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Transformation and Participation – A Reply to Niebert and Van Dijk

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Abstract:

In order to achieve more sustainability, more political education in the sense of Niebert (2019) and the inclusion of indigenous knowledge, as postulated by van Dijk (2019), are certainly important milestones. In addition, behaviorally effective teaching needs more application-oriented approaches. This requires a change in existing didactic formats, including more participation. Innovative, transformative learning environments naturally enable more participation by putting us in touch with ourselves, nature and the environment. Peer education also develops naturally in such contexts. This should be considered especially important because peers serve as multipliers. With a willingness to take the risk of changing existing educational curricula, there is an opportunity to transform the Anthropocene into an age of sustainability.

Keywords:

didactics; education; environment; learning; multipliers; participation; peer education; peers; sustainability; teaching; transformation

Niebert (2019) argues against sustainability education and points out that a higher amount of political education is the instrument to realise a change towards more sustainability. He concludes that steps towards sustainability have always been moderated by political and economic decisions. In order to change the Anthropocene towards an age of sustainability, he argues that the social science background of unsustainable practices has to be taught, and possible points of leverage have to be targeted. His intention is to disburden educators from approaches that usually aim at behavioural change unsuccessfully.

Van Dijk (2019) in response to Niebert (2019) and Su and Su (2019) states that they reject sustainability education too easily. She substantiates her position with a large meta study by Stern, Powell and Hill (2014), which points out that an influence on the behaviour of students is particularly noticeable when they are actively and experientially engaged with real environmental problems (Stern et al., 2014, pp. 600–602). Moreover, she supplements that alternative, local and indigenous knowledge should also be included in sustainability education. She argues that indigenous people have always lived in harmony and peace with nature and demands the inclusion of their traditional knowledge of nature in sustainability education.

In my estimation the transformation of didactic formats, including more participation, is the cornerstone to conveying sustainable developmental education in a way that is effective in terms of behaviour. As part of these changes will be discussed below, Niebert and van Dijk's contributions are certainly a useful addition to the existing sustainability education.

Why a change in the didactic format is necessary to achieve a behaviourally effective teaching of sustainability education becomes clear when we consult Rieß (2003). Already at this early juncture of sustainability education, he postulated that only an application-oriented approach to teaching sustainable development can have a behavioural impact (Rieß, 2003, pp. 149–150). According to Thio and Göll (2011), this is also a demand of the students themselves, who complain about a lack of clear recommendations for action. Moreover, the literature repeatedly emphasises the importance of participation (see e.g. Böhm-Kasper, 2006; Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2020; Eikel & De Haan, 2007; Roth & Olk, 2007; Schreiter, 2015) as well as of peers as multipliers (Hölterhof & Schiefner-Rohs, 2014; Kempen, 2007; Nörber, 2003, 2010). Summarized, the transformation of the didactic formats plays a major role, including significant student participation from the beginning, and therefore to learn on eye-level *with and for each other*. The following section exemplifies a possible approach.

Transformation

Sustainable development is still a relatively new field and educators can only teach what they understand themselves. A teacher's comprehension of the notion of the environment implies his or her practical implementation of

environmental, respectively sustainability education (Sauvé, 1996). Educators need the skills they want to teach themselves as well as the ability to support their students in their own competence development. Therefore, there must be a willingness of teachers to be a constant learner as well. This includes leaving the classic role of the teacher[1] and to be ready to act as a role model and learning companion (Bahr, 2017; see Reusser, 1994, p. 25). Cooper and Geyer (2008) describe education as a complex emergent process in which it is unclear whether what is to be taught has been learned. They argue that new and more creative ways of teaching are essential to achieve the learning objectives. The attitude of indigenous peoples towards nature as postulated by van Dijk plays an important role as a transgenerational space for experience and learning. Within our pluralistic western society, it is necessary to detach an approach to this attitude from explicit morality and spirituality. Both moral and spiritual ideas can arise implicitly from the subjective interpretive background of the educational recipient, but they should not and must not be moderated by a missionary attitude of the teacher. Sustainable developmental education can be processed in its holistic complexity by more innovative methods, so that students can understand interactions and connections. This enables the successful attainment of the learning objectives in a way which is effective in terms of behaviour. To achieve this, teachers must clearly work out the connections to their own subjects, relate them to students' everyday world and link them to clear recommendations for action. In order to be able to reach students, it is important to create a direct link to their everyday life and experience within an adequate teaching and learning environment, as well as to interweave the topics of sustainable development with the existing curricula (Thio & Göll, 2011).

Innovative and transformative teaching and learning formats and environments also enable more participation as a matter of course. This offers teachers and students an opportunity to come into eye-level contact with themselves, nature and the environment so they can learn under these terms with and from each other as part of a successful participation. As a corollary, the question arises as to what successful participation can look like?

Participation

A useful approach as to what participation by children and young people means was postulated by Jaun (2001). According to him, participation is the required involvement of children and young people in planning and decision-making processes, mediated by tools adapted to them (see Jaun, 2001, p. 91). Mussel (1993) shows that children from six years of age have the ability to think logically and are therefore capable of drawing logical conclusions. This implies that children from this age onwards can be considered as equal partners (see Schröder, 1995, pp. 19–20) and should be involved in an age-appropriate manner.

A *signpost for successful participation* can be found for example in a study commissioned by UNICEF (Rieker et al., 2015, p. 24). Table 1.0 contains the summary of this signpost.

In reference to the signpost, it becomes understandable that successful participation does not seem possible without a transformation of didactics. The point "Life Reality" shows that participation is an important cornerstone to increase the probability of a behaviourally effective education for sustainable development. Within the transformative teaching and learning environments described above, which aim at successfully conveying the importance of environmentally conscious action, participation is taken for granted. Peer education also develops naturally in these environments. In educational language use, peers as multipliers are understood as persons' who pass on knowledge or information and contribute to its dissemination and reproduction (see duden.de, n.d.).

Thio and Göll (2011) refer to the essential role of multipliers in the direct environment (peers, parents, teachers, etc.) to achieve behavioural changes successfully. In conclusion, it might be said that the ultimate challenge is the implementation of transformative didactic formats in interaction with the existing sustainability of education curricula, rethinking and/or renewing many factors in education such as successful participation with peers as multipliers. This includes the expansion of the curricula to include a more intensive and focused political education as Niebert meant it.

If we establish didactic formats in relation to current (local) real-world issues and show with clear recommendations for action how each individual can make his or her contribution in dealing with sustainability issues, then it will be more likely that sustainability education will become behaviourally effective in the way it was intended to be. Such an approach is certainly a way to change the Anthropocene and turn it towards an age of sustainability.

[1] In literature the classic role of a teacher is often mentioned (see e.g. Groen et al., 2003; Schlegel & Spring, 2011) but the meaning of this term tends to be taken for granted. By the classic role of the teacher I here mean the teacher as an instructor (Bär, 2015, pp. 8–9; Reich, 2006, p. 27).

Table 1.0

Voluntary	Get involved through their own enthusiasm and motivation.
Life Reality	Concrete relation to life reality and environment.
Personal Initiative	To get involved, children need information, open ears and contact points for ideas and wishes.
Communication Channels/New media	How can children be reached in the context of their use of new media, and how can the various channels be put to good use?
Eye-Level	Importance of age-appropriate support and openness to typical child-like procedures and communication methods, willingness to give up control and to let a process run chaotically from a subjective perspective.
Liabilities	Joint definition and negotiation of framework conditions and rules wherever possible.
Ressource Requirements	Clarification of time, money, material, infrastructure and legal requirements in due time.
Networking	Network all participants at an early stage and inform them regularly.
Transparency	Decision-making processes and time horizons must be comprehensible and manageable for the children.
Effect	The participation of children and young people should be visible and tangible.
Appreciation and Recognition	The work of all participants but especially of children must be appreciated (e.g. exhibition, inspection, brochure, newspaper articles).
Authenticity	Participating adults should keep an eye on their own role and motivation, and regularly question and review them critically. The opinions, ideas, wishes and suggestions of children and young people should only be asked if they are taken into account in the project.

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