

Beyond Teaching the Consumer: A Needs-based Conception of “Education for Sustainable Consumption”

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The paper presents an educational theoretical reflection and intervention on the challenges of contributing through education and learning to the transformation towards sustainable and just consumption and production systems. The starting point is a problematization of dominant approaches in consumer education to meet the socio-ecological challenges through incremental curricular integration, which mainly focus on responsabilizing learners in their role as consumers (e.g. consumer citizenship) and define solutions as system-immanent adaptations (e.g. qualification for green jobs) (Chachelin, Rose & Paisley, 2015). In response to this critique, this conceptual contribution explores how the critical potential of education for sustainable development can be used more strongly to expand the discourse space in which transformations of consumption and production systems are conceived and thereby support contemporary change processes more effectively.

The starting point of the argumentation is the sociological distinction between functions that educational systems fulfill (Biesta, 2015): schools introduce young people into an existing social and cultural order (socialization) and train them for concrete professional needs (qualification). In addition to this adaptation, however, they should also support learners in emancipating themselves, becoming independent and critically questioning the existing order (subjectification). This paper argues that education in the context of socio-ecological challenges should be conceived less as a response to unsustainability and much more as a driver of social change (transformation) (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015). To this end, the paper proposes a needs-based concept of “education for sustainable consumption” that no longer takes its starting point in the role of individual consumers, but problematizes current systems of consumption and production as a historical social variant for satisfying human needs (Fischer, King & Casanova, 2023). By taking human needs and social models for their satisfaction as the reference space for the pedagogical discussion of “sustainable consumption”, the structurally immanent narrowing to consumption and the consumer role can be overcome and discourse spaces can be opened to think about a safe and just satisfaction of needs as a goal of sustainable development both within and beyond consumption and production. The article shows on the basis of some case studies how a needs-based education for sustainable consumption can look like in practice and raises questions for further educational theorizing and experimentation.

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