

Pupil perspectives on education for sustainable development

Results of an empirical study at Austrian schools

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1. Introduction - The starting point of the investigation

With 1st of March 2005 the UN decade "education for sustainable development" was proclaimed. All educational organisations – starting from the kindergarten up to the universities, the institutions of the adult education up to NGOs engaged in education fields – are invited to participate in the organization of this decade.

The UN identified key areas of sustainable development to give shape and content to sustainable learning:

- “Society: an understanding of social institutions and their role in change and development, as well as the democratic and participatory systems which give opportunity for the expression of opinion, the selection of governments, the forging of consensus and the resolution of differences.
- Environment: an awareness of the resources and fragility of the physical environment and the affects on it of human activity and decisions, with a commitment to factoring environmental concerns into social and economic policy development.
- Economy: a sensitivity to the limits and potential of economic growth and their impact on society and on the environment, with a commitment to assess personal and societal levels of consumption out of concern for the environment and for social justice.” (UNESCO 2004, p. 12)

As subsystems also the schools are requested to compile programs for the conversion of this social brief to a brief for the educational system. The social challenges are to

be transformed into a concept of an "education for sustainable development" (ESD) thus into a brief for education in schools. Here is to be tied on already existing efforts. For the continuation of an education for sustainable development – in view of the designated large challenges – an active cooperation of all persons concerned with "school"-queries is necessary, if this innovation impulse is not to fizzle out. In the education system meanwhile, consultation processes of such range notoriously suffer from a lack of information about the most important clientele: the pupils! Therefore current developments run the risk of achieving a cross-linking of efforts on central and intermediate levels of the education system as well as on the single school level, but losing sight of the needs of the pupils. At this neuralgic point the introduced study starts: Beyond the question, how in the public and in the shoptalk "education for sustainable development" (ESD) is discussed, we tried, to find out empirically which conceptions of "sustainable development" pupils generated.

In the introduced study on behalf of the Austrian Federal Ministry this goal was pursued by discussing the term of "sustainable development" and taking in inspection the variety of existing concepts of education for sustainable development. Subsequently the empirical investigation of the ways of pupils to construe "education for sustainable development" followed. We selected twenty 15-21 year old pupils from schools, who participate in school-programs related to ESD. In these interviews we tried to get a broad range of concepts of sustainable development. The interview-strategy aimed at pupils' conceptions on the social brief of school for the future. The interviewed pupils showed a large framework for their subjective interpretations of the problem. In order to authenticate their

"re-interpretations", the researchers offered the results to the pupils for discussion (communicative validation).

In the following, some results of this interview-study are presented. The twenty case-studies as well as the details of the theoretical and methodical design of the study are to be found in an unabridged version of the project report, which is available at the Austrian Federal Ministry – unfortunately only in German language.

2. Consequences of the pupil's views for instruction related to ESD

In many cases pupils complained about unproductive forms of instruction – partially even in subjects that are relevant to an education for sustainable development. Several times the pupils also reflected the basic educational paradox that an instruction, which pursues the strategy of a gradual sensitization leads to inconsistencies: On the one hand it has to be sensitized by instruction, on the other hand a sensitivity for certain questions must be taken for granted in a certain way, if instruction is supposed to reach its aim. Even if this basic paradox of education cannot be dissolved, the interviews contain numerous desiderata of an instruction referring to ESD. Many of these demands represent long-known requirements for modern instruction. However, the fact, that many of the interviewed pupils again came up with criticism on these defective states, should be regarded as a signal for an ESD that has to be taken seriously:

1. *Anchoring the subjects to everyday-life as a condition of success for ESD:* In many cases the pupils called for an anchoring of the contents of ESD in everyday-life, since understanding and concernment could only be achieved by concrete references to global problems. However enlightening information and the capability for action should be in equilibrium, since otherwise rather fears than the intended effects are provoked. As a maxim of an ESD-related instruction, it should therefore be considered, whether teachers would also have to bring up for discussion the question of social change also by pupils' activities at the end of each lesson or at least at the end of each instruction-sequence. The two following paragraphs show, how such a promotion of ability to act could be embodied within an ESD.
2. *Education for sustainable development as organisation of the own environment and fields of activity:* Several pupils also emphasize the meaning of their own "ecological area" in school as a "learnscape" (Taschpka 2002). There would exist no difference as a matter of principle between the organisation of the own life- and learning-area and the development aid in the LDCs – the difference itself would be more gradually. In both cases a basic human need would be concerned: The need to actively arrange the environment in a way that ensures the well-being of all persons involved.
3. *Consideration of the pupils' "sensitive phases" regarding topics of ESD:* The anchoring of topics of an education for sustainable development to

everyday-life can only be reached by considering the so called "sensitive phases" of children and young people. Let us take for example the statement of a pupil about the necessity of offering lessons about a "sustainable style of driving" at the time of the acquisition of the driving licence, i.e. the time of the transition from the group of the "non-drivers" to that of the drivers can be considered a "sensitive phase" for environmental education.

4. *Forwarding the meaning of an ESD by innovative methods of teaching:* In several cases, pupils criticize the still insufficient establishment of an education for sustainable development at school. Therefore, they ask for innovative teaching methods ,especially' in topics of ESD (e.g. the critical reflecting of a pupil on the use of computer games). In the meantime pupils also explicitly complain to be taken seriously as experts of their own learning.
5. *Pupils are "more credible facilitators" in ESD than teachers:* The teaching of ESD topics should focus more strongly on using pupils as "mediators", since otherwise teachers easily run the risk of taking over the role of "moralists". In general, contents with normative requirements can be better mediated by pupils, if non-intended effects of resistance are to be prevented. In this case, pupils also refer to cooperation between schools, if grades or project groups pass their results on to other pupils.

6. *Binding in honor for ESD by explanation not by indoctrination:* Several pupils bewailed that environmental protection imperatives were put forth by moral preaches without sufficient explanations that convinced them. By an individualisation of explanation processes, the anchoring to everyday-life could be better achieved.
7. *Respect and responsibility in communication as a condition of the possibility of an ESD:* Many of the interviewed pupils referred again and again to the necessity to accomplish social responsibility by respectful communication. They focussed on the demand that an ESD can only succeed against the background of respectful contact with one another. The binding commitment of giving reasons of their own view in this context does not appear as a form of disciplining, because reflection-based verbalisation often yields points of view, which would otherwise remain in vague ambiguity.
8. *Learning arrangement for interlaced thinking as a condition of an ESD:* Some pupil statements document the processes of learning in circles and jumps, whose individual processes point out a problem for individualised school didactics and methodology. One pupil demanded more clearance for discussions and reflections referring to their own experiences, in order to reach a sensitization for questions of sustainability.
9. *Promotion of sustainable learning with respect to the problems arising by sustainable development:* Several pupils demanded a sustainable learning that does not exhaust in a short term "cramming

of information". One pupil explicitly demanded that even tests should not only be understood as a necessary evil of school but should also contain learning progress apart from the examination goal. She therefore pleaded for strengthening verbal forms of examination, since this would at the same time include the necessity of dealing with a topic and force teachers to grapple with the pupils' opinions.

10. *Consequences of an ESD for teacher education and further training:* From various demands of pupils there result also consequences for the teacher education and further training. One statement of a pupil illustrates this, since she requested – apart from the purely technical training (understood as instruction oriented) – a completion to teacher education in the form of social training (in this case the demand of a "social year" for forthcoming teacher generations). Such an equivalence of social and technical competence of teachers is supposed to enable them to bear the social contradictions which reproduce themselves at school in a daily manner and somehow turn their educating actions into something positive.

The considerations to an ESD, nevertheless, should not only focus on instruction and school activities. The interviews showed furthermore, that education processes do not necessarily have to occur directly at school, but during processes of further reflection at home or discussions with peer groups. However, such positive effects are only to be expected, if previous instructions themselves were also aligned to the principles of sustainable development.

3. Summary of pupil perspectives against the background of the beginning UN-decade

Altogether, future pictures of interviewed pupils pointing to sustainable development show, that topics outlined by this phenomenon cause strong interest and commitment among young people. This outcome is not astonishing since we interviewed pupils at the end of their school career: which is biographically in a status passage from teenager to young adult, where those questions of social integration not only become relevant but often even urgent. Nevertheless four general results seem to be remarkable:

1. *Prosaic realism*: Within the discussion about topics, which concern a sustainable development, the pupils proved to be amazingly sober, pragmatical, realistical – and partially even resigned. It becomes clear that populist formulas affiliate only in single cases: Superficially they are "reproduced" and at the same time – contentwise – criticised. Therefore it seems necessary for an ESD to strengthen rational argument and at the same time reflect how counter productive forms of public discourse counteract forms of reason/enlightenment.
2. *Ability of transfer*: The ability of pupils to transfer global problems to topics of everyday-life is amazingly high. At this point the question arises whether pupils have more competencies as many conventional instruction planning and didactics expected them to have.

3. *Sinking tolerance to ambiguity*: Against the often articulated prejudice of political naivety, the interviewed pupils do not show a questionless acceptance of social contradictions in most cases. Rather, it becomes clear that they find themselves in an area of conflict between social conditions and challenges on the one hand and the bona fide claims against bad conditions in ESD on the other hand. In many interviews pupil statements therefore vary between emphatically represented own and/or adapted social claims (social justice, environmental issues etc.) as well as resignative confession in relation to possibilities for change. Whereas some pupils rather pragmatically focus on small successes, other pupils – in regard of the large, partially global challenges – rather show resigned paralysis. Regarding the capability of society transforming acting and greater political participation, an ESD would therefore have to focus more on the modes of processing these conflict areas, in order to draw conclusions for suitable education tasks – up to questions of didactics – e.g. up to the planning of pupil-projects or discussion processes in school.
4. *Focus on social issues and equitable communication*: According to the two preceding results, pupils put much emphasis on questions of social issues and forms of equitable communication. This focus expresses itself in the numerous mentions of "visions of an equity society" in linkage with questions of social justice and solidarity in the medium of new forms of communication.

According to these results, an ESD in Austria would have to put much more emphasis on forwarding discussion processes on the “micro level” of instruction, in order to promote capacities for participation and to show effects for a forthcoming social movement: a forthcoming social change as it is claimed in the Austrian strategy for sustainable development as an fundamental reorientation “in politics, society and economics" (Österreichische Strategie für Nachhaltige Entwicklung 2002, S. 11). Such a strategy of participation by discourse must distinguish itself from present discourse tendencies, in order to be able to react to the phenomena of pupils’ *prosaic realism*, their *ability of transfer* and their *sinking tolerance to ambiguity*.

According to these claims the following demands result. This discourse has to:

1. designate the problems of sustainable development with sober realism,
2. promote an anchoring to everyday-life by offering possibilities of transferring the problems into actions which relate to the pupils’ lives ,
3. bring up for discussion the ecological-economic-social problems by addressing the existing social contradictions within those fields in order to activate the pupils’ capacities not by indoctrination but by sustainable reasoning. Otherwise ESD in schools will run the risk of provoking a superficial politically-correctness, which will rather inhibit than convey a sustainable future.

4. References

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