programme can also be valued for its potential contribution to long term strategic planning for a sustainable rural community. According to its website, the Crofting Commission ‘advises Scottish Government on crofting issues’. Its main aims are ‘to regulate crofting, to promote occupancy of crofts, active land use, and shared management by crofters as a means of sustaining and enhancing rural communities’. More specifically of relevance to this theme may be the *Crofting Commission Policy Plan Revised* (2014) where,

‘The Commission will give particular consideration to the creation of crofting opportunities through the creation of new crofts. The Commission will seek to ensure that the creation of new crofts leads to the retention or development of population and the effective use of land for recognised crofting purposes’.

This, we would assert, signals a need for community sustainability through succession planning, i.e., the ongoing cultivation of school pupils with the essential knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to maintain existing crofts and to develop new crofts. Interview evidence would suggest that Crofting Connections supported such a process. This also has potentially profound demographic implications for many parts of rural Scotland. The average age of a crofter is currently 55 as the Crofting Commission highlighted at interview, and thus there is a need for young people to understand and to experience the crofting lifestyle. The Crofting Commission therefore acknowledged the value of Crofting Connections input on issues such as the importance of environment, a managed but changing landscape and the production of local food. They hoped that programmes such as Crofting Connections would enrich the identity of young people and provide a structure for young adults looking for a croft, sometimes as tenants. Critically, they pointed out that the range of skills and occupations needed included being able to work the land but also that there was a need for other skills, trades and professions, such as solicitors who understand land ownership and tenancy issues, and those able to provide technical support to crofting.

Crofting Connections, therefore, not only linked pupils to a crofting heritage but also to a rural lifestyle which remains vulnerable to long term decline through urbanisation and rural-urban ‘flight’. One of the most commendable aspects of Crofting Connections was that it was able to match local professionals and

expertise with schools thus helping to develop Scotland's young workforce. In this way, the programme also supported the vision of Highlands and Islands Enterprise in making the area 'a highly successful and competitive region where increasing numbers of people choose to live, work, study and invest'. A key element of this is to 'strengthen communities and fragile areas' and to develop 'distinctive regional opportunities'. One interviewee from Highlands and Islands Enterprise talked about their four priorities, two of which were strengthening communities in fragile areas and growing capacity. One feature of this was the need to have 'inclusive growth from within'. He supported the educational impact that Crofting Connections had made, exemplifying this with the assertion that it was *'Curriculum for Excellence favourable ... learning by doing links adults and children ... using interdisciplinary learning, especially the STEM Ed subjects of science and maths'*.

Moreover, The Scottish Crofting Federation has, amongst its aims, the objectives of representing and safeguarding 'the interests of crofters, their families and communities, their cultural heritage and their legislative rights'. It also wishes to: 'promote the environmental, social and cultural benefits of crofting activity and land use as intrinsic aspects of rural development' and, finally, to 'raise awareness of crofting through information and education'¹. In the light of the evaluation undertaken of Phase 2 it seems that all of these aims were addressed, directly or indirectly, through the Crofting Connections project.

CONCLUSION

Around three decades ago Bryden wrote in the *Scottish Geographical Magazine* of his unease at having crofting and crofters 'characterised as an 'agricultural subject'' (1987:101). Crofting Connections has demonstrated that crofting is much more than an agricultural subject and deserves to be acknowledged as an exciting and forward thinking topic lending itself to cross-curricular and interdisciplinary education. Crofting Connections succeeded in 'joining the dots' between crofting and education, curriculum and policy, and community resilience and viability. The evaluation report exposed a widespread appreciation of the programme. As well as consolidating and maintaining what had already been achieved or set in motion, respondents advocated the extension of Crofting Connections to those communities and schools that had not yet benefitted from it, both locally and nationally, and in rural and urban contexts alike. In the words of one pupil, *'everyone should try this project'*. As a minimum there was a sense that it should be made available to all schools in the crofting counties.

The project offered 'botanical becomings' (Whatmore 2002:110), planting the seeds for a sustainable rural future where young people are embedded in a strong sense of place and have access to an education system which, while acknowledging contemporary changes and future needs, is attentive to local and regional heritage. Further opportunities could emerge in comparative international connections that bring together similar small scale, subsistence and sustainable forms of agriculture and their related cultural practices, from across Europe and beyond. Indeed the team behind the Crofting Connections project have developed

¹ Scottish Crofting Federation: <http://www.crofting.org/aboutus>

educational connections with smallholders in Kenya to exchange knowledge and educational resources.¹

The project as a whole demonstrated that carefully planned yet pedagogically creative initiatives such as Crofting Connections have the capacity to enhance young peoples' knowledge, skills and attitudes that might otherwise be lost to the communities they grow up in. It further suggests that education should be a core consideration in any government policies that seek to prevent depopulation and to support rural development. At a time when the original aims and principles of CfE seem at best to be misunderstood and at worst vulnerable to attack, initiatives that so clearly encapsulated the essence of CfE and related initiatives ought to be nurtured rather than discarded. The evidence of sustained impact identified through the evaluation process, and presented here in a wider social, economic and educational context, ought to contribute to a case for such projects to continue. There remains a pressing need to join the dots between young people, their sense of place and community, and their learning for sustainability.

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¹ See <http://www.croftingconnections.com/newsitem/291>

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