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Youth Engagement in Schools: Student voices, participation, and action in learning for sustainability

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1. Introduction

More and more young people are raising their voices for issues that are important to their communities and their generation. However, research suggests that young people perceive a lack of opportunity to influence decisions and policy makers[1]. This can generate concern and, in some cases, anxiety as many feel unable to address issues such as climate change or contribute addressing employment or cost of living issues shaping their daily realities[2].

As a result of feeling disempowered by mainstream processes, some young people engage in protests or disruptive actions[3] whilst others simply disconnect from social engagement as seen by the increasing numbers of young people intensely engaged in virtual reality gaming and other screen time activities[4]. Significantly, researchers point to how engagement levels are lowest in youth from socio-cultural backgrounds that differ from that of the core cultural group of a school, town or city[5].

Learning for sustainability (LfS) provides an opportunity to address this social challenge as well as advance the green transition. A first step may be to recognise that young voices hold a unique perspective on issues that affect them and that they can make a valuable contribution to more sustainable futures. Those engaged in education should consider not just the views and expectations of young people as they seek to actively participate in society, but also how best to fulfil the responsibility of equipping young learners with the skills and experience needed to effectively engage.

The focus of this paper is on school education and learner participation with the intention of informing education policy-makers on how to assist in upscaling efforts and creating additional spaces for youth engagement in, and through, formal education. In seeking to support youth voices, engagement and participation for sustainability, the paper addresses five key questions:

Q. What is meant by student voices, engagement and participation in LfS?

Q. Why should education authorities, schools and colleges[6] be concerned with this? What is the value or benefit?

Q. What does good practice in this area look like?

Q. What are the challenges to youth engagement in sustainability?

Q. What are the implications for policy and national coordinating actions?

This input paper uses the term ‘young people’ to refer to children (4-12 yrs) as well as teenagers (13-19 yrs) and recognises that this demographic consists of a heterogenous group that is diverse in gender, faith and socio-economic background and is inclusive of young people living with disabilities.

[1] Booth (2023); The Centre for Youth Impact (2022); UNDP and UNDESA (2013)
[2] Ingaruca (2022). The UNDP document acknowledges the results of Hickman et al. (2021). *This 2021 study of 10,000 youth from across the world found that over 50 percent of young people surveyed felt sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and/or guilty about climate change. Findings also pointed to 45 percent expressing how their concerns about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning.*
[3] Fridays for Climate is an example of how school children have opted out of classes to protest about climate change and lack of political action. Also see *Hickman et al. (2021)* cited above.
[4] Livingston (2019). It is argued that young people feel disempowered and disconnected from society making it easy for them to turn online activties and games where they can exercise some control. This increased online activitiy means a lack of opportunitiy for developing social skills and experiences which in turn makes it more likely that they avoid face to face situations and spend more time online.
[5] Borojevic, Petrovic, and Vuk (2014); Perkins et al. (2007)
[6] Colleges refer to sixth form secondary colleges and further education colleges.

It is important to note, that this is an emergent policy concern and, as such, this paper does not have the weight of research evidence needed to establish firm recommendations. Instead, the paper is informed by leading thinking, reports written by key agencies and established youth groups as well as by reflective pieces written by young people. Innovative practice is also used in an attempt to assist with assessing the state of play and how to advance this agenda meaningfully.

2. What is meant by student voices, engagement and participation in learning for sustainability?

Youth or student engagement can be multi-faceted and complex and yet it is often interpreted narrowly to mean consultation or limited participation with no ability to meaningfully inform, shape or change a context, scenario or situation[7]. Definitions of participation constructed by youth groups themselves often highlight the need to be actively involved in decision-making processes especially on issues that affect them directly[8]. When efforts are not inclusive, do not support purposeful engagement or do not permit young students to exercise control over their participation then they are viewed as tokenistic practice[9].

Youth voice activities support young learners to form and express their views and share them to create positive change in their lives and for others in their community. Often, young people who speak up persuade others to take action or influence decision-makers to change current policies, approaches or priorities.

Distinctions have been made between **engagement** and **participation**[10]. Engagement is understood as an umbrella term covering a range of interactions which includes information giving and receiving as well as consultation on specific issues. Participation, on the other hand, is interpreted as involving young people actively in a project or process, not just as consumers but as key contributors to the direction and implementation of work carried out[11]. A key aspect of this is the empowerment of young people to be able to exercise a high level of participation.

Some examples which capture the range of student engagement and participation activities in sustainability include:

- young people being **consulted and involved** in plans for the upgrading of their school playground or local park;
- young people **inquiring into issues** related to food served in the school canteen and forming an opinion or position that informs personal choices;
- young people **calling for** (campaigning/lobbying/advocating) greater youth representation in committees addressing climate change;

[7] Burke (2023)
[8] Markovich Morris and Naeem (2023); YERP (2013)
[9] Hart (1992); YERP (2013)
[10] Save the Children (2005)
[11] Save the Children (2005)

- young people **taking part** and actively contributing to an event that raises awareness about new plans for sustainable housing in their community;
- young people **joining youth committees** or **groups** to protect local biodiversity and habitats;
- young people being **given responsibilities to look after** green areas in school;
- young people **leading** a school magazine where they **become reporters and critical commentators on key sustainability issues** relevant to young people;
- young people **lobbying** a local supermarket to reduce its dependence on plastics and offer alternatives to consumers;
- young people **representing others** in national constituted groups to influence national curriculum development or reform.
- young people **expressing their visions for the future** in climate change youth parliaments or Mock-CoP initiatives.
- young people being a key stakeholder in **school decision-making bodies** that shape how the school practices sustainability.

The above examples recognise that young people can participate within and across a number of spheres of influence to include: home, school, neighbourhood and community as well as have influence at regional, national, European and international levels.

The engagement opportunities listed above also touch upon the concepts of citizenship, inclusivity, democracy and challenge to varying degrees.

They serve to build confidence and competence in learners as well as the experience of participation necessary for effecting the green transition[12]. Holdsworth reminds us that youth participation is an approach not something that can be done as a one-off project[13]. Youth participation supports young learners to act; to make their own decisions; and, to advocate for themselves[14].

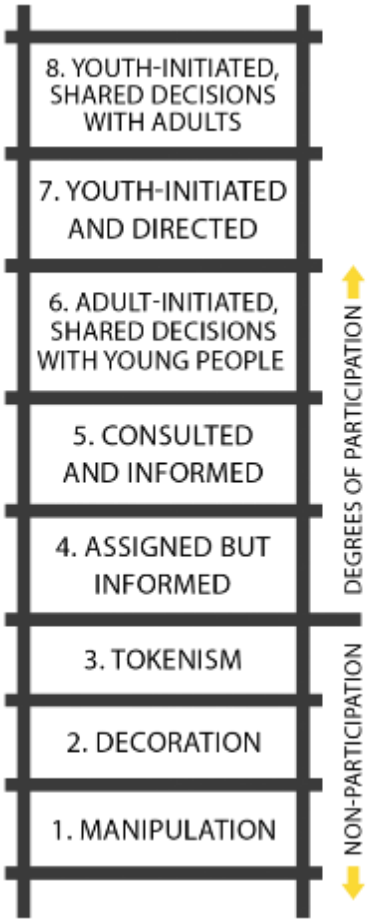
Whilst there are a number of conceptual models of youth engagement[15] these were developed some time back and before the internet and social media influenced engagement opportunities. Perhaps the most authoritative is Hart's *Ladder of Children's Participation* (1992)[16] which is an adaptation of Arnstein's (1967) original proposal for citizenship participation[17] (see **Figure 1**). This model ranks engagement and is helpful in identifying 'false' types of participation such as manipulation, decoration and tokenism which are placed in the 'lower rungs' of the ladder [18] . Critics of the rankings have argued that young people may not always be ready to start at a higher rung and that a more gradualist approach reducing adult involvement is often required. The ladder concept also suggests that there is

[12] The Working Group recently visited Kinsale Community College in Ireland where they saw first hand how LFS initiatives that engaged young people in school and community projects resulted in some core benefits for the students; including, the development of core LfS competences and the extension of generic skills relating to communication and team-building. These experiences also supported their democratic participation and engagement in wider social affairs.
[13] Holdsworth (2001)
[14] Ramey, Lawford, and Vachon (2017)
[15] For overview of different models see Kellett (2011).
[16] Hart (1992)
[17] Arnstein (1969)
[18] Later Hart (2008) explained that the ladder is an expression of different 'degrees' of agency or participatory engagement by young people (see [xxi]).

a necessary set of sequential steps necessary to children's developing competence in participation; this has also been challenged[19]. Despite its limitations the 'Ladder' has been used extensively to inform and assess youth engagement practice.

Figure 1: Hart (1992) Ladder of Participation

Hart (1992) Ladder of Participation



Source: Hart, R.A., Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship, Innocenti Essay, UNICEF, Florence, Italy, 1992[20].

[19] Hart (2008); Reddy and Ratna (2002)

[20] Image sourced from https://360participation.com/models-of-participation/ (2017). Accessed 18 November 2023.

The Treseder model (1997)[21] captured in **Figure 2**, places much more emphasis on power sharing and moving towards more gradual achievement of democratic youth participation. It also acknowledges cultural contexts placing them in a way that depicts them as different but equally valuable forms of participation.

Shier's model (2001)[22] is perhaps more relevant and helpful as it presents the adults' roles in supporting children and young people. This more complex model illustrated in

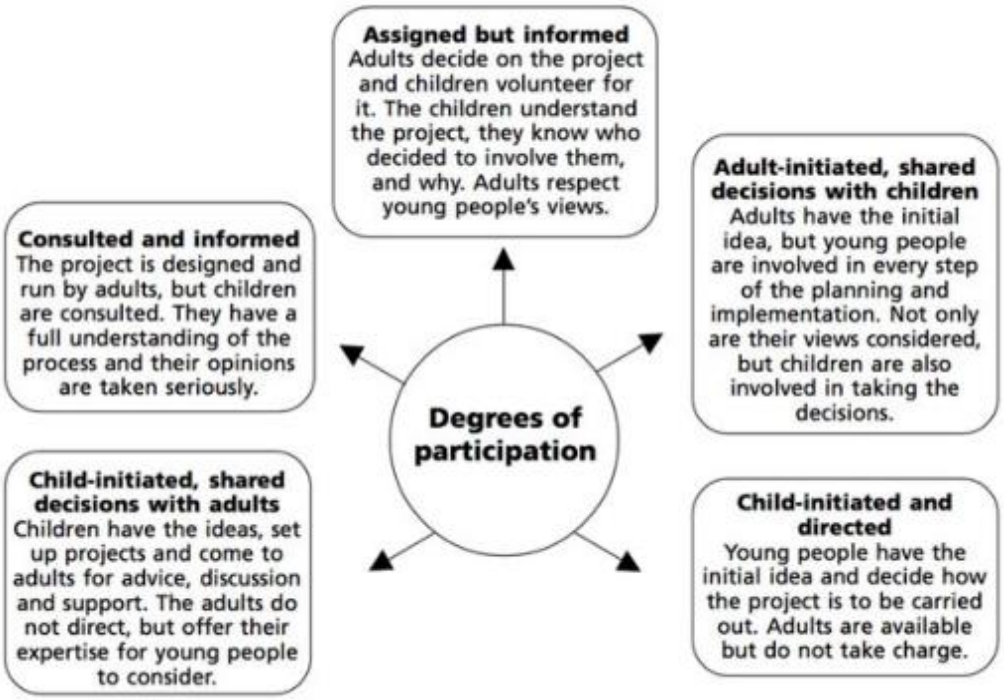
Figure 3 extends the 'readiness to participate' theme and maps participation from the lowest level ('children are listened to') to the highest ('children share power and responsibility for decision making.

These models are helpful in that they encourage educators and learners to reflect on their experience of participation and the roles they have played in the process. They can help question and scaffold participation experiences in sustainability, helping adults to gradually concede greater degrees of opportunity for a young person to take on responsibilities[23].

[21] Treseder (1997)
[22] Shier (2001)
[23] Hart (2008)

Figure 2: Treseder's Model (1997) Empowering Children and Young People

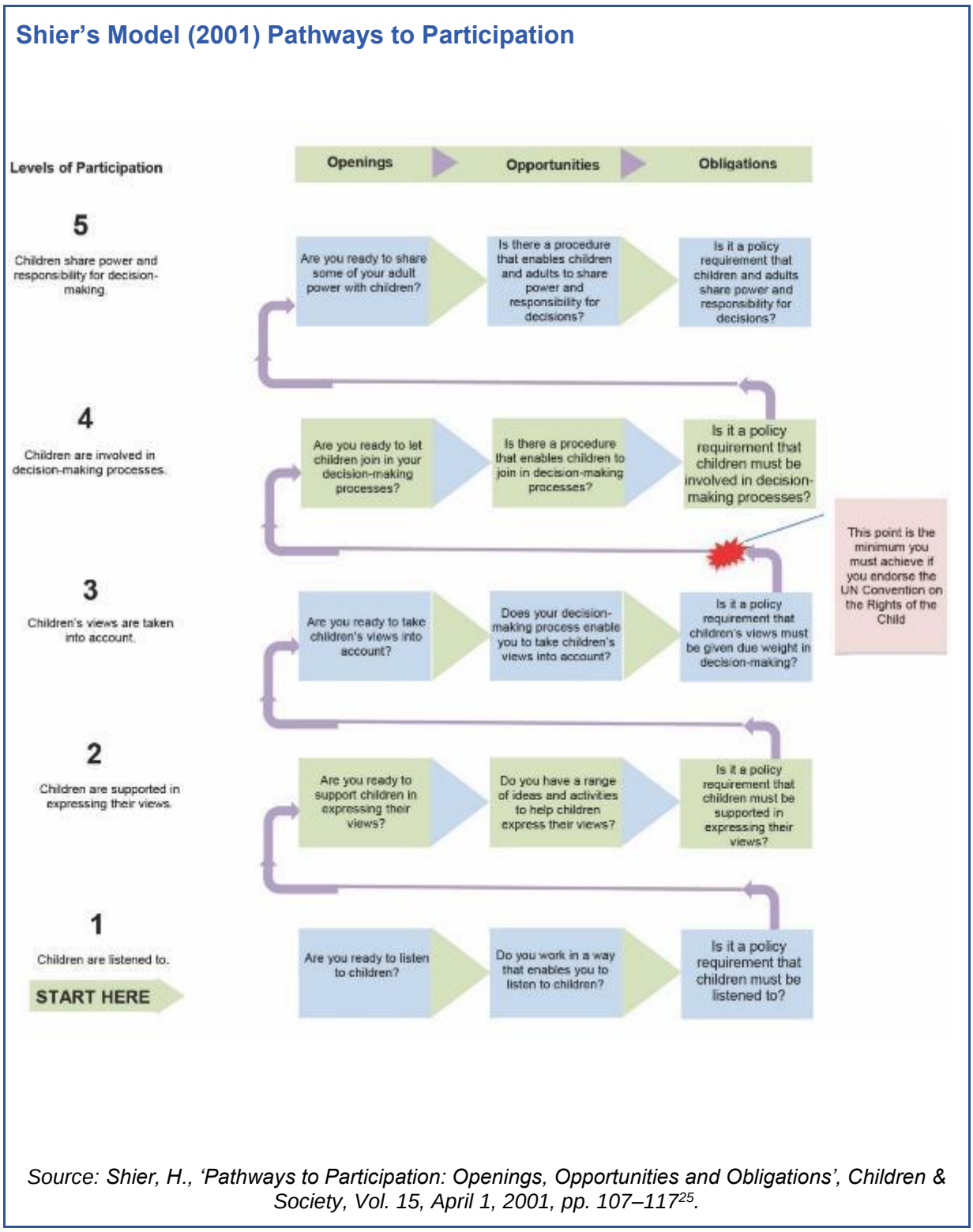
Treseder's Model (1997) Empowering Children and Young People



Source: Treseder, P., Empowering Children & Young People: Training Manual: Promoting Involvement in Decision-Making, Save the Children, London, 1997[24].

[24] Image sourced from https://360participation.com/models-of-participation/ (2017). Accessed 18 November 2023.

Figure 3: Shier's Model (2001) Pathways to Participation



Source: Shier, H., 'Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations', Children & Society, Vol. 15, April 1, 2001, pp. 107–117[25]*.*

[25] Image sourced from https://360participation.com/models-of-participation/ (2017). Accessed 18 November 2023.

3. Why should education authorities, schools and colleges be concerned with this? What is the value or benefit?

Numerous authors have spelt out the reasons why we should create opportunities for young people to actively engage in social activities more widely[26]. Below is a brief summary of the key justifications:

1. **To uphold the rights of the child:** The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child state that young people have the right to express their own views freely. It supports the right to freedom of expression including the freedom to seek, receive and share ideas as well as the right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (Articles 12, 13 and 31)[27].
2. **To empower young people:** Some see empowerment as a social need recognising that young people often have no voice or opportunity to shape their lives[28]. Giving them a greater say, the space to develop competences needed for agency and more power to influence is key to address what some see as the marginalisation youth voices.
3. **To improve School Culture:** When young people are involved, teachers and other school staff genuinely listen, they can influence decisions that improve school culture. Adults prioritise differently when students are part of the decision-making process and this responsiveness strengthens students' trust and creates a virtuous cycle of confidence, commitment and school improvement[29].
4. **To improve education and learning:** Engagement is seen as a way to make services more relevant to young people which will in turn improve their effectiveness and value. As partners in the education process, young people should be able to express what they need and also be listened to. They also learn better when they work with their peers and engage in self and peer evaluation[30].
5. **To enhance the democractic processes:** Preparing young people to engage helps develops their citizenship skills and enhances democracy[31]. It also builds a sense of purpose and belonging which helps them develop the confidence needed to make a difference[32]. When young people are authentically involved in education, they learn participation competences and leadership skills associated with agency and needed to advance sustainability in their communities and workplaces.

[26] Farthing (2012)
[27] UN General Assembly (1989)
[28] Farthing (2012)
[29] Fletcher (2014); OECD (2012)
[30] Fletcher (2014)
[30] Thomas (2007)
[31] Klemenčič, Bergan, and Primožič (2015)
[32] OECD (2012)

6. **To diversify educational pathways:** New learning relationships need to be created in order to support young people to gain these educational benefits. They also need new spaces to participate and be heard; this challenges dominant pedagogical approaches that are teacher centred. Teaching and learning approaches change as learners become collaborators or leaders in the learning process[33].

4. What does good practice look like?

This section depicts three examples of how young people have been engaged in sustainability in their schools, communities and at national policy levels. The case studies draw upon the relevant supporting national frameworks and initiatives and identify key factors influencing the students' levels of participation. It is important to note that while there is a significant literature exploring the theory and practice of young people's participation, there is less written about young people's experiences of taking part in engagement activities within education. Equally, there are a significant number of case studies from schools that report student participation but few document how students are engaged, what processes the teachers have established to empower students or what roles or responsibilities students have taken on to practice engagement. The same challenges were encountered during the process of drafting case studies for this report.

[33] Tilbury (2015)

Figure 4: Case study 1: Spain – National Voices for the Planet

Case study 1: Spain – National Voices for the Planet[34]

The Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MEFP) in collaboration with the *National Network of Schools towards Sustainability* (ESenRED) has been convening young people from across Spain to debate, share and decide on how best to participate in change for sustainability.

The students are convened at a National Youth Conference that supports youth voices and channels their energy into a manifesto for the planet. At the heart of the initiative is an attempt to boost the leadership capacity of young people. It does this through creating spaces for dialogue and cooperation as students are convened to share relevant school projects and attend workshops where they extend their learning in sustainability.

Student representatives aged between 10-16 years are democratically elected by their peers to attend the Conference. Attendees have a commitment to share the results of their learning with their schools and extend student voices beyond this national meeting. At a recent gathering students met in Seville to focus efforts on 'transforming the school to transform towns and cities' for sustainability.

The success of this initiative is attributed to the commitment of students who want to collectively address issues that affect them. Also key is the role of the networks of schools that initiate the

[34] *V Conferencia Estatal de Jóvenes «Cuidemos El Planeta» (CONFINT)* (2021)

projects at a community level and that create meeting spaces for debate and reflection across the regions[35]. National commitments in the form of the *National Action Plan for Environmental and Sustainability Education* provided the supporting structures and resources to make these experiences possible[36]. This initiative is a good example of how school action then connects with regional conversations as well as to national policy and in ways that reflect multi-level support for LfS.

Source: Ministry of Education and Vocational Training[37].

[35] González Torrents, Pérez Carrillo, and Vilar Recasens (2021)
[36] Ministerio de Educacion y Formacion Professional (2021)
[37] *V Conferencia Estatal de Jóvenes «Cuidemos El Planeta» (CONFINT)* (2021)

Figure 5: Case Study 2: Wales – Early Years Enterprising Environments

Case Study 2: Wales – Early Years Enterprising Environments

In Llandudno Wales, Ysgol San Sior places children's participation and rights at the heart of teaching and learning. Boyd (2023)[38] reports how this primary school has created opportunities for learners to become 'decision makers' in sustainability, resonating with the Welsh Government's encouragement for children to "take social action" and become "ethical informed citizens of Wales and the world"[39].

Each class in the school (from 3 -11 years) runs their own enterprise business as this *"helps when you are older with getting a job" (child aged 5).* For example, in the reception class (4-5 years old) the children make Vegan honey from dandelions to support plant-based thinking and create seed packets to sell to the community outside on the pavement.

Boyd points out how the literature sometimes perceives the early years as more challenging for the teaching of sustainability as children are not seen as knowledgeable on the economy. However, research documents how children from Ysgol San Sior use language such as 'profit' and 'cost' and in true authentic decision making choose how the profit is to be used as a whole class. They understand profits are needed for new materials to continue the business but also as a collective to choose something that they all want. The children display positive dispositions of learning, which are crucial in becoming "*actively involved in the improvement of their local environment*" and ensuring they play a role in climate action by protecting the environment - an aspiration of the UK's Department for Education's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy[40].

[38] [Forthcoming] Boyd (2023). Case Study Written for This Input Paper on Student Action Competences.
[39] Welsh Government (2015); Welsh Government (2020)
[40] Department for Education (2022)

The key to this success, Boyd argues, is that children are an integral part of all decision making, and this is clearly apparent in how the teachers authentically listen and respond to them; 'they feel confident and empowered'. Boyd documents how one of the pupils actively 'pumped' their arm and said, "*we have rights here, we are decision makers*."

***Source**: Boyd (2023)*[41]

[41] [Forthcoming] Boyd (2023). Case Study Written for This Input Paper on Student Action Competences.

Figure 6 : Case Study 3: Germany – Young Engagement As a Catalyst for ESD National Activities

Case Study 3: Germany – Young Engagement As a Catalyst for ESD National Activities

> Participation of all social groups is a foundation of sustainable development and is therefore integral to ESD. Children and adolescents must be involved so that the younger generation has an active part in shaping the present and the future. School democracy is pivotal in enabling young people to experience self-efficacy through participation in school and the community.
>
> **School – Action Area V: Participation and ESD**

The German *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) for 2030* programme seeks to involve young people as catalysts of change and as key influences in their communities. It recognises the role that education plays in helping young learners become change agents and acknowledges how critical their effective participation is to delivery of the German National Action Plan on ESD[42]. This landmark initiative enshrines young people's participation in law.

To assure 'effective young engagement', Germany has established a youth participation team at Stiftung Bildung funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The process to attaining this goal consists of three different components:

4.1. Youth panel - youpaN[43]

[42] Federal Ministry of Education and Research (2022)
[43] Youth panel on education for sustainable development (2023), https://youpan.de/.

The **youpaN** is a youth panel made up of 30 young people aged 16 to 27 who participate in the implementation of the German National Action Plan on ESD. Its membership is determined by a youth jury which reviews applications from young people living in Germany and assures diversity in backgrounds and representation. The chosen members of the panel are involved in learning for sustainability in a number of ways:

- The **youpaN** panel members participate in **national ESD-forums**.
- To ensure that young people's voices are **represented at the highest level of ESD decision-making,** in Germany a representative from the **youpaN** panel attends the National Platform ESD, that steers the implementation of the UNESCO-programme on ESD.
- The *youpaN* panel develops its **own positions, demands and statements**[44] to improve education and learning for sustainability for all young people. It meets with decision-makers from politics and science to raise awareness of ESD needs.
- The *youpaN* panel also **holds events** such as workshops and lectures to engage youth in key issues. The aim is to motivate other young people and open up spaces for thematic engagement and grounded discussions.
- The members of the *youpaN* panel also **participate internationally**, ensuring German youth voices also shape UNESCO global ESD program.

4.2. The youcoN

The **youcoN** is a youth conference, convened each year, bringing together 150 young people from diverse backgrounds from across Germany to work towards a brighter future. Under the theme "Wir l(i)eben Zukunft!" (We love and live future) young people participate in workshops, camps and lectures engaging with Sustainable Development Goals and reflecting on the implications for their schools and learning experiences. Over the years, the conferences have helped advance ESD through initiating projects, participating in hackathons and discussing key topics of the day such as the pandemic, just digitalization and strengthening youth participation.

[44] Youth panel on education for sustainable development (2023), https://youpan.de/.

4.3. YouprOs - microprojects for a better world[45]

In total, 30 micro-projects were implemented under **youprOs** microprojects with funds of up to 5,000 Euro per initiative. The projects addressed themes such as climate change, alternative ways of learning or sustainable consumption and were supported by tangible projects for sustainable living. A project guide was developed for young people to assist with the implementation of projects for a sustainable future.

[45] Stiftung Bildung (2021)

A key to the success of these efforts is Stiftung Bildung that is responsible for strengthening youth participation in the implementation of the National Action Plan on ESD. Funded by donors, this organisation supports the federal program 'People Strengthen People'. They have supported the engagement of young people in the evaluation of the ESD national action plan as well as engaging them in a diversity of ways to address sustainability concerns. The graphic below summarises the different ways that young people have been supported.

***Source**: Federal Ministry of Education and Research*[46]

[46] Federal Ministry of Education and Research (2022)

5. What are the challenges to youth engagement in sustainability

Numerous challenges exist to the embedding of youth voices, engagement and participation in school activities for sustainability. UNICEF points to how some adults believe that young people are too inexperienced or immature to make meaningful contributions. This is especially seen to be the case when involving young children who are seen as not ready to engage[47]. They may have a negative perception of youth and their ability to take a genuine part in the democratic process or prefer to believe that it is the adults that are motivating the engagement for their own benefit (for example decision-makers benefiting from positive publicity in the media)[48]. However, the case studies documented above illustrate how young people do have the determination to learn and energy to engage and drive change in our communities. These misconceptions can be challenged through sharing examples of good practice.

Some adults are concerned that student involvement can be tokenistic and therefore avoid engagement activities. Young people may also share these perceptions as they see that participation sometimes limited to consultation and not purposeful engagement. Educators seeking to genuinely involve young people in sustainability activities need to engage in active listening but also create opportunities for student decision-making at all levels.

Educators may also have worries about potential disagreements with young people's views and/or having to curtail the level ambition of student initiatives. There is also concern about young people being disappointed when they meet decision-makers who may not have much experience engaging with young minds. Decision-makers may behave in ways young people find limiting or intimidating and young people may be disruptive as a result[49]. Finding common groups and breaking down perceptions may be necessary for young voices to be heard and for enriching engagement. Youth mistrust of adults in power is also a factor. Building bridges and creating spaces for dialogue is key. Educators might not have the competences to facilitate this type of interactions and thus teacher support or development may be needed to provide the necessary confidence and skills.

The internet and social media is often cited as a challenge to youth engagement but it could be argued that the digital world has played a dual role influencing young people's participation. The influence of the online world is changing the way in which young people communicate and engage in social life. On the one hand, it has improved access to information which has led to increased interest in global issues and led to new forms of youth exchanges as young new forms of activism. The Rockefeller Foundation (2017)[50] describes how people participate critically online and via new networks to participate in key global movements. Research carried out by Kenway and Bullen (2001)[51] also refer to the influence of cyberspace and the importance of young people being not only observers consumed by information, but also critical engagers in understanding the wider world. Issues of public interest no longer know borders, and young people can now debate them almost instantly with anyone anywhere on the planet. Yet, commentators also point to how the internet is

[47] Dević (2020)
[48] Burke (2023)
[49] Burke (2023)
[50] Rockefeller Foundation (2017)
[51] Kenway and Bullen (2001)

used as a form of escapism as young people seek to remove themselves from the tough social challenges which in turn leads to the loss of social engagement skills[52].

6. What are the implication for policy and national coordinating actions

> *"I always hear decision-makers and adults say that children and young people are future leaders. But wouldn't it be wise to start preparing us for this future before it actually arrives?"*
>
> *Olga Dević, 19 yrs, from Belgrade, Serbia[53].*

Earlier, in this input paper, it was argued that there is a lack of policy frameworks to effectively support meaningful engagement by young people in education decision-making and activities in schools. These frameworks and policy measures are important to extend and deepen current efforts which can be found mostly in the margins of school education. There is a need for grounded research to inform these frameworks; research that extrapolates from the advances in practice and helps create new models of student participation that are more nuanced than the ones offered currently by the literature. In addition, there are other deliberate actions that can be taken to strengthen the effectiveness of efforts that seek to engage young people in education and social participation.

6.1. More integrated policy

The ambition to improve youth engagement in European governance and society more widely is not new at EU level[54]. For some years now, the European Economic and Social Committee has been working on how to better integrate the voice of young Europeans in its work and in the EU decision-making process in a structured and meaningful way. In September 2020, it published '*Towards structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU decision-making process*'[55] which was developed in close cooperation with the European Youth Forum and Generation Climate Europe. Its main recommendations were: to establish the *Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables;* to include a youth delegate in the official EU delegation to UNFCCC COP meetings; and, to include youth voices and proactively seeking input from youth representatives.

At the member state level, it is important to embed youth engagement aspirations across education policies as it would improve civic engagement and democratic governance as well as the attainment of a more sustainable future. LfS provides an opportunity to integrate the aspirations identified above within formal education more widely. As well as providing formal mandates and structures in support of this, Member states should also consider how they interprets engagement. In education, youth engagement should be conceived as much more than narrow forms of citizenship which require obeying rules and being a good neighbour or respecting community values. LfS requires young people to play their role in effecting change

[52] Kenway and Bullen (2001)
[53] Dević (2020)
[54] European Economic and Social Committee (2021)
[55] 'Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Towards Structured Youth Engagement on Climate and Sustainability in the EU Decision-Making Process' (Own-Initiative Opinion)' (2020)

in their schools and communities for the green transition; this means getting to the root of sustainability issues and engaging in activism and social change that goes beyond volunteerism[56]. A more integrated policy approach would bring benefits beyond governance and education and for the benefit of the environment.

6.2. Understanding and documenting value

Over the years, researchers have developed models for youth engagement and participation. They have also mapped the benefits and values which included: improved social skills; self-esteem and confidence; better sense of self and abilities; reinforced relationships and an enhanced a sense of belonging; deeper values and integrity; a greater motivation to learn. Youth participation in policy formation can help to highlight the link between public spending and young people's needs and help to reform institutions that affect their lives. Clarifying, documenting and sharing the value and benefits through concrete examples can help advance the changes needed to mainstream youth voice, engagement and participation in education.

6.3. Assessing progress

To be able to extend the opportunities of student engagement in sustainability through education requires assessing or measuring the effectiveness of current practice. However, a word of warning, youth involvement cannot simply be measured by the number of opportunities or instances when a young person has actively participated in sustainability initiatives. Capturing the type and nature of engagement is key as it is not simply a quantitative assessment. It would require different evidence gathering techniques such reflective diaries, interviews and observations to complement numerical data. Often policy makers are presented with information and statistics about youth participation and it is important to review this data cautiously and with an understanding of the role played by the young people in these activities, whilst recognising that descriptive analysis can also be challenged because of the uniqueness of examples and difficulty making comparisons. The data captured should address the key question as to whether meaningful youth engagement has taken place – that is participation that seeks to respond to the student voice and build capability to participate effectively. Finally, it is important to note that some experts argue that participation is not authentic unless it seeks to change the power structures that prevent young people from being considered experts in regard to their own needs and priorities[57].

[56] Nenga and Taft (2013)
[57] Ho, Clarke, and Dougherty (2015)

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