

# **Emotional aspects in forest-related education for sustainable development: Young people's emotions, coping strategies and engagement**

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# Background

- We live in a society characterized by different very complex and serious global sustainability problems such as climate change and threatened biological diversity
- These problems are all related to the forest
  - forest loss and degradation is both a cause and an effect of the changing climate
  - how we manage our forests are also directly related to loss of biodiversity or not

# Background

- The forest could be utilized to educate about these issues making them more present in people's life – more concrete and relevant
- To be outside in the forest could also create a sense of respect and love for nature, which is a first important step to become interested in environmental issues

# Young people and sustainability problems

- Young people are one important stakeholder group to include in societal efforts to deal with different sustainability problems such as climate change
- Why?
  - Pragmatic reasons
  - Ethical reasons
  - Knowledge reasons

# Young people and sustainability problems

- If we are going to include young people in societal deliberations around issues such as climate change, how can we go about doing it in the best way?
- The need of research based knowledge
- The focus in this presentation on **emotional** aspects when learning about these problem

# Why is it important to focus on emotions when it comes to ESD?

Two main arguments in the ESD literature:

- (1) That the complexity and seriousness of sustainability challenges can evoke negative emotions of worry anxiety -- prevent feelings of hopelessness and promote hope and agency (Gardiner & Rieckmann, 2015; Hicks, 2014; Ojala, 2012, 2015; Persson et al., 2011; Stevenson & Peterson, 2015).



# Young people's emotions concerning climate change

- Studies performed in different countries show that although many young people are interested in global problems, feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, and helplessness, as well as inactivity are common
- In worst cases education about global issues increases feelings of hopelessness (Hicks, 2014).

# Why is it important to focus on emotions when it comes to ESD?

Two main arguments in the ESD literature:

- (2) Pluralistic approaches that emphasize complexity and value conflict have become popular among ESD researchers during later years – take account of passions, anger, dissonance and so on, to prevent deadlocks and to promote constructive learning (Lundegård & Wickman, 2012; Sund & Öhman, 2014; Wals, 2010)



# Emotion regulation/coping

- I am interested in what young people do with their emotions - they are not victims of whatever emotions that are evoked in them, but actively cope and deal with them
- How young people cope at an individual level, in interaction, and how educators/teachers (and other role models) react to these emotions. How they communicate about emotional aspects

# Emotion regulation/coping

- Because as soon as we feel an emotion we react to that emotion in a cognitive or emotional way. How we react is *social*, we have learned how to deal with emotions throughout life
- One important thought in my research is that how people deal with emotions are very *important for* if they are going to feel that they can influence, for their engagement concerning these issues and also for *learning processes* at large

# The transactional theory of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

# Two main coping strategies

- Emotion-focused coping
  - strategies to regulate or get rid of negative emotions that are evoked by the problem/stressor
- Problem-focused coping
  - Strategies to deal with the stressor directly

# Emotion-focused coping

- **De-emphasizing the threat (denial and “here-and-now” thinking)**
- I think it would be great if it gets warmer and warmer – upper secondary student
- My advice to my friend is that there’s nothing to worry about, I don’t think it’s going to happen – intermediate school pupil
  - It feels like a media thing to make us buy more papers. We always have to have something to be afraid of, because then society sticks together – university student
- Then I try to tell myself that there won’t be any major disasters during my lifetime – university student
- I’d tell my friend that nothing is going to happen because Sweden is a safe country - intermediate school pupil
- I don’t care that much. If it’s going to happen, it will happen after we’re dead and then who gives a crap - upper secondary student

# Emotion-focused coping

## – **Distancing (distraction and avoidance)**

- I usually sing because when I do I really calm down, and then I try to think about something else - intermediate school pupil
- I try to calm down by listening to music or watching TV - upper secondary student
- I get worried because there are so many cars. They let out a lot of exhaust fumes and it's getting hotter on earth. So, if there is a lot of traffic, I look in the other direction - intermediate school pupil

# Emotion-focused coping

## – Social support

- Sometimes I lay in bed at night and worry. Then I go down and see my mom and dad - intermediate school pupil
- I don't feel I can do anything except talk about it to get my feelings out - university student
- My advice is that I think he or she should talk to somebody who knows a lot about the climate. That might make my friend relax a little - upper secondary student

## – Hyperactivation

- I think we pretty much deserve it because we ignore the environment for the sake of economic growth - university student
- I feel powerless; there's nothing I can do. Even though I recycle a lot, it feels like the coal-fired power plants just spew out carbon dioxide and then everything seems pointless - university student
- Try to accept the truth and become more bitter about humanity - university student

# Problem-focused coping

## – Individual (cognitive and behavioral)

- I usually read about things like how the ice is melting and what measures can be taken, meaning what I can do personally – upper secondary student
- I usually think a little more carefully about the good things I can do for the environment, try to see the small actions as important and not only focus on the huge problem, because then it gets overwhelming and you can't deal with it – university student
- I read in my climate book, where there are a bunch of suggestions about what kids can do for the environment – intermediate school pupil
- When I am scared, I try to get mom and dad to take the bus to work and buy the right products – upper secondary student

## – Collective

- I think if everybody helps out, we can stop the climate changes – intermediate school pupil
- I try to think positively and convince myself that if everybody does something, it will help. Nobody can do everything, but everyone can do a little – university student
- I would tell my friend to take it easy, we can all help out so that things get better on our planet – intermediate school pupil

# Quantitative survey/questionnaire studies

- Young people's **emotion-focused** coping in relation to climate change is associated with a lower degree of environmental engagement, knowledge, and efficacy (Ojala, 2012, 2013; Ojala & Bengtsson, 2018)
- Young people's **cognitive problem-focused** coping in relation to climate change is related to a higher degree of environmental engagement and efficacy but also to lower subjective well-being (general negative affect)

Is there any other way to cope with climate change that is related to both well-being and engagement?



# Today: Three main coping strategies

- Problem-focused coping
  - Strategies to deal with the stressor directly
- Emotion-focused coping
  - strategies to regulate or get rid of negative emotions that are evoked by the problem/stressor
- Meaning-focused coping
  - more closely related to the activation of positive emotion than to the reduction of negative emotions

It is important to investigate *both* how they cope with and regulate negative emotions such as worry and how they go about promoting positive emotions such as hope

# Mening-focused coping

## – Positive re-appraisal/Cognitive restructuring

- Because more and more people are starting to understand more about the climate and how it is hurting the animals - intermediate school pupil
- Because people are becoming more and more aware and concern for the environment is starting to become part of everyday life in the things we buy or do - upper secondary student
- I hope the changes that need to be made happen. That might not happen until the situation is absolutely urgent, but still. Change is going to happen because it is necessary - university student

## – Positive thinking/existential hope

- I don't believe in living my life as a pessimist - university student
- No hope, no reason to live – intermediate school pupil
- You have to feel hope to make things any better. If no one felt hope, then you might as well give up. And then everything will come crashing down. - upper secondary student

# Mening-focused coping

## – Trust in different social actors

- Because I think people are going to figure out new stuff, like cars that do not let out exhaust fumes - intermediate school pupil
- Because scientists and other people are working really hard to find a solution - intermediate school pupil
- You'll have to trust the politicians – upper secondary student
- You can see that businesses of all kinds are thinking a bit more about acting in environmentally friendly ways – university student
- It feels like the environmental movement is having more impact on those with power. They dare not resist anymore. - university student

# Quantitative survey/questionnaire studies

- Young people's **meaning-focused coping** in relation to climate change is positively related to environmental engagement and efficacy as well as subjective well-being (Ojala, 2012a, 2013; Ojala & Bengtsson, 2018)
- For young people who use a high degree of problem-focused coping, meaning-focused coping also works as a buffer, preventing low subjective wellbeing

# Positive aspects of being collectively engaged (Ojala, 2007)

- Increased feelings of self-efficacy
- Living in accordance with one's conscience
- Education, the possibility to learn
- Meeting friends, a social network
- Exciting experiences and time to enjoy nature
- Something both practical and creative to do
- Praise and acknowledgement from others

SUMMARY: it is a way to cope directly with negative emotions, increased self-esteem, positive emotions of HOPE

## **To take account of coping/emotion regulation - Is this really a task for educators and teachers?**

- Educators/teachers are important role models for their students when it comes to emotional aspects (Kristijansson, 2000).
- Teachers more or less consciously create emotional norms/emotional rules in the classroom (Cekaite, 2013; Zembylas et al. 2014).
- A questionnaire study with senior high-school students showed that how they perceived that their teachers would react to negative emotions in relation to societal problems was related to their coping strategies

# How do teachers/educators view the role of emotions in the learning process when it comes to ESD?

- Small study indicates (Cross, 1998):
- Teachers are aware that these issues can evoke strong worries among their students, and they get worried about their students worry, **and this have direct didactical/ pedagogical consequences, because they avoid talking about certain issues in the classroom**
- Instead one could argue that: These emotional aspects need to be dealt with educationally in a way that helps students, dare to go through transformation and confront worry/anxiety

# The importance of critical emotional awareness

- Cognitive - to think about emotional aspects in a reflective and critical way
- Critical – to acknowledge that emotional reactions are related to power, discourses about emotions, emotion rules, culture and structures (Ojala, 2013; Ojala, 2016; Ojala, 2017)
- It is a kind of ESD-competence that both teacher students, other educators and students in high-school could benefit from achieving

# What components should be included in critical emotional awareness?

- (1) Critical emotional awareness in ESD needs to contain an awareness of the importance of emotions for learning, to put emotions into words - control
- (2) That emotions are influenced by different emotion norms and emotion regulation strategies that have been created and are constantly recreated in social contexts. Quite often they are habitual and implicit.

# What components are included in critical emotional awareness?

- (3) Therefore, it becomes important to lift up to the surface, disrupt, and critically discuss different general coping strategies
- (4) Educators need to become aware of and ponder about their own coping and views about emotion in relation to ESD
- (5) It is important to implement this in the learning situation, to take young people's emotions seriously and not only dismiss them

# What components are included in critical emotional awareness?

- (6) An awareness of coping strategies that opens up for learning and being able to help students deal with difficult emotions, by, for instance, presenting and discussing more 'sustainable' ways of coping with emotions – **meaning-focused strategies** and **constructive hope**

# How to support meaning-focused coping and promote hope?

- Some suggestions:
  - Perspective taking training – both the threat (worry) and positive aspects (hope)
    - Probable future (dystopia)
    - Preferable future (utopia)
    - Possible future – need to identify different pathways to it
  - Pathways:
    - Get in touch with adults who work with climate change - trust
    - It is also vital to show what young people can do in everyday life to be engaged concerning climate change
    - It is important to also go beyond simple individualized consumer behavior and show and support young people to act as citizens and not least go together collectively

# Final comment related to the theme of the conference

- Research has shown is that both **participatory approaches** and **being out in nature** can help people feel more positive emotions and be hopeful
- Hence, these dimensions could also be a way of promoting more constructive coping with difficult sustainability challenges like climate change



Thank You!  
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