

Call for Abstracts - Conference Proceedings

Education, democracy & sustainability Contributions to theory development and empirical research

Annual Conference of the DGfE Commission on Education for Sustainable
Development, 23 to 25 September 2025 TU Dresden (Germany)

The claim that pedagogy in general and education as *Bildung* in particular should contribute to the democratisation of societies is not new. This claim can be traced back to Plato's (1871) "Politeia", for example, with a limited focus on the so-called Western cultural area. The question of the relationship between democracy and education was addressed, for example, in Rousseau's pedagogical assumptions about the social contract (Rousseau 2019/1762) and his pedagogical classic "Emil" (Rousseau 1948/1762), Dewey's "Democracy and Education" (Dewey 1916) and Hannah Arendt's (1960) "Vita activa".

Today political theory and pedagogy, post- and decolonial approaches that critically question the continued existence of colonial structures (cf., e.g., Kohn & Mc Bride 2011), as well as crisis diagnoses of the so-called Western liberal democracies themselves, which question the attribution of political systems as democracies (cf., e.g., Crouch 2005), are also coming into focus. It is not uncommon for these approaches to political theory to invoke pedagogy in order to at least help address the problems identified.

In addition, the demand for increased and appropriate promotion of democracy through education is increasingly being articulated in current education policy discussions, for example in the latest recommendations of the Standing Scientific Commission of the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs in Germany¹. A widespread diagnosis is that democracy under threat. Pedagogy and education should contribute to the successful resolution of this crisis. This means that a wide variety of expectations and topics are often placed on education, such as democracy education and political education. For example, making a contribution to social cohesion (Ganguin et al. 2023) or creating a culture of remembrance in order to contribute to the strengthening of democracy. What exactly is meant by democracy education is itself a debate within educational theorising with a wide range of approaches (see in particular Sant 2019).

The complexity of the relationship between democracy and education when the topic of sustainability or "sustainable non-sustainability" (Blühdorn et al. 2020) is added with regard to the threat to the natural foundations of human life and global demands for justice. Not all people who are affected by decisions on (non-)sustainability can contribute in these decisions. This is the case, for example, regarding the different global contributions to human-made climate change. Those affected by this only have extremely limited opportunities to participate in the democratic political processes of the societies that cause it. Furthermore, from certain ethical perspectives, the assumption can be questioned that only humans and not all living beings can or should participate in decisions, even if it is through the representation of interests by humans.

¹<https://swk-bildung.org/pressemitteilungen/stellungnahme-zur-demokratiebildung-swk-empfehltaerkerung-der-faecher-politik-und-geschichte/>

Finally, it is repeatedly assumed in the context of ESD that ESD can contribute to socioecological transformation processes (e.g. van Poeck et al. 2018, building up on Grin et al. 2010), that ESD functions as an individual and social search, learning and design process (Stoltenberg & Burandt 2015) and thus promotes democratic processes. But does ESD live up to these expectations or does it only to the pedagogisation of political problems (Nohl 2024) and, as a consequence, to the formation of ideologies? There is also the question of how ESD can better address social inequalities in the context of sustainability (Mau et al. 2023).

The conference of the ESD Commission of the DGfE at the TU Dresden 2025 aims to raise these and numerous other educational science issues in the context of ESD in the context of education, democracy and sustainability:

- Which concept(s) of democracy or which theory(ies) of democracy are explicitly or implicitly in ESD research?
- In terms of educational theory, we can ask which concept of democracy or democratic theory should be applied?
- What normative pedagogical programmes and concepts are used in the field of ESD? And how are they justified?
- What ideas of democracy do educators have in the context of ESD?
- What pedagogical ESD practices can be observed from this perspective?
- How is the connection between education, democracy and sustainability negotiated in educational institutions, how are inherent tensions and controversies dealt with?
- What are the criteria for controversy, and where might it also have limits?
- How do socially and politically controversial debates the culture of discussion or the thematisation of ESD in educational institutions?
- Who actively participates in shaping democratic structures and to what extent do educational inequalities limit or structure corresponding opportunities for participation? How can ESD contribute to social cohesion?
- How can ESD contribute to empowerment for political participation? Which pedagogical approaches prove to be effective?

We invite you to submit abstracts of up to 5,000 characters (including spaces, excluding references) and information about the authors (name, institution, research focus) by 31st October 2025 to the following e-mail address: antje.goller@tu-dresden.de.

Empirical and theoretical contributions are equally welcome, provided they address one of the above-mentioned research questions. For empirical contributions, we ask that the abstracts also address the relevance, the state of research, the research question and the results, as well as their discussion. For theoretical contributions, we ask that you address the relevance, formulate a specific question/thesis with initial arguments for answering/elaborating on it, and refer to existing work in the field.

Feedback on the proposed contributions will be provided in December 2025. Please send the complete contributions (approx. 45,000 characters) to the above e-mail address by 31st May 2026.

Information on publication

The volume will be published in the series 'Ökologie und Erziehungswissenschaft' (Ecology and Educational Science) by the ESD Commission of the German Society for Educational Science (DGfE) at Barbara Budrich Verlag.

Editorial team

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