

## ESD IN SCHOOLS: INTERVIEW WITH ANTJE BROCK



**How has Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) developed in schools over the past years?**

As we have all observed, sustainability has received increasing attention and has been taken more and more seriously in recent years by society as a whole, at the latest due to the world wide pupil protests. This has also had effects on the presence of sustainability in schools. Indeed, its legitimation and its priority have increased. Having said that, central fundamentals for implementing ESD are still missing, such as for instance a multidisciplinary curricular anchoring of ESD and – absolutely crucial – the sufficient qualification of teachers during their formal and later further vocational training so that they can adequately implement ESD. While a whole range of educational materials have indeed been developed, at the same time, teachers’ needs are far from being covered in this area. When implementing ESD, schools are increasingly cooperating with extracurricular partners, and the growing foundation of all-day schools offers more possibilities to apply ESD in a multidisciplinary way.

### **What are the main findings of the ESD monitoring of school education?**

One principal finding is that it is not only political actors who think that ESD is an important part of school education. A large-scale study that we conducted with over 3,000 learners and educators from all German states demonstrated that both groups would ideally like to deal much more with sustainability in class (three times more than is currently the

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case, which would amount to more than a third of the instruction time). This was even so before the presence of Fridays for Future, and it shows the prevalent interest in these topics and methods. At the same time, teachers feel nowhere near sufficiently qualified to be able to implement ESD well – nearly 70% of the teachers did not deal with ESD during their university education. Where has ESD been implemented well so far? On the one hand, in subjects with affinity to sustainability such as biology and geography - on the other, by individual engaged teachers. What the findings also reflect surprised us in its explicitness: the comprehensive data from 2018 showed that both young people and teachers are, on average, anything but optimistic as to how we will deal with the big challenges (climate change, social inequality and technologization/digitization) in coming decades. For them, it is realistic to think that things will worsen considerably in these areas, with declines in quality of life, etc. Scenarios where we ‘get our act together’ clearly appear less and less probable.

In a further study we observed school ESD from the perspective of governance as well. The educational sector is well known for complex and federal voting and communication structures. School therefore tends to react to educational policy reforms, and the schools' acceptance of individual topics only grows when their direct relevance vis-à-vis educational policy is recognized. As such, the structural anchoring of ESD is selective, in parts slow and particularly dependent on the specific federal states.

In another analysis, we reviewed over 1,600 documents concerned with school and the anchoring of ESD in it. It was shown that ESD and sustainability are increasingly being taken up in educational acts and curricula. However, this process is developing in teacher training at a much slower rate, and can be seen as a decisive challenge as teachers describe their own uncertainty and lack of competency in ESD and sustainability as a central obstacle in implementing ESD. An important role is being played here by the Conference of the Ministry of Education and the Arts, who has been able to give important orientation for all parties involved by means of current resolutions.

### **What do the findings of the ESD monitoring mean for actors who would like to advocate for the strengthening of ESD in school education?**

When it comes to structural anchoring, teacher training should be seen as a priority and thus include a structured qualification for instructors who are responsible for teacher training. Also, the nationwide anchoring of ESD in curricula can be further advanced - some states are currently demonstrating what this could look like. By the way, headmasters are important change agents in school ESD - they can support the school staff in various ways and for example implement a 'whole school approach', which makes sustainability a leading principle in all of the processes at the school (design of buildings and the grounds, school lunch, etc.).

Moreover, the findings concerning pessimism about the future among young people and teachers demonstrate particularly important dimensions of ESD: what emotions go hand in hand with growing knowledge about the state of sustainability globally? These are more often than not negative emotions, or feelings in the sense of 'if the problems are so big, what can I do about them', or 'such radical changes – the key people aren't going to cooperate anyways'. How does this affect the motivation to advocate sustainability? The importance of positive emotions, for instance surprising, effective examples of solutions, or something that amazes us, moves us deeply and reminds us why we are fighting for something, is an up to now neglected dimension of good ESD. This means that good school ESD didactics should become more emotion-sensitive. It is important to qualify teachers in this as well.

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### RECENT UPDATES FROM THE GERMAN ESD-MONITORING (LINK)

Holst, J., Brock, A., Singer-Brodowski, M., & de Haan, G. (2020). **Monitoring Progress of Change: Implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within Documents of the German Education System.**

Grund, J., & Brock, A. (2020). **Education for Sustainable Development in Germany: Not Just Desired but Also Effective for Transformative Action.**

Singer-Brodowski, M., von Seggern, J., Duveneck, A., & Etzkorn, N. (2020). **Moving (Reflexively within) Structures. The Governance of Education for Sustainable Development in Germany.**

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