

# Let's make our schools sustainable!

Change Agents empowered through the Whole School Approach





## Preface

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It is with great pleasure that we introduce this booklet, a culmination of a two-year project aimed at establishing the *Green Youth Club* at Sri Vimalabuddhi Primary School in Kandy. This initiative, a collaboration of the Postgraduate Institute of Science, University of Peradeniya (PGIS), Sri Lanka, University of the Sacred Heart, Japan and Keio University, Japan supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), has been a remarkable journey in promoting sustainable development through the Whole School Approach.

The *Green Youth Club* was founded with the vision of engaging young learners in understanding and practicing sustainability in their daily lives. Throughout the project, students enthusiastically participated in various attractive and engaging activities designed to foster a sense of responsibility and awareness of environmental issues. These hands-on experiences enhanced their knowledge and empowered them to become active agents of change in their school and community. The project made a deliberate effort to involve school teachers, parents, and the village community through various activities.

This booklet shares the lessons learned, challenges overcome, and the innovative approaches adopted during the project. It serves as a practical resource for teachers and students in other schools who wish to embark on a similar journey towards sustainability. The activities and experiences documented here reflect the spirit of collaboration, creativity, and commitment demonstrated by the students, teachers, and facilitators.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the PGIS, University of the Sacred Heart, Japan, Keio University, Japan, local field staff members and JICA for supporting this meaningful initiative and to all those who contributed to its success. It is our hope that this booklet will inspire schools across the island to adopt sustainable practices and nurture environmentally conscious youth for a greener future.

“Let us all work together to build a more sustainable and responsible world”

Dr. W.D. Chandrasena and Mr. A.M.R.S. Bandara  
Local Project Coordinators  
Faculty of Science  
University of Peradeniya  
Sri Lanka



## Foreword

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It is with immense pleasure that I write the foreword for this booklet, which record the inspiring journey of the Green Youth Project at Sri Vimalabuddhi Primary School in Kandy.

When I met the team led by Professor Yoshiyuki Nagata, the Project Manager of this initiative, I was deeply impressed by their commitment to practicing sustainability rather than merely discussing it. At the time, I was serving as the Director General of the National Institute of Education, and my team and I recognized this project as a remarkable example of authentic learning—a concept that emphasizes engaging students with real-world issues.

The Green Youth Project stands out as an inspiring model of how education can drive meaningful change. By adopting the Whole School Approach, the project has successfully placed students at the center of school development, empowering them to tackle local environmental challenges. This publication not only documents the outcomes of their work but also provides a practical roadmap for others to follow.

I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the entire team behind this publication, including the Postgraduate Institute of Science, the University of the Sacred Heart, Keio University, and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), for their invaluable contributions to this impactful initiative.

To the teachers, parents, and all relevant stakeholders who read this booklet: I encourage you to embrace the principles outlined here. By placing students at the heart of sustainability efforts, you can nurture a generation of responsible, innovative, and empowered individuals. Together, let us make an effort to create schools that is greener and more sustainable.

Prof. Prasad Sethunga  
Former Director General of the National Institute of Education,  
Department of Education, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya





## Introduction

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Now it is widely believed that the world is becoming increasingly unsustainable due to climate change, pandemics, rapid loss of biodiversity, and unending wars and conflicts. Because of these times, it can be said that the education of the future must be an education that brings hope.

How can such an education be realized? Is it through textbooks and tests on issues related to climate change and biodiversity? Or is it by training engineers and scientists to overcome these problems? These approaches may work to some extent, but they may not necessarily foster hope in many people.

However, this booklet presents methods that can be immediately implemented in any school, by any student or teacher, to encourage hope for future generations. It is a method that helps schools become models of sustainability. In other words, it is a way to educate the children of the future so that through concrete actions, they will recognise that they can create their own future, that even small practices are meaningful, and that if continued, they can lead to major transformations.

This approach, called the Whole School Approach, has been used in a project funded by JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) called the “Public School-based Green Youth Community Formation Project to Solve the Waste Problem,” which was attempted in a small public school in the suburbs of Peradeniya. In this project, a group of students called “Green Youth” tried to solve the local problem of garbage, which every village in Sri Lanka is facing. As a result of this two-year project, a small village primary school is being transformed into a school that brings hope.

While I mentioned global issues at the beginning of this introduction, a look at the situation in many countries reveals an excessive growth of the urban population and at the same time a decline of the rural areas, which is aggravating the disparities between and within the cities. Under these circumstances, the story of Sri Vimalabuddhi Primary School asks each one of us what true wealth or wellbeing is, and will remind society as a whole of what wellbeing is all about.

We hope that this booklet, with its practical examples and the theory behind them, will help you understand that even small public schools in rural areas can bring happiness to children and help them to move forward into the future with hope.



Yoshiyuki Nagata  
Project Manager  
Department of Education  
Professor, University of the Sacred Heart  
Japan



## The story of Green Youth at Sri Vimalabuddhi Primary School



### Building a Sustainable Future: From Children's Voices to School Transformation

This is the story of a public primary school in a small village in Kandy, Sri Lanka. This school was home to around 80 young minds buzzed with boundless energy, curiosity, dreams and hope.

Six years before this project began, we received a simple yet powerful message from a child in a nearby village: "Let's make the world a better place together." Those words planted the seed of an idea that grew into a journey—one that would transform the lives of children through learning.



The children's learning extended far beyond the classroom.

In 2024 a pupils' club named Green Youth has been established.

They engaged with the world around them—not just through books, but with their hands, minds, and hearts. From the schoolyard to the village, and then to the town, they explored, encountered, collaborated and discovered. Along the way, they met people, animals, places, and ideas that changed how they see the world and their role in it.

Today, the schoolyard is a place of growth and renewal, filled with life and possibility. Surrounding it is a supportive community of families, teachers, and friends—including those in Japan—who share in this vision.

This isn't just a story about dreams—it's a story about what happens when we work together to make them a reality. It is a story about creating our shared present and future.





# Theory

Let's embrace the Whole-School Approach and keep building a better world together.

## 1) What is the Whole School Approach?

The Whole School Approach presented here is an effective way to make our planet more sustainable. It is also a way to promote the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) throughout or beyond the school. In fact, this approach is the conscious background of Sri Vimalabuddhi Primary School story depicted in this booklet.



The motto of the Whole School Approach is "Practice what we teach in the classroom!" If we are teaching the importance of energy, let's save electricity at school and install solar panels, even if they are small. If you have a class on food and health, challenge the students to create an in-school vegetable garden and grow organic vegetables using as little chemical fertilizers as possible. Also, if your students are learning about a recycling-oriented society that produces as little waste as possible, you could try to eliminate waste from the school grounds and recycle plastics that are no longer needed into recycled works of art. Through these actions toward a sustainable future, children will naturally acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for the SDGs.



Figure 1 Elements of a Sustainable School

In this approach, teachers, students, parents, and community members work together to solve problems, but the focus is solely on the children, the generation that will carry the future. While customarily, the principal or teacher instructs students to clean up inside and outside the classroom, in the Whole School Approach, children take the initiative to conserve electricity and water, clean up the school, and grow food in order to achieve sustainability. Since there are so many sustainability issues, it is important that children decide through discussion, rather than adults, where to start.

In this approach, the classroom is the important core of learning, but it is a one-of-a-kind learning opportunity, and every other element of school life is a learning opportunity (see Figure 1). By implementing the Whole School Approach, sustainability is placed at the center of learning. A school that adopts the Whole School Approach becomes a sustainable place in itself, where sustainability is visible everywhere (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 Whole School Approach Source UNESCO GEM Report 2019.

There is no need to spend huge amounts of money to install solar panels or to dig up the schoolyard and turn it into a field. Adults can make recycled products from the trash they pick up with their children, or simply rent a nearby field to harvest organic vegetables once a month. The bottom line is that children need to realize that adults are making efforts toward a sustainable, if not perfect, and they need to have the experience of participating in activities that will help people in the community live happier lives and ultimately, a healthier planet.



## Theory

Let's embrace the Whole-School Approach and keep building a better world together.

### 2) Project-based Learning and Youth-led Approach

There are two key elements that are important to the Whole School Approach.

One is to introduce project-based learning to solve problems. The goal is to initiate projects for a sustainable future in areas as diverse as reducing local waste, increasing vegetable harvests, recycling unwanted clothing, reusing plastic waste, and so on.

A very small sample of projects include the following:

- Create a recycling area in one corner of the school building to reuse plastics from the school.
- Create an on-campus vegetable garden and hold regular sales events on campus to generate funds and promote an understanding of a sustainable future.
- Work with local businesses to install solar panels on the roof of the school and create a daily activities that takes advantage of renewable energy.



These are just a few examples of projects related to garbage, food, and energy. Please take a look at Figure 1 and think about what kind of projects are needed in your school or community, and consider the challenges in various fields.

The second point that is important is that children and youth are the main actors. In promoting problem-solving projects, it is essential to keep in mind that children are the main actors. Adults should do their best to guide them, including their mistakes, and respect the decision-making processes of the future generation. When learning to solve problems occurs simultaneously, the school becomes a place of challenge for a sustainable future, and hope grows in students as well as teachers. As the activity unfolds, the young people's self-esteem is also nurtured.

Some may say that it takes a junior or senior high school student to be able to manage a project. However, at Sri Vimalabuddhi Primary School, middle grade children took on the challenge of solving problems in a lively manner. Of course, we must not forget that behind such challenges lies the need for adult understanding and listening skills that respect children.

The whole school approach is said to have a variety of benefits. For example, the greening and cleaning of the school grounds and the reduction of the impact on the earth, students find meaning in their learning and become more motivated to learn, and teachers and staff develop a strong sense of belonging to the school.

In a nutshell, the Whole School Approach is a “win-win” approach. Please give it a try!

#### What is ESD?

ESD (Education for Sustainable Development), promoted by UNESCO and other organizations, is one of the educational theories and practices that have advocated the Whole School Approach. ESD is an international initiative to promote the acquisition of necessary knowledge, values, and skills through education, with the aim of realizing a sustainable society. The program emphasizes the importance of education in addressing global challenges (climate change, biodiversity loss, social disparities, etc.). It is characterized, first, by a holistic approach that integrates environmental, economic, and social aspects; second, by a participatory and learner-centered approach that emphasizes dialogue and experiential learning to foster learners' ability to think and act independently; and third, by critically analyzing social and environmental issues and seeking solutions. The third is the development of critical thinking, which fosters the ability to critically analyze social and environmental issues and seek solutions.







## Six steps to make the Whole School Approach happen!

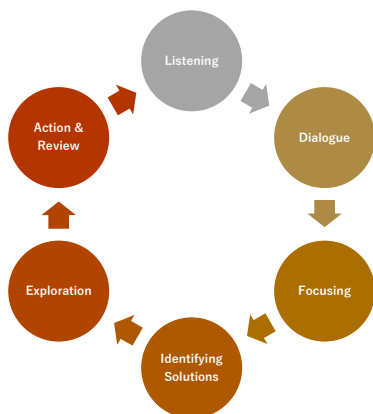


What does it take to build a sustainable future? Through our activities centered at Sri Vimalabuddhi Primary School, we discovered that the answer lies in collaboration, creativity, and culture of listening.

In the following pages, we invite you to explore the six steps that guided our journey toward creating a school-centered community for a sustainable future.

Each step builds on the last, from listening to children's dreams to taking action alongside parents, teachers, and local partners, and brings us closer to a shared goal: empowering young leaders to shape their world. Together, these steps demonstrate how small actions can lead to meaningful change—and how education can empower the next generation to make the world a better place.

These pages share not only a framework but also a story of hope, resilience, and the power of education to inspire.



Six Steps: Cycle of Joyful Learning







# 1) Listening

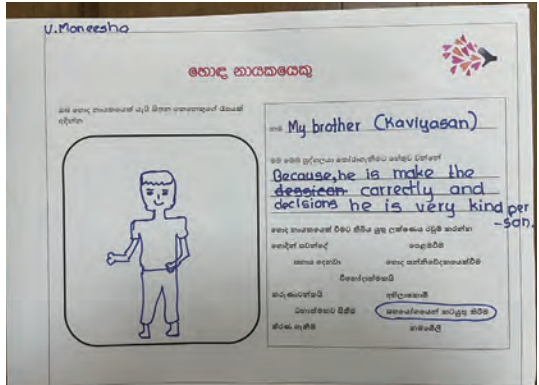
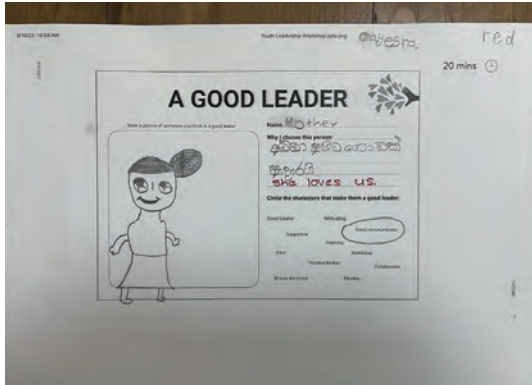
Six steps to make the Whole School Approach happen!

Listening is fundamental to the future of education. A sustainable future begins by valuing the voices of the future generation.

True teaching starts not with talking, but with listening to children.

Fostering a culture of listening will make schools more peaceful and more liveable.

Why not begin a class by simply asking, "What is your dream?"





## 2) Dialogue

### Six steps to make the Whole School Approach happen!



In uncertain times, dialogue becomes indispensable. Many of today's societal challenges have no clear answers, and teaching children to embrace hope requires fostering meaningful communications.

Encourage two-way communication—between students, and between students and teachers as equals.

Dialogue is a critical first step toward building a sustainable society.

Why don't you make your school a model of dialogue practice?







### 3) Focusing

Six steps to make the Whole School Approach happen!

Society faces countless challenges, but what are the priorities in your community?

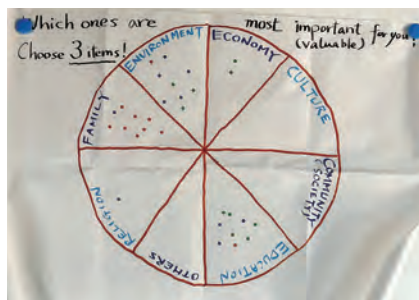
How can your village or town become more sustainable?

Start by engaging children in dialogue to brainstorm as many local issues as possible.

Then, identify one key issue to focus on.

You could spend a long time discussing to make a decision, or you could all vote together to choose one.

Even small steps can be meaningful strides toward a sustainable future.







## 4) Identifying solutions

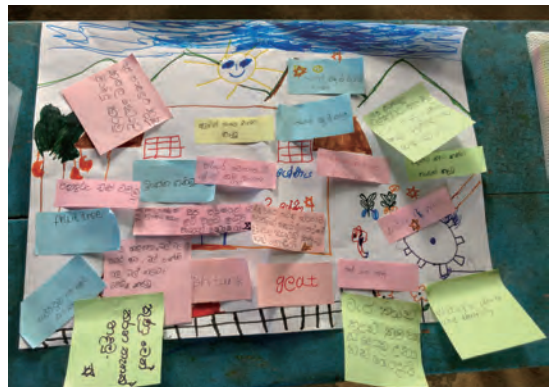
Six steps to make the Whole School Approach happen!

Work with children to explore creative solutions to the problem that their community faces.. Take the waste problem, for example: Is the answer a new garbage truck or a large disposal plant? Or does it lie in reducing waste through frugal living, recycling, or innovation?

At Vimalabuddhi Primary School, students created a visual map of their school and community on a large sheet of paper, brainstorming ideas and sketching potential solutions.

The role of the adult in this process is not to prepare answers, but to draw out the child's free and surprising ideas. Where appropriate, it may be useful to share good practices from home and abroad.

Listening to children's voices can uncover powerful insights.





## 5) Exploration

Six steps to make the Whole School Approach happen!

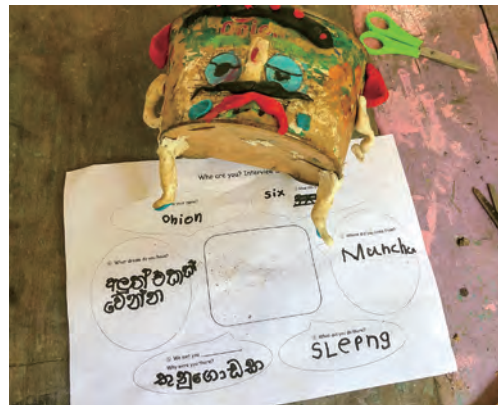
Among the many ideas, work together to select the most promising one.

Then take the children beyond the school grounds to find local resources and allies who can help bring the idea to life.

In the case of Sri Vimalabuddhi Primary School, Green Youth children collaborated with the municipal waste management department, spoke with staff at dumping ground, and visited nearby hotel with an advanced sustainable waste management system.

Through these encounters, children discovered the reality of the issue—and the hope within it.

Well, where do you want to take your children and what do you want them to discover?

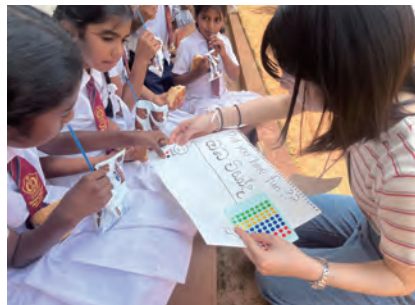






## 6) Action and Review

Six steps to make the Whole School Approach happen!



After gathering insights and resources, return to the school to design a solution. Here again, you could look for inspiration in local and global practices.

At Sri Vimalabuddhi Primary School, children turned waste materials into art and inventions, transforming negatives into positives. Their accomplishments culminated in a weekend festival, where families and community members celebrated their efforts and achievements. .

Events like these empower not only children but also the entire community to believe in their collective ability to solve problems, even when no single “right answer” exists.

Now, what kind of celebratory event would you like to organise?





## Outcomes

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- Developing an awareness of being a change-maker through the establishment of Green Youth Club
- Empowerment through the creation of school vegetable gardens
- Involvement of parents through recycling and dietary enrichment activities.
- Fostering a culture of praise through festas and other events in the community
- Collaboration between government, local company, and JICA volunteers
- Apply what one learn at school at home



### Message from stakeholders

*“If we prepare youngsters early, [...] their attitudes change from the beginning. Then, it will be permanent.”*

K.D.Deepthika Priyadarshanie, Director of Education, Zonal Education Office Kandy

*“Through education and best practices, we can keep our earth clean.”*

Malinda Siriwardana, Manager Engineering, Cinnamon Hotels & Resorts

*“We encourage young children as well as their parents for entrepreneurship.”*

A.M.M.L.B. Attanayake, Agriculture instructor, Department of Agriculture Sri Lanka

*“These activities with education for sustainability really make children learn, support meaningful learning, so children understand and apply what they learn.”*

Dr. W.D. Chandrasena, Faculty of Science, University of Peradeniya

## Appendix and Reference

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This is a collection of activities and worksheets.

Please access the following QR code, and feel free to obtain necessary information!



## Reference

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UNESCO (2019). *Let's work together: Education has a key role in helping achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.*

National Institute of Education (2024). *1st interim Report on Piloting of the Curriculum Transformation.*



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