Autumn School 2024 Beyond borders: Whole school approaches to sustainability education for secondary level educators and school leaders

Key note address

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Very good morning, everyone, and a very warm welcome from me! I am Rachel, the coordinator of TAP-TS based at the ZLSB, TU Dresden. It is a great honour for me to give this keynote. But first of all, over to you. Please turn to someone near you and welcome them, in all the languages you can.

Thank you. Wow. We are a multilingual community, and of course, language is just the tip of the iceberg – a sign, for the different communities we have been part of, and our different experiences, knowledge and skills. Our diversity is a rich resource for this community. That is excellent news– because we are here, this week, to engage with some of the most challenging issues in education and society today.

English is the main language of shared communication for this event, and this choice is good some people, like me, who grew up using English but it is more challenging for other people, for who English is an additional language. All languages are welcome here, but of course this is far more complex than saying let us use English only. We need to think, and be sensitive about how we use language so that everyone feels they belong and can participate and learn. Let us not be shy to try out new approaches, to translate, to ask if we don't understand something, or want to be included in a conversation, and to offer other ways to describe the these we will explore together.

Ok, on to the talk. I am going to keep it short, but want to touch on the three key themes of this autumn academy: sustainability, whole school approaches, and borders.

We live in the best and worst of times. More people than ever around the world have reached a level of prosperity unimaginable to previous generations. Humans have developed technologies beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors. And yet, human behaviour, in particular in 'developed' countries of the global north, has driven climate change, mass extinctions and loss of natural habitats. While overall wealth and prosperity has grown, so too has the gulf between extreme wealth and poverty. Polycrises and impacts such as forced migration and armed conflict, have weakened faith in democracy, in science and in professional expertise. The rise of populist and nationalistic movements is exacerbated through digital media.

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Education has never been more important, and is an essential component of sustainability – to all 17 sustainable goals, and a goal in its own right: high quality and inclusive education and lifelong learning for all.

And yet, a bit like technology, education in itself is neither good or bad. Education does not necessarily lead to more fairness or sustainability. In fact, we know that formal education often reinforces social and environmental injustice. Children and young people marginalised through poverty, ethnicity and language are further disadvantaged in our school systems. Indeed, some of the most highly educated people have caused the most damage to other humans and to our planet.

So, the challenge for educators is BIG. Education for sustainability is not just about adopting some new ideas or pedagogical methods, but a rethinking of why, what and how we learn.

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There are many different ways to describe sustainability education. In this project, we are working with GreenComp, developed by European Commission in 2022. Like many others, GreenComp includes wide ranging competences (read the 4 off slide)

Like many other frameworks, GreenComp is rooted in sustainability values. There is no clearer statement that education, like any technology, is not neutral – but must be planned, implemented and evaluated in relation to values. For example, sustainable schools may value inclusion, participation and justice.

The whole school approach reflects the understanding that it is not enough to simply learn about sustainability in classrooms, but that sustainability education can and should involve learning by the whole school.

But what is a whole school? Close your eyes a moment, and picture a whole school, what do you seen? Who is there? What other living things are there? What places are included in your school? What activities? What are people doing?

SIDE

This is one representation of a whole school, and we can immediately see it includes learners and families, teachers and local community members, and learning in school buildings and outside them. The definition provided here by UNESCO states that: (read blue box)

Onto the final theme of this school – and that is borders. I have a couple of thoughts to share here.

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The first, is that on one very basic level education is about pushing borders. The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, described the zone of proximal development as the border between what a learner can do alone, and what they can do with assistance. Through supported, or scaffolded practice, the learner expands their zone of competence. So, as educators we are very used to seeing, and helping learners to expand their competence borders.

Education is scattered with borders. We create physical, social and cognitive borders to define spaces for learning, groups of learners and topics for learning. Borders between concepts help us to define, and develop our thinking and action.

Many borders in education and invisible to us, because we are so used to them – through our own schooling, training and professional practice. An example of this are language borders, which dictate which languages are welcome and where. Although the vast numerical majority of learners in basic education in the world, and a growing minority of learners in Europe are multilingual in schools the dominant practice remains to only allow, to only 'let in' one official language of instruction. Decades of research shows that the official language of instruction is learned best when other languages are included in schools and in learning processes. Multilingual and marginalised learners do best when they are able to bring their linguistic and cultural resources to school, all learners benefit from explicit language teaching across the curriculum.

I suggest that an important part of a whole school approach to sustainability is learning to see the borders in our school community, and to critically question–if these borders serve our interests and align with our values.

In this academy we will be pushing borders, as we learn from this school community, including students. We will explore learning spaces in the school, and beyond the school

together. Kristian Raum, the head teacher, and the whole school community sow professional courage in allowing us in to see challenging work, and work in progress. The idea is not to show you how to do the whole school approach, because this will be different in every school – depending on who is involved, and what the priorities and resources of the group are. Our goal is to engage you as reflective practitioners to learn together this week, and to consider what you will take back to your schools.

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TAP-TS engages a diverse, international community of educators to develop their teaching sustainability competences through participation in professional learning communities, events and activities and in the co-creation, piloting and ongoing adaption of learning and teaching materials.

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Over the course of the project, we have run online workshops, hybrid active learning events and summer schools. This is the final face to face autumn school.

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During this week you will explore some of the interdisciplinary learning and teaching packages developed by the project, which are mostly available on the platform now, and will be available in final form from the end of November.

Thank you.