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Teaching the Sustainable Development Goals – A Chance of Decolonizing the Mind in the Classroom

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1. Introduction

Our present time is still strongly marked by the time of colonialism. Countries such as India, Asia and Africa were colonized and gradually taken over by the colonial powers in the past. Beatings, forced labor and rape were the order of the day. These human rights violations were sanctioned by giving the white race a higher status - which can be seen to this day in various contexts, most recently in the Black Lives Matter debate.

A truly critical reappraisal of colonization has hardly taken place in Europe. British colonialism also plays no role in textbooks, exactly where it would be most important: in the classroom.

Critical examination of colonialism is especially important in school, so that pupils learn not to accept everything from history, but also to question it. Although local decolonization took place predominantly, the mind was not decolonized. European influences can still be found in colonized countries such as Africa and India. The most striking example is probably the linguistic influence and the resulting displacement of the actual languages of a country, as well as the linear state borders in Africa.

Other consequences of colonialism include ethnic weakness, economic weakness as well as political instability, with which the countries are still struggling today.

For this reason, it is necessary to offer pupils a critical examination of the topic so that they understand what consequences resulted from colonialism.

*The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*¹ can make a great contribution to this, in order to widen horizons and decolonize thoughts. Adopted in September 2015, all member states of the United Nations joined the Agenda 30. The SDGs are global goals, for example to reduce poverty and hunger around the world, to strengthen health care and personal health or to protect nature. These are only four of 17 goals which will be explained in detail later.

The Western perspective and the privileges one has in Europe do not leave much room to reflect on events such as colonialism as an individual. For this reason, it is of great importance to let the pupils break out of their Western thinking already at school and to critically reflect on Western deeds that were done in the past.

The Sustainable Development Goals could be used to decolonize pupils' thinking and help them to understand the world better.

¹ The Sustainable Development Goals are 17 goals adopted by all Member States of the United Nations to overcome issues such as poverty, hunger, education and many more (United Nations).

This academic paper aims to show how the Sustainable Development Goals can help to widen the horizon of young learners and decolonize their minds in order to raise them as global citizens.

In the following, the time of colonialism and its long-term consequences will be discussed in more detail, and the concept "Decolonizing the mind" will be presented. The traces of colonialism are also reflected in literature which will be briefly explained.

The present paper will then give a general overview of the development of the Sustainable Development Goals and the 17 goals in detail.

Moreover, a closer look will be taken on how to implement the SDGs in the classroom in order to raise awareness for critical thinking as well as using simulations of the United Nations to empathize with a country that is still struggling with the consequences of colonialism.

2. Colonialism – An Overview

Looking for a definition of colonialism, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines colonialism as “a policy by which a nation maintains or extends its control over foreign dependencies” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language). A colony is a country or territory that has been involuntarily occupied and administered by another country. The first phase of colonization began in the 15th century. In the 19th century, the interest of the major European powers in conquering abroad increased in order to expand their power, to expand territories, to confiscate raw materials for their own land, and to oblige the locals to force and enslave them (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language). The largest colonial powers were Great Britain, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Russia. The greatest colonial power during colonialism, also known as the British Empire², was Great Britain. The colonial period lasted four centuries. In the late period of the colonial era, six million Britons emigrated to the Empire. Countries that were colonized included: India, Burma, Australia, Cameroons, New Zealand, Zambia, South Africa Uganda and many more. Figure 1 demonstrates all the countries which were colonized by Great Britain (Encyclopaedia Britannica).



Figure 1: The British Empire (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

² The British Empire was an empire built by the British in a period of over 300 years and became the largest colonial power with territorial occupations in countries such as India, Pakistan and Africa (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

The largest colony of Great Britain was India. With the first colony in 1583, Britain set foot in India for the first time. What was initially supposed to be an overseas exploration quickly moved in a different direction. With the founding of the East India Company³ in 1600, the foundation stone for the colony was laid. This was followed by political and military power, as well as Western influences. The colony lasted until the end of World War II, after India was slowly decolonized (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

2.1. Colonialism and its Passive Long-Term Consequences

As mentioned in the introduction, colonialism still has consequences for the colonized countries. European foreign rule continues to cause many countries to contend with unstable governments, ethnic conflicts, and economic weaknesses (Stolz et al. 2016, 228) .

Looting, human robbery and genocide characterize the approximately 500 years of colonial period. Few countries, such as North America or Australia, were able to turn their backs on colonialism, even if the natives had to pay a heavy price for it. India and Pakistan, which have been in an ongoing conflict ever since, are still struggling with the consequences.

It has hit the continent of Africa the worst. To date, the continent is home to the ten poorest countries in the world. Due to the formative colonial period, the European models were also adapted into the political system which can be seen in the adoption of uniform together with a central government. The adaptation after colonialism did not meet with joy among the population, as it was coined with the oppression of the colonial powers. In addition to the state concepts that were adapted, the English, German or Spanish language was also acquired. This exchange of languages led to so-called "mixed languages"⁴, as we know them today in Namibia. It goes so far that languages have been "forgotten", or no longer exist, up to prohibitions to use one's mother tongue. (Stolz et al. 2016, 228)

2.2. The Structures of Decolonization

After the colonization period, the countries had to enter a new phase: decolonization. Along with the process of replacement goes the attainment of independence of the countries. In

³ The East India company was a British trading company, which was a profitable daily business for the British in India. Products that were bought and sold were silver and tea (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

⁴ Because German was the official language in Namibia from 1884-1915, it came to a mixture of Afrikaans and German, a so-called mixed language. The same phenomenon can be seen in the mixture of the English language with Afrikaans, also called "Namlsh" (Stolz et al. 2016, 213).

addition to economic independence, cultural and social independence played a major role in this process, which was to return to its origins. But this was not so easy in reality. If one looks at the continent of Africa during colonial times, only European authors were found in the African school curriculum, plays were performed only in English, which in turn took up European values and made fun of African culture. One can say that African culture was suppressed during the colonial period in order to consolidate European ideas on the continent (Udengwu 2018, 18).

2.3. “Decolonizing the Mind” – A Concept to Encourage Critical Thinking

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, originally James Thiong'o Ngugi, is a Kenyan writer who became famous for his engagement for using the indigenous languages in African literature. Thiong'o is of the opinion to turn away from the English language and to refocus on the mother tongues after the time of colonization (Encyclopadia Britannica).

Thiong'o's appeal to the society of "decolonization of thought" was initially not well received by people from the upper class in Africa. They described his vision as unfashionable and a step back in time, because the English language, as well as other European languages, could no longer be banned from the culture. For this reason, Thiong'o decided in the 80s, to only write in his mother tongue, namely *Kikuyu*. Afterwards he translates his novels into English so the culture remains contained in his literary works in contrast to the African authors who write their works directly in an European language. One reason for the use of European language in African literature is the publisher, because most publishers do not publish in African languages, so authors are forced to not use their mother tongue (Deutschlandfunk).

Thiong'o's book "Decolonising the mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature" shows how one should look at the world and what self-image should be developed from it. It shows how languages relate to one's own culture and communication. It is all the sadder when school children are forced to speak foreign languages and are punished for using their mother tongue, as is still common in many parts of Africa today. That is why Thiong'o book is a very good incentive to question Western culture and language understanding, promote critical thinking and to pass exactly this aspect on to the pupils (Thiong'o 2005, xii).

2.4. Postcolonial Literature in the Classroom

To decolonize the mind in the classroom and to give new food for thought, teachers should use post-colonial literature. In post-colonial literature one will find characters with different origin and hybrid characters. Short stories are particularly suitable here. The protagonists often belong to the colonialists and describe their life in a colonized country, just as they experience a new country and culture for themselves. But there is also a lot of literature from the perspective of people who live in a colonized country and are confronted with the new, western rules (Singh & Greenlaw 1998, 199).

This change of perspective enables the pupils to critically reflect on actions and to get a new perspective on the topic of colonization, because the consequences and implications of this are very clear in the works (Goldblatt 1998, 6).

A book well suited for teaching in lower secondary schools is "*Cross-Cultural Encounters: 20th Century English Short Stories. English text with German word explanations*", edited by Susanne Lenz and Reinhard Gratzke. This compilation of short stories deals with the consequences of colonial rule and is easy to read for older pupils, as it includes many vocabulary explanations (Lenz 2010, 5).

In summary, one can say that the classroom must change to tackle postcolonial and global issues. The teacher's new role is crucial for creating a critical understanding of language and the world. Bloom's Taxonomy is very helpful for this, which can be used by teachers to design classes (Limbach & Waugh, W. 2010, 3). Through the use of Bloom's taxonomy, learners are encouraged to think critically and to engage cognitively, sensitively and affectively with the learning subject. Figure 2 shows Bloom's Taxonomy which describes the ongoing processes by which learner encounter work with knowledge.

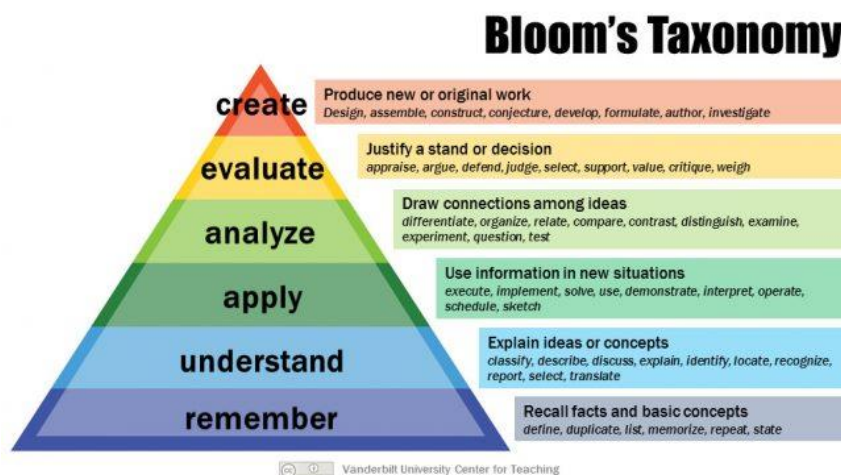


Figure 2: Bloom's Taxonomy: A Taxonomy for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (Vanderbilt University)

3. The Sustainable Development Goals

The *Agenda 30*, which contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals, was adopted in September 2015 by all Member States of the United Nations. With the focus on tackling global problems with all member states of the United Nations, the foundation was laid to develop goals dealing with global economic progress, social justice and a sharp eye on the environment (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 3).

One exception is the country of Lao PDR, which has an 18th target: *Lives safe from UXO (Unexploded Ordnance)*⁵ because of the many unexploded bombs from the Second Indochina War (Ounmany & Andriessse 2018, 6). The goal is to remove as many submunitions as possible. The main feature of the Agenda 30 are the 17 core objectives relating to social, environmental and economic issues. The aim is to achieve all goals per country by 2030 (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 3).

3.1. The Development of the Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs were adopted by the United Nations in 2015. The reason for this was the idea of leading a life in dignity all around the world and securing the basis of life in the long term. To this end, all member states have drawn up 17 goals that are to be achieved by 2030 and which should be implemented in the best possible way. Prior to this, there were the *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*, which were, however, only aimed at the countries of the global South and which were aimed at combating poverty and hunger, guaranteeing universal schooling for all, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality and ensuring environmental sustainability (United Nations).

Since the MDGs were not specific to all countries, they were subject to much criticism. Commitments were only directed at the South, while the North did not have measurable targets. As a result, the criticism was included in the Sustainable Development Goals and the jointly developed goals are now obligatory for each country to achieve (Nabu).

⁵ During the Second Indochina War (1964-1973) Lao PDR was the victim of numerous attacks by the American Air Force. 2 million tons of ordnance were dropped on Lao PDR, most of which are still in the country. The goal is to locate and defuse as many ordnances as possible by 2030 (National Regulatory Authority for UXO/Mine Action Sector in Lao PDR (UXO-NRA)).

3.2. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations

In the following the 17 Sustainable Development Goals will be further clarified. Figure 3 demonstrates all the 17 worldwide goals at one glance.



Figure 3: The 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (United Nations)

The first goal of the SDGs is “**NO POVERTY**” because poverty is still one of the greatest challenges worldwide (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 10).

The second goal is “**ZERO HUNGER**” because hunger is still one of the biggest development problems (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 14).

The third goal is “**GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**” because infant mortality rates are still relatively high, mothers are exposed to complications and loss of children during childbirth, just as preventable diseases lead to death (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 18).

The fourth goal, “**QUALITY EDUCATION**” is concerned with the goal of providing access to good education in every country, especially equal opportunities for women and men (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 22).

The fifth goal “**GENDER EQUALITY**” wants to ensure that women are treated equally and have the same fundamental rights as men (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 26).

The sixth goal is “**CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION**” for all, as more than a third of the world's people are still affected by water scarcity, have poor access to water, or polluted water.

In addition, there is the promotion of hygienic concepts which should be taught at school (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 30).

The seventh goal “**AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY**” faces the challenge of creating access to modern energy sources as three billion people still heat and cook with wood, coal, manure and charcoal (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 34).

The eighth goal “**DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**” wants to regenerate a steady economic growth that lives through big companies, business start-ups and the resulting jobs (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 38).

The ninth goal “**INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE**” wants to ensure a well-developed infrastructure, which is necessary for social, political and economic objectives (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 42).

The tenth goal “**REDUCED INEQUALITIES**” wants to reduce inequalities between states and thus also prevent poverty (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 46).

The eleventh goal is “**SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES**” which means that affordable housing needs to be created and critical neighborhoods to be upgraded. In addition, there is the expansion of local transport and green spaces within cities to become a sustainable city (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 50).

The twelfth goal “**RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION**” focuses on responsible production and consumption to protect natural resources. Recycling is also part of the goal (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 54).

The 13th goal “**CLIMATE ACTION**” wants to contribute to climate protection in order to keep the temperature rise as minimal as possible (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 58).

The 14th goal “**LIFE BELOW WATER**” strives for the preservation of the seas with their underwater living beings, which must be kept clean (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 62).

The 15th goal “**LIFE ON LAND**” aims to protect land ecosystems and their biodiversity and to make use of their sustainability (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 66).

The 16th goal “**PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS**” wants to reduce violence and provide everyone with equal access to justice. The focus here is also on human rights as well as combating illegality (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 70).

The last and 17th goal is "**PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS**" which are the basis for global cooperation and the implementation of the SDGs around the world (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 74).

4. Integration of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Classroom

Since the school year 2016/17, the subject “Education for Sustainability and Development” has been included in the education plan for Baden-Württemberg. The new guiding principle is that pupils should be responsibly involved in the environment, understand a stable economy and act in the interests of society, so as not to let future generations live in the mistakes of predecessors. At its core, it is about giving young learners a sense of responsibility, gaining empathy for other people's unfamiliar life situations and reflecting on questions of the future and thus contributing to a functioning society (Bildungspläne BW).

In the following it will be discussed how exactly the SDGs can be integrated into the classroom in order to sensitize pupils.

4.1. Teaching the SDGs Using the Example of SDG 4 “Quality Education”

Education should be freely accessible to everyone in all countries. Unfortunately, this is still not the case everywhere. Germany's citizens are very privileged in this respect because basic education is free. Studying at public universities is also free, except for a small semester fee of between €150 and €250 (Study EU Team).

To bring the SDGs closer to the pupils, the Education for Sustainable Development Expert Net⁶ (ESD Expert Net) has developed thought-provoking impulses, key competencies and ideas for teaching and practice on the basis of each goal. (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 4). If one looks for an example at the fourth goal of the SDG "Quality education", the ESD Expert Net has designed some ideas for the conception of lessons on this topic.

As a starting point, an acute topic is presented which falls into the category to the respective SDG. In the case of SDG 4 “Quality education”, the problem of dental prophylaxis in Mozambique is demonstrated, because on the one hand there are few trained specialists and on the other hand the high consumption of sugar poses an issue. The task is not to discuss the problem, but to discuss how to deal with the problem in order to find solutions. The ESD Expert Net gives a lot of information about the case and explains a project between a German hospital which invited the Mozambican specialists to Germany in order to educate themselves further. The project was supported by international fundings (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 23).

⁶ The ESD Expert Net combines experts from different education sectors to bring the Sustainable Development Goals in the classroom. Together they worked on lesson plans for each Sustainable Development Goal (Hoffmann und Gorana n.d., 8)

The learning objectives in this topic focus on the importance of education, as well as lifelong learning, as this can be the foundation for improving the living situation. It also seems important that pupils understand the privilege of education in order to share this idea with others (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 24).

On this subject, it is recommended to lead a discussion in which pupils should consider how education and training can promote sustainable development, how and whether health and education belong together. In order to stimulate critical thinking, pupils can note down pros and cons in which they should consider whether international funding makes sense in educational processes or not. Another example of the topic would be to let the pupils develop an educational project (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 24).

The learning objectives in this topic focus on the importance of education, as well as lifelong learning, as this can be the foundation for improving living situations. It also seems predominant that pupils understand the importance of education in order to share this idea with others. In order to get a broad perspective on different educational systems, it is advisable to encourage young learners to look at educational systems abroad. If the opportunity exists, one could also think of a school project involving a stay abroad. This would help to let go of western thoughts and let new influences take effect without evaluating them. (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 24).

Key competencies that pupils should achieve during the lesson are (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 24):

1. Critical thinking
2. Connected thinking
3. Thinking ahead
4. Normative competence
5. Integrated problem solving
6. Strategic competence
1. Cooperation competence
7. Self-competence

All these key skills help the young learners to broaden their horizon and not to accept everything as it is, but to question it. Above all, it is of great importance that pupils get a sense of countries that are facing other, and/or bad circumstances with which western pupils are not concerned with (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 24).

4.2. Regional and National Modeled United Nations as a Chance to work with the SDGs

Another way to introduce young learners to the SDGs and the in-depth critical thinking that goes with them is to participate in a simulation of the United Nations⁷. There are many formats, from regional to national and from small to big conferences (NMUN).

In a simulation of the United Nations, a group of pupils or students select a country that they represent. Taking on a new role, in an unknown country that is engaged in different political, economic and social activities is the key task. The difficult part is to put yourself in a country, from which one may not accept certain actions by its Western image. This is where the process of decolonization of the mind begins. Then, when pupils or students suddenly put themselves in other situations, with the knowledge of the background of a country, they immediately begin to understand why certain decisions were made and why some were not (NMUN NY).

Once the group or delegation has selected a country, they choose a committee⁸ of the United Nations, such as the First Committee. The conference administration gives each committee three sub-objectives which are written down in a position paper for the country to be represented and preceding the procedures that would be possible for the country. At the conference itself, the delegation sits in a room with the other Member States and talks about the pre-existing sub-objectives. The goal is to find allies who face the same problem, or to find supporters to help you achieve your goals (National Model United Nations).

The simulation of the United Nations acquires a wide range of competences. The focus is on global learning and to become a global citizen. That is what it is all about: empathize with countries and understand and defend their actions. This is impossible if people cannot break out of their western thoughts. In addition, the pupils or students gain intercultural competence and interdisciplinary and cultural exchange because they will meet people from all around the world (NMUN Halle).

⁷ A simulation of the United Nations reflects the work within the organization. Member states come together and debate current problems for which they want to find solutions together („United Nations“).

⁸ The United Nations has six main organs: The General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice and the UN Secretariat (United Nations).

5. Conclusion and Outlook

Given all these points, it is evident that by teaching the Sustainable Development Goals teachers have the chance to decolonize young learners' minds and help them to enhance their critical thinking.

Many countries are still suffering from the long-term consequences of the colonial time. Unstable governments, ethnic conflicts, and economic weaknesses are only a few consequences to name. Indigenous languages, which have been supplanted by the colonists and which are still not allowed to be used in schools, suffer particularly from this. This leads to displacement of many languages up to language loss.

With his thought "Decolonization of the mind", Thiong'o has made a major contribution to dealing with colonialism. He suggests seeing the world from a different perspective, to demonstrate which image can result from it. It is also clear that language is linked to culture and identity. When the language is gone, culture and identity are also gone. Thiong'o encourages a rethink of Western thinking and critical reflection on it.

With the thought of the decolonization of minds, the Sustainable Development Goals can be used to teach pupils the importance of social responsibility and educate them to become cosmopolitan citizens. Plus, gaining empathy for other people's unfamiliar life situations and reflecting on questions of the future and thus contributing to a functioning society are more key goals to obtain.

By passing the ESD Expert Net, the Sustainable Development Goals can be brought to the pupils by approaching case studies in a solution-oriented manner. Group work and discussions guide young learners to gain key skills such as critical and networked thinking.

Another way of bringing forward the Sustainable Development Goals is to participate in a regional or national simulation of the United Nations. By taking over a country, pupils are confronted with the political, economic and social choices of a country, which they may not be able to understand from their Western perspective. By decolonizing their Western ideas, they can begin to understand and perhaps accept decisions.

Although the topic of The Sustainable Development Goals has not yet arrived in all schools, young teachers will strive to educate their pupils as global citizens.

Nelson Mandela once said: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" (Hoffmann & Gorana n.d., 5) and it is precisely these words that teachers must take to heart, as must their pupils.

Teacher should see the Sustainable Development Goals as a chance to educate their pupils as global citizens who are helping to reach the goals of the United Nations. Through teaching the Sustainable Development goals, pupils are encouraged to think about critical issues, question unsustainability and look to the future. This calls for a rejection from traditional mechanisms of thought and the turn to decolonization of thought to help pupils to understand the complexities of the world.

The Sustainable Development Goals can be integrated in the classroom wherever they fit - in any subject. Pupils should be encouraged to discuss the topics with friends and families to sharpen their senses as well. In this way they put what they have learned into practice and spread their belief in a sustainable world. Because this is what teachers do: teaching for a better world.

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Karlsruhe, 21th July 2020

Shirin Ud-Din