

PLASTIK IM HAUSHALT



Flasche
(durch Glas
ersetzbar)



Lineal (durch
Holz ersetzbar)



Lang-Figur



Tüte (durch Papier
ersetzbar)



Armband
(durch Glasperlen
ersetzbar)

Can education prevent forest fires?

**Between drill and personal responsibility:
How education in the spirit of sustainable development might look**

By *Helge Kminek*

How can upbringing and education contribute to making society sustainable? Should they subtly inject the concept of sustainability into children and adolescents so that they act in a climate-friendly way? Or should upbringing and education aim to produce autonomous individuals?

As I am writing this article, the forests in California are burning. Forest fires in the west of the USA are not unusual at this time of year – new, however, are the scale and intensity. We often read that this is already a consequence of human-induced climate change.

Climate change is undoubtedly humanity's most pressing problem. However, there are further phenomena that are impacting on humankind's relationship to its natural resources, such as loss of biodiversity. Many educational concepts, which see themselves as »education for sustainable development«, claim to contribute to solving this and other problems. Yet how can education contribute to making people live their lives in a more sustainable manner? How should it proceed in order to prepare young people for a bright future? This is by all means a contentious issue. The following article aims to outline and discuss concepts that regard themselves as expedient approaches to an education in the direction of sustainable development. They aim to provide answers to the question: How can education contribute to solving manmade problems?

Young people's emotions as a lever for change?

From the perspective of educational psychology, colleagues from Australia and New Zealand recently called for efficient approaches with which to achieve the desired objectives. One of the main findings of their research is that people care significantly less about the environment when they cannot picture climate change and its consequences or react emotionally to imagined consequences (cf. Stanley et al., 2018). It seems to be a logical conclusion that the authors, against the background of this result, call for school students to develop stronger feelings about the future impacts of human-induced climate change. Accordingly, educational inter-

ventions need, in their opinion, to be developed, implemented and improved, perhaps with the support of further research, which successfully stimulate such emotions. To give a specific example, this could be a lesson where school students deal with the idea of a fire in the Indonesian rainforest, which they perceive as so real that they react emotionally to it. If they additionally see the reason for the fire in their own consumption of convenience food – the Indonesian rainforest is chopped down for palm oil plantations because this oil is needed for convenience food, for example, (cf. Hartmann, 2015) –, then this would be a good enough reason for a change in behaviour.

Making school students the authors of their own lives

Munich philosopher Julian Nida-Rümelin strongly opposes such approaches. He points out that the principle of personal responsibility is fundamental to our political order. In his view, educational concepts that negate the objective of personal responsibility, for instance by subtly targeting and attempting to alter school students' emotions, undermine this order and thus implicitly question our notions of democracy or rule of law and the ways we practise them – and thus the basis of our social coexistence. That is why Nida-Rümelin rejects approaches like the one described above. He calls instead for an education in the direction of authorship, which encourages individual school students in a way that allows them to be the authors of their own lives. This type of education should specifically foster their ability to reflect and is based on a confrontation with rational reasons. In this way, each individual is free to make decisions but also able to assume responsibility. This would be the case, for example, in the following scenario: In class

Learning about the environment with scissors and glue: Already at primary school, children learn how to behave in an environmentally friendly way, for example by separating waste properly.

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and together with their teacher, students should think about whether future generations should be able to have an intact rainforest. If »Yes«, the next question is whether something should be done or not done so that there is a reasonable prospect of future generations having an intact rainforest – and, if so, what this »something« might be.

Practising behavioural changes

Jürgen Menthe, then again, chemistry education expert at the University of Hildesheim, assumes that an upbringing or education that targets authorship or personal responsibility can no longer be the aim nowadays because this notion is based on the assumption of a strong and autonomous subject and can no more be upheld. Many studies, he says, have long shown convincingly that we not only do not »rule the roost« but also that we humans do not do those things which we know we ought to do (cf. Entzian, 2015). That is why he

IN A NUTSHELL

- How can education contribute to solving manmade problems? Research has revealed some partly diametrically opposed concepts.
- Since people care less about the environment when they cannot picture climate change and, as a result, are unable respond emotionally to its imagined consequences, scientists from Australia and New Zealand are calling for education to stimulate emotions in school students.
- By contrast, philosopher Julian Nida-Rümelin appeals for educational concepts that foster school students' sense of personal responsibility – and justifies this with the basic principles of democracy.
- UNESCO's concept paper »Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives« endeavours to resolve the controversy but also raises new questions. Children and adolescents should be educated to the point where they are free to make their own decisions and yet develop the competencies needed for sustainable development. However, it remains unclear whether these competencies are actually used to deliver this contribution.

advocates practising alternative behavioural patterns, for example in the form of cooking classes for a meat-free diet. In this way, in his opinion, schools and lessons could contribute to changing students' behaviour and thus to climate protection. This educational programme, similar to the targeting of emotions proposed by Stanley et al., is designed in such a way that the underlying intention is not explicitly communicated to the students. There are thus two roughly opposing approaches: The one stresses the importance of reflection and argumentation (Nida-Rümelin), the other the expectable impacts of educational interventions (Menthe, Stanley et al.).

Developing competencies

UNESCO's concept paper »Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives« (UNESCO, 2017) can be understood as an attempt to resolve the controversy between the approaches discussed so far. The authors suggest fostering competencies among school students that empower them to help solve problems in future without »drilling them« to act according to particular behavioural patterns through upbringing and education. This means that whether school students change their eating habits (in future) and, if so, how they do it, remains their own personal decision.

Yet this concept is not undisputed (cf. e.g. Kminek, 2020a, 2020b). Problems result, for instance, from the fact that competencies are defined without any reference to content or ethics.

For example, the critical thinking competency is defined as »the ability to question norms, practices and opinions; to reflect on own one's values, perceptions and actions; and to take a position in the sustainability discourse« (UNESCO, 2017, p. 10). Due to the arbitrariness in terms of content and ethics, a person who argues that the consumption of convenience food should be reduced in the interest of climate protection and a person who argues that consumption secures jobs both have the envisaged competency. The competencies called for by UNESCO do not therefore necessarily lead to changes in behaviour in the sense of climate protection, which would, however, be required in view of the acute threats. The example specifically criticises what is also criticised systematically. As far as the reasoning is concerned, it is not clear from UNESCO's competency model itself whether the competencies are to be used to help solve the problem. There is a step missing in the line of argument. Scholars at medieval universities would have called out: *Non sequitur* (it does not follow)!



Practical training in alternative behaviour: These children are learning that a delicious meal can be prepared even without meat.

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Pinpointing the problems

It is not, however, surprising that UNESCO's concept paper does not state clearly what an expedient solution to the problem would be, that is, what sustainable development would be, since no one is able to say exactly what in fact constitutes sustainable development. Indeed, there are measures, such as the significant reduction of meat consumption, which many stakeholders view as an important element of sustainable development. But many things are still open and must first of all be explored in

greater depth. How can we overcome the difficulty of not knowing exactly what constitutes sustainable development?

Resolving this difficulty and raising awareness of the many problems in the framework of educational interventions – this is what Philip Wallmeier and the author (2020) propose. In the case of diet, for example, this would mean broaching the contentious topic of meat consumption mentioned above in order to raise awareness of the problem in all its different aspects. ●