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Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Austria – A
Thematic Analysis of Conceptualizations in Policy Documents

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Abstract (German Version)

Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung (BNE) ist ein Konzept, das sich mit einigen der drängendsten Herausforderungen unserer Zeit auseinandersetzt, insbesondere mit Fragen der Nachhaltigkeit und der Bildung heutiger sowie zukünftiger Generationen. Diese Masterarbeit untersucht das Konzept mit dem zentralen Forschungsschwerpunkt darauf, wie BNE in politischen Dokumenten konzeptualisiert wird. Während die bestehende Forschung sich in Österreich vor allem auf die Implementierung des Konzepts in der Praxis konzentriert, priorisiert diese Arbeit die schriftliche Repräsentation von BNE in einem bildungspolitischen Kontext und erweitert damit den Zugang zu dem theoretischen Verständnis. Auf der Grundlage eines kritisch-reflexiven Forschungsparadigmas wird die Reflexive Thematische Analyse (RTA) als primäre Methode in der qualitativen Untersuchung angewendet. Die Interpretation wird zusätzlich durch einen „What's the Problem Represented to be?“ (WPR)-Ansatz unterstützt. Die Analyse zeigt, dass es keine einheitliche oder klare Definition von ESD gibt. Stattdessen werden fünf Komponenten identifiziert, die eine Konzeptualisierung von BNE im österreichischen Kontext ergeben. Zwei ergänzende Forschungsfragen präzisieren das Design der Masterarbeit. Neben der Analyse unterschiedlicher Zugänge zu diesem Konzept befassen sie sich mit den Auswirkungen internationaler Agenden und Empfehlungen auf die nationale Bildungspolitik. Die daraus gewonnenen Erkenntnisse basieren auf neuen Formen globaler Bildungs-Governance und identifizieren politische Angleichungsprozesse auf der strukturellen Ebene als auch den Transfer und die Vermittlung von Bildungsinhalten zwischen internationaler und nationaler Dimension. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass BNE primär als Instrument zur Förderung nachhaltiger Entwicklung positioniert wird, wobei Bildung per se eher eine ergänzende als eine zentrale Rolle einnimmt. Dies ist insofern relevant, als es Aufschluss darüber gibt, wie das Konzept, einschließlich seiner Terminologie, im österreichischen Kontext verwendet wird und wie es gleichzeitig mit internationalen Entwicklungen verknüpft ist. Gerade vor dem Hintergrund des Potenzials von BNE innovative Impulse für die Qualitätsentwicklung im Bildungsbereich zu liefern, ist seine stetige Weiterentwicklung und Anpassungsfähigkeit besonders bedeutsam. Abschließend beleuchtet die Arbeit den Prozess der Pädagogisierung von gesellschaftlichen Herausforderungen und wirft durch die Feststellung eines starken Fokus auf ökologische Nachhaltigkeit kritische Fragen hinsichtlich der pädagogischen Tiefe und Ausrichtung von BNE auf.

Abstract

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a concept that addresses some of the most pressing challenges of our time: sustainability issues and the education of current and future generations. This master's thesis explores the concept, with a central research focus on how ESD is conceptualized in policy documents. Existing research in Austria focuses primarily on the concept in practice. This thesis contributes by offering insights into an educational policy context that places particular emphasis on constructions of ESD in text documents. Grounded in a critical-reflexive qualitative research paradigm, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is applied as the primary method. The interpretation is further supported by a 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) approach. Key findings indicate that there is no uniform or clear definition of ESD. Instead, five components are identified to assemble a conceptualization for the concept in the Austrian context. Two sub-questions specify the research design. Alongside the representation of distinct approaches to the concept, they target the impact of international frameworks and recommendations on national policies. Responses to them are informed by new modes of governance in education in a global dimension and identify structural alignment as policy transfer as well as educational transference processes that connect global and national spheres of policymaking. Analysis shows that the concept is mainly positioned as a means to advance sustainable development, with its educational essence playing a complementary, rather than central role. This is significant as it highlights how the concept, and its terminology are employed in the Austrian political context that is connected to the international one. This is particularly relevant in light of ESD's potential to offer innovative approaches, due to its adaptability and continuous evolution as a guiding concept for quality development in education. Ultimately, the thesis sheds light on the process of educationalization and, through identifying a strong focus on ecological sustainability, raises critical questions regarding the depth of ESD's educational essence.

Foreword

The stimulus for this research was provided by a lecture from the *BiWi-International Lecture Series*, which is organized as part of the institutes event series *International Wednesdays* at the Department of Education, University of Vienna (n.d.). The lecture focused on the topic of global governance in education and the increasing homogenization of education policies. It was delivered by Maren Elfert, a Senior Lecturer at King's College London, whose research interests include the topics global governance of education, international organizations and shaping of educational ideas among other related areas (Elfert, n.d.). Thereafter I was fascinated by the issues of global educational governance and influences of international frameworks on countries' educational reality. After the book launch of Elfert and Ydesen (2023), I started thinking about how global influences play out at a national level, and in particular at country level. From the broad range of influences in global education policy, agendas as soft governance instruments became the primary research interest. To name an example of an agenda's influential power, the UNs Agenda 2030 gathered my attention because it is also a leading frame of a global educational agenda (Education 2030) and encompasses the concept of Education for Sustainable Development. Intrigued by the promising name of the concept and my general interest in education but also pressing challenges of current times, which the area of sustainability delivers in sufficient terms, the initial interest of the thesis was cultivated.

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List of Abbreviations

AI – Artificial Intelligence

DESD – Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

EE – Environmental Education

EESD – Environmental Education for Sustainable Development

ENSI – Environment and School Initiatives

ESD – Education for Sustainable Development

EU – European Union

Fub – Forum Environmental Education

G20 – Group of Twenty

GAP – Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development

GCED – Global Citizenship Education

HDI – Human Development Index

INGOs – International Non-Governmental Organizations

IOs – International Organizations

MDGs – Millennium Development Goals

NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations

OECD – Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment

RTA – Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SD – Sustainable Development

SDG 4 – Sustainable Development Goal 4

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

TA – Thematic Analysis

UNCED – Conference on Environment and Development

UNECE – United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UniNetZ – Alliance of Sustainable Universities in Austria

UN – United Nations

WPR – What's the Problem Represented to Be?-Approach

1. Introduction

Education and sustainability are two complex issues of great relevance for shaping the future. Especially in view of contemporary challenges such as the climate crisis, dialogue and cooperation between the two are becoming increasingly important. The concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has become a central topic in global education strategies, expressing a connection between sustainability concerns and educational approaches. National systems and the implementation of global educational ideas such as ESD are also impacted by international frameworks such as the United Nations (UN) ‘Agenda 2030’. The theoretical basis for approaching the topic in this context is the complex of issues relating to governance in education on a global scale, and particularly, the mode of soft governance expressed through agendas. However, the specific ways in which the concept is articulated in official documents remain unclear. Consequently, it is of interest to examine different approaches to the concept and how ESD is constructed by decision-making bodies. In order to understand this, policy documents related to education are analyzed for the country context Austria. Finally, conceptualizations of Education for Sustainable Development are formed. As interest in implementing ESD in Austria’s national context has grown, the focus shifted to practical application. This thesis aims to explore how ESD is understood on a theoretical level within the selected political context. Ultimately, the results are placed in relation to the theoretical basis, potential tensions in its interpretation are highlighted and discussed.

1.1. Current State of Research

Since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, Education for Sustainable Development¹ has been considered a ‘key to the future’ (Holm et al., 2016, p. 1). Within the thematic field of education, the issues of sustainable development and a certain range of topics related to it have already been covered by academic efforts.

¹ Always capitalized in the thesis, as ESD is acknowledged a concept.

The nexus between sustainability and education is evident in several areas. Academic work which interrogated that intersection includes research on promoting sustainable eating practices in schools (Dos Santos et al., 2022) and on integrating sustainability recommendations in educational curricula and the field of teaching (Addo et al., 2022; Buerkle et al., 2023). In the context of higher education, the connection to ESD has become more widely explored in recent years (Fia et al., 2022; López et al., 2023; Ruíz-Mallén & Heras, 2020; Schreiber & Torabian, 2023). Research comparable in scope to the present one were conducted regarding Education for Sustainable Development by Gantner (2006) and Ziegler (2014) for instance. Beyond the domain of education, sustainability has been incorporated into strategic programs across various sectors. Agendas targeting sustainability or sustainable development appear in corporate guidelines, party manifestos and university in-house strategies. National governments have issued their own sustainable strategies as well, publishing several reports in relation to sustainable endeavors, Austria among them (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020; BMLFUW et al., 2008; Bundeskanzleramt Österreich et al., 2023; German Federal Government, 2021). At the international level the UN, and particularly the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), has held a prominent position in debates about sustainability goals and future visions for a more sustainable world through the adaption of Agenda 2030. While its 17 goals and multiple sub-targets have received wide attention, the set of recommendations is not viewed merely in positive terms (Schreiber & Torabian, 2023; Unterhalter, 2019). Critiques concern the conception process of the agenda in terms of power and influences, the impact of implementing its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and followingly the risk of ‘sustainability’ becoming an empty signifier (Akkari, 2018; Machin & Liu, 2024).

Approaches to the central concept Education for Sustainable Development have been articulated both by UNESCO and in academic literature (Leicht et al., 2018; Rieß et al., 2018; Shulla et al., 2020; UNESCO, n.d.). One theoretical conception of ESD that holds particular relevance for this thesis distinguishes between two distinct forms: ESD 1 and ESD 2 (Rieckmann, 2020; Vare & Scott, 2007). ESD 1 focuses on promoting awareness and behavior aligned with sustainable development through the communication of predefined values and goals. It signifies educating *for* sustainability. ESD 2, by contrast, employs a critical and reflexive approach, viewing sustainable development as an open learning process. It emphasizes empowering learners to question, reflect, and actively shape

sustainability discourse and practice. Thus, it emphasizes educating *through* sustainability (see further elaborations in chapter 2.6.2).

In the Austria context, academic interest was directed at how Education for Sustainable Development is addressed at different school levels (Hauser, 2021; Hoheneder, 2022; Ucsnik, 2010; Zach, 2023). In recent years, a particular focus in that context targeted the school subjects of geography and economics in Austria (Hauser, 2021; Zach, 2023) as well as the ethical dimension of ESD in school settings (Sampt, 2021). Notably, Herta Ucsnik's (2010) doctoral research in educational sciences examined processes of ESD implementation in Austrian schools. Already in 2010, she asked whether the ESD concept could enable pupils to make a tangible contribution toward a more sustainable future, a question that remains relevant today. In Austria, scholars and researchers continue to investigate educational initiatives designed to achieve sustainability goals (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014; Rauch et al., 2014; Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019).² Implementation of the SDGs and associated processes has been subject to both academic study and critique (Haidacher, 2022; Obrovsky, 2020). Haidacher (2022, p. 80), for instance, found that six years after the resolution's adoption, the integration of the Agenda into Austria's political structures remained rather still in the early stages of the plan.

1.2. Research Gap

In previous research, accounts on ESD have been provided for the Austrian political level towards implementation, thus targeting practiced realities of ESD. What has received limited attention are systematic analyses of educational policy documents that are informed by theoretical conceptualizations of ESD. To bridge this knowledge gap, this thesis assesses constructions of Education for Sustainable Development that are presented in political documents.

The thematic complex of global governance of education has received growing interest by scholars and researchers³. Agenda-setting influence at the policy level constitutes a distinct

² For further information regarding the development of major projects and networks in Austria in the context of ESD since the 1980s, please refer to the following source: Rauch, Franz & Pfaffenwimmer, Günther & Jucker, Rolf. (2014). Education for Sustainable Development in Austria: Networking for Innovation. 10.1007/978-3-319-09549-3_10.

³ These will be named in a later part of the thesis (Beech, 2011; Carney & Klerides, 2020; Elfert & Ydesen, 2023; Kotthoff & Klerides, 2015; Matovich & Srivastava, 2023; Niemann, 2022; Niemann et al., 2021; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012; Waldow, 2012; Zapp, 2021; Zapp & Dahmen, 2017).

mode of governing within this thematic horizon. In this context, Education for Sustainable Development, as an integral part of the international Agenda 2030, is centrally connected to considerations of global educational governance. The respective agenda's successful implementation critically depends on the capacities and potential of education. Consequently, there is a growing demand for research to deepen understanding of Agenda 2030 implementation and associated ESD interactions (Shulla et al., 2020). Therefore, the planned research will lie in a rising field of interest for education, operating directly on effects of contemporary times.

A gap that this thesis aims to address was identified in the combination of the significance of ESD within political documents in Austria. Furthermore, by contributing an English-language analysis of an Austria-specific policy context in the education sector, this work expands the available body of scientific literature. Since governmental information on certain topics is often published exclusively in German⁴, this thesis also offers value to the international research community. The aim is to build on previous research findings and make a further contribution to the interdisciplinary field of ESD. As a result of this focus a specific research interest on the concept Education for Sustainable Development emerges, which allows a specific research question to be derived.

1.3. Framing the Inquiry: Research Questions Explored

The specified research interest is outlined as follows: The objective of the master's thesis is to examine how ESD is conceptualized in educational policy documents. The chosen frame of investigation is that of political documents. Therefore, the leading research question is constructed as follows:

‘How is Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) conceptualized in Austrian educational policy documents?’

The overall focus of this research is to ascertain the understanding of ESD presented in policy documents, and to identify emerging premises. Conceptualizations reflect how the

⁴ For example, educational concerns worked on in everyday school life, including topics of sustainability (Bundesministerium Bildung, 2025a; Federal Ministry Republic of Austria Education, Science and Research, n.d.).

concept is presented in the documents. Included in these are, alongside definitions and characteristics of the concept, topics which surround the mentions of ESD in texts. The question seeks to explore what components and attributes are used in text material when ESD is referred to. This central pursuit will be supported by two sub-questions, which aim at illustrating the complexity of this topic field.

1. Sub-question:

How do conceptualizations of Education for Sustainable Development in the policy documents relate to the different understandings of ESD 1 and ESD 2?

2. Sub-question:

a) How can these ESD conceptualizations be understood from a critical policy analysis perspective and b) how are globally formulated ideas of ESD translated in the Austrian context?

The first sub-question addresses different approaches to ESD that are elaborated as theoretical basis within the next chapter. Two approaches in particular are of importance, ESD 1 and ESD 2. As will be further described section 2.6.2, they are foundational for one of the conceived themes in the analytical process (5.5) and will facilitate a sharpened conceptual understanding of ESD. By including a policy analytic approach in sub-question 2. a), a comprehensive interpretation of analysis outcomes is ensured. Moreover, the question intends to ensure that the paradigm of critical reflection embedded within the thesis is given due consideration. The second part of the sub-question, 2. b), invites an examination of educational transference processes and by this anchors the research in a comparative paradigm. It connects the complex of governance in international education policy to national policy design.

1.4. Positioning the Matter – The Relevance of This Research

For the field of educational sciences, this thesis aims to highlight the concept of Education for Sustainable Development and emphasize its potential to positively influence the development of education in Austria. Its contribution to the field of comparative education stems from the aim, to understand ‘local policy contexts against the backdrop of a larger transnational (...) developments’ (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012, p. introduction).

Effective implementation of Education for Sustainable Development first requires an understanding of the specific context(s) of translation.

1.4.1. Advancing the Dialogue: Academic and Educational Relevance

Sustainability is expected to become a guiding principle for education on a global scale (Wulf, 2016, p. 294), further substantiating the relevance of a research project in this intersection.

As education is viewed as a key to achieve the UNs agenda, ESD is increasingly gaining prominence as a field of research (Buerkle et al., 2023). Although this thesis is firmly placed in the educational field, it is inherently interwoven with political dimensions. In light of current times' challenges, many of which cross national borders, and cannot be solved by countries individually, interdisciplinary research demands urgent attention. Such cross-border cooperation is required to address issues of the climate crisis and the question of a sustainable future for instance (Buerkle et al., 2023, p. 13). Each generation must be engaged in the processes of sustainable development, to guarantee an ongoing dialogue around Education for Sustainable Development. Thereby it is essential to draw on contemporary scientific insights within this domain (Holm et al., 2016, p. 1). The present work also responds to the appeals for more active academic research on ESD overall and more concretely, qualitative studies examining ESD at the process level (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 51). By constructing a conceptualization for the Austrian dimension, this work seeks to address the demands for novel scientific outcomes, with a specific focus on national narratives in policy documents. The statement by Bouslama et al. (2015), that ESD 'must be able to be (scientifically) reflected upon and questioned' (2015, p. 60) foundationally underscores the relevance of the present thesis, which responds to that call by examining Education for Sustainable Development in a critically reflexive research paradigm.

Educational science inherently carries **societal applications** due to the nature of its topics. In the face of pressing challenges worldwide, contributing to a sustainable, peaceful and livable future is more important than ever. The research purpose is not only to make a scientific contribution to the field of education but also to inform national policymaking by dismantling the complex representations of ESD in policy documents.

1.5. Thesis Structure

A brief overview will help outline the focus of the different parts of this section. **This introductory section** covers the general research interest and the current state of contemporary research. Thereafter, a research gap is identified, leading to the specification of the research interest and, ultimately, the formulation of the main research question and its sub-questions. Remarks on the significance of the thesis at hand are included as well.

Next, the conceptual **background** is introduced, encompassing sustainability, education and the central concept of the work, Education for Sustainable Development. The UNESCO's agenda on sustainability goals (Agenda 2030), along with specifics about ESD efforts in Austria, are presented, including a historical timeline for visualization purposes.

The subsequent part introduces **theoretical constructs** that form the foundation of key topics and theoretical assumptions relevant to the thesis. This includes sketching contemporary modes of governance and their global dimensions, as well as literature on policy translation and educational transfer.

The **methodology** chapter outlines the research design and explains why the chosen components are suited for investigating Education for Sustainable Development. A clear description is provided on how reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), the critical reflective paradigm of this thesis and research material are interacting.

Subsequently follows the **presentation of findings**, including seven themes developed during the analytical process. While brief remarks on the meaning of each theme already point to interpretative directions, a more extensive analysis is delivered in a **discussion part**. That chapter draws on implications from previously introduced theory to generate explanatory approaches to the findings.

With a final postulation the main part of the thesis comes to a close. **Results** culminate in the consequent section, that constructs conceptualizations of ESD. The **concluding part** offers clear answers to the research questions, while limitations of the conducted evaluation are outlined and insights into forthcoming research possibilities provided.

2. Sustainability, Education and Global Agendas: A Conceptual Overview

This section is informed by both, academic literature and research documents to provide background information on the topic, offering insight into key concepts as well as an overview of the national context in Austria.

It begins by exploring the term sustainability, presenting contemporary understandings in literature on Education for Sustainable Development while also acknowledging the ongoing challenges of defining the concept clearly. The intersection of education and sustainability is examined, with the two being central themes in the research context. Moreover, attention is given to the United Nations' agenda for sustainable development, which serves as a key reference point for understanding the international frameworks impacting educational policy. Within this context, one specific ESD-related sub-target (4.7) is highlighted, reflecting its prominence in research and policy documents. At the same time, critical perspectives are considered, especially regarding the ways in which the implementation and measurement of this target are approached.

A visual timeline is included to illustrate the historical development of ESD, providing a reference point for relevant events that are discussed throughout the section. Naturally, a dedicated subsection focuses on the core concept of Education for Sustainable Development itself. Different approaches to ESD are introduced, leading to a clarification of how the concept is understood and applied within this thesis, forming the theoretical foundation for later analysis and interpretation.

2.1. Sustainability – Some Preliminary Remarks

Based on guiding questions from research material sources on what is behind the terms sustainability and education for sustainable development and interrogating what sustainability means in the context of education, this sequence clarifies the intriguing concept of sustainability.

2.1.1. Definition Difficulties

The term *sustainability* has been subject to inflationary use for years. Governments and transnational agencies can claim to carry out sustainable projects just as readily as local social initiatives (Gottschlich, 2017, p. 22). As a concept, it has become embedded in variety of contexts, from party manifestos to corporate guidelines. Today, sustainability is a key component of economic considerations, with businesses recognizing the competitive advantages of implementing sustainable measures and branding their practices as ‘sustainable’ (Gottschlich, 2017, p. 127). At the same time, actors (from social movements in particular) are calling for an end to the use of sustainability as an *empty formula* that legitimizes and advances neoliberal expansion by reinforcing capitalist structures (Gottschlich, 2017, pp. 21–22). In line with Machin and Liu’s (2024) conception, sustainability is discussed as a *buzz word*, overused and often remaining weakly defined. Its widespread popularity makes it difficult to establish a concrete definition (Gottschlich, 2017, p. 21). Consequently, offering a single, comprehensive *one-size-fits-all* definition is challenging, for this term central to the thesis.

Sustainability is predominantly understood as a holistic model that encompasses three dimensions: ecological, economic and social (Brockhage et al., 2020; UNESCO, n.d.). These dimensions are closely linked and should not be viewed isolated. Nevertheless, the ecological aspect tends to dominate in discourses, often overshadowing the economic and especially the social dimension (Boarin & Martinez-Molina, 2022, p. 9; Wolff & Ehrström, 2020, p. 3). Boldermo and Ødegaard (2019) emphasize this imbalance, noting that social sustainability in particular, ‘seems to lack a clear and coherent definition’ (2019, p. 3).

2.1.2. A Contemporary Visualization of Sustainability

Recent discourse on sustainability has witnessed the emergence of a plethora of integrative approaches grounded in a cross-dimensional understanding. These approaches depart from the traditional three-pillar model, which continues to dominate within the German sustainability discourse for example (Gottschlich, 2017, p. 329; Kapelari, 2020; Pufé, 2017). With ongoing developments in the field, an integrative model of sustainability is widely adopted in literature on Education for Sustainable Development⁵. Rather than

⁵ Kapelari (2020) names as exemplary literature: Grünwald, A., & Kopfmüller, J. (2012). *Nachhaltigkeit: Eine Einführung* (2., aktualisierte Auflage). Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag;

separating the areas *economy*, *ecology* and *society*, the sustainability concept is regarded in its entirety as Pufé's (2017) considerations on its systematic show. This approach highlights the conceptual nature of a three dimensional sustainability (environmental, economic, and social dimension) with interrelated and mutually influential components (Pufé, 2017, p. 100).

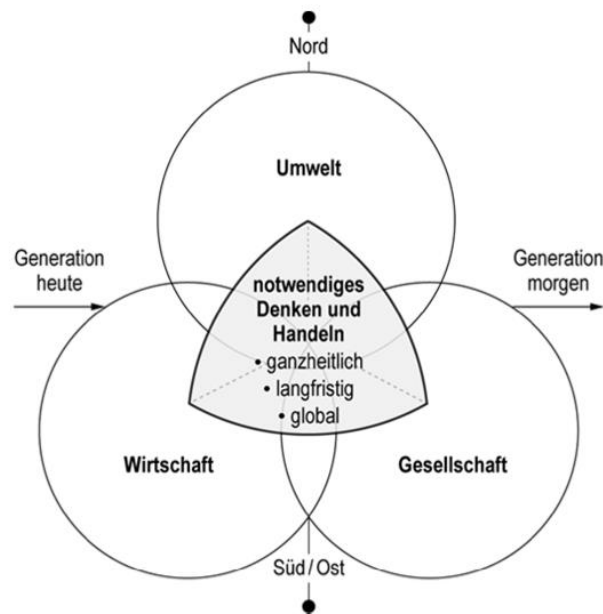


Figure 1: The Three-Dimensional Model of Sustainability by Pufé (2017, p. 100)

The illustration serves to demonstrate that all three components are of equal importance. It places the model along axes with 'north' in one direction and 'south/east' in the other. Arrows are depicted from left to right. On them both, current and future generations are represented in the graphic. The dimensions of environment (,Umwelt'), society (,Gesellschaft') and economy (,Wirtschaft') form the foundation of thinking and action that becomes necessary and is holistic, long-term, and global in nature. Based on this visualization of sustainability, the term is applied throughout the paper and understood with emphasis on the interconnectedness of the environmental, societal and economic dimension.

Künzli David, C., Bertschy, F., Haan, G. de, & Plesse, M. (2008). *Zukunft gestalten lernen durch Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung: Didaktischer Leitfaden zur Veränderung des Unterrichts in der Primarschule*. Berlin: Transfer 21. Verfügbar unter http://www.transfer-21.de/daten/grundschule/Didaktik_Leifaden.pdf;

Pufé, I. (2017). *Nachhaltigkeit* (3., überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage). Konstanz, München: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & UVK/Lucius.

2.1.3. Sustainability Euphoria

One of the corner stones of international popularity of sustainability, is the *Rio Conference* in 1992. The primary objective ‘was to produce a broad agenda and a new blueprint for international action on environmental and development issues that would help guide international cooperation and development policy in the twenty-first century’ (United Nations, n.d.-b). The expected result of these goals was a new global solidarity. This ‘spirit of Rio’ emerged as a prominent symbol of worldwide collaboration, a notion that would subsequently be reiterated in numerous publications and events (Gottschlich, 2017, p. 97).

Agenda 21 was the strategic scheme that resulted of the conference in Rio. Despite lacking legally binding status, it quickly proved to be highly dynamic on the international stage, exerting normative influence. It has shaped action plans at local, regional, and national levels around the world (Gottschlich, 2017, p. 96). Gottschlich identifies neoliberal strands of reasoning, along with an implicit neoliberal conception of the economy, as being embedded within the agenda (2017, p. 104). The question arises, whether the ‘hype’ of sustainability in this particular agenda was a short-lived excitement. Over time, and notably since the 2000s, active Agenda 21 processes declined. The initial enthusiasm for cooperation faded especially among environmental, development and women's policy actors. They noted that structural barriers to transformation had been insufficiently addressed (Gottschlich, 2017, pp. 26–27).

2.2. Education & Sustainability

Education must adapt to changing needs of contemporary times, such as sustainability. Yet, and maybe in consequence, it remains challenging to precisely define the relation of the two terms (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019; Gottschlich, 2017). Rather we find various explanations of an education that is in some way aligned to sustainability. The preliminary step is to illustrate this connection.

Education is related to sustainability in the way that sustainable thinking and action present an educational goal (Kapelari, 2020, p. 7). UNESCO (2020, p. 42) and recent literature (Öztemur, 2024, p. 168; Shulla et al., 2020, p. 5) underscore education’s central role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and shaping sustainable futures.

Plymouth University summarizes a definition for ESD, that suggests one way to approach a sustainability-oriented education:

'There is no 'correct' pedagogy for sustainability education but there is a broad consensus that it requires a shift towards active, participative, and experiential learning methods that engage the learner and make a real difference to their understanding, thinking and ability to act.' (University of Plymouth, n.d.)

This insight aligns with the broader construction of ESD in this thesis and makes clear that ESD pedagogy is context-dependent and debated. Furthermore, the statement makes an interesting point in the first sentence. Acknowledging that there is no singular, universally applicable pedagogical approach to a sustainability education, it is evident that the relationship between these concepts remains a subject of ongoing debate, with no consensus yet established. For each context it must be negotiated anew.

Sustainability and education are long-standing concerns of society. Their conversation is especially interesting as sustainability is to determine the normative orientation of education on the global scale in contemporary times (Wulf, 2016, p. 294). Out of the necessity to consider education for a progress in favor of a sustainable future, the term Education for Sustainable Development emerged.

2.3. Education for Sustainable Development

Education for Sustainable Development, abbreviated ESD, is the concept at heart of this work. This section establishes foundational understanding by reviewing literature before mapping its historical roots and displaying approaches to the concept, including how it is perceived in the present work.

Positional note on 'development': Within this thesis, *development* is understood in its processual meaning, implying advancement in the educational domain and design of its future mode rather than the humanitarian or growth-focused narratives often connoted in global development discourse (Akkari, 2018; Burde, 2004; Irwin, 2022). This distinction is declared up front and sets definitional boundaries for the thesis⁶.

⁶ For deeper engagement with the topic see for example Khan et al. (Khan et al., 2022) on the matter on classification of countries and implications thereof.

2.3.1. Foundational Underpinnings

Education for Sustainable Development has been recognized as a key strategy for shaping the future since the *Stockholm Conference* in 1972 (Holm et al., 2016, p. 1; UN, 1973). From the late 1990s, sustainable development (SD)⁷ gained prominence in educational discourse and practice. Within that milieu, ESD crystallized as a concept (Rieckmann, 2020, p. 13) defined as a pedagogical approach that places sustainability at its core. Rather than emphasizing specific skills, the objective of ESD is to cultivate interdisciplinary collaboration and generate knowledge that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries (Shulla et al., 2020, p. 7). ESD seeks to empower individuals to engage in social learning processes and develop critical understanding necessary for implementing the SDGs (Rieckmann, 2020, p. 13). Ultimately, it is expected to contribute to the broader goal of sustainable societal transformation – a matter widely accepted (Rieckmann, 2020, p. 15). However, the question of how ESD can most effectively achieve this remains open to debate.

Within educational research, increasing attention has been paid to the methods and strategies that best support the implementation of ESD and accompanied goals in teaching. A group of German scholars has published extensively on this topic (Rieß et al., 2018, 2022). Their work emphasizes the importance of applying modern, innovative and alternative, student-centered practices that encourage learners to take ownership of their learning. These methods aim to promote self-directed, problem-oriented learning processes that support the development of applicable knowledge and problem-solving skills (Rieß et al., 2022, p. 11). Interdisciplinary learning and critical thinking are thus consistently highlighted in the literature as central to effective ESD.

In connection with these pedagogical strategies, the *whole-institution* or *whole-system* approach has gained prominence in current ESD discourse (Leicht et al., 2018; Rieckmann, 2020). The way of proceeding that is also identified in UNESCO publications addressing trends in ESD extends practices of engaging with the concept as for instance. The overarching objective of this comprehensive, institution-wide approach is to ensure the

⁷ As is sustainability, sustainable development is a term allowing a multitude of possible interpretations, which has been pounced upon by a wide variety of players (Gottschlich, 2017, p. 21).

integration of sustainability principles into all domains of the educational institution (Leicht et al., 2018, pp. 12, 46). At the same time, critical perspectives have emerged that scrutinize the normative assumptions embedded in ESD, particularly in its practical implementation. Budde and Blasse (2023) demonstrate a perception of ESD in the political dimension, that sees the concept as a solution to the crises afflicting society and ecosystem on a global scale, and as a means of combating the climate emergency (Budde & Blasse, 2023, p. 4). Their critique draws attention to the conflicting tension of ESD between its often goal-oriented, normative framing and its open-ended educational ideals. They raise implications worth reading.

2.3.2. Historical Antecedents – A Brief Overview

Education for Sustainable Development has its conceptual roots in Agenda 21, the Thessaloniki Conference and the *World Summit on Sustainable Development* in Johannesburg in 2002. During the development of Agenda 21, a designated concept became increasingly concrete (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 16; Stelzer et al., 2012, pp. 83–84). A comprehensive history of what led to ESD, as the concept is understood in current times, cannot be adequately displayed in a sub-chapter of this shortness and would exceed the limits of this work. The following statement encapsulates the rise of ESD accurately and suitably:

‘With the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro and the Framework for Action of Agenda 21, ESD expanded and merged all forms of education, including environmental, social, ethical and cultural dimensions (UN 1992).’ (Shulla et al., 2020, p. 5)

As highlighted in this quote, a key feature of Education for Sustainable Development is its ability to adapt to different contextual dimensions, ecological, socio-cultural, or political. In their study, Shulla et al. (2020) provide a comprehensive literature review on the development of ESD to date. In subsequence, some of the most relevant milestones, in the form of recommendations and guiding strategies in international agreements and national policies, will be presented.

2.3.2.1. Self-Constructed Timeline

The overall aim of the generated graphic is to provide a visual mapping of ESD-related events that are relevant to the focus of this thesis. The timeline covers the period from a

point in the past, 2005, through to the future year of 2030. It illustrates selected milestones in the recent history of Education for Sustainable Development, both within Austria and on a global scale, in relation to the overarching framework of Agenda 2030.

As indicated, the graphical display of dates is not exhaustive. More detailed overviews can be found in sources such as UNESCO (2020, pp. 65–66), the United Nations Association of Germany (2023, p. 2) and the Austrian Education Ministry, which focuses on concerns specific to the Austrian context (Bundesministerium Bildung, 2025a). Austria's active involvement in international ESD efforts, is particularly noteworthy (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 2). For instance the conference '*Education for Sustainable Development towards Responsible Global Citizenship*', marked the first official event of the European Union (EU) in the field of ESD (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 17; Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 84). The vertical layout is designed to simultaneously illustrate global developments in ESD on the left-hand side, alongside specific progressions in Austria on the right-hand side. Naturally, global developments are also relevant to Austria. However, the reverse does not apply, as Austrian specifics are not universally applicable.

TIMELINE ESD

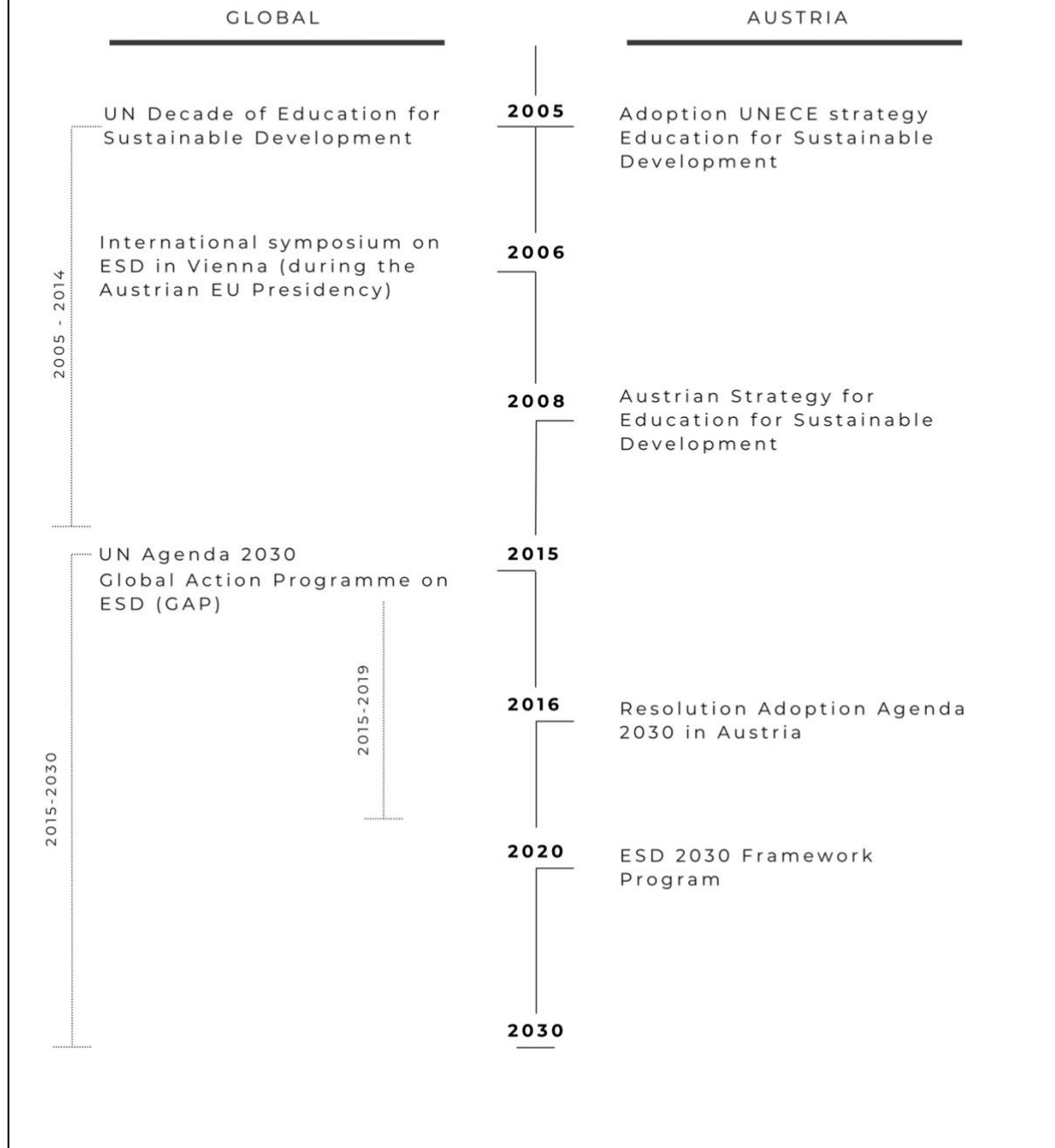


Figure 2: Timeline for Education for Sustainable Development (G.K.)

2.4. Agenda 2030 and The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda represents a contemporary, internationally scoped agreement that places sustainability at its core. It outlines 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which span poverty reduction, ecological stability, economic progress, and social development. Framed as a roadmap for transformation, it aspires to enable living in dignity for all (*Agenda 2030 für Nachhaltige Entwicklung / SDGs*, n.d.; Rieckmann, 2020, p. 12). A notable distinction of Agenda 2030, compared to previous global agendas, is the explicit integration of education into the broader unified global strategy (Akkari, 2018, p. 60).

Of the 17 objectives for sustainable development, the **fourth goal (SDG 4)** titled ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (in short *Quality Education*) is dedicated entirely to education. Further subdivided into ten sub-goals⁸, **target 4.7** is especially relevant. It focuses on Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education (GCED)⁹; its objective is formulated as follows:

‘By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.’ (Österreichische UNESCO-Kommission, n.d.)

This description delineates a highly comprehensive vision and places emphasis on skill acquisition. As Unterhalter (2019, p. 40) notes, the 4.7 is the only one specifically addressing a *content* of education, the accumulation of knowledge is thus identified a cornerstone of the educational sub-target.

⁸ Please explore SDG 4 and Education 2030 in further detail on the UNESCO homepage <https://www.unesco.org/sdg4education2030/en> (unesco.org, n.d.)

⁹ ESD goes hand in hand with the concern for *Global Citizenship for Sustainable Development* (GCED) which is the second part of target 4.7 of the SDGs (Leicht et al., 2018; Österreichische UNESCO-Kommission, n.d.; unesco.org, n.d.; United Nations, n.d.-a). GCED is less concerned about ecological issues but prioritizes more human rights, democracy and peace & conflicts more (Shulla et al., 2020, p. 7).

For assessment tracking purposes, target 4.7 includes an indicator measuring the extent to which both concepts (i) GCED and (ii) ESD are mainstreamed across:

- ‘(a) national education policies;
- (b) curricula;
- (c) teacher education and
- (d) student assessment’ (United Nations, n.d.-a).

Given the context of the thesis it centers particularly on points (a) and (ii). These two closely align with the focus on ESD and policy in Austria. Nonetheless, thematic analysis results further suggest implications for both curricula and teacher education.

2.4.1. Subject to Criticism

Despite – or maybe exactly because of – its ambitious vision, the UN agenda has drawn critique. Akkari (2018, p. 60) observes that many countries are unlikely to achieve the Agenda's objectives. Austria, in contrast, is acknowledged in its privileged position on this matter. The country is considered relatively well-positioned due to its prosperity and high ranking on the Human Development Index (HDI). The Austrian Federal Ministry for Education notes that many targets within Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) are already largely achieved in Austria (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, p. 10).

Nevertheless, a significant disparity has been identified between the Agenda's values, the specific aspirations of its targets, and the indicators used to assess progress (Unterhalter, 2019). McGrath (2014, p. 5) highlights similar concerns in the transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the SDGs, pointing to an inherent tension between technocratic goal setting and texts designed to advocate for and advance the objectives. These goals, he argues, are inseparable from debates around data availability and measurement tools (McGrath, 2014, p. 5). The issue becomes particularly evident when examining SDG indicators in Austria, where **data gaps** persist, especially in the context of ESD and target 4.7.

Furthermore, critical scholars warn that sustainability is at risk of becoming a ‘buzz word’ (Machin & Liu, 2024) amidst the sustainability ‘hype’. In this context, skepticism arises over whether the concept is becoming an *empty signifier* formula that being used as a lip-

service without critical engagement, a concern raised by Gottschlich (2017), Machin and Liu (2024), and Obrovsky (2020). Radical critique preserves space for reflexivity and deeper inquiry and is thus necessary once again (Gottschlich, 2017, p. 198).

Concerns are also voiced in the research documents about ESD being reduced to rhetoric, thus becoming in a way symbolic or superficial. One report mentions the establishment of a *sustainability award* as a step toward embedding sustainability into daily university practice (BMLFUW, 2011, p. 41). In another, experts expressed regret towards the lack of implementation progress following the UN's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), referring to Austria as a 'world champion in making good plans' (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 59) without delivering on them. ESD in this rather critical comment is depicted as a label, with questions raised as to whether previous understandings of education and sustainability persist under a new name (Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 8, 10, 58).

2.4.2. Representation of Agenda 2030 and ESD in Austrian Policy Material

As noted in earlier sections, Austria had engaged with educational dimensions of sustainability prior to the formal adoption of Agenda 2030. Themes such as environmental education and sustainability were already part of the national education system (a lot of them captured now by SDG 4) (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, p. 111; Bundeskanzleramt, 2017, p. 47; Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, pp. 7, 19). Yet, despite frequent reference to Agenda 2030, many national reports treat Education for Sustainable Development only marginally. In some instances, ESD is absent even from sections explicitly discussing SDG 4 and sustainability (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, pp. 26, 28). One report by the Federal Chancellery refers to ESD only once while simultaneously emphasizing education's importance in sustainable development broadly (Bundeskanzleramt, 2017, pp. 19, 47). This points to a discrepancy between the acknowledged importance of education and reporting on ESD in relation to Agenda 2030.

Nonetheless, connections to ESD are evident, such as in references to the *Education 2030 Framework for Action* and civil society initiatives like the 'Bildung2030' platform, which tracks progress on ESD in Austria (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, pp. 109, 129, 131;

Bildung2030 – Plattform für Globales Lernen und Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung, n.d.). ESD, embedded in sub-target 4.7, is recognized as a means of linking across the full set of goals and assigned a key role for achieving the SDGs (Allmer et al., 2021, pp. 8–9; Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020, p. 65, 2024, pp. 113, 131, 155; Bundeskanzleramt Österreich et al., 2017, p. 49).

2.4.3. Focus on SDG 4.7 and Challenges in Measuring ESD

Of the seven sub-targets in SDG 4, **target 4.7** is of central to this thesis. It addresses both ESD and Global Citizenship Education, though reports vary in how they emphasize on them. Austria's second Voluntary National Review, highlights ESD more prominently (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, p. 61), while other documents frame 4.7 in broader terms that include multiple learning goals and underscore that it is essential for a deeper comprehension of global interdependencies and sustainability (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, p. 266; Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, pp. 18–19).

Despite Austria's strong performance on meeting several SDG 4 targets early (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, p. 10)¹⁰, the challenge of adequate measuring of goals, mentioned above, remains. National target indicators linked to SDG 4.7 name the knowledge of sustainable development expected to be achieved in part through ESD for all learners. Yet, data on this indicator is missing, and this gap is acknowledged across several policy reports without further clarification (Allianz Nachhaltig Universitäten in Österreich, 2021; Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020, 2024, p. 157, 2024; Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, p. 34). The *Options Report* by the Alliance of Sustainable Universities in Austria (UniNEtZ) underlines the urgent need to implement SDG 4 more comprehensively (Allmer et al., 2021, p. 8).

2.5. ESD in Country Focus: Austria

This section explores Austria's engagement with ESD without aiming for a full historical account. Instead, it highlights key legislative actions, national strategies, and institutional actors shaping the Austrian ESD landscape.

¹⁰ To be named here are for example, the targets 4.1 'Completion of primary and secondary education', 4.2 'Access to early childhood education one year before starting school' as well as 4.6 'Literacy and numeracy among adults' count to these.

Commitment to sustainability efforts is reportedly anchored in Austria. On a national legislative level comprehensive environmental protection was constituted in the federal law in 2013 (Nachhaltigkeit, Tierschutz, umfassender Umweltschutz, Sicherstellung der Wasser- und Lebensmittelversorgung und Forschung, 2013). Austria has also played an active role in shaping ESD beyond its national context. Its participation in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Strategy for ESD¹¹ illustrates a strong commitment to international collaboration and policy development in this field (Rauch et al., 2014, p. 8). In 2005, Austria co-adopted the strategy and pledged to implement it (BMLFUW et al., 2008; Bouslama et al., 2015; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014). National coordination builds on already existing resources and structures and is in charge of the strategic management (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 13, 24).

The UN dedicated a whole decade solely to the concept. The DESD (2005-2014) was conceived with the objective of integrating the principles and practices of ESD into every facet of education and learning. The overarching ambition to effect transformative changes in knowledge, values and attitudes, with the vision of enabling a more sustainable and just society for all was relevant for Austrian ESD efforts as well. It is worth noting that as an accomplishment of the decade, ESD has gained increased visibility in national policies and international agreements (Holm et al., 2016, p. 1).

Austria implementation of the DESD was guided by UNESCO's recommendations and coordinated nationally by the Austrian Commission for UNESCO, with support from the Austrian Federal Ministries. Dedicated structures such as a *Decade Office* and a *Board of Trustees* for ESD were established to support operational and strategic efforts, while education officers from the federal states contributed to regional implementation (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 10–13, 20, 25; Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 4; Bundesministerium Bildung, 2025a; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014, pp. 3, 9; Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 6; Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 82). These efforts enabled the realization of numerous ESD projects across various educational sectors, even though the term 'ESD' itself was reportedly not widely used (Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 8–10).

¹¹ Signifies the engagement with ESD at European level.

Following the Decade, the Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (GAP) provided a continuation of the agenda (from 2015–2019), aiming to further institutionalize and deepen ESD integration. Many initiatives and structures established during the Decade were carried forward under this global framework, which also overlaps with UNESCO's broader Agenda 2030 (Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 5, 10–11; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014, p. 4).

A nationwide strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (Bundesministerium Bildung, 2025a), complemented by the dissemination of publications and associated research¹², contributes to country specific concerns on ESD. A whole document of the material is concerned with describing the *Austrian Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development*. Introduced in 2008, the strategy was adopted by three Federal Ministries in the Council of Ministers¹³. Remarkably, it is referred to by the acronym ESD (in German 'BNE') while in the text of the document, the abbreviation is used similarly to reference concept of Education for Sustainable Development. It is based on a comprehensive consultation process (already starting in 2005), in which numerous stakeholders, located in the formal, non-formal and informal educational sector, from several federal provinces, were included. In course of the process relevant stakeholders were informed about the goals of the UN-Decade on ESD that was already in place and analyzed their approaches to the thematic field. Its full timeline and corresponding milestones are displayed in the material (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 4). The strategy aims to promote a change in awareness towards sustainability among learners and teachers in all areas of education and comprises of the following elements:

'Mainstreaming within the education system; partnerships and networks; competence development among teachers; research and innovation; scenario development & monitoring and evaluation' (BMLFUW et al., 2008).

Its further components and goals are incorporated in respective parts of the subsequent elaborations on themes. However, references to the strategy largely disappear after 2015,

¹² See for example: Heinrich, M., Minsch, J., Rauch, F., Schmidt, E. & Vielhaber, C. (2007). Bildung und Nachhaltige Entwicklung – eine lernende Strategie für Österreich. Empfehlungen zu Reformen im Kontext der UNO-Dekade. Bildung für Nachhaltige Entwicklung (2005- 2014). Münster: Monsenstein & Vannerdat. Research literature has also directed criticism towards participatory and political processes in its development (Rauch et al., 2014, p. 7).

¹³ Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management and the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy.

raising questions about its long-term influence against the backdrop of normative influences of international agendas, are discussed, a point that is addressed in the discussion chapter.

Later, the adoption of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs is defined as guideline for sustainable development at an economic, environmental and social level (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich & Bundesministerium Europa, Integration und Äußeres, 2016). Towards educational concerns linked to the spectrum of sustainability, on school level, National Council resolutions in 2020 (Parlamentsdirektion Österreich, 2020b) expresses a greater emphasis on anchoring of sustainability in the school curricula and revising the at the time valid curricula for environmental education (Parlamentsdirektion Österreich, 2020a). Those actions can be read as example for Austria's ongoing efforts to combine the two complexes of education and sustainability.

2.5.1. Consensus Positions on ESD Within Austria

The Education Ministry explicitly presents eight thematic fields as essential to ESD:

Equality between women and men, Health promotion,
Environmental protection, Rural development,
Peace and humanitarian security, Sustainable consumption,
Cultural diversity, Sustainable urban development¹⁴

(Bundesministerium Bildung, 2025a)

Collaboration of these subject areas in a critical synopsis are posed as indispensable premise for its existence. Furthermore, addressing the ecological, social and economic dimensions of sustainability in equal measure is accentuated (Bundesministerium Bildung, 2025a). The listing reflects a broad interpretation of ESD, combining ecological, social, and economic concerns. The Ministry also lists UNESCO's guiding principles for ESD such as interdisciplinarity, values orientation, cultural sensitivity, methodological diversity, and being participatory and locally precise (Bundesministerium Bildung, 2025a). Implementation is based on selected initiatives, strategic partnerships, and integration into legal mandates of higher education institutions (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, pp. 3, 27).

¹⁴ Translated from the German original on the homepage into English by the author.

2.5.1.1. *Actors Supporting ESD in Austria*

Austria's ESD landscape is shaped by a variety of actors¹⁵. While individual educators play a foundational role, each responsible for aligning their teaching with ESD principles regardless of subject or institutional affiliation (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 15), the broader field is shaped by a range of institutional and organizational actors. At the interface of national policy and educational practice, next to the Austrian Commission for UNESCO, three players have been consistently recognized by stakeholders for their supportive roles in ESD implementation (Bousslama et al., 2015, p. 52).

Forum Environmental Education (Fub) is a nationwide initiative funded by governance bodies that is entrusted with educational concerns; it has held a particularly leading position. For the UNESCO *Education 2030 Framework for Action*, it serves as a central hub for ESD-related knowledge exchange in the German-speaking context (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich et al., 2023, p. 35). Fub's remit spans environmental education and ESD, targeting a broad range of multipliers, including schools, teacher training institutions, universities, extracurricular youth education, adult education providers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and public administration (Bousslama et al., 2015, p. 21; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014, pp. 64–65).

The '**ÖKOLOG**' program¹⁶ represents the foundational ESD initiative in Austrian schools. Coordinated by the Austrian Ministry for Education and Research, its primary objective is the integration of sustainability into school development processes and curricula. As of February 2023, more than 700 schools and 13 teacher training colleges participate in the ÖKOLOG network, making it one of the most significant ESD structures identified in the material (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020, pp. 26, 51, 65, 2024, p. 113; BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 26; Bousslama et al., 2015, p. 22; Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, pp. 18–19; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014, pp. 66, 73; Steiner & Rauch, 2013, pp. 15–17). Together with the international Network for Environment and School Initiatives (ENSI), ÖKOLOG made significant contributions to the early promotion of ESD in Austria (Rauch et al., 2014).

¹⁵ Actors refers to all players who were committed to the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (Bousslama et al., 2015, p. 9; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014; Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 85).

¹⁶ This is not an acronym, but the official name of the program.

Another noteworthy actor is **UniNEtZ**, an alliance of researchers and artists from multiple Austrian universities. The initiative seeks to strengthen dialogue between science, society, and policy, positioning academia as a driver of change within the ESD landscape (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, pp. 65, 67; Bundeskanzleramt Österreich et al., 2023, p. 29).

2.6. Approaches to ESD and Understanding in This Work

The objective of this section is to provide a brief introduction to UNESCO's interpretation of the concept, followed by an understanding of ESD adopted in this work. In line with Vare and Scott (2007) and Rieckmann (2020), it distinguishes between two approaches to Education for Sustainable Development.

2.6.1. UNESCO's Construction

UNESCO credits itself with laying the foundation for global ESD implementation processes (Leicht et al., 2018, pp. 3–4). The organizations perspective on ESD can be derived from a variety of sources. On its website ESD is defined as 'UNESCO's response to the urgent challenges facing our planet'(UNESCO, n.d.). A publication from the *On the Move* series emphasizes ESD's central place within the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. In *Issues and Trends in Education for Sustainable Development*, ESD is described as a means of addressing critical aspects of sustainable development, among them climate change, biodiversity, sustainable production and consumption, and poverty reduction (Leicht et al., 2018). The concept relies on stakeholders leveraging education to advance sustainability goals. In the same way its successful implementation depends on educational leaders to incorporate ESD principles into educational designs (Leicht et al., 2018).

Appointing central importance to ESD is continued in and underscored by data evidence. ESD reportedly occupies a central role within the context of Agenda 2030, reflected by the representation of the concept in all other 16 SDGs and its pivotal function in achieving them. Attributed as main reason for appointing ESD is in its capacity to empower individuals, equipping them to actively engage in sustainable development efforts (Rieckmann, 2020, pp. 28–29).

2.6.2. Parting the Concept in ESD 1 and ESD 2

Based on the characterization and described scope of Education for Sustainable Development, this thesis acknowledges the two conceptions of ESD 1 and ESD 2, as proposed by Vare and Scott (2007) and further developed by Rieckmann (2020), Rieckmann and Schank (2016), and Kapelari (2020, pp. 15–17).

This theory is fundamental to address the first sub-question of the project's research interest, which asks whether conceptualizations of ESD constructed out of the material align with either of the constructs presented here. At the same time, it remains a key interest of this work, how the concept ESD is represented within surveyed documents. This inquiry is reflected in the central research question, designed to ascertain the predominant conceptualization of ESD in Austrian political documents. Adopting one ridged definition of ESD in advance would hence risk overlooking the diversity of perspectives the concept includes. Approaching Education for Sustainable Development on a theoretical level, Vare and Scott (2007), distinguish between two conceptions: ESD 1 and ESD 2.

ESD 1 is grounded in the belief that there are certain values and behaviors associated with sustainable development. Accordingly, the aim of ESD is to raise awareness of SD, communicate sustainability-related and promote action that is recognized as sustainable (Rieckmann, 2020, p. 15).

In **ESD 2** by contrast, Education for Sustainable Development as a concept enables a critical examination of SD, including the complexity, uncertainty and contradictions associated with it (Rieckmann, 2020, p. 16). Sustainable development is in this access understood as a learning process (Vare & Scott, 2007). The focus lies on developing key competences and critical thinking skills, enabling individuals to actively shape the process of SD as the primary educational goal of Education for Sustainable Development (Rieckmann, 2020, p. 17). To facilitate visualization of the distinguishing characteristics between ESD 1 and ESD 2, a comparative table is provided.

ESD 1	• Promoting/facilitating changes in what we do
	• Promoting (informed, skilled) behaviours and ways of thinking, where the need for this is clearly identified and agreed
	• Learning for sustainable development
ESD 2	• Building capacity to think critically about (and beyond) what experts say and to test sustainable development ideas
	• Exploring the contradictions inherent in sustainable living
	• Learning as sustainable development

Figure 3: Description of ESD 1 and ESD 2 by Vare and Scott (2007, pp. 193-194)

In conclusion, as illustrated in the table above, **ESD 1** focuses on environmental education and environmental awareness, with the goal of promoting specific behaviors through educational processes. This concept is frequently referenced in statements by governments, organizations, and other entities, including the United Nations' SDGs, and signifies an education *for* sustainability. **ESD 2** adopts a more reflective approach. It aims to empower individuals to engage in critical reflection on issues of sustainable development, form their own perspectives, and participate in a continuous learning process. This more emancipatory approach is not viewed as a discourse reserved for experts but rather as an open, social process (Rieckmann & Schank, 2016, p. 70). It can be understood as education *through* sustainability.

As a point of reference for this study, the conceptions serve not only as a basis for addressing research sub-question one, but also emerge as a central element within the empirical evaluation, reflected in one of the identified themes (5.5).

3. Relevant Theory Constructs

In line with Maxwell (2013), this chapter outlines the conceptual framework of the thesis. It presents the current state of the field that is studied thematically, and the relationships between key ideas and factors. Existing theories are examined and employed as building blocks to construct the conceptual basis of the research (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 39, 41). The previous discussion of the current state of research has already introduced key strands within the field. This chapter now focuses on theories with explanatory power relevant to the research interest, drawing on contemporary literature from the respective domains.

3.1. The Area of Global Governance of Education

The topic area of global governance of education presents an overall theoretical orientation to the thesis at hand. Followingly, first the term *governance* and idea of a global governance of education will be sketched, providing some of the most important aspects.

In contemporary ways of policymaking, international and transnational agents emerge as pivotal parties. This given, the role of international organizations (IOs)¹⁷ in regard to educational governance modes will be addressed. Thereafter this broad field introduces the topic of policy translation, that is part of the complex as well. A specific priority in the educational field is found in regard to processes of policy borrowing and lending (Schriewer, 1990; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Remarks on world culture approaches shall utilize the recontextualization of a *global* through a *local*. These will be fruitful for a later analysis and answering of sub-questions. The building blocks of the theoretical foundation are inherently connected. Linkages and references will thus appear throughout displaying them.

3.1.1. Governance

Governance presents new, non-hierarchical forms of political steering (Carney & Klerides, 2020, pp. 81–82). Unlike traditional forms of government, which are characterized by hierarchical decision-making structures and the central role of public actors, this concept represents a decentralized approach to governing. It involves the active participation of

¹⁷ International organizations refer to international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While the terms are often used synonymously, ‘international organization’ in this work more broadly encompasses (NGOs) as well.

both public and private actors (Kohler-Koch & Rittberger, 2006, p. 28). Governance refers to the collective processes and mechanisms by which individuals and institutions manage shared affairs. It encompasses the continuous, cooperative negotiation of societal relationships and conflicts, and is best understood as a form of intentional regulation (Kohler-Koch & Rittberger, 2006, p. 28; Smith et al., 2024, p. 532). When applied to the education sector, this perspective gives rise to considerations of how education is increasingly influenced by mechanisms of global governance.

3.1.2. Global Governance of Education – Introducing the field

Following the *Education for All* summit in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, education has evolved into a multifaceted global organizational field (Zapp, 2021, p. 1023). As education became a policy domain, processes were activated, that shifted the design of, and thinking about, educational policy away from being solely located within nation states and toward a broader array of agents. Not only international organizations popularly debated about as UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023; Niemann, 2022; Zapp, 2021), but also formations such as the Group of Twenty (G20), think tanks, non-governmental organizations, philanthropic foundations and national development agencies have become involved in educational policy engagement (Beech, 2011; Matovich & Srivastava, 2023).

This leads to a consideration of the contemporary nature of global governance. Michael Zürn (2018) defines global governance as ‘the exercise of authority across national borders’, (2018, p. 4) carried out through shared norms, goals, and rules. This authority is typically justified by appeals to common or transnational interests, with actors asserting their legitimacy within the global arena (Smith et al., 2024, p. 533). The concept introduces a spatial and geographical dimension to governance and reflects a shift in how power and decision-making are organized in global politics.

3.1.2.1. *New Modes of Governing in Education*

With respect to the ‘changing nature of governance in education’ (Carney & Klerides, 2020, p. 83) new modes of governing in education that have emerged are described. Transnational modes of educational governance refer to the network-like involvement of supranational actors and institutions in shaping education policy and practice across borders. These

modes are evident in discussions of European educational governance, the influence of policy networks on national systems and the role of organizations as independent producers of policy-relevant knowledge (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023; Kotthoff & Klerides, 2015; Niemann, 2022; Zapp & Dahmen, 2017). Illustrating the rising interest of this mode of governing, ‘researchers have been especially interested in standardized international assessments, with particular focus on the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and its Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)’ (Carney & Klerides, 2020, p. 82)¹⁸. This reflects a broader mode of *governance through data*, a mode of steering education that relies on performance indicators, evidence-based policymaking, and accountability frameworks. Such data-driven approaches are operationalized through practices like school inspections, standardized assessments, and the use of data-informed tools for educational governance (Kotthoff & Klerides, 2015, pp. 13–34).

Following these implications on new modes of governance, the changeovers coming into effect generate **isomorphic tendencies** in globalized educational policymaking of contemporary times. The fusing trend in the educational policies, norms and practices is described as ‘homogenization’ (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023, p. 195). Niemann (2022, p. 154) indicates a ‘trend of general convergence’, in his analysis of the education ideas of individual international organizations. Homogenizing effects result from shifting power dynamics within the complex of global governance in education, an issue that will be further connected to the findings of the conducted analysis (see section 6.3.3).

3.1.2.2. *Soft Governance & Agendas*

New locations and agents of decision-making result in adapted forms of governing. Among these is one mode referred to as *soft governance* or *soft power*, which rises to significance in the context of educational policy. ‘Mechanisms of persuasion’ have been described as a tool for this form of governance (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023, p. 24). This reflects to govern morally, in terms of normative and cognitive processes found primarily in ‘agenda-setting tactics’ (Zapp, 2021, pp. 1022, 1026). The mode of governance comprises a range of activities, including the collection of data and the generation of ideas, the development of instruments, the evaluation of policies or enrolment in prescribed programs (Elfert &

¹⁸ Besides this extensively documented pupil performance calculation other tests like are popularly referenced. To provide a list of a few scholars here: Lenzen (2004), Hopmann (2007), Jahnke (2007), Galczynski (2014), Steiner-Khamisi & Waldow (2018), Laukaityte et al. (2024).

Ydesen, 2023, p. 24). That IO's cover the lack of legislative compulsion in the area of education through policy recommendations and tools like rankings is analyzed by Lingard and Sellar (2016) and Martens and Niemann (2013) among others. Thus, the use of soft governance opens the possibility to rule and regulate without legally binding instruments. The EU practiced this over a decade ago already, inviting member states to put a focus on certain topics. By that it indicated a desired direction in national politics without having legislative power in the area of education (Wagner, 2014, p. 63). Strategic programs in educational policy can be identified across a variety of domains, temporal periods, and thematic contexts, and are issued by a diverse range of actors. Given the need to define a clear scope for a meaningful master's thesis analysis, Agenda 2030 is used as a central reference point for examining agenda-setting processes. It is important to clarify, however, that this focus does not imply a normative prioritization of UNESCO or its institutional values.

3.1.2.3. *On the Authority of Science & Knowledge Production – Legitimacy as Point of Connection*

A mode of regulating through research and knowledge production examines how academic practices and the generation of knowledge are governed, with particular attention to the role of cultural norms and language (Elfert, 2021; Kotthoff & Klerides, 2015; Zapp, 2021; Zapp & Dahmen, 2017). The increasing exchange of knowledge and expertise in cooperative forums, is considered an important driver of change in educational policy (Wagner, 2014, p. 58).

At the global level, educational policymaking is increasingly shaped by scientific knowledge. This knowledge serves to legitimize policy directions. By that it asserts an *authority of science* and underscores the value of research production. Broadening this perspective creates links to the normative orientation underpinning this study.

Over the past decades, international organizations have emerged as among the most powerful type of actors in the global education field, particularly in rethinking educational planning and organization in a world shaped by the forces of globalization¹⁹ (Beech, 2011,

¹⁹ *Globalization* has undoubtedly become a significant and widely recognized phenomenon. As early as 20 years ago, Gita Steiner-Khamsi pointed out the almost inevitable need for scholars to address it briefly (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 2). Since then, researchers have explored the changing impact of globalization on education from multiple perspectives. Some also draw attention to the negative consequences associated with globalization processes (Rocha et al., 2023; Zapp & Dahmen, 2017).

p. 13; Zapp & Dahmen, 2017, p. 495). Through their recommendations, IOs have considerable impact on educational policies and practices (Beech, 2011, p. 13). This form of influence exemplifies *soft governance*, which draws on a culturally embedded, cognitive dimension as a source of legitimacy. According to Edwards et al. (2018), this legitimacy consists ‘of socio-political acceptability, reputation and status’ (Zapp, 2021, p. 1026). When organizations or agendas are perceived as desirable and proper within a socially constructed system, they are granted legitimacy (Waldow, 2012, p. 417). Science, in this context, plays a key role. Its ‘legitimacy-granting quality’ (Zapp, 2021, p. 1036) linked to coercive policy power, is especially prominent among education-focused organizations (Niemann et al., 2021, pp. 15–19; Waldow, 2012, p. 417). Zapp (2021) notes that IO’s increasingly provide novel, evidence-based scientific knowledge that is highly relevant to policy. They leverage the authority of science by transforming this knowledge into concrete policy guidance in the form of recommendations or universal standards, making scientific knowledge one of the most powerful tools for advancing organizational agendas (Zapp, 2021, pp. 1023, 1027).

3.1.3. Linking Educational Governance to the Evolving Conceptualizations of ESD

A key takeaway about global governance of education is the ‘high degree of global standardization of organizational structures, policy-relevant models and reform discourse’ (Beech, 2011, p. 12), which is unparalleled for the field of educational policy as well as policy-oriented educational research. Referring to the question of legitimacy (over knowledge), standardization and governance through educational data were addressed again. This showed that international agencies have become a significant source of authority, that can legitimize a policy agenda (Beech, 2011, p. 261).

Refocusing on Education for Sustainable Development in Austria, the country’s commitment to Agenda 2030, alongside its active engagement with ESD, illustrates the agenda-setting power of international recommendations. This also underscores how the research context relates to the interplay between national policy engagement and global modes of governance. To summarize, new models of global governance have emerged and impacted the educational sector, with Austria becoming a part of these broader dynamics. This chapter has provided a conceptual background for understanding how global

governance in education has evolved and continues to develop. In this context, the increasingly important agency of international organizations in defining and promoting education policy highlights the relevance of educational transfer (Beech, 2011, pp. 261–262). This sets the stage for a closer examination of policy translation and educational transfer in the context of ESD in Austria, more specifically, the impact of international programs and their interaction with national policies.

3.2. Policy in Motion: Translation and Transfer in the Educational Context

This chapter places the educational-political scope of the research interest within the broader dimension of policy translation. Drawing on Cowen's (2009, p. 323) insights into how ideas move within the field of education theory, and particularly the concept of transfer, this chapter provides a theoretical basis for exploring how policy agendas might be adopted. It is relevant to the research because it directly relates to the inquiry of whether Education for Sustainable Development in Austria reflects a local reinterpretation of an international policy agenda.

Within this thematic, the concepts of *educational transfer* and *borrowing*, in particular, have traditionally been used to describe the movement of educational practices across contexts (Beech, 2011, p. 11). The idea of exporting and importing education across national boundaries implies that education can be detached from its political, economic, and cultural context and treated in isolation (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 201). In contrast, a political dimension that accounts for international power relations is significantly emphasized by Cowen (2009, p. 316). Educational transfer is not only bound to a plethora of political and economic factors but also unfolds differently depending on the context (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, pp. 202–203). Given these diverse interpretations, it is necessary to clarify the specific construction of transfer used in this work. Cowen (2009) distinguishes between *transfer*, *translation* and *transformations*²⁰. For the purposes of this research, transfer is understood as the movement of educational concepts or practices across national, transnational, or international boundaries (Cowen, 2009, p. 323). Translation occurs when

²⁰ It is important to note that transformations are not specifically employed in this work; however, further reading is available on the subject in Cowen's work (2009, p. 323).

educational institutions modify or reinterpret ideas when relocating into new contexts, analogous to a chameleon changing its colors to match its surroundings (Cowen, 2009, p. 323). In this broader sense, transfer extends beyond policy adoption to include not only the movement of people but also the mobility of ideas. As Cowen notes “(A) remarkable number of social phenomena ‘move’” (2009, p. 317). Moving, in this context involves crossing borders (Cowen, 2009, p. 317). He defines such occurrences as *mobilities*: ‘the transfer of peoples, ideas, institutions and educational processes across international boundaries’ (Cowen, 2009, p. 322). However, he also problematizes instances in which **concepts modify their shape, without undergoing a geographical shift**, highlighting this as a contentious aspect of mobilities (Cowen, 2009, p. 320). This tension is particularly relevant to the present study, as it sheds light on conceptual shifts in the understanding of Education for Sustainable Development within Austria. The theoretical lens outlined here underpins the sub-question 2. b) of the research, responding to how policy translation interacts in the construction of Education for Sustainable Development within the Austrian context.

3.2.1. Contesting the Processes of Borrowing and Lending

The understanding in this thesis follows Steiner-Khamis’s perception: ‘Borrowing is not copying. It draws our attention to processes of local adaption, modification, and resistance to global forces.’ (Steiner-Khamisi, 2004, p. 5)

The processes of lending and borrowing processes are multilayered. In economic dimensions, borrowing of policies can serve as condition for receiving aid, often tied to receiving grants and loans, in which case it is ‘coercive and unidirectional’ (Steiner-Khamisi & Waldow, 2012, p. 5). In education, the topic links policy research with the field of comparative education (Steiner-Khamisi & Waldow, 2012, p. 3). Schriewer (1990) frames educational borrowing, and particularly, learning lessons from other systems as an ‘act of externalization’ (Steiner-Khamisi, 2004, p. 203). Policy borrowing and lending research investigate how policies are transferred between subsystems, or whether they are transplanted across national borders or within different domains (Steiner-Khamisi & Waldow, 2012, p. 7). Subsequently, observing local policy contexts is central to ascertain how transfers of policy unfold (Steiner-Khamisi & Waldow, 2012, p. 5). Periods of political change often prompt policy borrowing, as they create opportunities or demands for

reorientation (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 203). The likelihood of borrowing increases when reforms do not succeed and policymakers, facing pressure, turn to educational models they claim to be international (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 4).

Borrowing and lending, as described here, are not only connected to policy translation theory, but also represent a form of educational transfer. There always is agency behind such transference processes; they involve active agents. Comparative education scholars highlight the role of multilateral, international and nongovernmental organizations on this matter. In light of the success of these international agencies' strategies for educational transfer, their impact on national educational reform deserves careful attention (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 169).

3.2.2. Power Dynamics and Exerting Influence in International Education Policy

Beyond what has already been established, it is vital to examine the influence of international organizations (IOs) and their use of agendas as soft governance tools. Power relations between member states as well as their geopolitical positioning are crucial (Akkari, 2018, p. 60). Influential states may leverage IO guidelines to advance their own initiatives (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023, p. 199), raising questions about whose interests' 'global' goals fundamentally serve. To combat the frequented impression that such programs are universally applicable and relevant it is crucial to highlight that international development nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) often implement models which are 'frequently underwritten by U.S.-based theories' (Burde, 2004, p. 174). This underscores the dominance of Western epistemologies in so-called 'global' agendas. Moreover, in discourses of policies and education, not all players are being considered, which limits possibilities to become 'of the global dialogue' (Burde, 2004, p. 174).

With regard to forms of governance, it appears that IOs are well-positioned to exert influence over other actors (e.g. nation-states and INGOs). They employ diverse governance strategies ranging from coercion and financial incentives to persuasion and norm diffusion (Zapp, 2021, pp. 1024–1025). Their role as authoritative sources of education knowledge underscores the complex power dynamics at play between national strategies and IOs in regard to policy processes in the field of education. Scholars like Beech (2011) and Jakobi et al. (2010) stress that countries with education systems that

already embody many of the internationally promoted policy goals are more ‘likely to adapt to new policy advice than a system that is more distant to such ideas’ (Jakobi et al., 2010, p. 229). Akkari (2018) further notes the particular challenges faced by fragile states reliant on international aid to adapt strategies from the international domain (2018, p. 60).

Historically, initiatives such as the *Fast Track Initiative*²¹ illustrate the exertion of power over low-income nations by promoting accelerated development models (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 170). However, Steiner-Khamsi (2004) argues that adopting policies aligned with international standards does not necessarily lead to homogenization; rather, countries may translate and adapt these models, exhibiting both acceptance and resistance to global forces. International cooperation programs in education, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals, have continued to shape educational efforts up to the present day (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, pp. 5, 203). This tension reflects the broader challenge in educational transfer of balancing international influence in adaption to local contexts.

3.2.3. From Global to Local and Vice Versa

How does influence operate in global education policy? Do national ideas serve as fertile ground for shaping agendas with global reach, or is the process reversed? As an analytical approach, *world culture theory* explores the emergence and global diffusion of a shared, ‘Western-based’ culture (Waldow, 2012, p. 413). This approach emphasizes human agency as shaped by powerful ideologies, highlighting a reality-shaping power of cultural dimensions in communication and interaction.

Within this perspective, UNESCO’s dissemination of Agenda 2030 can be located as a manifestation of such ideological influence. These ideologies often transcend national boundaries and adapt to various contexts (Schulte, 2012b, p. 474). The efforts of local actors in promoting or adapting educational models involve a degree of uncertainty, as the outcomes of their initial actions are not predictable (Schulte, 2012b, p. 482). In her analysis, Schulte discusses two dynamics: ‘**reconstruction of the local through the global**’ and ‘**reconceptualization of the global through the local**’ (2012b, p. 473). These phenomena illustrate how local and global influences interact to shape one another. Similarly, Schulte

²¹ Program of international cooperation led by G-8 countries to fasten the path of development that included financial support (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 170).

(2012a, p. 95) notes that global or transnational communities engaged in the circulation of educational knowledge often create direct linkages between local and global spheres. Building on this idea, Shulla et al. (2020, p. 17) argue that operational programs and strategies are increasingly adapted to align with Agenda 2030 and, through Education for Sustainable Development, are translated into regional contexts. This observation offers a compelling basis for the current research focus. ESD would assume the position of a translator mediating between global sustainability goals and the specific needs, values, and conditions of local contexts.

3.2.4. Significance of the Chapter

This chapter is significant as it establishes the theoretical foundation for understanding how global educational ideas and models, such as Education for Sustainable Development and international agendas, are received and recontextualized within national settings, specifically in Austria. ESD gained prominence through global initiatives like Agenda 2030, which exemplifies how educational concepts emerge from shifting global discourses. Policy transfer is never a direct, one-to-one process; it is always shaped by the local context in which it occurs. Accordingly, unexpected effects that pose a challenge to the assumption of straightforward transfer occur (Beech, 2011, p. 269). This insight directly constitutes the research focus: examining how ESD is conceptualized in Austrian policy documents factoring in how globally predominant ideas occur at the national level.

4. Methodology

The central objective of this chapter is to present the research design of this project. To that end, a coherent conceptual fit among all constituent elements of the qualitative research is outlined.

The method for data analysis, thematic analysis (TA) is introduced first, followed by a brief remark on the overall research design. Theoretical elements of policy analysis are utilized with a ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ (WPR) approach. This methodological orientation is supplemented by theoretical considerations from scholars that are rooted in the discourse analytical research tradition to further investigate underlying reasons behind data findings, enabling the thesis to grasp a deepened analytic level. Commenting on political education-related documents as material, draws on implications from document analysis to highlight characteristics of documents as research material. This combination of elements shall lead to a coherent research outlet. Furthermore, as supplementary resource the researcher additionally employed memo writing to document reflections concerning material, the progress and related insights. In addition, a research journal was maintained throughout the project for the purpose of providing ongoing reflection, in line with the works’ epistemological orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 176).

This thesis is grounded in a paradigm of critical reflection, underpinned by a critical realist ontological framework. Conceptualizations of Education for Sustainable Development reflect a reality as perceived in this thesis (Terry & Hayfield, 2022, p. 433). The perspective acknowledges that knowledge is context-dependent and shaped by specific social and historical conditions, rather than representing a single, objective truth (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 176). Such a stance aligns well with the research design, which seeks to explain ESD conceptualizations in relation to relevant theories emerging from the global education governance complex. Critical realism emphasizes the importance of uncovering underlying causal mechanisms to explain phenomena (Bhaskar, 2008). In this, it aligns well with an approach that interrogates beyond surface-level manifestations and seeks to analyze explanatory models for the ways a phenomenon is displayed. Originally designed to analyze *problematizations*, the ‘*What’s the Problem Represented to Be?*’ approach of Bacchi (2009) is employed to interpret the findings of the conducted analysis. It is precisely these underlying causal mechanisms that are of interest in the poststructuralist access.

4.1. Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is characterized by flexibility and reflexivity. While a study following a qualitative research design is based on a well-planned structure, it remains adaptable in its individual elements. These are interconnected and interact with one another. A pivotal feature is the researcher's ability to reconstruct and adjust the carefully designed construct for the study, when necessary. The stages of data collection, analysis, theory development and the formulation of research questions do not follow enclosed processes; rather all components of the research design influence each other (Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative data 'requires different, complex and systematic analysis', as stated by Kuckartz (2014, p. 16). According to Bernard and Ryan (2010), qualitative data analysis may also refer to analyzing any form of data, thus also quantitative data, in a qualitative manner (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 16). Identification and interpretation of meaning derived from statistical results counts as such. Conversely, it is also possible to apply quantitative methods to qualitative data, such as evaluating word frequency or word combinations (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 16). Considering these diverse analytical variations, Kuckartz (2014) argues that there is 'no reason to suspect a deep divide between the qualitative and quantitative perspectives' (2014, p. 17). Given these implications, the qualitative research approach employed in this work will be supplemented by a linear component.

4.1.1. Quantitative Component

A feature of the present study is the inclusion of a quantitative aspect to further corroborate, contextualize, and visually support the findings. In line with other scholars the researcher views computer-assisted content analysis techniques not as contradictory to qualitative approaches, but as complementary (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 142; Silverman, 2007, p. 220). One particularly suitable technique, *word frequency analysis* (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 142), is integrated in the empirical plan and operationalized using the qualitative data analysis software **MAXQDA**. It facilitates data management and in particular assists in visualizing results. The software was utilized in the coding stage, to gain an overview of the data material and to display connections. However, in all other respects, it played a purely supplementary role in the analysis process. Given the research questions' aim to contextualize the use of ESD in heterogeneous documents, identifying the most frequently occurring terms offers a useful heuristic tool, even though statistical generalization is not the goal of this research (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 143). Applying the MAXQDA word frequency

counting tool to the whole data corpus shows that the four most frequently used terms are *development*, *Austria*, *sustainable* and *education* in chronologic listing (see *Appendix, A 2*). This not only mirrors exactly the central research interest of Education for Sustainable Development in Austria, but in addition confirms an optimal fit of selection of documents to research topic. A common misconception is the idea that the use of software to support analysis is the idea qualitative data analysis software packages *replace* the researcher and perform the analysis *for* the researcher (Paulus & Lester, 2022). However, even with supportive tools, the quality and depth of qualitative research depend on the human researcher's interpretative skills, analytical, creativity and commitment (Clarke, 2017; Paulus & Lester, 2022, p. 421). Stressing the linear component as **supplementary**, the advantage of an enriched research designs prevails, allowing to view the phenomenon from a broader and more nuanced perspective.

4.2. Thematic Analysis (TA)

To analyze the data, a particular form of content analysis is chosen. Thematic analysis (TA) proves to be an efficacious method for systematically examining qualitative research data while staying within an appropriate scope for a master's thesis (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 20). It is a widely used analytic technique employed in the context of educational research for the structured investigation of documents (Grant, 2022, p. 304).

Thematic analysis is a method with its theoretical orientation varying depending on the chosen variant applied which allows for a wide array of approaches²² (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 225; Clarke, 2017). Considering this flexibility, it can also be used within the critical-reflexive oriented research paradigm. It is important, however, to be clear on the particular perspective, through which the researcher approaches the data (Terry & Hayfield, 2022, p. 433). TA involves identifying, analyzing and interpreting *patterns* across a body of data (Bowen, 2009, p. 32; Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4). This is achieved through in-depth examination of the selected data. Coding was conducted carefully based on the characteristics of the material, which leads to the identification of meaning that is relevant to the phenomenon under study (Bowen, 2009, p. 32; Chanda, 2021, p. 5; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82). In the case of the thesis, Education for Sustainable Development constitutes the central phenomenon.

²² The authors make clear, that it is not as simple as to say there is this one method of TA, but that there are variations.

4.2.1. Approach of Choice – Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

The guiding approach for this research project is reflexive thematic analysis (reflexive TA²³ or RTA) a specified school of thematic analysis, focused by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, 2022).

Reflexive (or sometimes referred to as organic) analysis aligns with the principles of *Big Q qualitative research* (Clarke, 2017). In this tradition, the researcher, is actively engaged in interpreting the data. Important is recognizing the own social positioning when drawing conclusions and being attentive to subjective theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments that influence the researching perspective (Clarke, 2017). Big Q qualitative research and Big Q thematic analysis aligns well with a critical research orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 159). Salient features that distinguish this approach from other forms of TA lie in the analytical process and central position of researcher reflexivity, both highlighted in the course of this chapter. The coding process in particular reflects an iterative development process, encompassing re-coding, revision and further development of coding the chosen dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 236). Unlike other schools of TA, that emphasize coding reliability for instance and try to be ‘more scientific’, RTA is understood as reflexive because it emphasizes the active role of the researcher in knowledge production (Clarke, 2017). Assumptions that are central to TA are listed in Braun and Clarke’s practical guide (2022, p. 8). Among the most central, is the role of *researcher subjectivity*. It is standing out as primary tool for reflexive TA. Implications towards this topic are considered in the last part of this chapter (*Ethical Research Considerations & Researcher’s Role*). Operating in line to underpinnings of RTA and Big Q qualitative research cultivates what Braun and Clarke describe as *qualitative sensibility*: a vital skill for researchers working qualitatively that is enforced for example in conceptualizing leading questions for inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 7–11).

²³ They themselves developed their approach since their first collaborative publication on TA to the point that they now refer to the term *reflective TA* for their approach to the method (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 5).

4.2.2. Applying the Analytical Process in the Research Project

The analytical process followed in this thesis contains six steps, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022) for a thematic analysis. Alongside outlining the essential foundations of the research process, the specific application of the analytical process in this thesis is detailed.

The six steps of a thematic analysis process in line with Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 6):

- 1) Dataset familiarization
- 2) Data coding
- 3) Initial theme generation
- 4) Theme development and review
- 5) Theme refining, defining and naming
- 6) Writing up

The analytical output manifests in the form of *codes* as well as *themes* (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 230, 236). As becomes apparent, the overall analytical orientation follows a bottom-up reasoning, can therefore be categorized as inductive rather than deductive²⁴. Steps two to five are covered in somewhat greater detail than the others. Reason to this is primarily that the coding process and development of themes involve a particularly rich and reflexive iterative process. This signifies as characteristic for the approach of choice, reflexive thematic analysis. Nonetheless this section elaborates on all six steps of the analytical procedure.

1) Becoming Familiar

Familiarizing oneself with data involves reading and re-reading the material while taking notes (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 35). In this project, familiarization started even before formal analysis; everything from acquiring data to defining criteria and the recording of key information, counts as such. In fact, this early engagement constitutes an integral part of the initial stage of the applied TA. After collecting an extensive body of documents, a first skimming phase provided a preliminary understanding of the material. This initial work on the material, in the first phase of thematic analysis, encompassed close and attentive reading. Particular focus was placed on tables of contents and introductory sections of the documents.

²⁴ Though both ways are possible, as pointed out by Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 236).

2) *Coding, Coding & Coding*

Coding can be understood as allocating labels to data segments. Codes function as description for units of analytical meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 35). As shown in step two of the analytical process, these codes are later used for developing themes and present a level of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 229). The decision to conclude the coding phase is ultimately a subjective one because '[c]oding is never completed because meaning is never final' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 71). Once this stage is finalized, all coded data must be collated (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 71), before their further analysis leads to the development of the next analytical category, themes. The software MAXQDA facilitated the process of creating codes. The iterative nature of this coding process played a central role in the analysis. While initial search items guided initial coding, during the process additional codes were developed to support investigating the nuanced and layered context of the material. During the re-coding phase, disconnected or overly specific codes were for instance merged into broader units. These refinements helped clarify the role of Education for Sustainable Development in the data. It also became apparent that ESD could not be adequately captured by a single term. Sub-codes were introduced to differentiate in a meaningful way between the layers of ESD present in data. For instance, there appeared various wordings of an education which strives to be sustainability oriented, which the overarching code *sustainable education* subsumed in the following. Throughout those iterative stages tools of the software-analytical program MAXQDA were of assistance while priority was on a narrowing down the interest to ensure the common thread was not lost in face of the rich material. A key methodological adjustment in this thesis was the addition of an extra level of code aggregation, which slightly diverges from Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) original approach. This is commented on in the following chapter (4.3).

3) *Generating Initial Themes*

Themes a subsequent level of analysis to codes (Clarke, 2017). In the present study they are understood as 'patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organizing concept' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 230). Thus, they capture 'the essence of meaning' across significant portions of data and are characterized by being recurrent within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 230). A key distinction regarding the use of themes in research categorizes them as either input to the analysis (also *bucket theme* or *domain summary*) or

as output of it (Clarke, 2017). The themes presented in this work fall into the latter category. These output themes are developed through coding, thus deriving from codes (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 230; Clarke, 2017). Likewise called *storybook themes*, these patterns are creative, interpretive, and tell a story about the data (Clarke, 2017). Themes operate as central organizing concept, by that helping to think about the essence and the patterning of shared meaning that informs the analysis to articulate a central idea. Constructed in this way, a rather abstract nature is inherent to themes as they often involve implicit meanings that are not immediately obvious. One of their potentials is the ability to bring together seemingly disparate data, enabling a coherent analysis even when the data is heterogeneous (Clarke, 2017). Themes do not passively emerge from data, they are actively developed by the researcher from overlapping, intertwined and always morphing smaller units of meaning (codes). This approach emphasizes the construction of themes as analytical outputs, particularly in the context of political document analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 232–233).

In the stage of initial theme generation, ideas for domains surfaced repeatedly during reading, coding, and reflection. Identifying patterns of meaning took time, being an iterative task. Proceeding from thematic mapping, initial themes were established by aggregating related codes in a way that better aligned with the research question. This first draft of themes was refined in the later process.

4) & 5) Specifying Themes

In steps four and five of the analytical process, themes were specified. Their **development and review** involved repeated engagement with the coded material. The primary objective of this fourth step is to ascertain themes are coherent with both the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole. Additionally, it was important to determine whether the potential themes offered a meaningful narrative that captured a significant pattern of shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 35). Connections between codes were actively explored, reconsidered, and sometimes discarded as new insights were discovered. This part of analysis proved to be the most challenging aspect of the project because the process occasionally stalled. Moreover, it requested a level of creative thinking, that is not always accessible on demand. Particular care was taken to ensure that all themes were recurrent across the dataset. Finally, the themes required a last round of refining as well as succinct names (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 36). Precise and appropriate naming is essential for an effective analytical process (Clarke, 2017). This fifth step, **developing, refining, defining and naming**

themes, was conducted with some temporal distance from the earlier stages of theme engagement. A late but important adjustment exemplary for the process concerned merging the spelled-out term ‘education for sustainable development’ and its abbreviation ‘ESD’, which had initially been coded separately. This distinction proved limiting, as both forms referred to the same core concept and were used interchangeably. Recognizing this overlap led to a revision in how the theme was defined.

6) *Writing Up*

As indicated already in the steps of process above, the last step of thematic analysis is completing the writing part by blending the theoretical narrative with a convincing, vivid data extracts and followed by thorough editing (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 36). Importantly, writing does not begin only at this point but accompanies the research since its early stages. Informal notes and preliminary drafts created throughout the process can be revisited and incorporated during this final stage (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 36). Each theme is first described as output of the analysis on ESD of the 17 political documents, with its inherent meaning explained. Subsequently, further *writing up* continues in the discussion part, where outcomes are bound back to theoretical implications. Finally, writing also extends into the conceptualization of ESD, culminating in the final presentation of findings.

4.3. Modifications of the Method

The chapter elaborates on the way the methodology was modified to suit the specific research questions addressed in this thesis. These special attributes do not fully align with the method for thematic analysis that Braun and Clarke (2022) applied. Such adaption necessarily requires a high degree of researcher reflexivity, a feature that is not only integral to analysis, but described a primary tool for RTA. Grounded in this reflexive stance, the researcher interpreted the required reflexivity as permitting the creation of an adapted TA variant, particularly in relation to theme development. In this adaption the codes from which the themes are formed were already aggregated from the preliminary coding with the software tool MAXQDA in an intermediate step. However, the first set of codes, while numerous, often covered very little substantive content. These codes were subsequently re-coded into broader, more meaningful units in preparation for generating themes. Proceeding from thematic mapping, codes were aggregated to the end of supporting the research inquiry more suitable. Themes are derived from these aggregated codes and aim

to express what meanings are inherent to them. This added step was necessary to capture core ideas more effectively. As an individual modification of this work, in the main analysis section, definitions and characterization precede the schematic analysis of the themes. This is not exclusively listed for the method of TA but became necessary in light of the research design and to be able to answer the research interest. The collection of definitions, while methodologically significant, does not qualify as a separate theme. These definitional segments could have been assigned to multiple different codes and lacked thematic coherence to stand alone. It is therefore unique for the present application of thematic analysis, that the Education for Sustainable Development definitions are separately displayed prior to the themes. Although this is intrinsic to TA, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), the outcomes derived from the process did not align seamlessly with a thematic analysis standard methodic process. This became evident in the dynamic (inter-)connections observed between themes. While they can be considered in isolation, it is through their dynamic interrelation that they reflect a comprehensive depiction of ESD conceptualizations. This marks a minor modification to the conventional conception of TA, wherein the thematic elements are delineated by distinct boundaries.

And quoting Victoria Clarke, ‘the researcher is what makes a qualitative research project a great one, not blindly following procedures; we are our primary tools techniques and instruments’ (Clarke, 2017).

4.3.1. Unveiling Aggregated Codes

Codes of which the themes were created are, as explained, aggregated from the preliminary collection of codes in MAXQDA. To guarantee transparency in the methodological process, the development of these aggregated codes is illustrated in a graphic. In each box the aggregated codes are visualized in capitals, while below them the preliminary codes are enlisted which led to the overarching units.



Figure 4: Aggregated Codes (G.K.)

All 18 codes displayed in the graphic above are listed among the respective themes they are distributed to and referred to in the course of theme description (see chapter 0).

4.4. Critical Reflexive Paradigm

To investigate and conceptualize ESD, this thesis employs a policy analytical approach grounded in the tradition of ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ (WPR), as developed by Bacchi (2009). Central to the analytical process is the *why* behind development of categories which promotes to critically interrogate taken-for-granted working with empirical material in a reflexive manner. The understanding of critique in this thesis follows Foucault’s perspective:

‘A critique does not consist in saying that things aren’t good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based’
(Foucault, 1994, p. 456)

While several theoretical strands could offer to this project’s interest. Without prioritizing any specific tradition in a deepened commitment, this thesis draws on selected argumentative strands of discourse analytical research that mark pivotal contributions to addressing its central research interest. They are in subsequence briefly sketched before WPR as the main contribution to the critical reflexive paradigm is presented.

4.4.1. Tracing Discursive Lineages: Scholarly Influences in the Paradigm

The potential to critically observe and reflectively analyze is facilitated through the approaches of several scholars situated within the field of discourse analytical research. All the while this thesis is distancing itself from prioritizing language in the analysis, as practiced in certain traditions of *discourse analysis*²⁵. Nevertheless the thesis uses the position of James Paul Gee (2001) to offer an interpretation for a more visual understanding of ESD conceptualizations. In his work about method and theory of discourse analysis, Gee (2001) focuses on ‘the analysis of language as it is used to enact activities, perspectives and

²⁵ Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) represented by scholars Ledin and Machin (2018), Machin and Mayr (2023), Machin and Liu (2024), as an example is a school interested predominantly in the role of language and communication in the functioning of society and politics (Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard, 1996; Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018).

identities' (2001, pp. 4–5). Because language holds the power to bring about specific meanings, it becomes essential to contextualize indispensable the terms used to describe the concept of ESD. Hence, language is employed to visualize the vocabulary surrounding ESD publications, as illustrated with word clouds in the chapter *Imbalance of Sustainability Dimensions*. Implications of an interdisciplinary foundation, as found in the tradition of a *critical discourse analysis* (Weiss & Wodak, 2007, p. 12; Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2), can be meaningfully applied to a thematic analysis of educational policy documents. Any social phenomenon under investigation can thereby be critically examined. This approach aligns well with the critical observation of ESD conceptualizations pursued in the current work. It entails an attentive research posture, expressed in openness to subjective interests and positionality regarding the topic at hand (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 3), as further discussed in this methodology (see part *Researcher Subjectivity*).

The analytical focus on power relations, as emphasized by Weiss and Wodak (2007, pp. 5, 11), is central to the critical approach adopted in this thesis and is applied in the discussion, particularly in relation to the governance mode of soft power. This supports the aim of interrogating structuring forces within social contexts and challenging their legitimacy (Richardson et al., 2014, p. xvii). In this way, questions arising from contemporary trends in the global governance of education can be meaningfully addressed. In the context of the present research interest, this helps explain a rationale behind different components of ESD, while particularly considering how legitimacy grants power to soft governance tools such as agendas.

4.4.2. What's the Problem Represented to be? (WPR) – Approach

This thesis draws on elements of poststructuralist policy analysis framework. The epistemological stance is operationalized by working in a critical-reflexive way through Carol Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) approach. It offers perspectives behind the surface-level readings concerning ESD conceptualizations in the research material, especially of developed themes and their meaning.

Although based on different theoretical underpinnings that surface in posing distinctly different types of research questions (Bacchi, 2023), a WPR approach complements the reflexive thematic analysis. The research design selectively applies elements from both approaches compatible with each other and underscore a critical look on knowledge. This

resonates well with the global policy background, that is part of this thesis' construct. The way of proceeding within WPR to analyze and understand phenomena, is utilized to support explaining data analysis outcomes. It is an analytic strategy for critical policy analysis, that questions taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in government policies (Bacchi, 2009, p. xv). Its principal aim is to identify and interrogate how problems are characterized and conceptualized within policies. Such *problematizations* are targeted through critical analysis of *problem representations*. This term, coined by Bacchi, describes how problems are conceptualized and produced within policies. Hence, the method does try to identify how problems are **represented** and not repeat their perceiving as real problems (Bacchi, 2009, p. xxi).

This strategy avoids treating established ways of thinking, familiar notions or accepted designs that policies are based on, as fixed and instead critically interrogates them (Bacchi, 2009, p. 39). Characteristic of WPR is this backwards analysis. Starting from the final product (like a policy draft in this context), the approach formulates the underlying problematization, that necessitated this policy (Bacchi, 2017). Adopting that logic, WPR supports contextual understandings of ESD and offers an interpretative tool for explanation models of underlying rationales. 'Problematizations are central to governing processes' (Bacchi, 2009, pp. xi–xii), asserts the scholar. Given the variability of country contexts, problematic perception differs and problematizations thus the same. In line with this argument, WPR supports unpacking constructions of Education for Sustainable Development. The full multilevel steps strategy to interrogate a problem(atization) in Bacchi's (2009, p. 48) design, is not pursued in this thesis. The approach nevertheless serves as important theoretical lens, guiding the discussion chapter.

In her book '*Analysing Policy: 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?'*', the author proposes an approach for policy analysis with the potential counter 'enthusiasms' she detects in the fields of education as well as public policy for **solving problems** (Bacchi, 2009, p. vii). The method connects productively with the phenomenon of *educationalization of problems*, which signifies the tendency to define a societal issue as educational responsibility (see elaborations in the discussion chapter section 6.3.6.2). The scholar in the same work critiques how the task of problem-solving remains predominantly the premise of policy analysis approaches (Bacchi, 2009, p. x). Instead, she advocates for shifting from a popular idea of *problem solving* to *problem questioning* (Bacchi, 2009, p. vii), positioning WPR as a challenge to prevailing paradigms (Bacchi, 2009, pp. xvi, 262),

she locates to be dominating in Western industrialized nations, as well as in international organizations shaped by them.

4.5. Documents as Research Material

Focusing on documents as research material enabled the researcher to engage in a flexible application of methods and at the same time guarantee a scope that fits a master thesis project. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is applied as the primary method of evaluation. The following remarks on documents serve to acknowledge their specific characteristics as data and offer context for their use, rather than to outline a full document analysis, or documentary analysis.

Material was for the purpose of this thesis narrowed down to publicly accessible digital documents, all of which originate from Austrian governmental bodies, ministries, and affiliated institutions. The exclusive focus on electronic formats aligns with contemporary research practices, particularly in policy analysis, where digital availability ensures access and transparency (Grant, 2022, pp. 301–302). Evaluating documents can offer valuable insights into historical developments and conceptual shifts over time. Although this thesis does not compare successive drafts of individual documents, it does examine how ideas such as Education for Sustainable Development are conceptualized across materials from different time periods, thus pointing to evolving understandings (Chanda, 2021, p. 7).

4.5.1. Specifics of Political Documents in the Educational Setting

The data body analyzed in this study is composed of political documents focused on the educational field. These texts offer formal and authoritative insights into how ESD is positioned within an ‘official context’ in Austrian education policy. As Grant (2022, p. 301) notes, policy documents shape the conditions under which people work and learn in educational settings and are therefore central to understanding how political ideas are translated into pedagogical structures. Document types include strategic papers, ministerial reports, and agendas, thus materials suitable for thematic approaches and commonly used in policy research (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). In correspondence to the proceeding in Gross et al. (2021), this thesis uses the specific form of RTA as analysis strategy for the material of political documents. The heterogeneity of sources reflected in research material used in this study calls for careful handling and contextualization, particularly with regard to

ethical considerations, which is linked to considerations presented in the section on *Ethical Research Considerations & Researcher's Role*. Before that, the process by which the researcher obtained the material is outlined.

4.6. Research Material Selection and Data Sources

It is the responsibility of the researcher to determine the relevance of documents to the research problem and purpose. Furthermore, it is imperative to ascertain the authenticity, credibility, accuracy and representativeness of the selected documents (Chanda, 2021, p. 7). Following this imperative, research data is described in the subsequent sections.

4.6.1. Data Acquisition

The data corpus was compiled using a variety of tools and diverse proceeding. Initial searches targeted Austrian institutional web archives, ministry websites, and government repositories, hence, platforms affiliated with public authorities. Open access data proved particularly suitable due to its digital availability and has proven reasonable to facilitate the collection of research material. Early attempts to identify a meaningful dataset that explicitly references Education for Sustainable Development quickly revealed constraints. For example, the filters *education* (in both English and German) and *resolutions* were applied simultaneously on the website of the Austrian Parliament in a specific section. In the list appearing, resolution's titles were scanned for 'sustainability' and ESD. By the end of August 2025, none of the resolutions back to the year 2015 (starting with the first document of the year 2015) had a variation of the phrase ESD in its title.

After extensively reviewing data bases, the scope of data collection was broadened beyond legislative documents to include reports and policy recommendation texts. This allowed for a more heterogenous understanding of the field. Data from Austrian official offices got extended by material from non-governmental actors, related to Austrian official offices. The term *non-governmental data* here refers to documents not produced by an official government body but commissioned or published by one. Initiated by Austrian Federal Ministries, the *Forum Environmental Education* (Fub, abbreviated after the German name *Forum Umweltbildung*) is an example for a government affiliated agent, operating as a top-down actor (Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 20–27). The corpus thus developed through an iterative process.

4.6.1.1. Criteria

To identify relevant policy documents, a filtering process was applied based on the main criterion of thematic intersection of sustainability and education. The following selection principles guided the final selection:

- Presence of 'ESD' in title or text
- Presence of both 'education' and 'sustainability' in title or text
- Education related to sustainability in the text
- 'Sustainability' in reference to education the title or text
- Publication by or affiliation with an Austrian governmental/political body
- Commissioning or publishing initiated by such a body

While not all criteria had to apply to each document, these principles were instrumental for assessing suitability. Ultimately, subjective judgment was also required to determine whether education, sustainability, and ESD were presented in a context appropriate to investigate.

4.6.2. Finalized Data Corpus

From the initial pool of 28, a finalized volume of 17 documents was selected. It encompasses reports, parliamentary decrees and laws.²⁶ Additionally, the curricular level is represented by one exemplary curriculum. To establish diversity in the data material, policy-relevant recommendation texts were also incorporated. The timespan covers documents dated from 2005 to end of the 2024.

In order to facilitate the process and ensure a better overview over the data corpus, a table was conducted. Collecting key facts of the data material aided the subsequent in-depth engagement with the material. As indicated by Kuckartz (2014, p. 57) it is of utter importance to develop a clear overview of the material before starting analyzing it closely. To this end, and inspired by the approach used in Gross et al. (2021), a tabular grid was created. The self-developed grid can be seen in the *Appendix (A 1)* and encompasses following document characteristics:

- Authorship and/or publication rights

²⁶ **Remark on citing grey literature:**

In realization, that a number of documents can be considered *grey literature*, the guidelines of APA 7 were a valid basis to consult on how to handle this issue (Murphy, n.d.). A variety of different material is categorized as grey literature, some at governmental level included. The producing body does not primarily have to be active in publishing (Murphy, n.d.).

- Year of publication
- Title
- Commissioner (if applicable)
- Length
- Type of document
- Language
- Presence of graphics

Due to space limitations and because the research design does not seek sentence-wise, in-depth hermeneutic interrogation of the analysis, individual documents are not discussed in detail. Most documents are in German. As this became increasingly evident during the data collection process, the thesis itself is written in English, a decision maintained despite the linguistic disparity which is grounded in the fact that the topic is not exclusively Austrian in scope, and that its international dimension is a central element of the research. As the data corpus evolved, internal links between documents became more apparent. For example, earlier documents show how Austrian institutions aligned themselves with the goals of the DESD. This interreferential character further justified the selection of documents.

4.7. Ethical Research Considerations & Researcher's Role

Ethical considerations are essential in any academic research. In this work, the importance of such considerations is further accentuated by the reflexive stance adopted by the researchers, which is central to the chosen analytical approach. Employing a systematic method of analysis contributes to enhancing the overall quality standards of qualitative research (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 24). Given the potential risks surfacing in qualitative research, the following remarks address both these risks, and the strategies employed to reduce them. Prior to that, a brief statement addresses the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) within this project. Within the scope of this master's thesis, artificial intelligence AI-supported language models (specifically *ChatGPT* and *DeepL*) were used selectively to revise the author's own draft texts and to clarify formatting issues. The content concept, structure, argumentation, and tools for source research are entirely the result of the author's own work. All content has been carefully checked for accuracy, own formulations have been revised, and sources have been fully referenced. These tools were used in accordance with the

University of Vienna's guidelines on the use of AI in study and teaching (*KI in Studium und Lehre*, n.d.).

4.7.1. Validity & Relevance for Material Selection

In qualitative research, concerns about validity do not imply a pursuit of 'objective truth' (Maxwell, 2013, p. 122). In the context of scientific research, validity pertains to whether the researcher perceives the phenomenon in the manner they claim to (Flick, 2021, pp. 492–493).

Whilst documents can offer researchers with a rich volume of data, it requires a critical eye in approaching and evaluating them; their use in academic studies demands careful and sensitive evaluation (Chanda, 2021, p. 7). A particular challenge lies in the selection of data, which poses a possible *validity threat* (Maxwell, 2013, p. 123). Researchers cannot be certain to have chosen the 'right' data, nor that material was overlooked that would have been very beneficial to the results. To address this, carefully defined selection criteria were applied throughout the process. Data eventually never represents the totality of events but rather an excerpt. The absence, scarcity, or incompleteness of documents should not automatically be a verdict on poor quality of the material. Instead, such gaps invite interpretative inquiry of the circumstances: What is said and what is unsaid? Why has a particular topic been given little attention? Why are certain voices not displayed and therefore not heard? (Bowen, 2009, p. 33; Cardno, 2019, p. 633)

Moreover, many documents are not originally produced for research purposes. Some may be created with an underlying strategic intention, for example to serve a political agenda (Bowen, 2009, p. 31; Chanda, 2021, p. 2). Awareness should also be raised to *biased selectivity*²⁷, the election of documents by an organization or website is already a choice itself (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). When working with curated document collections, potential interests of the content producers must be critically considered. Therefore, researchers should avoid treating documents as inherently objective or flawless sources of truth (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). To confirm authenticity and relevance (Bowen, 2009, p. 38; Chanda, 2021, p. 2), the data corpus used in this study includes a diverse range of documents published by both governmental and non-governmental sources, ensuring a balanced representation of perspectives. As advantageous effect, the use of as data in qualitative research is their **non-reactive** nature (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 124–125). Unlike interviews or

²⁷ A term coined by Yin (1994).

observations, documents remain unaffected by the researcher's presence (Bowen, 2009, p. 31; Cardno, 2019, p. 626). In this sense, their use ensures further validity and supports adherence to core quality criteria in qualitative research.

4.7.2. Researcher Subjectivity

The way data is approached has the potential to address concerns about a lack of reflexivity in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009, p. 31; Cardno, 2019, p. 626). Researcher subjectivity (often referred to as researcher bias) is one of the two most frequently cited concerns regarding quality in qualitative inquiry. One effective way to mitigate this issue is through reflexive practice: openly acknowledging the researcher's own position, including their values, expectations, and beliefs related to the topic (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124; Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 3).

For novice researchers, identifying which aspects of the data to prioritize can be particularly challenging, as Chanda (2021, pp. 5–6) notes. Early in this project, it became clear that the focus needed to remain on Education for Sustainable Development, due to the overwhelming prevalence of material addressing sustainability more broadly. Initial preconceptions emerged through engagement with Machin and Liu (2024), who critique a *tick-list sustainability* in relation to the 17 goals on sustainable development of UN's Agenda 2030. For the sake of quality criteria for research and to guarantee openness to new insights, these considerations were consciously set aside. Rather than reinforcing those expectations, the analysis shifted toward exploring conceptualizations of ESD itself. The researcher's active role, especially in knowledge production, is central to Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Clarke, 2017). Within this framework, the idea of a 'biased' researcher is considered unhelpful (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 8). Instead, researcher subjectivity is regarded 'an essential resource' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 13). In line with the method of RTA, the researchers knowledge and perspective are viewed as integral to interpreting patterns of meaning in the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 232).

4.7.3. Reflecting on the Process

In maintaining an actively reflexive perspective while conducting analysis and in retrospect, the researcher aligns with the principles of reflexive TA and the chosen research paradigm. There is a difference in the prevalence regarding references of the research material's documents. The report on the UN DESD in Austria highlighting developments

related to ESD between 2005 and 2014 (Bousslama et al., 2015), along with the report on the Austrian Strategy on ESD (BMLFUW et al., 2008), provide the largest volume of coded material and are therefore overly represented in the analytical output. While reviewing the collated segments, certain passages stood out; some, not at least evoking a sense of unease in the researcher. Passages that did not neatly fit within existing categories, were subsequently addressed in the interpretative analysis. In some cases, clear-to-distinguish labels could only be allocated after iterative rounds of engaging with the material. Therefore, it is openly acknowledged that some segments were examined more thoroughly than others. In light of the dynamic nature of the research process, certain terms or ideas receive greater attention in the final analysis than initially anticipated. One illustrative example, which emerged as more prominent for the Austrian context of Education for Sustainable Development during later stages of analysis, is the topic of teacher education.

4.8. Application Steps of Methodology

In this short abstract is outlined which methodological instruments are applied at each stage of the research process. To start chronologically, the thesis begins by using data material to contextualize the thematic areas of sustainability, the concept of Education for Sustainable Development, and the Austrian context. Implications for working with and analyzing documents, as outlined in this chapter, are applied to extract relevant background information. This knowledge is integrated with research literature in chapter 0. At the core of the empirical evaluation, reflexive thematic analysis is applied to education-related political documents. The initial outcome of this process consists of aggregated codes and constructed themes. While each theme is explained regarding its meaning in the course of presenting them, this shall not be confused with the interpretation. In the discussion chapter, respective themes and inherent meanings are interpreted through a policy analysis lens, drawing on the '*What's the Problem Represented to Be?*' approach. The linear component is applied in that chapter as well, deepening insight into the data material for the reader. As a MAXQDA application, the word frequency list in the *Appendix (A 2)* brings to attention the most frequently used words. The combination of all this ultimately leads to constructing nuanced findings regarding Education for Sustainable Development conceptualizations. Throughout the thesis, a research paradigm embedded in critical realism serves as the overarching architecture, providing a consistent lens for the entire analysis.

5. Presentation of Findings

The following chapter contains the ‘traditional’ thematic analysis. Seven themes were developed in the thematic analysis process. They each represent underlying patterns, which appear throughout the material.

Codes form the basis of the themes. As outlined earlier (see section *Unveiling Aggregated Codes*), in an intermediate step preliminary codes were aggregated to meaningful codes. Displaying all coded text segments would be too extensive, hence a selection of the most conclusive text parts for each respective theme is presented. The themes contribute to answering leading research questions. The schematic outline is maintained as follows: Each theme is introduced by its title, followed by the aggregated codes that form its basis. In an ensuing descriptive segment, selected data excerpts illustrate the theme. These serve as foundation for explaining the meaning and core idea of each theme.

Preceding the presentation of the seven themes is a subchapter dedicated to ESD definitions. They are part of the findings, as they resulted out of the coding phase, but do not fill the criteria of a storybook theme. Rather, they are a unique code which is relevant for the general conceptualization and overall findings. This is a modification to the traditional process in thematic analysis which has already been communicated in the methodology (4.3).

5.1. ESD Definitions

During the coding process, definitions on the concept found in the surveyed documents were coded. The selected segments either described ESD as a concept or included phrases indicating how it is understood. The defining character was implicated by specific formulations used to describe Education for Sustainable Development:

*strives for ... / is perceived as / is understood as / is / means / does not mean ... but
requires / is seen as / is associated with / stands for / must be seen as / as.*

The most frequent and perhaps most expected outcome is **concept**, which occurs as normative, global, one of sustainable development or for the pedagogical implementation of content. Further definitions are depicted in graphic below, constructed to facilitate

visualization of the conglomerate of definitions for Education for Sustainable Development in Austrian politically relevant documents.

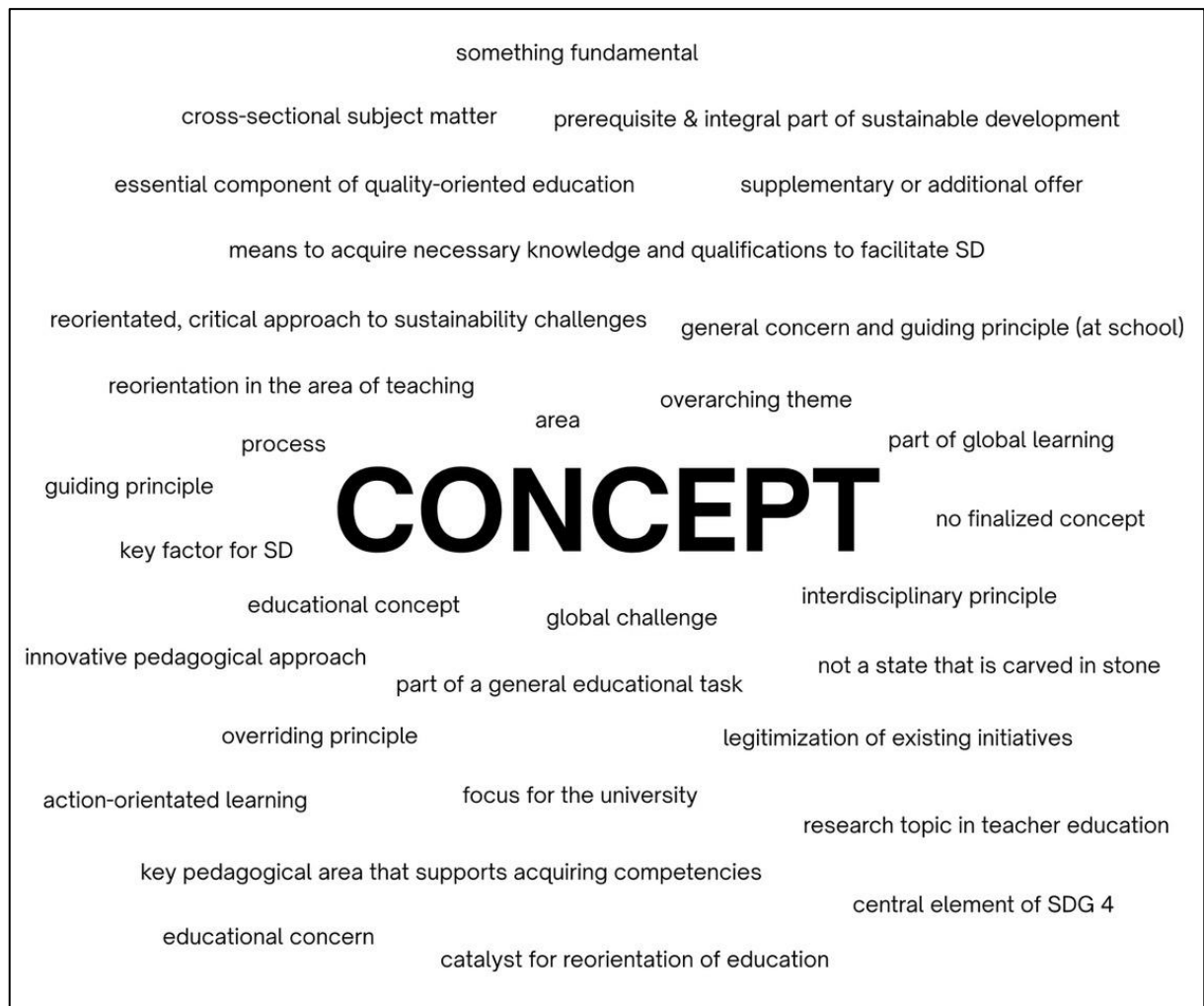


Figure 5: Definitions of Education for Sustainable Development in Research Data (G.K.)

Upon examination of this collection of definitions, it becomes evident that the concept under discussion encompasses a wide spectrum of subjects. The material spans a broad continuum, ranging from rather vague, generalizing terms such as ‘general concern, area, additional offer’, or ‘guiding principle’ to definitions more specifically related to education (*research topic in teacher education; innovative pedagogical approach*) or sustainability (*prerequisite & integral part of SD; reoriented, critical approach to sustainability challenges*). Consequently, it can be assumed that ESD is understood to mean all of the above. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the definitions presented herein pertain predominantly to the sphere of education.

5.1.1. Making Meaning of the Definitions

Certain segments of the material present critical view of the understanding(s) of ESD. One section openly considers ESD as diffusely concepted idea. As noted on the opening pages of the document outlining the Austrian strategy, ESD is described as being *less* a ‘common, future-oriented concern’ and more as a tool legitimizing established measures of ESD. That the consecutive page states it is a necessary goal for ESD to surmount the prevailing deficits concerning its diffuse understanding (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 5–6) should be acknowledged cautiously. This aligns with recurring references throughout the material that portray the concept as overly inclusive and lacking in conceptual precision. Such diffuse descriptions further contribute to a *disorganized*, and *weakly defined* vision or idea of Education for Sustainable Development. This renders its comprehension somewhat challenging. Additionally, they reflect a pluralism of domains associated with ESD, complicating efforts to clearly delineate its scope of action. Asking if this presents a contradiction becomes plausible. On the one hand, the formulated goal is to overcome existing shortcomings of a diffuse understanding of ESD through the concept itself. On the other hand, the material simultaneously explicitly emphasizes how broad and varied the understanding of Education for Sustainable Development is.

Different descriptions of the concept are used in documents under scrutiny at various points during the analysis. ESD is occasionally framed as an additional component to a broader idea such as global learning. For example, in 2008 it is indicated to be a supplementary offer (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 5). When concepted as a tool or medium, facilitating a sustainable development, this implies a perception of the concept as supporting mechanism for SD. The selection of definitions is rich in variety and includes negative definitions as well. As a result, **conflicting elements** emerge in the characterization of Education for Sustainable Development. Different designations even appear within a single document. This is particularly evident in the Austrian report on the UN decade, which conveyed different perceptions of ESD. At one point, ESD is declared as concept, or more detailed as normative concept. Elsewhere on the same pages, it is described *not* to be a finished concept, but one in constant development (Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 56, 60). To remain consistent to analytical proceeding, notions from subsequent themes are reflected in the accumulated definitions. The perception of ESD as a collaborative endeavor is mirrored in its depiction as a ‘global challenge’, a ‘general concern’ and a ‘general educational task’

for instance. These definitions can be understood to apply across the entire education system, rather than being confined to a specific sector. This is evident in references to ESD as a research topic in teacher education or as a focus area for universities, representing the higher education level. Mentioning ESD as a reorientation of the entire teaching field indicates an even more comprehensive application. Additionally, its conception as an innovative pedagogical approach and key pedagogical area underlines that all areas of education are targeted. The emphasis of ESD as a facilitator of skills development stands out, particularly in connection with the theme engaging with ESD 1 and ESD 2 (5.5). While the focus on acquiring competencies aligns with the ESD 1 framework, references mentioning it as means for knowledge acquisition for a self-directed decision making align more closely with ESD 2.

These examples illustrate, on the one hand, the versatility of the concept, and on the other hand, the contradictions that can arise within a single document. Consequently, it is reasonable to interpret an unresolved ambiguity in the definition of Education for Sustainable Development. This suggests that not one unified definition exists for ESD, but a multifaced and a little diffuse understanding of the concept.

5.1.2. Characteristics

What signifies a pivotal role for the concept, what does it offer, ensure or guarantee and what does it fundamentally require? To begin with, the concept is explicitly described as action- or activity-orientated (Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 29) and future-orientated in every respect (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 7). In relation to teaching skills on the topics of ESD, certain didactic and value-mediating goals are mentioned of ESD. Educational work is to be organized in accordance with the goals of Education for Sustainable Development (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 15). The objective is to achieve a comprehensive, future-oriented approach to education. One that enables present and future generations to live together peacefully, in solidarity, freedom, prosperity and in an environment worth living in. To that end, equal opportunities in access to education, humanist educational ideals and critical reflection on the realities of life and social conditions are identified as core needs of the concept of ESD (BMLFUW, 2011, p. 37; BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 7). Commitment to human rights and the integration of democratic and participatory elements are further necessities listed in the Austrian strategy on ESD (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 10). Below,

the seven themes developed in the process of the reflective thematic analysis are presented in chronological order.

5.2. Theme 1: ESD as a Collaborative Endeavor

Networking

Collaboration

A close examination of data material reveals a pronounced emphasis on collective action, collaboration, and the initiative of all stakeholders. This surfaces in a statement that stresses ESD could be developed further and unfold only through networking and intelligent collaboration. Networks make exchanging examples of good practice for ESD possible (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 7, 21; Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 60). The aim to initiate and strengthen partnerships and networks with ESD stakeholders is emphasized on (Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 6, 12). It requires transparent processes between the various stakeholders in the sense of good governance (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 7). The collaboration effort encompasses cooperation between schools, municipalities and research institutions regarding the qualitative development of the concept, which targets among other means scientific support for projects on ESD (Bouslama et al., 2015). A relation to networks can be observed for popular agents in the ESD field. Examination of the role of ESD actors reveals that fostering a collaborative environment is of paramount importance (see f.e.g. ÖKOLOG network and UniNEtZ). The networking aim is also a designated goal of the Austrian strategy, accompanied by prioritizing the integration of existing activities and projects into the national discussion process. Hence, all existing experience shall be made use of (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 12).

5.2.1. Meaning

In the meaning of this theme, a strong emphasis on alliance, partnership and community-building, as well as on different stakeholders identified as key players, including educators and policymakers can be observed. It becomes significantly apparent that prominent agents (Fub, UniNEtZ, ÖKOLOG) are closely linked to networks, thereby promoting a notion of collaborative engagement. This emphasis on **networks** and cooperating highlights the collective efforts within ESD's areas of action, while also underscoring the importance of community and stakeholder involvement. The theme captures notions of co-operation,

synergy, interplay and interaction, all of which are analyzed as central for the representation of ESD in research material. The interconnectedness of individuals, organizations and agents conveyed through the emphasis of networks can be interpreted as an attempt to amplify impact through collaboration and create synergies which result in greater effect for the cause of ESD. This combined power is captured in a nuanced sense of *togetherness*. Implicitly conveying a notion of shared responsibility, the theme draws upon the foundational economic, ecologic and social dimension of sustainability, that are interconnected and act in unity. Because networking and the collaboration between various actors are accorded such high importance, the responsibilities associated with ESD appear increasingly distributed. They are no longer concentrated in the hands of a few but are shared among many agents. The greater the engagement in networks, the more diffused the areas of ESD become, along with their boundaries.

5.3. Theme 2: Mainstreaming

Structural alignment
methodological diversity
Awareness raising

A mainstreaming-approach is stressed in regard to structural anchoring of ESD in Austria, intended along the entire administration at all levels. ESD requires the commitment of all administrative divisions in terms of a *whole-system approach*, indicated in mentioning ESD-principles, -strategies, -approaches and -models (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 7–8; Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 55; Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 9). This approach followed to implement ESD in Austria signifies an integrative and institutionally reflected access to ESD processes (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 53). The same *modus operandi* is used for Agenda 2030 implementation in Austria (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020, p. 7).

The theme prevails in policy-relevant processes, evidenced by quoting guidelines and strategic actions as well as overarching frameworks. For instance, embedding ESD as a university priority in administration, teaching and research (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, pp. 5, 8–9). Methodological diversity and multi-perspectivity is of utter importance for ESD to enable a thinking in alternatives, and to recognize various approaches and perspectives. By that, the integration of different aspects like the cognitive-intellectual but also emotional

can be ensured (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 8, 18; Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 14; Stelzer et al., 2012, pp. 16, 56). Such novel approaches concerning methodology and didactics are required for ESD, if it wants to cultivate innovative potential. In promoting an interdisciplinary access, it dissociates from burdening existing teaching units with additional topics. It rather offers subject areas for new forms of teaching and learning through creating more synergies between the numerous related topics, which is precisely how it facilitates new impetus for school development and school innovation (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 15). This focus underlines mainstreaming the concept across a multitude of methods, obtaining the aspect of learning across different fields. Subsequently, open learning processes create foundational dynamics of Education for Sustainable Development and are targeted to anchor in the institutional structure (Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 37). Educational concepts of transformative character and interdisciplinary learning are seen as pivotal in the area of ESD (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020, p. 44). Teaching individuals, stakeholders from rural regions, youth as change agent, as well as the competence of civil society are engaging with ESD. Thus, responsibility, is divided between a wide range of agents of ESD, active in both formal and informal education and are anchored in a wide variety of areas (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 61; Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 6; Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019, p. 7). To provide an illustrative example, the ÖKOLOG program involves all federal states, as it is set up in regional teams and all schools of all school types can apply to participate (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014, p. 69).

Several references in ESD coded segments point to an effort to generate and disseminate knowledge about the concept as for example individual studies, presentations and events to promote ESD commissioned by the Austrian Ministry for Education (Bouslama et al., 2015). To promote a **shift in awareness** towards sustainability among learners and teachers is laid out as distinctive aim of the *Austrian Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development* (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 3, 5). This endeavor of spreading ESD reaches as far as into the food and non-food sector, raising awareness to supply chains and targeting consumption patterns with Austria-wide initiatives like ‘buy consciously’ (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020, p. 87). That proceeding offers ESD to a broader target group and shall in particular advance information about the topic in the public sphere (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 9; Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019, p. 13). Furthermore, this objective is

detected for all areas of education, formal and non-formal (Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 4, 56), indicating mainstreaming efforts within the educational system.

Implementation incentives support the whole-system approach, as they support to put effort into engaging with ESD. In that respect a certificate for university lecturers in ESD (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, p. 29) and the award ‘Education for Sustainable Development - Best of Austria’, which aims at making the role of education and learning visible in all projects, programs and activities (Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019) serve as evidence in data material. On a contrary note, material also states that new approaches such as ESD are seen difficult to implement within old structures (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 59).

5.3.1. Meaning

In regard to the codes at the basis of this theme, the focus lies in harmonizing structure, methods, and mindset within Education for Sustainable Development. It reflects an intentional, system-level change in how ESD is conceptualized and implemented. The theme Mainstreaming suggests a strategic transformation and simultaneity in engaging with the idea of ESD and its integration into Austrian national policy. A key characteristic of this theme highlights ESD’s integrative nature, demonstrated in openness to diverse methods and approaches for advancing the concept. By that, the theme shows the flexibility of the concept to be applicable across a wide range of topics. The data associated with this theme emphasize coordination, particularly in relation to policy and planning. It is concerned with the enabling conditions necessary for ESD. Mainstreaming involves the more formal work with the idea of ESD within broader political and institutional structures.

Establishing a specific content-related requirement, such as ESD in this context, as a central element in all processes and decisions is what constitutes *mainstreaming* in the political sense.²⁸ The descriptive analysis invites the reader to recognize the importance placed on mainstream ESD strategies at a broad structural level, aiming to align endeavors to anchor the concept. A key word is *whole-system approach*, which proposes to apply a strategy or idea not just in one place, but across multiple levels or areas. In this way, it also connects to the theme conceptualized next, which targets ESD’s position reaching all stages of the

²⁸ In accordance to the lexical entry on the homepage of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ, 2025).

educational system. An overarching aim of this mainstreaming approach can be seen in fostering a well-informed society, underlining the ongoing need to communicate the concept widely. In this regard, awareness-raising initiatives are meant to provide broader public access to complex topics. Efforts to broaden understanding and increase the visibility of ESD in the public sphere were undertaken by various agents. The interdisciplinary potential of ESD is reflected in parts of the material that highlight the variety of methods used and its connection across multiple teaching subjects. Interdisciplinary learning, as described in the data, implies mainstreaming ESD into diverse fields of knowledge. To support this, several awards were introduced. The interpretation assumes that recognizing ESD engagement through such prizes is both a form of implementation and a way to foster competition among participants striving to be the most sustainable actors. The final statement in the section above, which addresses implementation within existing structures, takes a more critical view of how ESD is embedded. This perspective may be due to the fact that public administration structures (especially in the education system) have remained largely unchanged and are characterized by a high degree of rigidity.

The theme captures ESD efforts at a horizontal level, where mainstreaming aims to reach all areas simultaneously. This suggests not merely adding ESD to existing structures, but fully integrating it into them. Similarly, placing the concept at the center of policy-relevant processes by references to guidelines, strategic actions, as well as overarching schemes, marks ESD as an institutional multi-level effort.

5.4. Theme 3: Throughout the Whole Education System

inclusion of different educational settings

several places of ESD

Project-based work

In terms of education in Austria, integrating the topics of ESD into the educational sector is an described goal (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 8; Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 61). In various aspects of this spectrum the goal can be found again:

- as focus of educational institutions, including the tertiary education sector (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 8; Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 16)
- in curricula (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 14, 22; Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 49)

- in the individual subjects (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 60) and
- the overall school program (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014, p. 66).

In reference to governance in higher education and management thereof, universities are bound to include the concept of sustainability, which again includes ESD (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, p. 23). Accompanying, research efforts not only exist in one place but across the educational landscape (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, pp. 5, 8–9). Furthermore, at the macro level, the necessity to consider and likewise better position ESD in **teacher education** is highlighted in research documents (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 7, 14; Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 60). The policy paper on ESD in teacher education prioritizes to advertise measures in teacher education on the matter of ESD. Included is at least one compulsory course for all teacher trainees on the subject area of one of the topics of ‘Concepts of SD and ESD’ informing about interrelationships and how to integrate those into the school curriculum. A teacher training network for ESD is additionally installed (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, pp. 5, 15, 17). Teacher training is in particular targeted in objectives of ESD and described as a key factor in the success of the concept (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 8).

The new competence-orientated curriculum for primary and lower secondary level places ESD as a general concern and as a guiding principle. This targets several levels and is applied throughout the school, which reveals an approach that encompasses the entire educational chain (Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 7). The curriculum further conceptualizes schools not only a place of learning but a place of Education for Sustainable Development, the concept here understood in the sense of active participation in shaping society (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, p. 21; Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 3). ESD, civic education with its global perspectives, global citizenship education, peace education and human rights education as well as other cross-curricular topics are educational concepts that complement and support each other in the pedagogical engagement with sustainable development in all its dimensions (Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 7).

The call for increased involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in all educational areas is considered a foundation of ESD (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 15). Moreover, the explicit aim is to strengthen ESD activities in **local educational landscapes**. In that respect,

anchoring the concept regionally and involving local players more prominently is addressed (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 8, 18; Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 14, 61). This intensifies the appeal to integrate formal education, non-formal education and informal education. All these areas can contribute to sustainable development (BMLFUW, 2011, p. 38; BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 10, 16). Reportedly, actions towards ESD and extracurricular sustainability projects are targeting the informal education sector. Initiatives and project-based work constitute a significant proportion of the manner in which ESD is being permanently implemented in the educational landscape. They are frequently community-based or incorporate elements of community and civil society engagement, but may also emerge from governmental departments (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 19; Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014, pp. 5, 61; Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 37).

5.4.1. Meaning

To create a contrast with the preceding theme, this meaning highlights a different temporal orientation and application of ESD. This theme suggests a **longitudinal pattern** and in this differs from the meaning in *mainstreaming*, which focused on simultaneity or synchronicity. It highlights the flexibility of the concept to engage with different life stages, thereby conveying the idea of lifelong learning. The data associated with this theme transports more evidence of how ESD is distributed as well as expressions of ESD action and how the concept is embodied in practice. The meaning ‘throughout the entire educational chain’ refers specifically to one context: the education subsystem. The meaning illustrates ESD’s reach, the extent to which it spreads across the educational ecosystem. Evidence demonstrates that there is a practical dimension to the theoretical concept, and that ESD is contextually situated. A project-based approach to engaging with ESD efforts, which features prominently in the data, points to applied learning, an aspect central to the concept itself. ESD is not limited to political actors or confined to a theoretical or ‘formal’ space; rather, it is enacted in practice, through projects and initiatives, and occurs throughout the entire educational system.

Throughout the analyzed research material, calls for implementing and embedding ESD (and the broader thematic of sustainability as well) across the entire educational landscape were consistently present. At the same time, definitions in this chapter (5.1) already described ESD as existing in and spanning the full educational chain. This suggests that the demand for education systems to adapt to changing global needs like sustainability requires

not only revising curricular content, but also embedding sustainable practices across multiple levels of the education system. Particular attention is given to projects that reference and promote ESD. One example is a report dedicated to showcasing all projects and initiatives nominated for the Austrian Award for ESD (Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019). These project-based efforts appear in both bottom-up and top-down initiatives. In fact, the interpretation goes so far as to suggest that project-based work represents one of the most central approaches to engaging with ESD in Austria. To conclude the examination of this meaning, it was observed, how **places of ESD** stretch throughout the whole education system. *The local* is a meaningful setting revealed for ESD within the Austrian educational landscape. These *places* include not only curricula and individual subjects, but also administrative coordination levels, formal institutions such as the Federal Ministries, regional authorities, schools, higher education, and especially teacher training. That is where a link to the theme mainstreaming is evident. In contrast to the previous theme, the evidence here is characterizing ESDs vertical integration, illustrating a longitudinal pattern of the concept.

5.5. Theme 4: Caught Between Directing Behavior and Critical Thinking

Critical thinking
ESD competencies
active engagement
empowerment

Based on the prevailing distinction of ESD 1 and ESD 2 decided to apply for a theoretical background of this thesis (2.6.2), this theme entails understandings of named approaches.

Professionalization of teaching staff is a priority of ESD, especially skills development and teacher education. This targets cultivating competencies of teaching staff as well as strengthen skills of teaching ESD (Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 12, 61). Expertise, teamwork, self- as well as methodological competence are important abilities to possess for ESD (Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 57). ESD is also trusted to strengthen teachers' roles. It does simultaneously require them to lead discussions on values, make areas of conflict visible and point out possible courses of action (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 22). Skills development

of students comes across in the Austrian curriculum. Pupils shall show certain competencies when they finish primary school. These competencies are listed for the overarching topic EESD. They are also environment-related and include naming characteristics of nature and environmentally conscious behavior and thinking about ecological cycles for example (Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 15). As opposed to a construction of ESD, that stresses skills and abilities that are necessary to be able to act in a certain way (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, p. 107), a distinct understanding prevails in the majority of data material. Considering that what counts as *sustainable* changes over space and time and requires negotiation, the purpose of ESD is not to alter people's behaviors. It is to enable them to shape sustainable development and critically reflect on their actions (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 8). The learning process described in the curriculum aims to develop knowledge, competences and skills, values and attitudes that enable young people to play an active role in overcoming social, economic and ecological challenges at both, a local and global level (Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 7). For pupils, recognizing local and global connections and the importance of their own actions is included in the prescribed competencies as well as developing a mindful attitude towards themselves, their fellow human beings and the environment (Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 15). Economic education contributes significantly to ESD, represented in pupils' development of skills in order to be able to assume their present and future roles in society in a mature, critical, independent and responsible manner (for example as consumers) (Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, pp. 37–38). Additionally, the way of learning in ESD, constructed in SDG 4, underlines a categorization as ESD 2, in its foundations solution-based and learner-centered (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, p. 111). This includes and is accompanied by *active shaping of societal transformation and enabling participation*. School itself is conceived a place for ESD in that respective sense (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich et al., 2023, p. 21; Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019, p. 21). Stated in the Austrian strategy on ESD report, ESD must provide stimuli and opportunities to question one's own viewpoints and attitudes and must contribute to the expansion of individual competences for action (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 10). The reader can here engage with the notions of participation, reflection and critical thinking, which are all bullet points of an understanding of ESD as framed in ESD 2. Promoting the intellectual capacity to think about responsible behavior in line with planetary boundaries and the idea

of a sustainable living in the future is also understood as an Education for Sustainable Development categorized as ESD 2.

A significant part of segments encompassed in this theme reflects **empowerment**. ESD opens the opportunity for learners to develop their own initiatives and contribute creatively to the bigger cause of a sustainable future, which has a stimulating effect on learning (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 10). Having engaged with ESD in a learning setting can therefore improve one's own quality of life, as it encourages you to take greater and active responsibility for a sustainable world (Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 8). This aligns further with the prescribed goal of active engagement of society with the topics of ESD. Individuals should actively and autonomously shape their living environment and their future and become active themselves (Stelzer et al., 2012, pp. 7, 29, 34, 56). Equipping people with the competences and skills needed for this is of importance. ESD shall enable students to make responsible judgements and act responsibly in the interest of sustainability (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, p. 111; Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 15; Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 16). It is in fact stated a pedagogical vision for ESD to present complex issues of global developments as workable, to ensure optimism despite social problems. In that respect, ESD must **encourage** young people to be optimistic about the future (Künzli-David, 2007) is cited in the policy paper on ESD for teacher education (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 8). To illustrate this point, the concept aims to contribute to the development of a critical awareness among learners without, however, leading to the loss of an affirmative attitude towards life (Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 41).

Supporting individuals through education to form their own opinions and become active for their concerns plays an important role for and in ESD. This can be extracted from foundational pedagogical principles formulated by UNESCO. *Value-orientation, sensitization for cultural differences, participation and problem-solving orientation* make apparent that ESD is bound to an examination of values (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 18; Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 14). Dealing with knowledge consciously, reflection and critical thinking as well as developing visions are named core aspects of Education for Sustainable Development. It thus produces *active* people (Stelzer et al., 2012, pp. 7, 56). This equally accentuates the active-engagement-understanding of ESD 2.

5.5.1. Meaning

Aggregated codes that supply the theme with material, grasp the components of the meaning uncovered within the theme. The name *Caught Between Directing Behavior and Critical Thinking*, mirrors the two approaches to Education for Sustainable Development ESD 1 and ESD 2. It even renders possible to align them to one another, as critical thinking and active engagement are empowered by ESD while they concurrently are constructed skills, the concept shall promote. The material highlights not only participating as a pivotal aspect for ESD, but even more so independent action, fostered by the empowering nature of the concept. The overall notion that emerges from the research data depicts ESD as proactively engaged in the adoption, promotion, and implementation of (novel) practices, concepts, or frameworks related to sustainability and education. The terminology used conveys a strong sense of taking initiative and being actively involved. To illustrate this point, one may consider the strengthened role of educators within ESD. As a result of this teacher empowerment, educators are expected to engage with ESD in a reflective and critical manner within their professional practice. Interpreted in this way, ESD serves the purpose of empowering individuals, enabling them to promote reflexive engagement, encouraging critical thinking about their own educational practices and fostering the ability to reflect on dominant narratives.

5.5.1.1. *ESD Competencies ≠ ESD Competencies*

The emphasis on acquiring skills and competencies relevant to ESD is a distinct aspect of the present research. It becomes evident that skills development can reflect different conceptions of ESD. However, it is important to note that there is often a fine line between ESD 1 and ESD 2, particularly regarding skills development and knowledge cultivation. To ensure a thorough analysis, specific attention is given in the discussion section to instances where the concept is described in a way that would categorize it as ESD 1. It can be observed that both ESD 1 and ESD 2 are present and at times used concurrently when referring to Education for Sustainable Development. The analyzed documents themselves do not distinguish between ESD 1 and ESD 2; this differentiation was made by the researcher during the analysis. This should not be perceived as an inconsistency or contradiction; on the contrary, it should be addressed with curiosity. It reflects a remarkable passage in data material that shall not be smoothed out, also with regard to the critical stance of the research paradigm. Equipping educators and learners with the knowledge and

tools to address sustainability challenges is core content of ESD 2 (see 2.6). These competencies are allocated foremost to an *ecological thinking*. When segments of the evaluated data refer to knowledge development and are associated with ESD 2 in the analysis, they typically cite objectives related to cultivating critical reflection on sustainability narratives. In this understanding, ESD is seen as the learning process itself. The emphasis lies on critical thinking and on enabling individuals to question and reflect on dominant narratives of sustainable living. Aligned with this, the underlying interpretation of Education for Sustainable Development in the sense of ESD 2, as applied in this research, is centered on empowerment and active engagement. However, with regard to skills development, there is a recurring lack of clarity about the specific skills being developed or required.

The national curriculum suggests an approach of ESD 2, which emphasizes cultivating decision-making skills that are more aligned with sustainable principles and developing competencies that are values-based. Curriculum elaborations indicate an understanding of ESD in the curriculum that it is somehow globally entangled and bears a responsibility towards more people than oneself, when engaging with it.

5.6. Theme 5: Shifting Name – Meaning the Same?

Semantic variations

Alternative concepts of education and sustainability

Uncertainties about a clearly delineated definition emerge from the material itself, based on questions like ‘*what is behind the terms sustainability and ESD?*’ and ‘*what does sustainability mean in the context of education and ESD?*’ (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 15; Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 80). The document on the Austrian strategy is highlighting that there are different perceptions of Education for Sustainable Development (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 5). To the more, sustainable development was perceived as abstract and ESD as abstract topic to an even higher degree (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 51; Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 9). In regard to the dominant abbreviation for the concept at center of the present thesis, attention is drawn to the **use of ESD**. How is ESD worded differently in the manner of variations on a semantic level? On this matter, the Austrian Strategy on ESD is to be named. It is referred to by the abbreviation ESD (BMLFUW et al., 2008). Subsequent to critical notes made towards ESD as a lip-service, there is a linkage to perceiving ESD as a label.

Projects which do not run under the name of Education for Sustainable Development but are recognized as (practiced) ESD are understood as labeled (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 10).

5.6.1. Environmental Education (EE)

In order to contribute to the research interest while being attentive to maintaining a coherent red thread throughout the thesis, the many for environmental education coded segments were interrogated towards their interconnectedness with ESD. Subsequently, only segments that provide information towards a linkage of EE and ESD are featured in analysis. While there is evidence for ESD and EE being referred to on an equal level in the material, a second presentation of the relation between EE and ESD emerges in segments of the material.

In the respective relation, environmental education is perceived a part or contribution of Education for Sustainable Development marked as of central importance in the context of the concept (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 20). This relation is also illustrated by the ENSI network. EE is there understood as an interdisciplinary endeavor with the aim of developing competence to act; its underlying concept encompasses the natural environment as well as the cultural, technical, and social environment (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014, pp. 71–72). Environmental education has been embedded a teaching principle in the Austrian school system since 1979. Now referred to as inter-, cross- or interdisciplinary competence²⁹, EE is viewed to make an important contribution to SDG 4, and specifically to Goal 4.7 (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, pp. 18, 21). In yet another part in the text, EE is traded as a specialized educational approach for sustainable development (Allmer et al., 2021, p. 5).

5.6.2. Environmental Education for Sustainable Development (EESD)

Something of a special subunit of the just described concept is *environmental education for sustainable development* (EESD). Listed as an interdisciplinary competence, it aims at significantly and equally supporting the acquisition of essential skills by pupils which ensure that they can survive in today's and the futures living and working environment (Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 7). In the eponymous policy

²⁹ As interdisciplinary competence, former called teaching principles are now comprehensive topics, used across the curriculum (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, pp. 18, 21).

decree of principles, drafted in 2014 it shall be expanded by climate education and installed as overarching topic (BMBF, 2014; Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, p. 18). Formerly conceived a teaching principle (Bundeskanzleramt, 2017, p. 18), EESD is designed as one of 13 overarching topics through which pupils are to acquire interdisciplinary competences (Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 4). To conclude, EESD can out of material be constructed as its own subunit of the broader field of interest that interweaves sustainable development, environment and education.

5.6.3. Sustainable Education

ESD is placed as thematic area in the sustainability complex (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023). It is also recognized as a key factor for sustainable development (SD) (Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019, p. 5). Another position in the material where ESD focusses on SD is found in pedagogical visions for ESD (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 8).

Apart from the ESD concept, the relationship between sustainability and education is further described in ways, which correlate with the idea of ESD and thus represent a valid part of the research interest. Following phrases that describe the relationship between *education* and *sustainable development* stand out as gap fillers in evaluated documents:

in the sense / terms of a / in context of / realignment / reorientation towards /
and (combined with) / as contribution to vs. as basis / condition for / playing an
important role for / a pioneer for / alignment to / orientation towards

A further variation is *education for sustainability* or *sustainability education* (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020, p. 88; BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 3, 7, 8, 21), accompanied by the expressions *educational initiatives for sustainability*, *education on the path towards sustainability* and *quality education for sustainable development* as well as *orientation of education towards sustainable development* (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020, p. 26; Bouslama et al., 2015, pp. 21, 47; Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019, p. 6). In concluding on the correlation between sustainability and education, a final linkage states SD to constitute a component within a broader educational mandate that aims to enhance the quality of life for all individuals and foster peaceful coexistence, as pursued by the idea of a good life for all. Within this paradigm, education signifies the capacity to reflexively and responsibly contribute to shaping society in pursuit of SD. Education in the concept of

ESD, is narrated to underscore self-development and self-determination of individuals in their interactions with the world, with other people and with themselves (Allmer et al., 2021, p. 8).

5.6.1. Meaning

All of the examples listed represent a form of ESD in practice or an approach that corresponds (in large parts) to the idea of Education for Sustainable Development. As apparent in the different versions of ESD, a wide variety of alternatives is employed to articulate the idea underpinning the concept. Consequently, this results in a vague demarcation of Education for Sustainable Development to related ideas and constructs. While on the one hand, different names occur, on the other hand not all efforts, which in their essence practiced the principles of Education for Sustainable Development, were labeled as ESD. **Semantic variations** are especially striking in analysis in the different use of ESD and EE, as well as special case of EESD as they evoke a diffuse depiction regarding the relations. To start with, ESD is placed on a same level with EE. In this relation it could be considered an alternative to EE, insofar as it combines ecological aspects of sustainability with education. Drawing back on the deficient definition of ESD, that was pointed out before, the concept is stated to be perceived as environmental education, just supplemented by social aspects (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 5). This would suggest a hierarchy of ESD and EE, placing ESD as the subordinate idea, which is contributing to EE. Nevertheless, a hierarchical difference in favor of ESD as the superior concept is more apparent. Indeed, passages in the material acknowledge ESD separately, as its own, distinct concept. Concerning the relation, this presents ESD as the concept standing ‘above’, and consists of EE among other aspects, which are hierarchically subordinate or belonging to education for sustainable development.

As evident in the preceding, **contradictory** constructions concerning a superiority of either ESD or EE are revealed. That provokes questioning if the underlying ideas are as evidently distinguishable or if the only shifts are the ones in their names. Therefore, there is no clearly defined concept of ESD in place here but moreover as assemblage of environment, education and sustainable development. It is asserted that this is of greater significance for final conclusions of the project. In consequence, it is not only going to be featured in the explanatory approaches but will significantly contribute to conclude on the research interest.

In putting the relation of education and sustainable development in a different perspective, disparate meanings emerge. Education in the sense or in terms of SD point towards the scenario that education can function like SD, respectively in a similar way. Realigning education towards SD suggests an existing link that needs to be renegotiated, thus adapted to a transformation in standards of SD or what it requires. In certain segments the two were simply appended to one another, in this act designating them as distinctly separate domains. There is also the narrative, that SD is thus considered an integral part of a more extensive educational task. Standing out is the last referral, that seemingly delivers a contradiction. Education that is contributing to SD gives the impression of being additive, a part that is nonessential but accompanying other building block of a SD. Contrarily, being a condition would imply for education to be an essential part for SD. The two examples are even found in the same document (Stelzer et al., 2012, pp. 84, 110), making it even more interesting. At the same time is not possible to extract one fundamental way of relating education to sustainable development that would iterate through the analyzed material in the same tone. The evidence is twofold, suggesting both ways of hierarchy plausible. Expressing reciprocal approaches to the relation leaves the concept ESD not finally clarified. Also reiterated in this last segment analyzed, in line with the apprehension expressed by an interviewee, the question remains open if an old understanding presents under a new name (Bousslama et al., 2015, p. 58).

5.7. Theme 6: Narrowing ESD Down to its Ecological Component

ESD focus areas

ESD teaching contents

Description of EESD in the Austrian curriculum requires the integrative thinking of the ecological, economic and social dimensions by default, highlighting that both, subject-specific and cross-curricular references are of great importance. However, a focus on the ecological aspect is strengthened in the formulated competencies pupils are supposed to gain over the course of their primary schooling. These feature keywords like *environmental perspective*, *ecological cycles*, *responsible use of resources* and *perceiving the environment with all their senses*. The curriculum beyond pays tribute to ESD in combination with global responsibility in addressing the responsible use of natural resources (Lehrpläne der

Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, pp. 15, 86). Teaching contents described in the context of ESD mention knowledge about multifunctionality of forests for example (Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019, pp. 21, 46). ÖKOLOG's program for schools follows this prioritization, as its changes and design measures in the institutions are targeting foremost the ecological aspect of ESD: Conserve resources like energy, water, etc. and reduce emissions (traffic on the way to school). In addition developing teaching and learning culture as well as designing their school environment aligned to a sustainable ideal is centered (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, 2014, pp. 66–69). The *greening* of schools is a further process that each school can shape individually (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, p. 113; Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, p. 19). ÖKOLOG marks an important contribution to ESD by placing ecology at the center of schools (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2020, p. 65). That is equally the case for a lot of projects with ESD concern, presented in one research document. Declared objective is to raise awareness towards ecological and social topics of sustainability (Stelzer et al., 2012, p. 3).

Implementing ESD is described as a matter of didactically preparing the concerns and content of SD or of social concerns such as climate protection. But not merely that, additionally, **Education for Sustainable Development requires the development of education itself** (BMLFUW et al., 2008, p. 16). This statement is of interest for interpretative analysis, following in the subsequent section.

5.7.1. Meaning

The theme is not proposed in the material like this directly but is established as a finding out of sufficient indications in analyzed data. Narrowing ESD down to the ecological aspect of the concept, points at the same time to a superiority of this dimension of sustainability. As one would expect, in environmental education, an ecological understanding of sustainability is addressed. Considering EE as one of ESD's main pillars as suggested in the descriptions of the relation of the concepts, reveals a dominance of the environmental aspect. Although the curricular text first advises the integral thinking of all dimensions of sustainability in applying ESD, it gives bigger evidence for setting priority with the ecological aspect. Even with the social aspect being mentioned, the requirements targeting pupil competencies for example are not bound to ecological aspects specifically. However, neither are they referring concretely to a broader understanding of ESD or the social

dimension. The quote concerning the development of education itself, stated as pivotal above, conveys the objective to not merely educate the public on climate protection and environmental issues. Rather developing education as the subject itself in order to meet the demands of ESD. While this is an elegant articulation of a commendable concept; albeit it is also likely to be a fallacy.

Additionally, segments elaborated on EESD were allocated to *Theme 5: Shifting Name – Meaning the Same?*, due to their interconnectedness in variations of concepts in the crossing SD, education and environment. However, acknowledging the importance of the special case of ESD has valuable point for the argument of this theme as well. Besides EE being highlighted in analysis, precisely EESD is detected a subunit of the concept at heart of the present research. Notably, both related concepts center the ecological component of sustainability. Overserved can be with certainty, an overly emphasized environmentally thinking is central to concepts of sustainability and education. To summarize, environmentally thinking prevails as main focus of the evaluation conducted on the documents. The consecutive question can be posed, whether ESD efforts are rather ensuring long-term integration of sustainability principles into educational practices than pursuing an own specialized agenda.

5.8. Theme 7: Constantly Evolving Concept

Future directed
innovation

Segments in coded data reveal some awareness that ESD is a field that is evolving with time and acknowledges adaption is required. In a ministerial-commissioned study has been reviewed which existing sustainability and education indicators in Austria, that appear to be usable for the complexity of ESD processes. ESD indicators were not seen in this study as a static or fixed system, but as dynamic and open learning and evaluation processes in the sense of a broad spectrum of applications of orientation, comparability and self-evaluation (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 44). Education for Sustainable Development needs innovation, research and multi-perspectivity as well as the use of modern information and communication technologies, underscoring the future-orientated character it gets ascribed in the definition part. Accompanying, the process of ESD is described to **require continuous evolution** (BMLFUW et al., 2008, pp. 7, 9). Depicted as promising to promote

ESD goals is, the link between ESD and lifelong learning initiatives and expanding it (Bouslama et al., 2015, p. 53). ESD has the potential to acknowledge problems and challenges, but consciously tries to see these as opportunities for new, long-term development perspectives (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 10).

5.8.1. Meaning

A special aspect that manifests in data material is the perception of ESD as a constantly evolving concept. This consideration also gets profound, when acknowledging ESD characterized as future oriented. Fueled by a need for innovation, research and use of modern technologies this foundational asset of ESD is accompanied to a dynamic process which is subject to constant change. Mentioning the complexity of ESD processes, further implementation and development as well as the future of ESD suggests a forward-looking perspective, acknowledges that ESD is an evolving field that must adapt to new challenges and opportunities. This description is also matched by the notion of lifelong learning. The meaning of this theme becomes suitable as explanatory approach for changes in education system or new demands based on current times.

5.9. Summarizing on Connections of the Themes

Although themes are in thematic analysis methodic constructed as delineated units, it presents as significance for this project, that there are connections linking them to each other. The expressed need for multi-level cooperation and a multi-stakeholder approach allocate in the theme *ESD as a collaborative endeavor*, are at the same time a link to the captured meaning in the theme *mainstreaming*. Evidently, the prevailing theme aligns closely with mainstreaming, exhibiting significant overlap in meaning and aspects of descriptive segments. Dissemination efforts around ESD, respond to a whole-system approach that suggests several levels are bound to work together. Commissioning multiple institutions with the same task to engage with ESD, is associated with it happening at various levels of an area, in this case education. Constructing ESD as cross-curricular concept material shows how ESD is not only a vertical endeavor, but also a horizontal one. As overarching topic, it targets all teaching subjects with the use of cross-sectional material, hence combining the themes *Throughout the Whole Education System* and *Mainstreaming*. The former is in respect to ESD in Austria again related to perceiving ESD as *a collaborative endeavor*, evidenced in the finding that the broad sub-fields of the

educational landscape encompass quite a few different actors and agents of ESD. These heterogenous groups are collaborating in networks and thus fostering a perceived feeling of togetherness.

5.9.1. Changes Observed

Throughout the material changes were observed **over time**. On the matter of relating sustainable development and education, they are detected in alternative wordings in data material.

The first indication pertains to a semantic adaption that developed from *re-orientation of education to SD* in an earlier dated document to *orientation* of the same concepts in a more recently published text of the data body. This suggests that the relationship necessitated negotiation, a resumption or new positioning becoming necessary. Thus, education underwent a reorientation towards SD, potentially in response to the emerging demands of sustainability. With the subsequent reference, in which this prefix is absent, it is understood that the two concepts have established their connection. Consequently, the necessity for re-negotiation of the positioning has been rendered obsolete. Nevertheless, the active orientation of the one concept towards the other must persist. Concluding, a fundamental re-orientation of education towards values of SD might have taken place and in recent years since then, a steady alignment of the two is possible and pursued. Moreover, it also suggests education must adjust to SD, positioning it in a lower stance, which again becomes interesting for drawing final conclusions on what is the main framing of ESD. Occurring as peculiarity of the linkage of sustainability and education in newer dated documents (material published after 2015), are the terms *climate education* or *climate change education* (Allmer et al., 2021, p. 5; Parlamentsdirektion Republik Österreich, 2020; Umweltdachverband GmbH, 2019, p. 56). Reasons could be multifaceted and might derive from a rising awareness of the climate crisis in current times, which manifests also in social activist initiatives showing youth engagement, like *Fridays for Future* among others. Has the approach to ESD shifted in response to contemporary agendas? And has the aim of ESD evolved toward educationalizing climate protection and environmental issues? These questions will be examined in the discussion of results, evaluated against the theoretical background in order to interrogate the extent to which ESD is acknowledged as an education-centered concept. A development can also be located within the dataset regarding definitions. Chosen wordings in more recent research material like *comprehensive topic*,

general concern, guiding principle do not convey enthusiasm towards a distinct definition of the concept. In these there is no specific area of concern, no thematic delimitation recognizable, supported also by the shift from *educational concern* (Steiner & Rauch, 2013, p. 16) to *general concern* (Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen, 2024, p. 7). In addition to the shift from a more education-centered understanding of the concept to a broader, more generalized concern, the definitions displayed in Figure 5 further expand the range of areas encompassed by Education for Sustainable Development.

6. Discussion

The seven themes identified above provide fertile ground for discussing their implications in relation to the research interest of this project. The theoretical perspectives introduced in the earlier chapters are used as supplementary and woven into insights that emerged from themes' meaning. The objective is to create plausible explanatory approaches for data findings and, subsequently, to present more extensive research outcomes, in respect to constructions of ESD. This chapter begins by briefly disclosing on overarching discussion points concerning changes, contradictions and continuities within the data material. Theoretical influences, that inform interpretation in the subsequent sections are outlined, drawing in particular on policy analysis approaches, which significantly shape some of the implications. At the core of the section, explanatory approaches are demonstrated. Finally, the evaluation process reveals certain silences within the material. In connection with this, the possibility of Education for Sustainable Development as an *empty signifier* is considered in a line of critical reflection.

The methodological instrument applied for interpretative analysis is a critical policy analysis perspective in line with Bacchi (2009). Accessing policy analysis in that way that challenges established ways of thinking. Acknowledging the 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' approach provides a valuable tool for interrogating the causes of political directions taken. Targeting an issue on a political level is based on the underlying assumption that something needs to change or be fixed, a problem. The objective of WPR is to offer a mode of uncovering implicit 'problems' in the respective policies (Bacchi, 2009, p. Introduction).

6.1. Continuities, Changes, Contradictions?

Revealing continuities and contradictions is one of the most exciting aspects in conducting research. It invites to draw compelling conclusions and interrogate the field of research further. Certain peculiarities observable over time in the data will be displayed.

One evidence in the material can be considered exemplary for a conflicting matter: competencies and knowledge cultivation in Education for Sustainable Development. Following Vare and Scott (2007) in Rieckmanns (2020) reconstruction, ESD 1 is reflected in promoting changes in our actions. In accordance to what governments or organizations

feature in statements towards ESD (Rieckmann & Schank, 2016), this also appears in data material referencing awareness raising, facilitation of selected behaviors and ways of thinking, and their subsequent adaptation. This is particularly evident in the emphasis on skills acquisition. In comparison to the understanding in ESD 2, it targets knowledge development in teaching ESD, thus reflects a learning for ESD is the objective. As noted earlier in the descriptive analysis, it occurs only rarely. The abundant evidence suggests the concept promotes participative learning, empowers and engages the learner to develop their own opinion, and enables critical thinking.

6.2. Influences from Global Education Governance and Critical Reflexivity

The implications discussed are presented in the form of explanatory models. To ensure they are plausible, it is necessary to clarify the factors that lead to the particular conclusions drawn. The impact of contemporary research literature on global governance of education along with entanglements in international educational policy and the maintaining of a critical reflexive perspective, form a red thread throughout the section. These elements constitute the primary frameworks of the thesis. On the one hand, the theoretical construct and on the other, the paradigm reflecting the critical-reflexive stance applied in the work.

To start with the complex role of education as global instrument of governance, the theoretical basis for shifts in global educational policy is evident once again when considering the architecture of global education politics and transnational influences in relation to analysis outcomes. Looking in this field for explanatory models offers alternative insights to various aspects that have emerged from outcomes. A vast majority of these align with the vibrant existing research in the field. Consequently, it serves as the main frame for the literature contribution in the discussion part.

The critical reflective paradigm is reflected in the chapter through influences from critical and reflexive analysis, particularly in the form of RTA and methodologically relevant scholarly approaches. Practices that facilitate the critical investigation of social phenomena are considered (Weiss & Wodak, 2007; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Since this proceeding requires attentive research behavior, it provides valuable support during this writing-up stage of the conducted thematic analysis. Utilizing the power of language, revisiting Gee

(2001) proves useful when illuminating the semantics of the data sample and the concentrated meaning attributed to one component of ESD. Finally, the lines of argumentation that stress power relations and their critical interrogation (Richardson et al., 2014; Weiss & Wodak, 2007) connect this norm-challenging paradigm back to the field of global governance of education, where exerting power and influence are of central interest to research.

6.3. Explanatory Approaches

Explanatory approaches mark insights to data provided in analysis. They are tying back, rebinding, offering an ascription to theory constructs of the research field in which the present thesis is placed. Out of connecting these to themes that are relevant to the phenomenon under study, ESD, findings are articulated in the final chapter. While connections between themes were already remarked subsequently to descriptive segments and establishing the themes' meaning, it is inherent to this part to cross-refer between the themes. Implications of the preceding influential strands are utilized in addition to facilitate the interpretation of meaning. The section here serves as essential foundation to answering the research questions of the thesis.

6.3.1. Building Networks as a New Way in Global Educational Policy

Networks are extracted from the theme *ESD as a collaborative endeavor* and present of certain importance in the thesis. Already while specifying themes, it appears that creating and strengthening networks occupies a pivotal position, serving as one of the primary objectives employed by and for Education for Sustainable Development. These data results can now be rationalized with aspects of current trends in global design of educational policy and results in network building as a new way in global educational policy.

Trends in policymaking elevate the importance of networks as new places of governance in the global educational sphere. This allows more non-state actors in the field to become policy-shaping agents. The development to new governance in educational policymaking aligns with data result, where the emphasis on networks and collaboration of a wide array of ESD-agents is stressed. Not only policy relevant considerations are located within 'new' actors like networks, think tanks, foundations, NGOs and organizations, they also are the places for implementing ESD action. This is evident on a multitude on occasions in the

analysis. For illustrative purposes, UniNetZ, FuB and ÖKOLOG are cited. They all pursue ESD implementation efforts while are being organized in alliances and networks. Furthermore, networking facilitates the activity of provide information as well as to raise awareness. These two actions are reported in the theme *mainstreaming* and are decisively promoted by collaborative units. The data provide clear evidence that ESD is not merely a theoretical construct but carries a strong practical dimension, shaped by the contexts in which it is applied. A project-based approach to ESD, which appears frequently in the data, emphasizes the importance of applied learning as a core aspect of the concept (see section 5.4.1 of *Theme 3: Throughout the Whole Education System*). Regarding the significant feature of networks, that they are not solely accessible for government and official bodies but also involve civil society, a result emerges. ESD is not restricted to political actors or confined to formal, theoretical spaces. Rather, the findings show that ESD is implemented in practice, through concrete projects and initiatives, and takes place across all levels of the educational system and through the collaboration of a diversified range of actors.

While the supportive theory stands in reference to international findings on developments in the area of educational policy, additionally, research literature on ESD and Austria is suitable for highlighting the creation and strengthening of networks. ESD is understood as ,networking for innovation‘ as highlighted in Rauch et al. (2014), underlining the point that networking is utilized as pivotal means for development and an integral to ESD. Ultimately, results of the analysis mark forming partnerships and strengthening collaboration as substantial aspect for conceptualizations of ESD.

6.3.2. The Significance of Agendas as Soft Governance Instruments

The remark of Shulla et al. (2020, p. 17) that (national) strategies are designed in alignment with Agenda 2030, presents coherent to the outcomes of conducted thematic analysis. It places agendas as soft governance instruments, situated in the bigger field of global entanglements in education and policymaking, central for the projects' interest. Recalling theory constructs presented at entrance of this thesis, agenda-setting strategies were constituted a form of governance applied in contemporary times. Such *soft governance* instrumentalizes agendas for disseminating educational ideas, and countries adopting these ideas points to normative mechanisms at play, that were reported on in chapter 3.1.2.2 and can be identified within the scope of this project. In the 'case' of Education for Sustainable

Development, starting with *Agenda 21*, agendas were henceforth decisive for a broader popularity of the concept in the national context of Austria. Indicators on SDG 4 achievement relatedly help to classify how normative mechanisms are at play in the data. Derived therefrom, national policies thus exhibit the agendas' recommendations which do not have a legally binding character. This is where Agenda 2030 and ESD interplay is activated and how the importance of global agendas for ESD is characterized.

The debate can be furnished with the vital question: Is education policy still an area where national governments possess the power over objectives and content of educational ideas? Considering the link of knowledge production and academic drift of IO's for scientific authority and thus legitimacy in policymaking (3.1.2.3) the presumption of central influence of soft governance tools is strengthened. It becomes apparent in surveyed educational documents of political relevance.

6.3.3. Homogenizing Effects

Driving forward the argument, that affirms the collaborative endeavor that characterizes Education for Sustainable Development, homogenizing effects mark a related yet distinctively narrated explanatory model.

Shifts in global educational policy reveal new locations of policymaking as well as isomorphic tendencies as observed by Elfert and Ydesen (2023) and Niemann (2022). Educational ideas tend to fuse or to *be* fused in contemporary times. This indicates why ESD in the material is described as encompassing and broadly diversified. A conglomerate of multiple ideas of ESD creates bigger challenges in finding a suitable definition that is applicable to all fields of influence. Politics of convergence pertain to a diffuse division of the areas covered by ESD and consequently facilitate abstract descriptions of the concept that are found not only in Figure 5 but also in the theme *Theme 5: Shifting Name – Meaning the Same?*. At the beginning of the findings section, the empirical data reveal the versatility of the concept of ESD, often expressed through contradictory descriptions within the same document. This leads to an important observation: rather than a single, clear-cut definition, ESD is characterized by a multifaceted and somewhat diffuse understanding. An opportune moment to revisit the demand of Bouslama et al. (2015, p. 60) that the concept of ESD needs to be open to scientific reflection and critical questioning (see chapter *Advancing the Dialogue: Academic and Educational Relevance*) presents at this point. In light of the globally applied modes of governance in education, this strong argument for the thesis's

relevance serves as a foundation for the insight that ESD cannot be defined through a traditional, fixed definition, but instead requires a different conceptual approach. It implies that the components of an ESD understanding must be capable of functioning across different contexts, allowing each to remain compatible with the others. This is precisely what the final conceptualization aims to achieve.

Another option to elaborate on this finding, is through the call for comprehensive transformation of educational institutions, explaining the *whole-system approach* employed for ESD in accordance to Leicht et al. (2018) and Rieckmann (2020). To achieve optimal effectiveness in ESD, it is essential that the educational institutions undergo comprehensive transformation in their entirety. This whole-system perspective is evident in several passages that emphasize inclusion of all levels in the administrative chain and promote structural alignment for the cause of ESD. Furthermore, several additional segments are referenced in the theme *mainstreaming*. Not only governmental data, but also ESD actors in Austria are among the publishing parties on ESD topics. A key message emerges: To facilitate the implementation of ESD efforts, adopting a whole-system approach is essential. Homogenizing processes are also evident in embedding ESD throughout the entire education system. It highlights constructing the concept as an overarching topic that shall be employ cross-curricular. As a consequence, Education for Sustainable Development is allocated to all subject matters with no subject taking responsibility for integrating it in an encompassing manner. While it widens the scope of the concept, the presentations in data material fall short in establishing a draft of Education for Sustainable Development that is readily transferable to the teaching environment (so to say ‘teachable’). Thus, it leads back to the rich variation of definitions with challenges grasping one in particular.

Semantic adaption of the concept of Education for Sustainable Development can be depicted as a sign of homogenization taking place in international education policy. The theme concerned with *shifting names* (5.6), exhibits a plethora of evidence in this regard. The relation, or differentiation, between environmental education and ESD was extracted from data material and queried for a possible hierarchical interplay. From the discussion about semantical variations of ESD or in the use of sustainability and education can be drawn: When EE is used, an ecological understanding of sustainability is implied. Furthermore, environmental education for sustainable development was detected a special case in the thesis. Tying it to contemporary examples of ESD engagement in regard to

Austria, a relevant distinction of the concepts is confirmed on the country's homepage of the Ministry of Education. EESD is named under the section teaching principles while ESD is categorized as educational concern (Bundesministerium Bildung, 2025b, 2025a).

Acknowledging the difficulty when trying to delineate these concepts precisely, a tendency emerges for concepts that combine sustainable development and education to merge in meaning. Consequently, this raises the question, of whether the concept's naming was adjusted has shifted over time while essentially referring to a continuous meaning of the same concept. This line of thought significantly contributes to constructing understandings of ESD. Its importance as outcome was detected already earlier in the analysis process. However, it was not until developing the themes that names of the concepts were cross-referenced with shifting tendencies regarding consistent conceptual titles. The described difficulties encountered become explicable by referring to Cowen (2009, p. 320), who identifies a phenomenon educational transfer that modifies its shape, without undergoing a geographical shift, as a problematic aspect of mobilities he concepts (*Policy in Motion: Translation and Transfer in the Educational Context*). Is that what can be observed with the changing definitions and not at least various names for the concept of Education for Sustainable Development? This perspective offers at least some fruitful insights. Such insights of the theme that portrays ESD as a *constantly evolving concept* align closely with the interrogation of shifting names of constructs linking sustainability and education, which preserve their core meaning. Recognizing a **concept that is in a constant state of evolution** in the research material, allows for some insight to why certain definitions or distinct areas and responsibilities of the concept are difficult to grasp. As something that is continuously transforming, ESD necessarily needs to remain adjustable to a certain extent. This is attributed to the need to align terminology with prevailing changes in the field where ESD is situated. This implication counters homogenizing tendencies, explaining why arriving at one fixed definition, one name, and a clearly delineated concept remains subject of ongoing debate.

6.3.4. Imbalance of Sustainability Dimensions

Regarding the question of whether the **ecological aspect** holds a dominant position in how ESD is represented in the research material, the theme addressing the overemphasis on environmental issues in the data provides a clear guiding direction.

This dominance is apparent not only in the allocated constructs of EE and EESD, which both center an environmental sustainability, but also in the content focus of ESD teaching. To enhancing understanding, a secondary implication concerning shifts over time is illustrated. In order to facilitate comprehension of presented data, word frequency is visualized using the *Word Cloud* tool in MAXQDA. The word frequency list was generated by the software and is available in the *Appendix (A 2)*.

This proves enriching for further interpretation, by offering a visual representation of the terms most frequently appearing in the documents. Word frequency was analyzed across different time periods, to enable comparison. Considering the publication range (2008-2024), the year 2015 was set as the dividing point. Two graphics of word clouds are used to visualize potential differences and to support plausible conclusions.

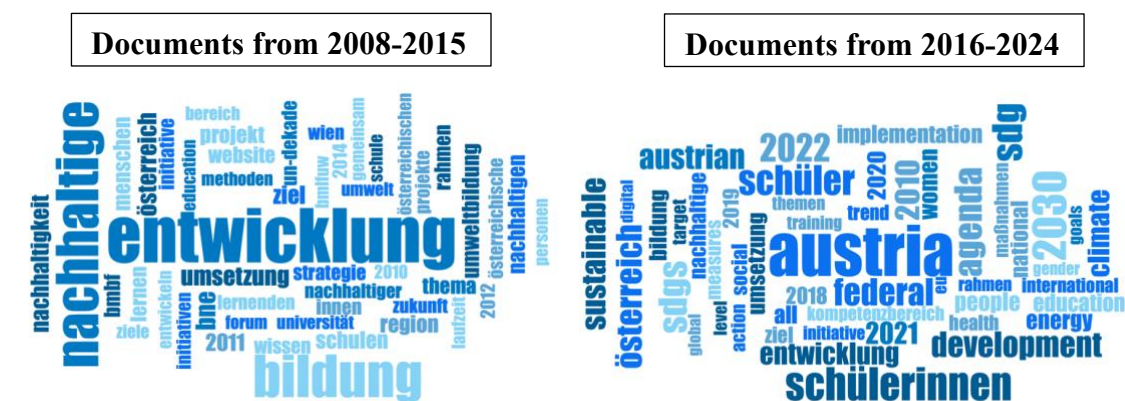


Figure 6: Word Frequency Clouds (MAXQDA)

The 50 most frequently used words are collated in the illustrations presented. As stated directly above the graphics, on the left-hand side signifies the word frequency of analyzed material dated up to (and including) the year 2015 is presented, while on the right-hand side the graphic consists of research data from publications after the year 2015 until the end of year 2024 can be observed. It is important to note, that the display of data is in German as well as English, as the analysis software does not differentiate by language.³⁰

³⁰ Descriptive analysis and interpretation by the researcher are naturally given in English, this affects German words the same. Should the naming of German words deemed relevant, they will be described.

Operational remark: Part of the word visualization tools is an integrated *stop word list*. The feature weeds out dismissive words, that would dominate the visual display because of their frequent occurrence in language use. In addition, it is possible to manually add words to the list. This enabled

This empirical insight on word frequency in the evaluated documents visualize how the word landscape depicted on the right-hand side circles around terms like *climate*, *health*, *energy* that are indicating a focus on the area of the climate crisis and Agenda 2030 topic fields. Thinking of Gee (2001), language displays its power in this data. Accumulated words create a meaning that instantly points to a certain notion of sustainability. In consideration of the different components targeted by ESD and sustainability, the environmental dimension is prevailing in occurring terms. The conglomerate of words indicates a spectrum of ESD that centers nature, environment and ecological sustainability. Tying back to contemporary research literature to offer a way of understanding, UNESCO frames ESD as the organizations response to ‘urgent challenges’ that the planet encounters (UNESCO, n.d.), indicating a similar central priority on environment and planetary resources. Likewise, placing ESD as a means of addressing critical components of sustainable development, as reported by Leicht et al. (2018), strengthens the perspective. Nonetheless, the narrative of a contemporary systematic of sustainability describes dimensions that are equally important (see Figure 1). Scholars challenge the perspective of an imbalance, arguing that the effort to achieve the SDGs ‘(...) considerably exceeds focusing on environmental sustainability’ (Buerkle et al., 2023, p. 14). From this viewpoint, the emphasis on ecological aspects found in the data contrasts with the demand in research literature for a more balanced and equitable approach to all sustainability dimensions. It is a widely acknowledged that demands of research and scientific development are not always implemented consistently in practice. Conflicting evidence between data material and theoretical research becoming apparent also here.

In terms of their relationship, ESD is presented as the overarching concept that encompasses EE, among other subordinate elements of Education for Sustainable Development. Regarding the definitions employed for ESD throughout the sample, as illustrated in Figure 5, the overall presentation of the meaning of the concept appears fragmented. In contrast to what the hierarchal relation of ESD to environmental education revealed, namely ESD placed as the superior concern, documents prominently discuss SD and environmental issues to a significant extent. Considering how several definitions stress

to cut f.e.g. single digits, which did not have meaningful information but were result of the page numeration and in that respect further specify the outcome produced.

the *educational* essence of the concept, a significant gap is mirrored here between how ESD is enacted in the data and how it is characterized in definitions.

6.3.5. Transference Processes Around ESD

Processes located in the theoretical line of educational transfer and policy translation prove to be fruitful for an interpretative analysis.

It is evident that not one agent transports their ideas of ESD to another geographic location where they are adapted. Rather, the understanding or objectives of ESD that are embedded in international agendas are implemented in a respective national context by local players. This signifies a task of moving ESD ideas and efforts into regional contexts. This corresponds to data parts advocating for an emphasis on regional (implementation) processes of ESD. Consequently, it is not an educational *translation* that is evident in the material (working with the differentiation Cowen (2009) marks regarding the terminology). More accurate for the description are contributions of Shulla et al. (2020, p. 17) and Schulte (2012a, p. 95) in which *the local* is directly linked to *the global*. Local circumstances are thus, as evident in the case for Austria, reconstructed or adapted somehow to align to recommendations from international spheres.

Orientation (in terms of a reference frame) at Agenda 2030 for concepting national goals or adopting them can be linked to exactly this ‘*coming from the global and going to the local or national*’. With regard to the literature describing the Agenda 2030 target of SDG 4.7 (see *Agenda 2030 and The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*), policy translation processes can be contested for

- (a) national education policies, as they observably describe to center ESD across structural levels;
- (b) curricula, evident in university mission statements and primary school curriculum; and
- (c) teacher education that was singled out as peculiarity.

One example of transference is teacher education, which presents with significance in evaluated material. Reportedly, it shall incorporate ESD principles, including them as they are formulated by UNESCO. To mention in this context, Austria applies a mainstreaming strategy for ESD. The mainstreaming, respectively, whole-system-approach, is especially strengthened for Agenda 2030 implementation in the country. Considering the early

adaption of efforts to mainstream ESD action in Austria, no certain evidence for a policy transfer from the international agenda to the local context can be marked. Nevertheless, the approach aligns for the settings *local* and *universal/transnational*. Accompanying, implications can be drawn from foundational information about ESD origins and incident for the context of Austria (2.5). As pointed out, strategic frameworks of the international dimension were involved in shaping ESD. In this, agendas as soft governance instruments would be underlined foundation of thesis' results. It was outlined that certain topics have been addressed in Austria prior to Agenda 2030 already and are now included in SDG 4 endeavors. They were translated into teaching about Education for Sustainable Development, among other things (Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2023, p. 19). This resembles an adapted naming of one issue, changing nothing of the content. Thus, policy transference in that specific regard can be assumed, as it is observed that national policies appear to mirror the agendas of IO's, potentially as a result of perceived coercion.

6.3.6. Exploring the Significance of 2015 in ESD Policy and Practice

The year 2015 was taken as the dividing line for observations of changes in respect to the selected research material. To that end, it is interrogated towards being a possible turning point for the leading interest of the thesis at hand. This grounds in UNESCO's narrative, that the launch of Agenda 2030 signifies the start of a new era for developing a sustainable future.

WPR qualifies to be utilized for questions of a possible special importance of year 2015 in this project. Following the evaluation of word frequency of post 2015 material, a problematization in terms of WPR can be presumed. Acknowledging the prevalence of terms allocated to health, climate and ecologic sustainability, the underlying 'problem' could be a perceived marginalized consideration of these areas up to that point. Evaluation challenges that with **expressing an understanding of education that seeks development in its entirety**. Not just the educationalization of climate protection and environmental concerns, but the entire further development of education as such should be strived for to be able to meet the demands of ESD. In regard to the equally on environmental sustainability concentrated evidence in more recent material, this commendable idea is at risk to stay an illusion. Analysis of the word frequency in documents made clear that

material conducted before 2015 differs in regard to subjects in the ones published after that date; different foci prevail in political documents that are concerned with ESD.

6.3.6.1. *Dominance and Influence from the International Sphere*

The UN has become inseparable from how ESD is currently constructed. Through Agenda 2030, and, by extension, the way ESD is framed, the organization (particularly UNESCO) appears to hold considerable influence over the broader discourse. Yet, despite this assumed authority, references to UNESCO's agenda were notably scarce in the analyzed material.

Revisiting this contradiction through a critical policy lens, informed by Bacchi's (2009) '*What's the Problem Represented to Be?*' approach, offers further insight. WPR emphasizes uncovering the assumptions embedded within policy formulations. Applying this perspective to international policy instruments reveals how certain problem representations are shaped into strategies combating them. Policy agendas carry certain assumptions about what is missing or needs to be changed. The very existence of a global agenda can be understood as an indication that earlier approaches were seen as inadequate – an idea that is also reasonable for the Austrian strategy on ESD, which positions itself as corrective or strategic step forward.

From this perspective, international organizations actively shape understandings of ESD through their policy recommendations, rhetoric, and strategic guidance. Some IOs, more explicitly than others, promote specific framings that highlight certain aspects, most notably ecological concerns, while sidelining others, such as critical educational perspectives. This raises an important question: does Agenda 2030 introduce a distinct understanding of ESD that was not previously present in Austria, or does it simply reinforce existing notions under a more globally recognized semantic? Although there is evidence of a nationally rooted approach to ESD before Agenda 2030, the influence of the UN's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), which began in 2005, clearly provided a reference point. The Austrian strategy, developed in this context, explicitly references the DESD and reflects its orientation. What is notable, however, is that while the *Austrian Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development* used the abbreviation 'ESD', later references to this national strategy, as 'ESD' abbreviated, disappear. This suggests that the universally 'applicable' agenda has effectively overshadowed or replaced the national interpretation of ESD, to the extent that the term is now almost exclusively used to refer to the global framework.

This potential displacement of the Austrian strategy by Agenda 2030 deserves further examination. From a policy translation perspective, it illustrates how international policy frameworks may not only inform but replace national strategies. The lack of a parallel or updated Austrian ESD strategy following Agenda 2030 supports this. As shown in the timeline of ESD-specific developments (see Figure 2), Austria has not introduced a separate national agenda to complement the current global one.

6.3.6.2. *The Narrative of the Crucial Role of Education*

A crucial role of education is not only affirmed in topic-relevant literature but also identified within evaluated documents. Education is negotiated as a key prerequisite for the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda, which explicitly includes the concept of ESD. Education as instrument of global governance indicates an increasing politicization of the educational sphere. This provides an explanatory line on why the emphasis on education, both its role for SD but also its important position in ESD, is repeatedly highlighted in the political documents analyzed. Given that as a topic, Education for Sustainable Development spans across all institutional and administrative levels, this central standing of education is reinforced. However, an incongruent representation emerges.

The key meaning of education and ESD within the sustainability paradigm appears as a commonality of the data, and yet it is accompanied by clear indications of internal contradiction. The phenomenon of *educationalization*, grounded in a problem-solving paradigm, offers an access to understanding the pivotal position assigned to education. Widely recognized in the sphere of global educational research (Bridges, 2008; Depaepe & Smeyers, 2008; Fendler, 2008; Tröhler, 2016), in the process of educationalization the responsibility for complex societal problems is shifted into the field of education. It is understood to signify a connection with a ‘search for knowledge and the urge to reform society’ (Fendler, 2008, p. 47). Equally to other societal responsibilities, the shaping of a future that aligns with sustainable values is successfully being transferred into the educational sector and as task for its institutions (Smeyers & Depaepe, 2008, p. 1). Also constructed as ‘educationalization of social problems’ this phenomenon is evident across various life contexts (Tröhler, 2016, p. 2). This interpretation becomes particularly relevant towards the final conclusions of this work.

During analysis, repeated references underscore the vital role of education for achieving Agenda 2030. Despite this assigned centrality, ESD in combination with the UNESCO

agenda, is only addressed on a limited number of pages in evaluated documents. It is thus a conflicting result to allocate education a key position and at the same time attach as limited importance to ESD, as done material focused on Agenda 2030. The following section captures that tension in more concise terms.

6.3.7. A Decline in Significance?

Because sustainable development is included in the Austrian Federal Constitution as a national objective (Austrian Federal Chancellery, 2024, p. 31), one would think ESD has an equally high position in the country's concerns. Although striving for including sustainability in frameworks and performance agreements, very little considerations of Education for Sustainable Development and concrete actions thereof are featured in the documents which are concerned with the UNESCO agenda in some way. Those happen to be all published after 2015. McGrath (2014), following the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals, already pointed to a marginalization of educational concerns in debates about the conception of sustainable development after the year 2015. This provides an explanatory insight for the split narrative about the standing and role of education, respectively ESD compared to actual occurrence in the data material. To refrain from hastily concluding that educational subjects are being systematically marginalized, it is equally plausible that other subjects are prioritized in the documents evaluated. This leaves still unresolved the emphasis put on education and ESD.

6.4. Silences Surfacing During the Process

Silences, when getting noticed, in the first instance always raise questions. Those surfacing during the process of a research project most of the time offer vital points to emerge in deeper analysis. Certain ones are immediately salient, capturing the observer's attention, while others surface in a subtle way and are not always apparent even at the second look.

Not a silence but rather a missing piece of data is evident in material. A blatant data gap in Austrian official statistics reveals there are no indicators available for target 4.7 (Education for Sustainable Development) of the SDGs. The reported lack of availability on ESD related indicators is confirmed by information of the Federal Statistical Office of Austria (*Ziel 4*, n.d.). One section from the themes developed in the analysis provides remarkable evidence that informs an important result regarding this matter. Following RTA outcomes

presented in chapter 5.8, this discussion suggests a different approach to measuring ESD. Rather than being understood as a static or fixed system, ESD indicators are viewed as dynamic and open processes of learning and evaluation. This evidence established that measuring the concept ESD should be designed to serve a broad range of purposes, including orientation, comparability, and self-assessment. Considering the construction of international recommendations and agendas they instead articulate statistically quantifiable indicators. As a result of the discussed evidence, they are not suitable to measure Education for Sustainable Development.

The evidence pointing to approaching sustainability as an empty signifier, indicate concerns that ESD may hold scant significance within the UNESCO agenda. The key role attributed to ESD is particularly important in comparison to the more critical views on the indications of the risk of a label and simple lip-services of ESD. What was reported in descriptive segments for UN's Agenda 2030 and inherent to the section crucial role of education is suitable to be discussed as silence. Suggesting that Austria would be world champion in making good plans surely is slightly provocative, as it implies plans are not further put into operation. It is nevertheless an essential comment excerpted from material as it is solely in this one context in the 17 analyzed documents that the danger of ESD becoming a lip-service is addressed. It is indicative of an absence of explicit mentions of a potentially hypocritical use of ESD that only two documents refer to such a possibility.

6.4.1. Beyond the Buzzwords? Investigating the Depth of a Sustainable Education

In recalling on the current state of research, resuming and challenging thoughts present the final sequence of this discussion chapter. In summary, the possibility of ESD as an empty signifier is interrogated.

Initial intention for the thesis that ultimately led to the precision of the research interest is depicted in the role education policy resolutions and agendas play in the educational reality of individual countries. Critique on that manner was reported in the review of contemporary literature and is debated in connection with sustainability. Approaching the topic of sustainability from an alternative perspective gives rise to the question whether the label-like use of ESD is leading to a lip-service rather than interest in engaging with the concept

and idea (Gottschlich, 2017). Machin and Liu (2024) continue to work in that line, analyzing the use of sustainability as a ‘buzz word’. Building on this, Obrovsky (2020) targets the implementation of SDGs in Austria, in particular defaming the focus on strengthening global partnerships to be an empty formula. Indeed, this can be observed as confirming the findings from conducted TA in some parts. For example, the implementation of indicators to demonstrate efforts to implement the UNESCO’s policy recommendation. Especially the blatant data gap on indicators for ESD can be interpreted in the way that it suffices to list indicators and make visible efforts of following ideas of the prescribed agenda without caring to solve the default of data. Remarkable, however, is that the text segments of the research material that suggest a ESD as an empty signifier are all entailed in documents dated before 2015, while the literature that theoretically underpins this was published from 2017-2024.

What prevails, is that SD is the term highlighted in these formulations and education is identified as secondary concern. From this standpoint, it is worthwhile to question a decline in the importance attributed to education. Importantly, evidence suggests its role as a facilitator of sustainable development as its basic purpose.

7. Resulting Conceptualizations of Education for Sustainable Development

In this section, the central interest of the thesis is discussed. To clarify the range of the construction attempted, it is important to note that the construction refers solely to what can be found in text-based documents and cannot provide information on (practiced) ESD. The construction of ESD in Austria based on education policy documents is described concisely. As the leading question interrogates how ESD is conceived in Austrian documents that show reference to education policy, constructing a more comprehensive framing for a national context based on findings and discussion results is given priority. Subsequently, alignments with a universal framework are presented, utilizing implications from policy analysis perspective. While this contains evidence for translation processes of agendas established on a global scale, characteristics for the Austrian context are demonstrated in a next step. A precise final postulation closes the section.

7.1. Bridging Global Sustainability Goals and National Context: The Conceptualization of ESD in Austria

As research findings, five components define the conceptualization of Education for Sustainable Development in the Austrian context. This presentation is comprised of evidence of plural dimensions as reflected in developed themes. Considering these in their particular significances, as well as in their relations, constitutes the basis for portraying a nuanced understanding of ESD. Text segments as well as interpretative analyses serve as foundation for this conclusion of the comprehensive evaluation. In the discussion evaluated evidence and theoretical traits from the literature synthesize to arrive at the following conclusion of a conceptualization of Education for Sustainable Development in Austrian policy documents.

7.1.1. Definition, Deconstructed

This first conceptualization captures the emphasis placed in findings on identifying definitions of Education for Sustainable Development. The abstract and multilayered nature of how ESD is understood was targeted in themes and discussing the results. It is neither sufficient to isolate a single definition, nor adequate to compile a list of definitions

drawn from documents and thereby assume a clear delineation of the concept. Confronted with this challenge, ESD is conceptualized as multifaceted concept. As an alternative to conventional definitions, the following suggestion is submitted.

Education for Sustainable Development marks a future-oriented educational concern, a general educational task, that presents an approach that critically engages with issues of sustainability, respectively a sustainable development.

Overall, it closely aligns with contemporary descriptions of the concept found in literature, and particularly with characterizations provided by Shulla et al. (2020) and Rieckmann (2020) (see *Foundational Underpinnings*). The aspects that, beyond this definition, contribute to the construction of Education for Sustainable Development are presented under the subsequent headings.

7.1.2. ESD is a Multi-Level Inclusion Effort

ESD is integrated into the macro, meso and micro levels of education policy, thereby fulfilling the criteria for a multi-level endeavor. At the macro level it is embedded to organizational policy; at the meso level in national curricula; and at the micro level, in ESD-related school initiatives or in the value orientation of institutions towards ESD. This ultimately signifies how ESD, mainstreamed as idea, connects to the theme that anchors ESD throughout the education system as part of this component of a national conceptualization. A connection between these outcomes has already been established. Although not explicitly stated in the material, the whole-system factor emerges from the analytical results as a concept being relevant to the education system in its entirety. This is evidenced by the integration of ESD in higher education institutions, in their mission statement and teaching principles, as well as in school curricula representing formal education. At the same time, numerous initiatives and projects address the area of informal education, through bottom-up approaches. Data material suggests a balanced distribution of ESD measures in the formal and informal education sectors, therefore indicating that the concept appears not only in multiple categories but also involves a range of actors. In this way, the goal Austria committed to, embedding ESD across multiple levels in the education system, is achieved (in terms of representation in official documents).

7.1.3. ESD is of Collaborative Nature

In further advancing the preceding aspect, ESD can be characterized as collaborative in nature, forming a third conceptual component. Determined in segments of the Austrian documents that emphasize networking, collaboration and cooperation, this continuity persists throughout all material. By creating and strengthening collaborative units to address ESD-related concerns, the concept advocates for network-like structures to be established. Moreover, analysis in this manner reveals, that a joint effort exists, aiming to advance ESD in Austria. Homogenizing effects that were identified particularly in regard to educational ideas conceived in international dimensions and are shaped by normative standards for education, further establish this third conceptualization. However, they are not always desirable as they also disperse the definitions and responsibilities for ESD. After elaborations in discussion the observation that a notion of *togetherness* is consistently present in conducted analysis, it can be stated with certainty that Education for Sustainable Development is a collaborative endeavor in Austrian documents on education.

7.1.4. Shaping the Future Through Empowerment

As a fourth conceptualization, ESD can be understood as a conglomerate of empowering, future-oriented efforts. An emphasis on promoting active engagement is detected in contributions to *Theme 4: Caught Between Directing Behavior and Critical Thinking* as well as in discussion. The concept is reportedly located in fields of action where an adaption to new challenges and opportunities is required, the area of teaching and education pioneering in that regard. In this regard, Education for Sustainable Development is identified as a concept that is in a state of constant evolution. The concepts constant exposure to change amplifies the challenge of arriving at a definition for the concept that presents suitable as a basis to undergo necessary adjustments and is sufficiently stable. This direction towards the future is accompanied by an empowering force inherent to the concept. Such empowerment is in particular tied to the context of enabling upcoming generations to critically reflect on the kind of future they wish to live in, on dominant sustainability trajectories, and on prevailing perceptions of what sustainability should entail. Sharing knowledge about ESD and increasing public awareness of related topics also serve the purpose of educating individuals and the society about sustainable options for creating a future worth living in. These findings mirror a conception of ESD 2 more than of ESD 1, although relations to both were described.

7.1.5. Narrowing ESD Down to the Ecologic Dimension

The conception in the previous section partially guides the contents of this last section. ESD is predominantly referenced in relation to an ecological side of sustainability as referenced for curriculum and teaching focus and prioritized in ESD-related initiatives, to name two examples. Based on strong evidence, this fifth component of the final conceptualization narrows Education for Sustainable Development understanding specifically to its ecological aspect. Not only do the majority of projects, but also the primary tasks of Austrian ESD actors focus on environmental issues and planetary resources. This focus sustainability in terms of a livable future is not necessarily to be viewed as negative. On the contrary, an emphasis on resource sensitivity and climate protection entails a commitment to ongoing development and the aspiration of a sustainable future. In consequence, the narrative of a **reduction of the concept ESD to the ecologic component**, as identified conceptualization, is attached to the characteristic of ESD as future-oriented and constantly evolving idea.

7.2. A Universal Conceptualization & Translation Processes

Examining the research interest through the conceptual basis of education as instrument of global and national governance leads to the conclusive findings presented in this section. Even if the two conceptualizations of national and universal are named and outlined as distinct, they are closely interrelated.

The material highlights the need for a common **global understanding with nationally peculiar foci** of Education for Sustainable Development. This demanded emerges in face of ongoing challenges to identify a clear definition of ESD. At this juncture the policy interrogative approach helps to consider this dynamic in the perspective of translation processes. What could be grasped as commonalities for distinctive Austrian and universal, agenda-oriented ESD conceptualizations is shaped through policy translation and educational transference processes and includes a range of aspects. Notably, policy translation is identified in the matter the idea of ESD is being addressed on the structural level. **Adopting structures and strategy** is captured in the theme *Theme 2: Mainstreaming*. This way of proceeding is a corner stone of the internationally placed Agenda 2030. Making the efforts of ESD central to all levels of administration and thus pursuing structural alignment becomes an inherent component to constructing ESD at a

universal level. This way of processing is also described to be enforced in Austria. Moreover, increasing public awareness of ESD-related topics is not only listed as one of the objectives within the UN agenda, but was already a central aim throughout the course of the DESD. Despite being contextualized in the educational sphere, the adoption of awareness raising as strategy therefore counts as policy translation and not as educational transfer as such.

Similarly, the positioning of ESD as essential for achieving other Agenda 2030 goals refers to processes of translation, particularly with the national being directly linked to the global, as discussed earlier. *Theme 3: Throughout the Whole Education System* reflects on this, illustrating how Agenda 2030 is meant to be anchored across multiple ‘*places*’ in the educational sector. This submits the finding, that **education is placed strategically**. When revisiting the earlier discussion, this can be linked to the concept of educationalization. In the context of this research, it translates in the process through which social and political challenges of sustainability are positioned as educational concern.

Not only in terms of implementation but also in the way ESD is described and defined, the understandings displayed in Austrian political documents match constructions of the concept by UNESCO, as well as those found in contemporary research literature (revisit Shulla et al. (2020) and Rieckmann (2020) in chapter 2.3.1). Austria adheres to the prescribed characterization of the concept by UNESCO, which becomes evident when tying back to the ESD construction on the official webpage of the Austrian Ministry of Education. The endeavor to teach and prepare for a resource-effective living is enforced as consistence across both depictions. Drawing on this evidence for effects agendas have on national policies, their conception as soft governance instruments, provides a re-establishment of the initial paradigm. At the same time, asserting influence through soft governance becomes a plausible background for the rationale of this policy translation and observable, content-wise alignment to agendas. The results conceptualized here are equally to the five components in the Austrian context above, important findings that respond to the research questions.

7.2.1. Which Particularities of ESD Result for the Austrian Context?

In conclusion, the findings of this work, on how Education for Sustainable Development as a concept is described, are largely consistent with the existing international research

literature on the subject. It prompts the question of whether Austria has fully adapted policies and ideas on ESD from a universal dimension. A certain normative effect of international agendas is evident in shaping the national approach.

It would be remiss not to mention the agents *Forum Environmental Education* and *ÖKOLOG*. Although context-based examples of institutions and initiatives can be found in any given regionally specified context, this does not diminish the significance of these agents as a distinctive feature of the Austrian context. Both appear in the data material with great frequency and can be captured as most popular initiatives of the intersection of education and sustainability, respectively schools and efforts of ESD. It is, particularly notable that they unite more than one identified theme. Most obvious is their definition as collaborative units, as *ÖKOLOG* for instance was already mentioned to consist of network structure itself. The two organizations are promoting both, changes in behavior for the sake of a more sustainable acting and enabling learners to engage in learning processes of critical thinking. In addition, they share the notion of ESD being narrowed down to its ecological dimension. The focus on environmental issues and understanding ESD primarily to facilitate learning about sustainable ways of living in respect to planetary boundaries is central for both initiatives. It strikes as a specific aspect for the Austrian depiction of ESD, that the field of teacher education receives a considerable amount of attention. The dataset includes a document, that has been published to specifically address this issue (see in the *Appendix, A 1*). Comprising a great part of the theme that locates ESD across the entire education system (5.4), ESD is represented in teacher education to a high extent. This prioritization of teacher training considerations was not evident during preliminary analysis; the finding became apparent at a later stage of interpretation and combination of results.

Country case particularities are extracted as well from observations of changes over time related to the subject of interest which were outlined following the seven developed themes. It is important to note that the changes are limited to the written material analyzed and may not necessarily reflect the practical or perceived reality of ESD in Austria. Based on these changes and the discussion results that highlighted a visible transformation in regard of the terms in the data body, three notable features can be identified:

- the term *climate (change) education*

- a dissolving definition
- increasing prominence of ecological issues in more recent material

The **first** indication reveals, that in Austrian documents, climate change education appeared exclusively in political documents dated from 2015 onwards. These documents address Agenda 2030 and the globally defined development goals for sustainability, thereby connecting them to a universal dimension. However, within the context of this evaluation, it is important to note that this is specific to Austria, as no comparative figures were collected to assess this aspect from a broader, international perspective.

The **second** feature concerns the challenge of defining ESD and aims to put these difficulties into perspective. As displayed in section 5.9.1 a formerly contested ESD as *educational concern* shifts to be viewed as *general concern* in current material exemplifies this. Hence, the definition has become more encompassing but at the same time more diffuse, in the process losing the clear focus on education. When comparing ESD definitions constructed in documents published after 2015 to those in earlier materials, they appear noticeably vaguer. One could therefore argue that, rather than becoming more clearly defined over time, the conceptualization of ESD has further dissolved within the given context, of political documents.

Addressed in the discussion chapter, evidence is drawn from the supplementary word frequency analysis was discussed. This represents the **third** notable feature which can be outlined in somewhat greater detail. The inclusion of word frequency analysis revealed that materials published prior to 2015 displayed significant differences in subject matter, focusing more on topics other than ESD, compared to documents released in the following years. It is reasonable to infer that, with the exception of cases where ESD had already been a central concern, materials published after 2015 place greater emphasis on environmental issues. As visualized in Figure 6, terms frequently revolve around the climate crisis and corresponding effects. This supports the argument that the conceptualization of ESD increasingly leans toward a more specialized, nature- and environment-focused understanding. To conclude, it is a peculiarity for the analyzed material that ecological concerns (environment, climate, planetary resources) are centered more in more recent publications. Since no comparative datasets are included to validate whether this trend applies to the universal dimension, it is contested a finding specific to the Austrian context.

As indicated by these observations, it is reasonable to consider that ESD is regarded as a concept that assists in engaging with and educating about climate change issues, which are among the most pressing societal challenges of the current times. This leads to a central postulation, which forms the basis of the final interpretation, asking if ESD is genuinely recognized as a concept in its own right or if it is framed as ‘merely’ educating for a ‘sustainable tomorrow’? First, however, the following section concludes on the premise that was being conceptualized in the discussion (*Exploring the Significance of 2015 in ESD Policy and Practice*).

7.2.2. No Meaningful Turning Point for ESD in Austria Identified

If 2015 signifies a meaningful turning point for ESD in Austria was discussed at length in the preceding chapter (6.3.6).

Word frequency analysis of the body of data made a difference apparent in material conducted before 2015 to the ones published from there on in regard to thematic subjects. Drawing on the theoretic framework and results from conducted analysis, different foci prevail in political documents that are concerned with ESD in material prior to the SDG’s introduction and afterwards. Applying contemporary theory to global governance of education in this context prompted the question of whether Agenda 2030 affects a distinct understanding of ESD that was not previously evident in Austria, in other words, whether it coined the predominant understanding of the term. In fact, ESD neither solely appeared after 2015 in text-based documents on a political level, nor did it become of greater importance with the 2030 Agenda. If it is in some respect of special importance, it is not for an acceleration of the intensified employment of ESD in documents. The presumption, that only after 2015, the term ESD appeared and became a topic discussed, thereupon collapses and devalues the impact of Agenda 2030 as key event. As became evident as early as in the chapter on theoretical background, mentioning Agenda 2030 does not equally correlate with mentioning the concept of Education for Sustainable Development. All the while, the set of goals is notably featured in the evaluated data material.

As a result, it is reasonable to suggest that the adoption of ESD semantics, and particularly the abbreviation ‘ESD’, are affected by UNESCO's Agenda 2030 introduction, but not meaningfully way that brought significant change to the essence of the concept. If 2015 in the context of this research does present of special significance, it is linked to an adaption regarding the semantics and thematic areas that are *related* to the concept.

Conceptualizations of ESD were already present in data that precedes the adoption of this specific set of goals, and many of these earlier constructions reflected similar principles. To conclude, the significance lies not in a specific point in time, but in the ongoing conversation of the *local* and the *global* constructions of the concept.

8. Educating for a Sustainable Tomorrow? A Final Postulation

This final postulation returns to the starting point of the thematic analysis: the struggle to define a concise understanding of ESD. In light of the difficulties outlined there, the central finding –how the Education for Sustainable Development is conceptualized – is considered here against the backdrop of negative definitions found in the data (5.1). These suggest that while ESD is indeed described as a concept, it remains an unfinished one, fluid rather than fixed. ESD appears to exist in continuous dialogue with sustainable development, as reflected in the frequent references to their interrelation. This alignment with SD indicates that the concept of ESD is constantly evolving, responding to shifting societal challenges such as the climate crisis. The relationship of ESD to SD is identified as a subject to debate, positioned on the one hand as being in an ongoing exchange with and cooperation with sustainable development, and on the other as a driving force for ecologically just progress toward the future, reduced to being a mechanical tool in favor of SD.

By revisiting the conceptions of ESD 1 and ESD 2, the introduction of the present work already outlined how they differ in their notions. And although more evidence is reported of ESD 2, education *through* sustainability, the final conclusion suggests that the overall meaning the construction of the concept in Austrian political documents transports, aligns more closely with education *for* sustainability (ESD 1).

Throughout the course of analysis, increasing portions of the material pointed toward a recurring reflection. The conception of education, as briefly outlined in the basic characteristics of ESD, in some segments emphasizes the ability to contribute reflectively and responsibly to shaping society in pursuit of sustainable development. But does this reflect the predominant understanding of ESD? Is it seen primarily as a facilitator of ‘global’ responsibility in favor of sustainable development – rather than as a concept with its own distinct educational essence? Framing ESD in such a way, as simply acting in favor of sustainable development, risks diminishing its *raison d’être* as a concept with educational integrity and specificity. As the analysis progressed, a growing focus on the ecological component of sustainability gave rise to the sense that education, and educational concerns more broadly, are becoming less significant, at least in how ESD was represented in the

material. Notably, this was not openly addressed or discussed. On the contrary, many sources emphasized education for a better future, for sustainability, and for its own sake. Yet the marginalization of education appeared to be latent, surfacing throughout the data, though difficult to clearly articulate until the analysis was reconnected with theory. Once this link was made, the pattern became increasingly apparent.

In summary, this raises the question of whether ESD is functioning as a flexible meta-concept, so adaptable that it leaves behind a clear understanding of its core definition. This leads to a critical assumption that emerged gradually through the reflexive thematic analysis and deeper engagement with the data: namely, that the difficulty in defining ESD is tied to its dominant ecological framing. Is ESD being acknowledged primarily in its role as an enabler or vehicle for sustainability, rather than as an educational concept in its own right? The concern here is that ESD lacks recognition as a qualified, standalone concept with meaningful educational essence. Its primary function appears to be responsible for the creation of a 'better' future. Shifting this responsibility to the educational sphere signifies ESD as result of educationalization of societal sustainability issues.

9. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to determine conceptualizations of Education for Sustainable Development according to how they are conveyed and constructed in policy documents. To maintain a manageable scope and enable meaningful findings, the Austrian context was selected as the specific focus of analysis.

One key finding of the thesis is the broadness of the thematic space in which ESD is situated, a range that inherently presents challenges in arriving at a narrowly defined concept. Within the available definitions extracted from the data, Education for Sustainable Development was finally understood as **a future-oriented educational concern, a general educational task, that presents an approach that critically engages with issues of sustainability, respectively a sustainable development.**

The relationship between sustainable development and education emerged as the decisive factor in constructing conceptualizations of ESD. The second central finding arises out of the final postulation (see chapter 0) made on ESD and its role in relation to sustainable development, particularly regarding its educational essence. The overarching understanding of ESD conveyed in the Austrian policy context highlights the ways in which education contributes to a broader global responsibility for sustainability. The question of whether ESD can be seen as a facilitator or promoter of such responsibility was directly addressed in the findings, leading to the conclusion that ESD supports sustainable development by foregrounding the educational contribution to global sustainability efforts. This is inherently linked to the distinction between different forms of ESD. Elements associated with ESD 2, which underlines the educational purpose of the concept (supporting individuals in forming their own critical thoughts) appeared more prominently in the descriptions. However, the overall conceptualization conveyed in the documents aligns more closely with ESD 1, framing ESD primarily as a facilitator for sustainable development rather than as a concept grounded in meaningful educational essence. In this context, it can be concluded that the ‘for’ in ‘Education for Sustainable Development’ is accorded significant importance, underscoring an environmental sustainability purpose-driven orientation rather than an educationally substantive one.

A critical and reflective stance toward both theory and findings was maintained throughout the thesis. Adopting a **policy-interrogative perspective** proved effective, as it encouraged a critical engagement with the results themselves. Consequently, the thesis demonstrated that a policy-analytical lens, through applying the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be?’ (WPR) approach, offers valuable tools for contextualizing ESD not only within the Austrian policy landscape, but particularly in relation to international impacts. It enabled a deeper interrogation of the underlying problem representations embedded in policy texts, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how ESD is conceptualized and mobilized in the dialogue of these national and international contexts.

Grounded in the theoretical framework of contemporary forms of governance in global education, the thesis further identified the role of international agendas and the influence of new actors in global education policy. The most relevant theoretical lens for exploring these processes was that of **policy translation** and **educational transfer**. Evidence of transference processes was particularly identified at the structural level, for instance through the mainstreaming of ESD into existing schemes. At the same time, the thesis considered critical perspectives on global agendas, acknowledging concerns about their normative function and their potential technocratic application. As a short subjective afterthought on this topic the narrative that a socially just vision can be achieved by following strategic frameworks needs to be questioned very strongly. Most importantly it does not take into consideration contemporary realities, such as ongoing armed conflicts, rising inequality, and other systemic injustices to a sufficient extent. And therefore, the assumption that social justice on a global scale is achieved by adhering to agendas must be considered overreaching.

9.1. Addressing the Research Questions

In summary, answering the leading question ‘*How is Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) conceptualized in Austrian educational policy documents?*’ was achieved by aligning multiple analytical implications. Section 7.1 provides a detailed response by identifying five components that form a nuanced conceptualization of ESD. Consequently, as the main result of this thesis,

Education for Sustainable Development is conceptualized as a **multi-level inclusion effort of collaborative nature, that is regarded foremost in its ecologic aspect and shapes the future through empowerment.**

This corresponds in large parts to ideas of the concept that are displayed in international education agendas. However, all formulated sub-questions contribute to providing a detailed answer to the project's interest and bring the construction to a cohesive end. In brief, the conclusive answers to the sub-questions are displayed in the following two paragraphs. With the **first sub-question**, '*How do conceptualizations of Education for Sustainable Development in the policy documents relate to the different understandings of ESD 1 and ESD 2?*', this thesis examined whether an understanding of either one of the approaches appears more prominently in the documents. Both the conceptions, ESD 1 and ESD 2, introduced by Vare and Scott (2007), were identified in the analyzed material. Evidence for this can be found in the RTA theme *Theme 4: Caught Between Directing Behavior and Critical Thinking*. It became evident that knowledge plays a significant role for the ESD, which is reflected in the conceptualization that ESD shapes the future through empowerment (7.1.4). Both, ESD 1 and ESD 2, are reflected as they emphasize skills development and strengthening the competencies of learners as well as teachers on ESD. Data shows that a substantial part of the references to Education for Sustainable Development align with to the conception found in ESD 2, i.e. prioritizing to empower individuals to think critically and actively engage in designing a 'more sustainable future'.

The **second sub-question**, '*a) How can these ESD conceptualizations be understood from a critical policy analysis perspective and b) how are globally formulated ideas of ESD translated in the Austrian context?*' is answered in two parts. The first part of the question (a.), benefits significantly from applying a critical policy analysis perspective. In accordance with the WPR tradition, this approach offers an interrogative perspective on why policies are designed with tackling certain 'problems' and what could be the underlying reason for problematizing a phenomenon. As a result, of interpretation through this critical perspective, ESD can be understood as part of the trend of *educationalization*. In this view, ESD's educational potential is made responsible for achieving sustainability goals or a more sustainable future. Overall, the conceptualizations were identified to largely align with internationally promoted agendas. Finally, *a policy analytical approach* ensured that the critical reflexive paradigm chosen for the work was maintained throughout evaluation. Thus, interpretations of the findings were not rushed, but instead were checked against the backdrop of underlying theory.

For answering the second part of **sub-question two** globally framed agendas become important as tools of contemporary governance. ESD ideas that were formulated in the international space, translate in the Austrian context. The findings highlight how local and global contexts are interconnected in reference to theory on global governance of educational policy. Policy translation and educational transference processes were identified and shown through the adoption of models and strategies from international recommendations in local conditions. Ideas of Education for Sustainable Development are translated in the country context. On a ‘technical’ note on how such translation into the Austrian policy system happens, the approach to mainstream ESD in policy structures and align administrative efforts confirms this. This applies to Agenda 2030 as well as to earlier influences through soft governance tools like the encompassing objectives of the UN’s DESD.

9.2. Scope and Limitations

The research conducted is of a finite scope. As a result, there are issues which arise throughout the thesis that would exceed an in-depth exploration. They are considered here as limitations; however they also provide promising directions for further research.

One boundary of the study lies in the use of MAXQDA. While the software was employed during the coding phase and for basic data visualization, its full analytical potential was not utilized. The author relied on MAXQDA in a supplementary manner, without extensively applying the wide range of advanced tools the program offers. This decision, however, did not compromise the analytical process, as all steps were transparently documented and justified in the methodology chapter. In critically reflecting on the methodological procedure, particularly the thematic analysis as structured by Braun and Clarke (2022), modifications of this design are noted. These concern the stage of theme development. Rather than assigning themes directly from individual codes, the author aggregated codes into broader categories from which themes were then developed. This approach establishes a meaningful analytical basis for the study and, although diverging slightly from the original method, was applied rigorously and with transparency.

One aspect that leaves room for further exploration is the **analysis of actors** involved in ESD policymaking. The research material included various references to different actors responsible for initiating or implementing ESD in Austria. However, conducting a network

analysis of these actors and examining their roles, interactions, and influence, was beyond the scope of this work. A detailed investigation into how different agents conceptualize or interpret ESD, and how they align with or diverge from international agendas, could offer a valuable extension of this research. Such an approach could explore questions such as: Which actors use which definitions of ESD? What discourses are they embedded in? What power dynamics are at play in their adoption and promotion of, or resistance to global frameworks? These questions, particularly in the context of soft governance and the role of international organizations in shaping national education agendas, are suitable for further exploration. This also raises broader considerations about authority in policymaking, for example, to what extent science is authorized to advise politicians through agenda-setting mechanisms.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge a core boundary of the study: no claims can be made about the practical implementation of ESD. The analysis is confined to written, text-based materials, namely policy documents and publications, and does not extend to evaluating how these concepts are realized in educational practice. As such, conclusions drawn are limited to how ESD is represented and conceptualized in policy texts. The mere assertion of policy goals or intentions does not necessarily imply effective implementation or actual change in practice. Therefore, caution must be exercised when interpreting the findings in terms of their practical relevance or impact.

9.2.1. Promising Directions for Future Research

Where are next few years of research headed? This section provides an outlook by trying to give a trend analysis based on the conducted research. Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several promising paths for future research can be identified. These directions address the conceptual and practical dimensions of Education for Sustainable Development, as well as areas that were beyond the scope of the present work.

One such research opportunity involves investigating the **social and cultural dimensions of ESD** which are often subsumed under the broader umbrella of social sustainability and emerge as significantly underexplored. Preliminary research already suggested that these dimensions are disregarded in the materials analyzed, with ecological aspects receiving considerably attention. A more in-depth examination of social sustainability, both in ESD and more broadly in sustainability discourse, holds considerable potential for future

inquiry. Not only is this dimension less prominently discussed, but its integration into Agenda 2030 frameworks is also difficult to define and thus warrants closer scrutiny.

Another promising direction lies in a **deeper theoretical investigation of ESD**, particularly through frameworks that extend beyond educational discourse alone. Exploring theoretical perspectives from other disciplines, such as sociology, political science, or environmental studies, could yield new insights into the evolving nature and function of ESD. Additionally, analyzing how ESD is conceptualized in other national contexts would offer valuable comparative perspectives and could help illuminate how different countries construct and interpret the role of ESD in policy and practice. In the Austrian context, further research could revisit the classification of **ESD 1 and ESD 2**, specifically examining how these categories are reflected in national education practice. This leads to a compelling line of inquiry related to ESD's potential for innovation within contemporary education systems. This includes examining whether ESD can serve as a catalyst for reform at various levels, such as influencing organizational policies at the macro level or transforming teaching practices and attitudes at the micro level. In this regard, ESD could be investigated not only as a thematic content area but as a driver of structural and pedagogical innovation. Closely related is the question of **quality education**. One of the key findings of this thesis is that ESD is predominantly conceptualized in its facilitative function, as a means to address sustainability challenges, while its educational essence remains secondary. This raises important questions for further research: Does ESD, as currently framed, contribute to improving the quality of education? Or does its instrumental use risk sidelining core pedagogical objectives?

9.3. Implications of the Thesis and Significance

As outlined at the outset of this thesis, considerable research has already been devoted to the intersection of education and sustainability, particularly in relation to the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development. However, a significant gap remained concerning how ESD is framed within political documents that shape educational policy in Austria. This study addressed that gap by investigating how ESD is conveyed in the Austrian policy context, contributing to a deeper understanding of the concept's policy-level articulation.

By identifying ESD as part of broader policy transfer processes, the thesis positions itself within the field of comparative educational research. It offers insights into how global

education agendas and normative frameworks, such as those advanced by the UN through Agenda 2030, are translated and adapted in national contexts. Specifically, this research advanced the comparative dimension by analyzing how Austria has constructed and contextualized ESD in alignment with internationally scaled recommendations and global governance mechanisms in education. In terms of practical implications, the study suggests that future efforts to embed ESD in Austrian policy should not necessarily focus on establishing a narrow or fixed definition. Instead, what is needed is a clearer and more consistent reference to ESD across educational policy documents, ensuring both conceptual coherence and visibility. This would support a more deliberate integration of ESD into Austria's educational frameworks.

This thesis overall contributes to the academic discourse on ESD by offering a policy-analytical perspective that foregrounds how ESD is represented not just as an educational idea, but as a societal response to global sustainability challenges. A central finding is that ESD, in the Austrian policy context, functions less as a concept rooted in pedagogy and more as an educationalized solution to environmental and sustainability issues. Its primary function appears to be the facilitation of a 'better' future, placing education at the service of broader ecological and societal goals. This educationalization of sustainability issues raises critical questions about the nature and purpose of the concept ESD. While it is framed as a tool to address societal concerns, the educational essence inherent to Education for Sustainable Development (such as pedagogical approaches, epistemologies, or learning theories) often remains underemphasized. Rather, ESD becomes a tool through which sustainability is made teachable, learnable, and, in a sense, 'educationable'.

Nonetheless, the potential of ESD lies in empowering learners with the critical thinking skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex world. In this regard, the constructed understanding of ESD developed in this thesis highlights the importance of equipping learners to critically reflect on current and future challenges, exemplified in this research project by the climate crisis, but also applicable to more recent phenomena such as the use of artificial intelligence. These contemporary realities underscore the importance of ESD's learner-centered, empowering dimension. Furthermore, ESD's dynamic and evolving nature makes it suited to serve as a guiding educational principle in times of societal and environmental transformation. As both a concept and a practice, ESD encompasses the adaptability required for navigating uncertain futures. However, at present, Austrian policy

documents primarily depict ESD as a strategic means for advancing sustainability goals, rather than as a fully developed educational framework.

As a final reflection, this thesis contributes to the theoretical debate on Education for Sustainable Development by offering a nuanced, critically reflective analysis of how ESD is conceptualized in Austrian policy. It underscores the urgent need to move beyond instrumental framings and toward a deeper engagement with the educational essence of ESD, positioning it not merely as a means to an end, but as an evolving educational paradigm in its own right.

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Appendix

A 1: Key Facts Research Material (G.K.)

A 2: Word Frequency List (1-50) Research Material (MAXQDA generated)

A 1: Key Facts Research Material (G.K.)

Authorship / Publication rights	Year	Title	Commissioner	Length (pp)	Type of document	Language	Graphics present
Bundesministerium für Land- und Forstwirtschaft, Umwelt und Wasserwirtschaft et al.	2008	Österreichische Strategie zur Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung	/	31	report / text	ger	yes
Bundesministerium für Land- und Forstwirtschaft, Umwelt und Wasserwirtschaft	2011	ÖSTRAT - Österreichische Strategie Nachhaltige Entwicklung Arbeitsprogramm 2011ff des Bundes und der Länder.	/	68	report / text	ger	yes
Stelzer et al. / Forum Umweltbildung	2012	bildung.nachhaltig.regional - Aspekte einer Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung für RegionalentwicklerInnen und BildungspraktikerInnen.	BMLFUW	116	manual / report / text	ger	yes
Steiner R., Rauch, F.	2013	Grundsatzpapier zur Bildung für Nachhaltige Entwicklung in der PädagogInnenbildung Neu.	BMWF	19	position paper	ger	yes
Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen	2014	Grundsatzpapier Umweltbildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung	/	8	decree	ger	no
Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen	2014	UN-Dekade zur Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung: Initiativen des BMBF, Stand 2014	/	88	report / text	ger	no
Beuslama et al. / Umweltdachverband GmbH / Forum Umweltbildung	2015	Österreichischer Bericht zur UN-Dekade für Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung 2005-2014	BMLFUW & BMBF	37	report / text	ger	no
Bundeskansleramt Österreich et al.	2017	Beiträge der Bundesministerien zur Umsetzung der Agenda 2030 für nachhaltige Entwicklung durch Österreich. Darstellung 2016, Wien.	/	69	report / text	ger	yes
Umweltdachverband GmbH / FORUM Umweltbildung	2019	Auszeichnung Bildung für Nachhaltige Entwicklung – Best of Austria. Die eingereichten Projekte 2019	BMNT	62	report / text	ger	yes
Bundesministerium für Nachhaltigkeit und Tourismus	2019	SDG-Aktionsplan 2019+ Nachhaltigkeit forcieren – Zukunft gestalten	BMNT	68	report / text	ger	yes
Austrian Federal Chancellery	2020	Austria and the 2030 Agenda. Voluntary National Review – Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals	/	116	report / text	en	yes
Parlamentsdirektion Republik Österreich	2020	Bericht des Untersuchungsausschusses über den Antrag 146WE	/	2	Protocol of the National Council	ger	no
Altner et al. / Allianz Nachhaltige Universitäten in Österreich	2021	Optionen und Maßnahmen. Österreichs Handlungsoptionen für die Umsetzung der UN-Agenda 2030 für eine lebenswerte Zukunft. SDG 4 Hochwertige Bildung	/	10	report / text	ger	no
Bundeskansleramt Österreich et al. / Austrian Federal Chancellery	2023	Umsetzung der Agenda 2030 in und durch Österreich 2020-2022	/	188	report / text	ger	yes
Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung	2023	Agenda 2030 Umsetzungsbericht	/	37	report / text	ger	yes
Bundesrecht konsolidiert	2024	Lehrpläne der Volksschule und der Sonderschulen.	/	137	decree	ger	no
Austrian Federal Chancellery	2024	Austria and the 2030 Agenda. 2nd Austrian Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs	/	276	report / text	en	yes

A 2: Word Frequency List (1-50) Research Material (MAXQDA generated)

Wort	Wortlänge	Häufigkeit	%	Rang	Dokun	Dokumente %
entwicklung	11	1341	0,62	1	15	88,24
austria	7	1184	0,54	2	11	64,71
nachhaltige	11	992	0,46	3	15	88,24
bildung	7	981	0,45	4	14	82,35
schülerinnen	12	790	0,36	5	12	70,59
österreich	10	751	0,34	6	17	100,00
schüler	7	704	0,32	7	8	47,06
sdg	3	654	0,30	8	9	52,94
sdgs	4	623	0,29	9	9	52,94
development	11	621	0,29	10	15	88,24
sustainable	11	587	0,27	11	13	76,47
federal	7	585	0,27	12	3	17,65
agenda	6	545	0,25	13	13	76,47
umsetzung	9	544	0,25	14	14	82,35
austrian	8	524	0,24	15	8	47,06
ziel	4	485	0,22	16	14	82,35
climate	7	446	0,20	17	10	58,82
education	9	425	0,20	18	13	76,47
eu	2	421	0,19	19	9	52,94
energy	6	374	0,17	20	6	35,29
rahmen	6	372	0,17	21	14	82,35
all	3	370	0,17	22	12	70,59
women	5	365	0,17	23	4	23,53
initiative	10	356	0,16	24	12	70,59
people	6	351	0,16	25	6	35,29
menschen	8	349	0,16	26	15	88,24
national	8	345	0,16	27	11	64,71
implementation	14	339	0,16	28	6	35,29
lernen	6	316	0,15	29	14	82,35
maßnahmen	9	303	0,14	30	14	82,35
nachhaltigen	12	298	0,14	31	14	82,35
social	6	298	0,14	31	7	41,18
themen	6	292	0,13	33	15	88,24
health	6	291	0,13	34	8	47,06
nachhaltigkeit	14	288	0,13	35	15	88,24
österreichischen	16	285	0,13	36	14	82,35
action	6	278	0,13	37	9	52,94
trend	5	268	0,12	38	6	35,29
measures	8	265	0,12	39	3	17,65
international	13	264	0,12	40	11	64,71
projekt	7	264	0,12	40	10	58,82
kompetenzen	11	255	0,12	42	14	82,35
kompetenzbereich	16	252	0,12	43	2	11,76
umwelt	6	251	0,12	44	16	94,12
ziele	5	251	0,12	44	13	76,47
bereich	7	246	0,11	46	13	76,47
bne	3	241	0,11	47	11	64,71
target	6	240	0,11	48	4	23,53
jahr	4	237	0,11	49	11	64,71