

Engaging youth in the local environment

Promoting sustainability action competence in Danish high school teaching through citizen social science.

Cathrine M. S. Winther, Michael Søgaard Jørgensen

Abstract: Many young individuals experience a sense of disconnection from their immediate environment, which adversely affects their engagement in civic activities. This article outlines experiences with a sustainability actionable approach in a Danish high school, and how it influenced young people's understanding of the local environment. The study entails a three-month collaboration with a teacher and 17 high school students in Copenhagen who were being trained as citizen social scientists. They investigated and proposed youth-friendly sustainable changes in the neighbourhood, which enhanced their sustainability action competence. The article discusses how an action-oriented framework may inspire high school teachers to incorporate citizen social science in planning education for sustainable development that supports youth civic engagement.

Keywords: Citizen social science, youth civic engagement, sustainability action competence

Desarrollando el compromiso de las personas jóvenes en el entorno local.

Promoviendo competencias para la acción orientada a la sostenibilidad en la educación secundaria danesa a través de la ciencia social ciudadana

Resumen: Muchas personas jóvenes experimentan una sensación de desconexión de su entorno inmediato, lo que afecta negativamente su participación en actividades cívicas. Este artículo describe experiencias desarrolladas con un enfoque accionable de sostenibilidad en una escuela secundaria danesa y señala cómo influyó esta experiencia en la comprensión que las personas jóvenes tenían sobre el entorno local. El estudio se desarrolló a través de una colaboración de tres meses con una profesora y 17 estudiantes de secundaria en Copenhague, que se formaron en las ciencias sociales ciudadanas. Investigaron y propusieron cambios sostenibles que favorecerían a las personas jóvenes de un vecindario, lo que mejoró su competencia en acciones para la sostenibilidad. El artículo analiza cómo un marco orientado a la acción puede inspirar al profesorado de secundaria a incorporar las ciencias sociales ciudadanas en la planificación de una educación para el desarrollo sostenible que apoye la participación cívica de las personas jóvenes.

Palabras clave: Ciencia social ciudadana, compromiso cívico de las personas jóvenes, competencias para la acción orientada a la sostenibilidad

1. Introduction

16% of the global population are young people aged 15–24 years. By 2030, the number is projected to increase by 7% to nearly 1.3 billion youths (Nations, n.d.). In recent years, dissatisfaction among youth has received attention, prompting a move to empower them as equal citizens (UN Press, n.d.). In 2022, Danish researchers found that the root of this dissatisfaction lies in societal pressures, including an accelerated education system and heightened expectations (Katznelson et al., 2021). According to Hartmut Rosa (2021), the constant acceleration of society is affecting our lives and can alienate us from our surroundings. He asserts that dissatisfaction is not due to a fragile psyche, but because youths are becoming aware that something is wrong with the way society is constructed (Politiken, n.d.). However, these pressures often leave youths with little time for local engagement, which has a negative effect on their sense of citizenship, belonging and recognition (Iwasaki, 2015; Simmons & Harding, 2011). At the same time, climate change is threatening human and non-human identities, and the latest IPCC report calls for urgent action (Langsdorf et al., 2022). Transitioning to a sustainable society requires, among others, engaging the youth and enabling them to take control of their future. Though young people have participated in activism against governments, many still feel powerless and resort to denial-like strategies to cope with climate change (Ojala, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate new methods for engaging the youth in sustainable development and their local environment.

This article explores how the educational system can serve as a platform to connect youth with their local environment, bolstering sustainability action competence and encouraging engagement. We define sustainability action competence, inspired by Jensen & Jørgensen (2002) and Mogensen & Schnack (2010), as a set of action-oriented and participatory components that foster an interconnected and motivating understanding of sustainability challenges and ability to act. We emphasise that sustainable development requires an understanding of environmental, social and economic perspectives.

Schools are considered essential for building skills and values related to sustainability (Bosevska & Kriewaldt, 2020; Wamsler, 2020), and since the Agenda 21 Report in 1992, suggested linking sustainable development to education, researchers have argued that using educational institutions to promote sustainable development is effective (UNESCO, n.d.). Particularly in high school (when students are aged 16–21 years in Denmark), young people are moulded into individuals and absorb a substantial amount of knowledge, which enables them to think critically (UBU, 2022). However, many young people lack knowledge about their local community. Therefore, active engagement in their neighbourhood can provide valuable insights, which they can reflect on (Gabrielsen & Korsager, 2018).

Educational institutions educate future citizens, giving them knowledge about how to behave in society. Though this is an essential skill, there is a lack of concrete action-oriented approaches in Danish high schools (Christensen et al., 2022). One way of creating action-oriented education is through action research. Conducting action research in educational settings is not new, but it can still be challenging for teachers to include it as an active part of the curriculum. Kemmis (2009) argue that action research can create collective self-transformation, i. e., the transformation of our practices, how we understand them and the conditions that enable or constrain them. Furthermore, engaging students in action research can empower them to influence their social conditions. This approach creates close connections