

DESIGNING ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

POLICY PAPER

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Designing environmental education with young people for young people

To enhance democratic environmental citizenship, there is a need to create spaces where young people can actively contribute to sustainability discussions and actions. Involving young people in the development of environmental education enhances its overall impact and relevance, encouraging student participation and co-creation.

Co-creation is a frequently used method for developing products or processes together with stakeholders. Engaging students in improving learning materials by sharing their ideas, experiences, and feedback has also been applied in higher education (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Finlayson, 2014). These experiences have shown that youth involvement can be a powerful tool to create educational resources, particularly when aiming to support the active citizenship of young people (Sjöström & Eilks 2020).

Example 1: Insights of young people on why it matters to engage youth in shaping sustainability education

“Young people are the ones who need to learn about green competencies because it is our future. Something so important should not be ignored, but put on blast, so that solutions can be put in place.”

“I care and feel worried about the climate crisis and think it’s important to discuss how we can make a change. It’s an important issue and concerns everyone.”

“They (young people) are aware of how young people like to learn and what they find interesting and relevant. Therefore, in order to make the process effective, young people need to have a say in how it should be.”

GreenSCENT successfully piloted the Youth Design Assembly method involving 56 young people aged 14 – 24 from seven European countries in a dynamic review and feedback process. Participants from Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Romania, Serbia, and Spain discussed, evaluated, and gave feedback to co-create sustainability education from curriculum design to individual courses and specific pedagogical tools (more information at www.green-scent.eu/youth-assemblies) This approach has demonstrated the benefits of youth participation in shaping education for sustainable future (e.g., Burmeister et al. 2024).

Youth Design Assembly’s findings and feedback show that involving students in shaping and co-creating environmental education is an impactful approach to generate novel ideas and enhance the relevance of education for young people. Engaged students generated many concrete suggestions for new pedagogical tools and suggested valuable enhancements to existing ones. Our feedback and evaluation data underscores the effectiveness of this engagement strategy in enhancing students’ environmental agency (see the example 2). Recognising that young people are often underrepresented in participatory processes, targeted efforts are needed to ensure their equal involvement in decision-making. These insights highlight the transformative potential of student engagement in shaping a more meaningful and impactful environmental education.

Example 2: Feedback of participants involved in GreenSCENT Youth Design Assemblies

Student feedback

“It made us feel helpful, because our suggestions were used. We are also happy and excited to see the end result. The app could be useful if implemented right”

“I feel angry that so little is happening in relation to green change. Being part of a [Youth Assembly] has shown me how a lot of individuals and companies are doing their best. However, on a larger scale, we are seeing little to no difference, which is very demotivating”

"Seeing the results made me feel like I have contributed to the start of a greener Europe"

Moderator’s feedback

“The participants expressed how the co-creation workshop and the ideas generated gave them hope”

“We are beyond happy to see how the Youth Assemblies enable the young participants to recognise themselves as changemakers”

“Becoming aware of the value the participants bring to the table is an important step towards empowerment, and hopefully they can use it to inspire other youths”

Summary of the key benefits of engaging young people in shaping environmental education

- **Relevance and Motivation:** Student-centred educational approaches can significantly increase learning motivation. Co-creating educational resources with students ensures the curriculum and activities are engaging and pertinent.
- **Early Involvement:** Students' early participation in curriculum and course design makes it possible to identify opportunities and shape implementations for better support and positive engagement.
- **Mutual Learning:** Dialogue and co-creation support mutual inspiration and learning, provided the right means and platforms are available.
- **Community Engagement:** Mutual learning, inspiration, and cultural encounters can help to foster a sense of community and engagement.
- **Emotion and Action:** Emotions and motivation are crucial for action. Science, facts, and rationality seldom lead to action on their own.

Recommendations for policy measures to support student – centred methods and dialogue in shaping environmental education

Student involvement in curriculum and course development is a promising, yet underused approach to enrich environmental education and support environmental citizenship of young people. However, a knowledge gap exists among schools, educators and policymakers regarding effective engagement methods and best practices for involving young people in dialogue. This gap, coupled with scepticism from decision makers and educators, can hinder the adoption of co-creation and dialogic methods in shaping environmental education.

To address these challenges, we recommend the following policy measures:

- **Establish Youth Design Assemblies:** Create local, national and European youth design assemblies to promote dialogue between young people and decision-makers on sustainability issues. Youth design assemblies can be used to generate ideas and recommendations for specific policy topics, to inform and validate policies and to develop and improve the content of environmental education framework or to develop the framework itself.
- **Awareness Campaign:** Launch an information campaign to highlight the benefits of youth design assemblies in social dialogue, sustainability decision making and in designing sustainability education for young people. The campaign should also include Blueprints and training for organising youth design assemblies.

Guidelines for organising Youth Assemblies in a fair and inclusive manner

In addition to designing education, youth assemblies can serve various other purposes as well, such as idea generation and policy recommendations and validation. Therefore, they can be arranged in diverse ways and should always be tailored to the specific objective. Here are some general guidelines to guarantee a fair and impactful design of youth assemblies:

- **Objective and scope definition:** Clearly define the purpose of the youth design assembly. Determine who the participants will be (age) and consider whether they should be experts on the topic or laypeople. Establish the assembly's scope.
- **Content and process overview:** Plan the number of meetings, identify the facilitators, and decide on the platforms and tools to be used. Consider whether the participants will convene in person, online or both. Outline the topics and decide how much should be fixed from the start and how much will the participants be able to influence the process and the content.
- **Participant recruitment:** Select participants relevant to the assembly's scope and strive for inclusivity considering age, gender, sociodemographic background, regional diversity, and representation of underrepresented and vulnerable groups.
- **Safe and inclusive dialogue space:** Allocate enough time initially for participants to get to know each other and the topic. Ensure that those uncomfortable with speaking in plenary sessions have alternative ways to express their opinions, such as using the chat function. Assist participants in developing a code of conduct that sets the norms for the youth design assembly.
- **Co-design of the process:** Maintain a flexible process plan and actively involve participants in co-designing the final process, methods and content.
- **Face-to-face connection:** If possible, organise at least one in-person meeting at the start to foster personal connections among participants.

- **Respecting young participants:** Treat the youth design assembly with utmost respect and seriousness. Avoid overruling the decisions and wishes of the young participants.
- **Participant motivation:** Encourage and support participant's ideas, allowing for process flexibility to allow new ideas to evolve.
- **Creating impact:** Consider how to bring the youth design assembly ideas out to the real world. Support participants in further work on the topic by facilitating network connections, linking them with relevant organisations or individuals, and providing recognition through certificates or personal recommendations for their work.

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