Youth and ESD: Interview with Janne von Seggern

What role does (E)SD play for young people?

We know from past studies that youth view environmental protection and climate change as central problems for society. Young people care deeply about environmental protection, and young women in particular are active in this area. In recent years, young people have called the attention of civil society to climate protection as never before. Due to social movements like Fridays for Future, political actions have been demanded for ambitious climate policy.

And what role do young people play in ESD?

The participation of young people now plays an important role in the implementation of ESD because democracy also means including young people in political processes. They should be co-shapers particularly when it comes to such seminal issues as sustainable development that will especially influence their lives.

Thus the 'effective participation of young people' is enshrined in the ESD National Action Plan. Additionally, in 2017, the youpaN was founded, which is the ESD youth forum whose members collaborate in ESD committees and have a vote in the National Platform. This is a special achievement internationally.

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What central findings does the monitoring deliver regarding youth and ESD?

Even before Fridays for Future, the findings of an online study conducted by the nationwide ESD monitoring demonstrated the increased interest of young people in sustainable development. At the same time, young people and teachers alike assessed that the topic of sustainability was not being sufficiently dealt with in formal educational settings. Approximately half of the surveyed trainees and students said that sustainability is not visible in the classroom. In order to satisfy the wishes of these young people, the scope of sustainability-related topics dealt with in the classroom would have to increase about threefold.

Lastly, this study established a considerable gap between the future that young people would like to see and the future that they view as probable: while 50% of the participants can be described as sustainability-conscious, they are also disillusioned. They would like to see more justice and environmental protection and would even take on more responsibility for it, but they have little hope that the sustainable future they wish to see will be obtained together. This represents a challenge for

the teaching staff in particular, but also a chance to pedagogically capture the desires and disillusion of these young people and at the same time to catch other young people who are not particularly conscious about sustainability.

The monitoring team also conducted interviews with experts. What were the main findings of these interviews?

Based on expert interviews we also know that young people are not only concerned with the 'what', but also the 'how' of participation, in other words, the way that participation takes place counts. A culture of participation is needed which is attuned to youth and has flexible structures that take into account their day-to-day life. Important events should not collide with class, for example. Young people would often prefer to be included in action-related activities at short notice than be tied to long-term activities. At the same time, their strengths and interests should be seized upon. Volunteer ESD engagement in non-formal educational institutions such as clubs or NGOs can be used even more than is currently the case to build bridges to institutionalized youth participation at the local and the political level.

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What do these findings mean for the actors who would like to advocate for the strengthening of ESD regarding youth?

Young people demonstrate an enormously high affinity for the diverse issues related to sustainable development and they recognize its urgency as their own. Moreover, youth have shown over the past years that they can transfer this affinity for political processes to other groups like parents, teachers and politicians. Yet it is decisive that young people not be made solely responsible for the implementation of ESD. In a successful process of youth participation, it is therefore crucial to involve young people according to their possibilities, to listen to their ideas and to support their actions to the greatest degree possible. However, this clearly has to happen in a way that is compatible with the day-to-day life of young people. Youth should continue to be aware of their important and valuable role. Other actors can ask themselves the following questions in their work: are we dealing with topics that are really interesting for young people? Are we involving young people enough in decision-making processes? Are the basic conditions, for example dates and language, that we are using appropriate for the everyday life and possibilities of young people? Are we living sustainability by example in our day-to-day collaboration? These are questions whose answers ESD actors can negotiate with young people in order to bring about good, effective youth participation.

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