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the planetary justice crisis, structural racism and sustainability education

Inken Carstensen-Egwuom and Birte Schröder

We follow two main arguments in our contribution: First, we contend that there is a vital need to connect theories around racism to discussions about the Planetary Ecological Crisis. This is a link that has hardly been addressed in German-speaking social science research on racism. And secondly, we argue for a critical engagement with the workings of racism within Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), an educational field with a strongly normative underpinning that (cl)aims to work for a "better future for all". Questions on how the futurity inherent in this claim and the divisions within the "all" have colonial and racist underpinnings are imperative for an engagement with ESD.

Keywords: ecology, education for sustainable development, justice, racism, sustainability

> For us, this event is not called Fridays for Future. For us, this event is called Fridays for Past, Present and Future, because the Global North is stealing the past, the present and the future from us and our families. (Kennedy-Asante, 2019)

This is what Rebecca Abena Kennedy-Asante emphasized in an interview with Paul Dziedzic in the journal 'Analyse und Kritik', after participating in a global climate strike with a black kids block on the 20th of September 2019 in Berlin. Her intervention has two main impulses: The *inter*generational aspect of the global ecological crisis is shifted: Apart from a focus on "the future", there is an emphasis on the need to acknowledge historical responsibilities for today's crisis and the injustices that were part of the development of our current non-sustainable world system. Furthermore, the *intra*generational aspect of the climate crisis is pushed to the forefront: The effects of global warming are not only to be expected in the future, they are already there; and they are especially felt by people in the Global South as well as intersectionally marginalized people in countries of the Global North. In this contribution, we follow this important impulse and argue for the need to engage with the current Planetary Ecological Crisis when thinking about how racism works.

The ongoing Planetary Ecological Crisis is accompanied by a Planetary Justice Crisis (Biermann & Kalfagianni, 2020). The latter is increasingly moving into the public consciousness – but with a significant gap, as Rebecca Kennedy-Asante argued in her statement: Debates around the Planetary Justice Crisis in Germany have a strong focus on *inter*generational justice emphasizing the current generation living at the expense of future generations and pushing the job of solving the ecological crisis towards future generations. This is connected to a Eurocentric focus on ensuring the future

potential for coming generations. *Intra*generational justice problems globally and locally, which are strongly relevant in and for discussions around racism, on the other hand, remain largely ignored. What Julian Agyeman (2008, p. 751) has argued in his article on "Just Sustainability", remains a bitter truth for public debates on 'saving the climate':

> There is a common belief among those in the environmental sustainability movement that as they are 'saving the world', they are saving it for everyone equally, which somehow absolves them from wider discussions of equity and justice.

This is also evident in mainstream approaches in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which is an established educational field that aims to develop competences in young people for shaping a future, sustainable social coexistence. We thus follow two main arguments here: First, we contend that there is a vital need to connect theories around racism to discussions about the Planetary Ecological Crisis. This link has hardly been addressed in German speaking social science research on racism. And secondly, we argue for a critical engagement with the workings of racism within Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), an educational field with a strongly normative underpinning that (cl)aims to work for a "better future for all". Questions on how divisions within the 'all' have colonial and racist underpinnings are imperative for an engagement with ESD.

The workings of racism and the planetary ecological crisis

Coloniality as a foundation of racism is a central underpinning of the Planetary Justice Crisis and deeply connected to the ecological crisis – both *intra*generationally and *inter*generationally. The devaluation, dehumanization and exploitation of humans marked as 'different', and the suppression of their knowledge and cultural practices (with simultaneous partial appropriation) as well as the extraction of resources from colonized parts of the world enabled the emergence of European modernity (Quijano, 2000). As part of the long-term inequalities shaped by colonialism, racism is both historically and currently a manifestation of a Planetary Justice Crisis (Kashwan et al., 2020; Quijano, 2000, p. 533). Racism is a part of colonial structures and knowledge systems that favor the commodification of nature (Patel & Moore, 2018), that have shaped inequalities in the "longue durée" (Boatcă & Rauhut, 2019) and that are the basis of the current situation of "sustainable unsustainability" (Blühdorn et al., 2020).

The current cumulative ecological crises are thus closely intertwined with colonial global-local structures of racial capitalism (Bhambra, 2021; Vergès, 2017). It is mainly activists and scholars from the Global South (Maathai, 2006), as well as BIPoC movements and Scholars from countries in the Global North who have continuously made these connections and spearheaded movements around environmental justice (Bullard, 1993b; Ituen & Tatu Hey, 2021; Maathai, 2006).

On the one hand, these interventions point to the fact that racialized, gendered and class-based structures and positionalities can affect how the current crises are perceived: Are they mainly seen as ecological (for climate issues: CO2 emissions based) problems that can potentially be solved (only) through technological change and innovation, through cleaner and greener lifestyles? As problems "out there", that have to be tackled through environmental stewardship and reform? Or are they perceived as planetary, historically developed crises of justice, that are related to the production or exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities for premature death, as Ruth

Wilson Gilmore (2007, p. 28) defines racism?

People in the Global South, as well as BIPoC in the Global North, are disproportionately affected by pollution and climate change impacts as well as by the negative effects of the Global North's decarbonization strategies (Bauriedl, 2015; Bullard, 1993a; Bumpus & Liverman, 2011). Unregulated resource extraction, mining, soil erosion and degradation have led to irreversible environmental degradation in many places in the Global South and threaten the livelihoods and food security of local communities (Harvey, 2014). At the same time, the decarbonization strategies of the Global North also have negative effects elsewhere, as they are based on the externalization of social conflicts (Bauriedl, 2016). E.g. Biomass cultivation for energy use contributes to the further precarization of socio-economically vulnerable groups and is thus called "green grabbing" in some publications (Fairhead et al., 2012). Mechanisms of market-based carbon compensation are also referred to as carbon colonialism (Lyons & Westoby, 2014). The hegemonic imperial way of life (Brand & Wissen, 2017) in the Global North and of the upper classes in the Global South is generally based on the externalization of environmental and social costs to vulnerable groups in the Global South, while the surplus value created is largely accumulated in the Global North (Ouma, 2021). These environmental, economic and political processes further underpin and exploit the structural racisms that are part of the afterlives of slavery (Hartman, 2007, p. 6) and colonialism (Bhambra, 2021).

How, thus is it possible to reflect on racism within ESD? What are the mechanisms with which racism works within ESD?

The question of how we shape the future in the face of the world's immense socio-ecological and planetary justice challenges is an essential part of young people's lives today. As the FFF movement shows, young people are also willing to acquire knowledge in the field of informal education in a self-organized way, which they find fundamental for movements towards more climate justice (Bauriedl & Neubauer, 2021). Sustainability education in formal, non-formal and informal contexts is shaping their senses of self and of their relation to the world. And especially the younger generation is highly interested in developing action and problem-solving strategies (Albert et al., 2019). At the same time, knowledge and competencies in the field of sustainability is internationally institutionalized as a social and educational goal (United Nations, 2015, Goal 4.7). Education is seen as central to achieving sustainable development, human rights, peace and "responsible citizenship from local to global levels" (United Nations, 2015, Goal 4.7). Education for sustainability thus has a transformative perspective: It is directed towards shaping a normatively better, liveable future, potentially addressing both *inter*generational and *intra*generational global justice issues according to the established concepts of sustainability (Pichler, 2016). However, hegemonic and Eurocentric problem-solving strategies run the risk of consolidating racism into the future, as we have argued above.

In the context of ESD, racial constructions of meaning are subtly at work and often difficult to grasp or to understand because action "for a better, more sustainable world" is strongly normatively charged and sometimes idealized (Danielzik, 2013; Messerschmidt, 2018). There is a tendency to understand actions perceived as 'environmentally conscious' as 'good' per se. This evaluation represents a barrier to addressing racism within ESD. It can conceal patterns of interpretation and action that are relevant to racism and – at the same time – make them appear legitimate. The fact that racism is also produced, reproduced and legitimized in the context of sustainability and environmental education is often hardly imaginable for well-meaning educators (Danielzik, 2013).

However, there has been ample evidence that racist ideologies have the potential to connect with environmentalism and can (sometimes strategically, sometimes subliminally) be disseminated within environmental protection discourses and practices (FARN. Fachstelle Radikalisierungsprävention und Engagement im Naturschutz, 2018)

This means that racism can unwillingly be perpetuated in ESD and the SDGs as a normative basis for ESD are deeply embedded in colonial power structures (Langan, 2018), effectively perpetuating a racist view of modernity. At the same time, we can ask how ESD can possibly have the potential to be a truly "future-oriented and actively anti-racist" (Ha, 2021) educational field, since it is a field that can actively engage with questions of environmental justice, coloniality and racism.

It is well established in racism research that formal, informal and non-formal educational processes as well as educational media are highly significant for the (re)production of socially legitimized, racial knowledge, images of self/other and the world, as well as symbolic orders in society (Broden & Mecheril, 2010). Research on the coloniality of education and knowledge production closely relates to these findings; see the On Education issue "Provincializing 'Western Education'", e.g. Castro Varela (2020) and Stein et al. (2020). Processes, topics and educational materials in ESD, however, have so far been a gap in research on racism.

We thus want to point out two different, but interconnected foci at hand to trace racism within ESD that can hopefully inform and inspire further research.

First, it seems vital to look at educational topics, materials and media as well as underlying curricula. We consider especially school-based ESD as an important field of study as formal education is relevant for all young people and connected to justice and equity in educational achievement. In formal ESD in Germany, especially in the related field of Global Learning, e.g. in Geography (Schrüfer, 2013), complex translocal relational geographies, structures of inequality and exploitation are part of the curriculum. Dynamic and long-term human-environment and social processes are analyzed and global injustices are addressed. However, coloniality and structural racism are not necessarily named as such and inequalities are usually approached from a *white*, middle-class Eurocentric perspective (Danielzik, 2013). Thus, there is a significant risk of effectively reproducing racism, for example by naturalizing Black suffering and Black death (McKittrick, 2014, p. 17) or by othering and blaming populations of the Global South for the world's sustainability crisis (Randeria, 2019).

This means that topics around global and intergenerational injustices are discussed in classrooms with heterogeneous groups in terms of racialization, migration experience, class, gender, and more. Racism is therefore relevant in the interweaving of these scale levels (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020, p. 330). However, the emerging field of racism studies in subject-matter teaching and learning (Fereidooni & Simon, 2020) has so far mainly taken up topics of migration society (see also Schröder, 2019), representations of Africa (Marmer & Sow, 2015), colonialism (Bönkost, 2018) and development discourses (Kleinschmidt et al., 2015, p. 29). Topics and educational materials in school ESD have been less of a focus (for an exception in Germany: Danielzik, Kiesel, & Bendix, 2013). Hellberg and Knutsson (2018) show that ESD concepts and topics can (unwittingly) sustain "the life-chance divide" between the Global North and the Global South, but they do not explicitly mention racism. We would like to invite educational researchers and practitioners to look for and develop new educational materials and media that have the potential to understand, explore and engage with racism as a topic without imagining only white students as the learning subjects. There

is hopeful and engaging materials that have been developed and can be a basis for further engagement (Glokal e.V., 2017; Kartal et al., 2021).

Secondly, we can follow the insight that racist knowledge structures anchored in educational curricula and media can have very different effects depending on the way people interact with them in the classroom. Educational media and materials that have been developed to match standards of reflection and engagement with racism are not enough. Teachers need to know how to use the materials, and every interaction in the classroom is potentially relevant to racism (Bönkost, 2020). Thus, adopting a bottom-up perspective (Szakács-Behling et al., 2020) and following classroom interactions on how teachers and students make sense of the materials and media images of global inequalities and entanglements they discuss (El-Mafaalani, 2021, p. 36), can be a very promising direction of further research.

In conclusion, we believe that ESD is an important field for both analyzing implicit racisms (re)produced in mainstream society and developing transformative, liberatory educational approaches. This field can develop a potential to dismantle racism in knowledge bases and structures and to intervene in current and future dynamics of racism. However, we do not believe that education and schooling is going to be the only (or even the main) field that will help social-ecological transformations towards a more just planet to succeed (Budde, 2020). Rather, any environmentalist movement, campaign or political party striving for a "better future for all" needs to critically engage with coloniality and racism to face the current multiple and connected planetary crises.

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