

Basic decree on environmental education for sustainable development



We all depend on the natural resources provided by planet Earth. Waste and exploitation, loss of biodiversity and climate change call for thorough re-thinking and comprehensive action to ensure a sustainable development for ourselves and future generations. Many successful initiatives are evidence of the fact that our livelihoods can be lastingly improved. The 2013 Federal Constitutional Act on sustainability, animal welfare, comprehensive environmental protection, securing the water and food supply and research¹ is a mandate for action and at the same time provides backing for initiatives in this context.

Challenges for environmental education at Austria's schools

Environmental education contributes to a sustainable development of society. To achieve this end, it is necessary to

- perceive environmental education as an integral part of teaching and school development,
- use instruction as an opportunity for learning and for gaining findings, in order to become aware of the impact of growing global complexity and the transformations of the local and global environmental situation and, on that basis, to deal with future risks and uncertainties,
- identify opportunities for sustainable change and harness potentials for implementation,
- initiate projects together with pupils and support their project ideas so that they can apply and reflect upon their knowhow and skills through concrete action.

Objectives of environmental education

Environmental education highlights how the complex interaction of various social influences has led to the current state of our environment. It can strengthen awareness, a sense of responsibility, and the skills which allow pupils to shape their future.

Pupils are to be given an opportunity to

- experience nature's diversity as a place of personal learning (i.e. appreciating their connectedness with the world both cognitively and emotionally),
- explore the environment based on interdisciplinary research, and critically and constructively reflect on their findings,
- comprehend technological change and understand it as a chance for new, long-term developments,
- realise their democratic responsibility as active citizens, develop their own standpoints and personal value codes, and take a pro-active and constructive part in shaping society,
- critically review their personal lifestyles and rethink the impact of individual action on the environment,
- jointly develop sustainable future scenarios and, if possible, take concrete action in their daily routines which encourages others and sets an example.

In this manner, environmental education promotes the acquisition of competences needed to understand the finiteness of our natural resources, and contributes to shaping the environment and society in a forward-looking manner, based on solidarity and responsibility.

1 http://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2013_I_111/BGBLA_2013_I_111.html [6.5.2014].

Competences

The curricular focus on competences is aimed at integrating know-how and skills beyond the reproduction of acquired curricular contents and at creating learning opportunities which allow pupils to develop in a cognitive, emotional and action-oriented manner.²

Competence orientation should be reflected in the annual plans as well as in the plans for the individual teaching units.

Competences under the heading »Generating, reflecting on and sharing knowledge«

Pupils are able to

- understand, interpret and present ecological, economic and social facts and systemic interrelations,
- assess environmental changes in terms of their potential ecological, economic and social impact,
- realise the need to develop and use resource- and environmentally sound procedures, products and services in business and industry,
- deal with conflicting standpoints and interests, and assess and evaluate different perspectives.

Competences under the heading »Developing attitudes«

Pupils

- interact considerably with each other, with fellow citizens and the environment in their individual learning, work and life settings and develop an empathic attitude vis-à-vis all creatures,
- are ready to contribute to the preservation of biodiversity (diversity of species, soil, landscape) and to the sustainable development of our natural resources.

Competences under the heading »Evaluating, deciding, implementing«

Pupils are able to

- assess the impact of their actions at school, local, regional and global level and take informed decisions on consumption, use and exploitation,
- stand up for their opinions in public and are willing to participate in sustainable development initiatives.

Principles

Environmental activities at school are to

- raise awareness for the causes and requirements of nature, animal welfare and environmental protection and, specifically, for personal responsibility as well as the possibility to live up to that responsibility in everyday life,
- explore the complex interdependencies and action mechanisms of our environment as well as the interrelation of ecological, economic and social influences, needs and interests,
- be based on interdisciplinarity and cooperation and consider the findings of the natural and social sciences and the humanities,
- handle emotions which may surface when dealing with environment-related issues in a conscious and constructive manner,
- allow discussing conflicts of interests and dilemmas and encourage the assessment of differing views,

2 Weiglhofer, H.: Die Kompetenzenlandkarte für Unterrichtsprinzipien und Bildungsanliegen. In https://www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/uek/kl_weiglhofer_25649.pdf [6.5.2014].

- reflect on the values underlying activities and decisions,
- combine cognitive and practical activities,
- tie in with the daily environment of pupils within their families, at school and during leisure time, and pay attention to respectful interaction,
- promote pupils' self-reliance and cooperation as well as creativity,
- seize given occasions and make use of the local surroundings for activities.

These principles of instruction are congruent with the objectives of education for sustainable development as laid down by UNESCO.³

Integration in everyday life

Environmental education becomes alive if environment-related concerns are integrated in teaching and school developments.

Active democracy at school, the determination and practice of routines according to agreed rules⁴, participation in school networks, striving for environmental awards and the use of school quality management systems (SQA, QIBB) all support the concerns of environmental education.

Contents and thematic approaches

The contents of environmental education relate to all aspects of human interaction with nature. The thematic areas mentioned are to be understood as an inspiring choice without claiming to be exhaustive: Classic themes which promote an understanding of eco-systems (water, soil, air, climate, energy, forest, ...) are to be supplemented by themes which increasingly include social and economic concerns (consumption and lifestyle, sustainable use of resources and fairness, ecological footprint, renewable energies, environment and health, mobility, animal welfare, foodstuff production, genetic engineering and biotechnology etc.). Themes relating to current local and global affairs are to be given special priority as they make it easier to establish a link to the environment.

Methodological and didactical principles

Learning in environmental education is to activate at the cognitive level, appeal emotionally and encourage self-reliant action. Learning settings should be conducive to stimulating pupils' interest in the environmentally relevant topic at stake, relate to the learner, and involve their knowledge and experience in the learning process.

When providing and processing information the numerous possibilities offered by the new media should be taken into consideration.

3 »Austrian Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development«. Vienna. In: https://www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/ba/bine_strategie_18299.pdf, p.18 [6.5.2014].

4 Bibliographic reference: C. Laimer: Vereinbarungskultur an Schulen, guidance paper by ÖZEPS, 2011

A diverse range of methods is required to leverage the multiplicity of (cognitive, emotional, action-oriented) approaches to the environment. This implies that:

- in addition to the systematic provision of knowledge
 - open, controversial issues are being addressed;
- in addition to a focus on individual subjects and/or subject areas
 - complex, real-life situations are dealt with across individual subjects;
- in addition to learning that is directed to the reproduction of knowledge
 - experiential, hands-on learning is enabled,
 - knowledge is generated locally by pupils and teachers,
 - pupils actively shape their environment,
 - a critical and reflective attitude vis-à-vis knowledge and information is encouraged.

Key elements of teaching and learning processes

- Nature discovery and education (in the forest, on the meadow, at the river, in the city etc.), visit of out-of-school learning sites as part of educational outings and excursions
- Use of theme days (e.g. day of biodiversity, world animal welfare day, environment day world water day etc.), competitions and similar campaigns
- Project-based learning (see Basic Decree on Project Education⁵)
- Design, use and maintenance of sites outside and inside of the school building
- Using real-life learning opportunities such as e.g. active participation in community life and taking on tasks for the common interest in the school surroundings (»service learning«)
- Cooperation with parents and external partners (associations, authorities, companies, experts etc.)
- Learning by experiment and discovery up to pre-scientific work, research-education cooperation and participation in scientific projects
- Conducting role plays as well as experimental games and simulations.

Interaction with other principles of instruction

Dealing with environmental issues in classroom instruction also helps implement other principles of instruction and overarching themes such as social learning and personality development. Content-related, didactic and methodological interactions emerge particularly with regard to the following principles of instruction:

Civic education, European policy and development policy education

More and more it is necessary to reconcile the conflicting demands of the environment in the context of sustainable development and different values, needs and interests. Differing views should be addressed by democratic discourse based on objective information. In this process, awareness should be raised for the limits of any economic development in terms of social justice and the conservation of natural resources, and national, European as well as global development policy concerns should also be raised. Environmental education thus promotes democratic attitudes and behaviours and creates the preconditions for addressing social conflicts in a constructive manner. In this context, reference is made to the democratic principle laid down in the Austrian Federal Constitution (Article 1, Constitution) and to the Federal Constitutional Act on sustainability, animal welfare, comprehensive environmental protection, securing the water and food supply and research of 11 July 2013⁶.

5 https://www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/ba/pu_tipps.html [6.5.2014].

6 http://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2013_I_111/BGBLA_2013_I_111.html [6.5.2014]

Health education

The interrelation of health, the environment and sustainable development manifests itself also when it comes to nutrition and physical exercise, as well as noise and emissions. Pupils are to be encouraged to develop a health-promoting and sustainable lifestyle and, by doing so, take on responsibility for their own lives. This also includes recreation, leisure behaviour, sports and tourism combined with nature and the environment.

Reading and media education

The study of environmental issues presupposes the ability to read and understand as well as to critically question contents. Equally important are

- a critical attitude towards the media,
- their conscious and moderate use, and
- social interaction in the real and the virtual worlds.

Economic and consumer education

Economic and consumer education is to empower pupils to critically question non-sustainable operations, reflect on the local, regional and global impact of their own consumer behaviour, and allow them to take informed and independent purchasing and consumption decisions. This equally touches upon fundamental issues of resource consumption, organic farming, fair trade, ecological procurement, regionality and seasonality as well as animal welfare.

Traffic education

The way to school as a place of experience and learning and issues such as traffic safety allow dealing with the different forms of mobility and their impact e.g. on emissions, fine particles, area planning, loss of unsealed natural surfaces.

General Principles, Legitimation and Guidance

Environmental education helps empower individuals to take on responsibility for themselves, present and future generations, and to actively involve themselves in the design of a future that is worth living.

This requires knowhow, skills and the readiness of each individual to commit him- or herself. Responsible action presupposes that ecological, social and economic aspects are equally considered in a balanced manner when taking decisions.

In 1984, Austria committed itself by a constitutional act to »comprehensive environmental protection« and in 2013 adopted the Federal Constitutional Act on sustainability, animal welfare, comprehensive environmental protection, securing the water and food supply and research⁷.

Since 1979 environmental education has been embedded as a principle of instruction in the Austrian system of education. The purpose of such principles of instruction is to help attain those educational tasks of school which, more than others, require an interdisciplinary cooperation of several subjects of instruction.

Guidance is also provided by the National Education Report 2012, the EU Sustainable Development Strategies, and a UN resolution.

7 http://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2013_I_111/BGBLA_2013_I_111.html [6.5.2014].

The National Education Report 2012⁸ emphasizes that the implementation of interdisciplinary competences – such as environmental education – at various levels is a key factor for the quality of the Austrian system of education.

The strategies for sustainable development of the European Union⁹ are reflected in the Austrian system of education in the key competences for lifelong learning (social competence, civic competence, mathematical competence and competence in science and technology)^{10,11}.

The United Nations' call to embed the values and principles of sustainable development in the respective national system of education has been taken up in the Austrian education strategy for sustainable development¹².

The Fourth International Conference on Environmental Education in Ahmedabad¹³, India, in November 2007 adopted a number of forward-looking recommendations for the practical implementation of environmental education in the 21st century.

Implementation of the decree

This basic decree applies to all levels at all types of schools.

It also applies to pedagogical staff and/or leisure-time educationalists working in day-care provided at school.

The contents and objectives of the basic decree are to be implemented in initial, further and continuous education at university colleges of teacher education, kindergarten teacher training colleges and training colleges for social pedagogics. They are addressed as recommendations also to all other institutions providing initial or further training of teachers.

The province school boards/the school board of the City of Vienna, the rector's offices of the university colleges of teacher education, and the heads of the training colleges are requested to make this basic decree public as appropriate and to implement it in their sphere of responsibility.

Thanks are addressed to all those who have worked towards supporting environmental education. At the same time, all educational institutions are encouraged to continue actively and critically addressing events of day-to-day life which affect the environment.

8 National Education Report 2012, Volume 2 Fokussierte Analysen bildungspolitischer Schwerpunktthemen, Chapter 02: https://www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/uek/nbb_2012_b02_kapitel02_23886.pdf [6.5.2014].

9 Council of the European Commission (2006): document 10117/06 Renewed EU Sustainable Development Strategy, p 22: in <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/de/06/st10/st10117.en06.pdf> [6.5.2014].

10 Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning [Official Journal L 394 of 30.12.2006], pp. 10–18 in: http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11090_en.htm [6.5.2014].

11 Strategy on Lifelong Learning in Austria (2011): https://www.bmbf.gv.at/ministerium/vp/2011/llarbeitspapier_ebook_gross_20916.pdf [6.5.2014].

12 Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, Federal Ministry of Education, Art and Culture, and Federal Ministry of Science and Research (Eds.) (2008): »Österreichische Strategie zur Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung«. Vienna. In: https://www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/ba/bine_strategie_18299.pdf [6.5.2014].

13 <http://www.tbilisiplus30.org/Final%20Recommendations.pdf> [6.5.2014].

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