

Reflections on Education for Sustainable Development and the new UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has been a pivotal, yet evolving concept in the global discourse on sustainability since its introduction in Agenda 21 (1992). This article critically examines the recent UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development (2023) in light of ESD's disputed definition(s), functions, and intended outcomes including perspectives on philosophical underpinnings. The analysis applies Critical Social Theory and uses critical discourse analysis. The findings show that despite the UNESCO Recommendation's claim of creating consensus on definitions of concepts including ESD, it perpetuates existing inconsistencies and vagueness, thereby hindering implementation and fulfilment of the enabling role of ESD. The study demonstrates that the UNESCO Recommendation includes references to humanistic thought without acknowledging or addressing potential limitations in relation to diverse worldviews. Following an extensive literature review published in 2024 (Kohl et al., 2024), this article is a second insight into doctoral research underway at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The research analyses the ESD-related UN/UNESCO discourse between 1992 and 2023, examining ESD's understanding and references to humanistic thought. Moving forward, the authors call for pluralistic perspectives on ESD that embrace a shared basis and philosophical grounding to support context-sensitive implementation.

Keywords: *education for sustainable development, UNESCO, critical discourse analysis, humanistic thought, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 2030 Agenda.*

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Education for Sustainable Development

Providing quality education for all learners is among the 17 most pressing global challenges identified by the United Nations (UN). Since 2015, the global commitment to quality education has been stated in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of the universal action plan for a sustainable future: the ‘2030 Agenda’ with the 17 SDGs. The concept ‘Education for Sustainable Development’ (ESD) is mentioned in SDG 4.7 themes, among others, include knowledge and skills for sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and an appreciation of cultural diversity (United Nations, 2015). In addition to being mentioned in the SDGs, ESD’s relevance has been repeatedly acknowledged by the UN General Assembly including its recognition as a key enabler of all SDGs (United Nations, 2017, 2019, 2021, 2023). Thus far, ESD is the only key enabler identified with a cross-cutting relevance for all SDGs. However, despite its elevated importance, there is no agreed-upon, shared understanding of the definitions, functions, and intended outcomes of ESD.

ESD is not a new concept but has been around since the 1990s. It was premiered in the first-ever global action plan for sustainable development, called “Agenda 21”, and specifically addressed in chapter 36 (United Nations, 1992). Chapter 36 named access to education as a prerequisite and addressed three foundational elements “education”, “public awareness”, and “training” to define the baseline with these four thrusts, jointly forming ESD (United Nations, 1992). Positioned within Agenda 21 as a “means of implementation”, ESD was considered a “UN-borne” concept (Gadotti, 2008). Following the adoption of Agenda 21, ESD was seen as a crucial driver to the sustainability agenda. While having roots in environmental, outdoor, and conservation education, ESD was to be an innovative approach to reorient entire education systems towards sustainability (Hopkins et al., 1996).

Since these early days, UNESCO has served as a global ‘task manager’ for ESD (IACSD, 1993), working to implement ESD across national education systems through programmes, conferences, and publications (UNESCO, 2020a). However, due in part to the persistent challenges in reaching a shared understanding, ESD has not been fully mainstreamed. Today, while the SDGs describe ESD in SDG 4.7 as one of several approaches (United Nations, 2015), UNESCO sees a more detailed vision for ESD in their agency-specific ESD for 2030 Programme:

ESD empowers learners with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to take informed decisions and make responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society empowering people of all genders, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity. (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 8).

The prolonged confusion over terminology and the lack of clarity of the scope of ESD present serious obstacles – particularly given the urgent need to transform education and to drive societal change to address today’s climate and other human-caused sustainability crises (UNESCO, 2021b). The newly adopted ‘UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development’ (short title: UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development, UNESCO, 2023a), a binding legal instrument of international

law, aims to provide clarity to the ESD debate. It is the first standard-setting instrument in UNESCO to make an explicit reference to ESD.

Research Problem

Despite extensive discourse, the understanding of what ESD means and how it translates into learning, teaching, and education management is still controversially discussed (Jeronen, 2022; UNESCO, 2012). UNESCO admits that “...its [ESD’s] ‘vagueness’, which stems in part from its broad and inclusive perspective and the ever-changing nature of sustainability issues...” (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 57) continues to challenge the academic community. As ESD is both an education and normative concept, the absence of a shared understanding is a major obstacle for those aiming to move from intent to action (Higgitt, 2006).

In addition to the challenge of definitional ambiguity, ESD also competes with another education approach: Global Citizenship Education (GCED). Following the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, ESD aimed to embrace GCED but “...the inclusion of global citizenship education into the SDGs seems somewhat overlapped and confusing.” (Chung & Park, 2016, p. 18). Since GCED is also stated in SDG 4.7, questions arise including how these concepts are to be jointly monitored (Edwards et al., 2020).

In addition, the philosophical foundations of ESD present another challenge. ESD was originally developed by a small group of experts that drafted chapter 36 for Agenda 21 (Hopkins, 2012). The original epistemic and philosophical foundations of ESD are largely unknown and the literature lacks exploration of (if any) underlying philosophies. Key policy documents of that time offer no substantial insight. A deeper engagement with ESD’s underlying foundations and their potential influence on ESD could offer new perspectives on its role in advancing sustainable development.

In promoting deeper engagement with knowledge (systems) in higher education, an independent expert group to UNESCO recommended to reconsider what knowledge is relevant and whose knowledge is to be considered. This aims to open new avenues for seeking knowledge towards achieving more epistemic pluralism (UNESCO, 2022a). This is particularly important for sustainability-related themes which have had limited success in both acceptance and implementation (UNESCO, 2022a).

Since its founding following World War II, the UN – and UNESCO in particular – has been rooted in humanistic values (United Nations, 1945; UNESCO, 1945). Most famously, the preamble of the UNESCO Constitution states: “...since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed...” (UNESCO, 1945, p. 1). Humanistic thought emerged as a defining movement within UNESCO – even visible in the choice of institutional logo (Singh, 2010). Thought leaders like Julian Huxley, emphasizing scientific humanism, shaped the initial vision of UNESCO during the founding phase (Huxley, 1946). In contrast, the potential role of religious and spiritual dimensions, e.g., incorporated in Jacques Maritain’s concept of integral humanism (Maritain, 1939), were sidelined. UNESCO has since periodically referenced humanism (UNESCO, 2014a) and UNESCO’s principal education policy documents, such as the ‘Faure Report’ (UNESCO, 1972), the ‘Delors Report’ (UNESCO, 1996), and the ‘Futures of Education Report’ (UNESCO, 2021b) with the ‘Humanistic Futures of Learning’ (UNESCO, 2020b), have included mentions of humanism. However, UNESCO has never engaged in a deep or critical examination of humanistic thought. This creates a persistent risk of exclusion or barriers for spiritual, religious, or non-secular (other) worldviews due to the often-secular nature of humanism. The central role of humans in thinking, the elevation of human reason and individual autonomy, above collective or spiritual understandings of human existence, are issues that remain largely unaddressed (Mohd,

2019). This failure to acknowledge the potential of exclusion raises concern regarding the universal acceptability and accessibility of ESD, particularly given its important role within the SDGs and global sustainability.

It is yet to be understood if the new UNESCO Recommendation on education for peace, human rights and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2023a) solves this longstanding challenge of conceptual vagueness and if it addresses any philosophical grounding of ESD.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study pursues two interrelated objectives: First, it explores if the adoption of the UNESCO Recommendation helps resolve the conceptual debate around ESD regarding its definitions, functions, and intended outcomes. Secondly, this study examines whether the Recommendation addresses potential (implicit or inferred) philosophical foundations or the lack thereof. According to UNESCO, the new recommendation allegedly creates consensus to discussions about definitions, such as ESD, and provides a roadmap to guide societies (UNESCO, 2024). By pursuing these two objectives, the authors aim to contribute to the global efforts to comprehend ESD, to further situate ESD in (education) philosophy, and to clarify its role in normative policy efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An extensive systematic literature review, confirming a lack of shared understanding of ESD and the consequent implementation and engagement challenges, was published in an open access, digital format in 2024 as part of the doctoral research that is the foundation to this article (Kohl et al., 2024). This article presents the key points.

In the search for relevant literature, 430 peer-reviewed articles and reports were examined, of which 209 directly addressed questions of ESD's understanding, functions and intended outcomes. Initial search terms, such as "Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)", "Education for Sustainability (EfS)", "Sustainability Education", "Sustainable Development", "Quality Education", "education, public awareness and understanding" as well as "UNESCO" and "United Nations (UN)" guided the search in digital library databases.

The academic literature on ESD has expanded notably since its introduction into global policy discourse in the early 1990s (Hallinger & Nguyen, 2020). However, despite this increased attention, ESD remains conceptually contested, with debates over its definition, purpose, and implementation still unresolved (Leicht et al., 2018). Its key messages continue to be questioned, and further literature is needed (Hallinger & Nguyen, 2020). This review identified the following key themes in the academic framing of ESD, with particular attention to foundational gaps and tensions that hinder more coherent integration across educational systems.

First, the ESD concept still lacks an agreed definition, and UNESCO concedes that the term ESD remains vague and inconsistently applied (UNESCO, 2020a). ESD originated in the context of Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992), where education was positioned as a means of advancing sustainability through awareness, knowledge, and skills. While this positioned ESD in policy, the academic field of ESD only emerged subsequently, mainly shaped by environmental educators who initially rejected the idea of ESD. Environmental educators believed that all social and economic challenges as taught in sustainability were pivoting around environmental learning since all issues were symptoms of ecological phenomena in the end. Yet only environment education was reaching

the bottom cause (Bonnett, 1999). Others, such as Helen Kopnina, criticized the dilution of the forceful environmental approach (Kopnina, 2012) or Alan Reid rejecting the need for additional policies while environment education had the field well covered (Reid, 2020). ESD is at times reduced to a simplified ‘environmentalist approach to the future,’ reflecting ongoing challenges in conceptual clarity. Any attempt to define its boundaries is hindered by this initial lack of understanding (Maurer & Bogner, 2019). Over time, as the concept evolves, ESD has become relevant for other educational agendas, such as global citizenship education and climate education, complicating the boundaries of the concept (Bamber et al., 2017). To date, the literature shows a continuous shift in definitions and approaches.

Second, ESD still operates without an explicit philosophical foundation while UNESCO at times embeds humanistic ideals without clarifying their limits (UNESCO, 2020b). Critical commentators argue that such implicit humanism can marginalise alternative worldviews (Biesta, 2021). Only Busoi (2015) and Zhang and Zeng (2021) have addressed humanist education perspectives for wider SD in the frameworks of UNESCO and look back in history but do not address the present and/or future. Several authors argue that, without explicit values, ESD risks being interpreted in instrumental or technocratic ways if any underlying values are to be attached to the concept (Selby & Kagawa, 2014). These views have not influenced or been incorporated into the mainstream ESD dialogue. A persistent absence limits critical dialogue on whether ESD is grounded in a particular view of human development, learning, or the purpose of education and avoids the question whether ESD can be truly inclusive. Although humanism promotes dignity, peace, and universal education, its dominant perception has tended to reflect Western liberal values and is perceived as secular (Elfert, 2017; Singh, 2010). This critique links to calls for epistemic pluralism, which argue that ESD must go beyond dominant paradigms to include indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western worldviews (UNESCO, 2022a). As UNESCO (2022a) notes, addressing sustainability effectively requires rethinking whose knowledge counts and how it is legitimized in higher education and science.

The literature also emphasizes the relevance of higher education institutions in understanding and implementing ESD. Although universities are uniquely situated to support sustainability transitions by fostering critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, and civic engagement (Rieckmann & Barth, 2022). However, conceptual uncertainty around ESD has often led to piecemeal or symbolic adoption within higher education policy and curricula (Tilbury, 2011). Institutional constraints, such as siloed disciplines, further complicate efforts to integrate ESD holistically (Mayo & Miah, 2022).

In summary, the literature points to three persistent challenges. First is the definitional vagueness of ESD, which has led to a flexible yet elusive use. Second is the lack of a clearly articulated philosophical underpinning, limiting deeper theoretical engagement, also from other disciplines. Third is the tendency in higher education to move away from this conceptual discussion towards applied approaches leads to a research and implementation gap and ESD often remains marginal or becomes fragmented. These challenges limit ESD understanding and reduce its potential to foster transformation. Together, the findings highlight that these key challenges continue to restrict ESD’s inclusivity, acceptance, and practical impact.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Scholars have stated the need to research ESD through social science perspectives and strengthening it through social science didactics (Bragdø, 2022). Traditional approaches may be too narrow to address the breadth of the ESD application (Lenglet et al., 2010). Accordingly, this study adopts

Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine if the UNESCO Recommendation contributes to solving the two challenges: (1) adding to conceptual clarity of ESD and (2) addressing any philosophical grounding of ESD.

The recommendation represents both a new normative foundation for ESD and as the result of global consultation and negotiation. The CDA is well-suited to unpack the convoluted content of this complex document through multiple layers, aiming to better understand comprehensive events and social practice (Fairclough, 2003). The recommendation constitutes a complex discursive moment within the global education policy discourse.

Grounded in transdisciplinarity, Fairclough's CDA has proven effective for analyzing education policy documents, where language, ideology, and power relations are closely interconnected (Fairclough, 2023; Taylor, 2004). Fairclough's model is appropriate to analyse UN documentation as a distinct policy genre (Luo, 2021), can support investigating underlying social dimensions, and advance transformation (Fairclough, 2003). In doing so, the CDA supports the study's twofold research objective: to assess whether the UNESCO Recommendation advances conceptual clarity and if it addresses philosophical foundations. To critically examine the ESD discourse, this study engages with the final text of the UNESCO Recommendation, using a five-step CDA approach (Fairclough, 2003):

Step 1:

Identifying The Social Problem

ESD's understanding and the philosophical foundations are in question which presents a semiotic issue regarding how ESD is addressed and referenced.

Step 2:

Identifying The Obstacles

This means unpacking the ESD-related challenges within the Recommendation that either hinder a shared understanding or remain silent regarding philosophical foundations. The second step applies a trifold approach: text analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. It ensures a thorough connection between linguistic features and broader societal structures, making this model uniquely rigorous (Fairclough, 1992).

Step 3:

Considering Whether The Problem is 'Needed'

The third step explores whether the persistence of conceptual ambiguity and lack of philosophical grounding of ESD may serve any interest, or whether stakeholders benefit from the way decisions are made.

Step 4:

Identifying Possible Ways Past The Obstacles

This stage explores pathways to support a shared understanding and allow for philosophical grounding, further advancing ESD accessibility and engagement.

Step 5:

Reflecting Critically on The Analysis (1 – 4)

The final step offers room for reflection regarding the Recommendation's contribution to the discourse including if and how it may inform future global education efforts.

This article presents the single-document analysis of the UNESCO Recommendation while the underlying doctoral study addresses the policy dialogue (1992-2023) through in-depth examination of a range of UN/UNESCO documents.

Research Tool

Fairclough's CDA (Fairclough, 2003) was applied to the UNESCO Recommendation to examine if and – if yes, how – it contributed to ESD's conceptual clarity and whether it addressed any philosophical grounding.

Step 1

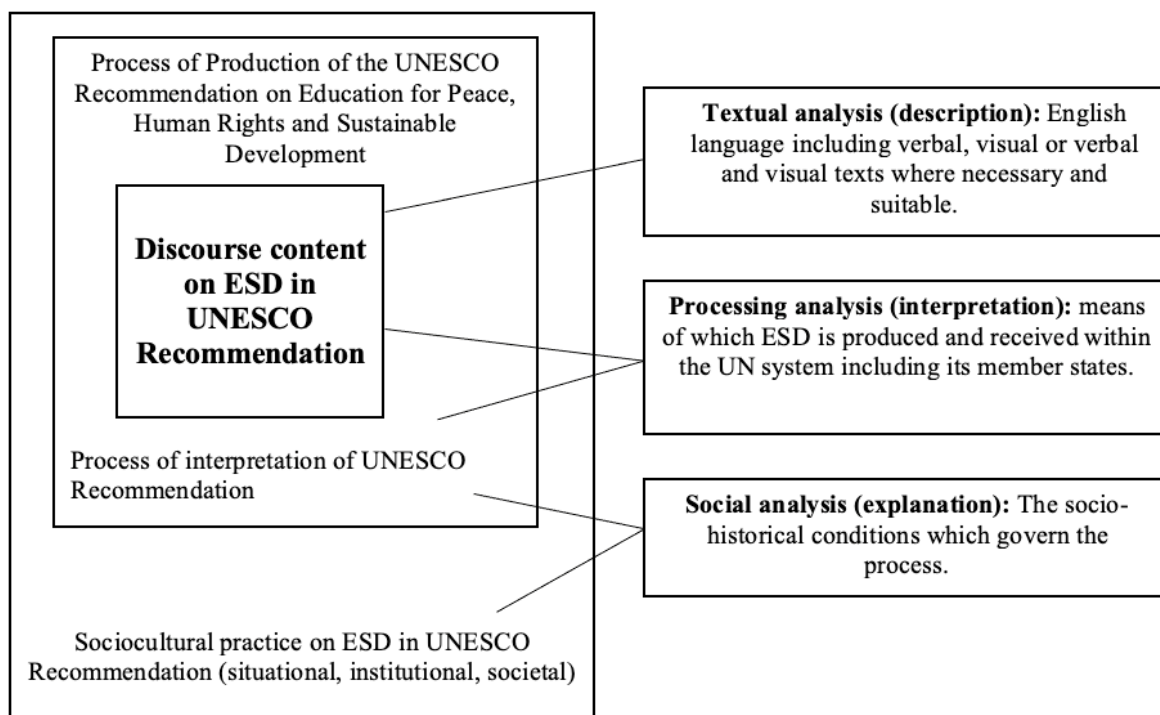
At the centre of this study is the education and normative concept of ESD. The discussion has social implications as education performs a societal function of enabling individuals to participate in society. ESD, aiming to transform societies, is deeply interwoven with key themes of social issues while promoting sustainable development (Rieckmann, 2018). Therefore, ESD represents a semiotic issue according to Fairclough.

Step 2

The second step represents the deep analysis of the Recommendation. The Recommendation's structure, language, and intertextual links to earlier UN documents were analysed, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Fairclough's 3D Model of the CDA. Adapted to address the UNESCO Recommendation



A predefined list of key terms¹, originating from the text of Agenda 21, guided the coding process. This list was supplemented with language reflecting humanistic thought, emphasizing education as a means to uphold shared destiny, human values, human dignity, freedom, and shared responsibility (UNESCO, 2014a). This aimed to uncover its potential influence and subsequent limitations of ESD in being universal and globally applicable.

Steps 3-5

The remaining steps served to move from the textual interpretation towards a discursive reflection. In Step 3, emerging patterns were thematically clustered. This included considerations if an optimized state of the ESD concept could hold advantages or disadvantages for UN/UNESCO member states, motivating them to wanting or not wanting to further explore the concept and overcome its vagueness. This step served to understand if there were power relations in place, holding back on the engagement and/or hindering transformative change. Step 4 built on this critical insight by identifying the remaining discursive gaps, especially the silence around philosophical foundations, and the potential openings to advance the shared understanding of ESD including philosophical perspectives. Step 5 concluded the CDA by reflecting critically on the (normative) findings from Steps 1-4.

Researcher Description

The researcher's background includes work in education, UNESCO, and sustainability. Prior understandings were critically examined through reflexivity, multilingual analysis, and grounding in Critical Social Theory. Insider insights were managed through transparent disclosure and a structured, independent research design as well as close supervision throughout the process.

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

The primary data source for this study was the UNESCO Recommendation in its adopted text (UNESCO, 2023a), presenting the result of global consultations informed by research and followed by member state negotiations. The document's discursive construction is critically assessed with attention to how it positions ESD. The analysis was supported by MAXQDA Analytics Pro for systematic coding, thematic clustering, and visualisation (e.g. word clouds, co-occurrence tables). Initial coding was informed by the targeted list of key terms, serving as discursive anchors and as a deductive codebook, to trace semantic continuity and shifts in addressing ESD throughout the Recommendation.

The analysis of discursive features paid particular attention to how ESD was represented across the key dimensions as originally outlined in chapter 36 of Agenda 21: reorienting education, increasing public awareness, and promoting training. These programmatic anchors served to trace continuity and shifts, while also revealing recurring vagueness and inconsistent references. The analysis included presenting relationships and uncovering ideological underpinnings as well as the positioning of the document within the wider historic context. Through this multi-layered process of linking textual elements to discursive practice and social context, the CDA determined if the

¹ The full list of key words included: (public) awareness, capacity / capacities/ capacity-building, development(al), economic(ally) / economy /economies, education for sustainable development, ESD, education for sustainability, education / educational / educator(s)/ educate, environment(al) / environmentally, human(s) / humanity / humanities, (human) development, (human) dignity / dignified, (human) value(s) / valued, (public) awareness, research(er/s) / researching / researcher(s), science(s) / scientific / scientist(s) / scientific(ally), social(ly) / social justice, sustainable development, training / train / trained.

UNESCO Recommendation meaningfully advanced ESD's conceptual clarity and addressed philosophical grounding. A summary of findings and conclusions was generated from critical reflection and thematic clustering of repeated patterns, identifying the remaining challenges and gaps.

RESEARCH ETHICS

This analysis ensures trustworthiness, validity, and reliability by embedding secondary documents – such as preparatory protocols, meeting records, and witness accounts – into historical and contextual settings. Using Habermas's Critical Social Theory and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, internal validity (credibility) and academic rigor is achieved through a systematic rationale. External validity (transferability) is addressed by providing detailed contextual descriptions, while confirmability is ensured through systematic documentation. Ethically, the study involves publicly accessible documents, adhering to the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines. Self-citation is acknowledged and so is citation of a family member of the principal researcher (C. Hopkins). The principal researcher reflects on potential biases shaped by personal experiences, education, and professional roles, implementing a robust research plan to minimize unconscious bias and uphold the credibility and integrity of the analysis.

FINDINGS

Textual Analysis

The final text of the Recommendation (UNESCO, 2023a) consists of approximately 9,000 words (English). It was negotiated in two working languages: English and French. The adopted text follows UNESCO's standard formatting, beginning with definitions and objectives, followed by implementation strategies, follow-up and monitoring. The language is neutral and inclusive, e.g., using word choices, such as 'all', 'participatory.'

First, the Recommendation's preamble recognizes the 'Berlin Declaration', emphasizing continuity with recent intergovernmental consensus on ESD's enabling function for achieving the SDGs (UNESCO, 2022b). However, in the following paragraph, the text reaffirms member state commitment to ensure that all learners are knowledgeable and able to promote sustainable development through ESD, sustainable lifestyles or other approaches. In omitting the enabling function for all SDGs, the second reference implies a reduced approach to ESD as one of several paths (pp. 3-4).

Secondly, the Recommendation makes a formal attempt to precisely define ESD in Part I. In Definitions under No. 1 (f), it states that ESD has an empowering role for learners for informed decisions and responsible actions "...for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity..." (p. 4). This mirrors the definitions in the 'Education 2030 Framework for Action' (UNESCO, 2015) and the 'ESD for 2030 Roadmap' (UNESCO, 2020a). Yet, No. 1 (i) also frames ESD as a subset of "transformative education" and as one of several thematic approaches, such as GCED, human rights education, and sustainable lifestyles (p. 6). Then, the Recommendation suggests an intertwining of ESD and GCED (No. 71, p. 15). The inconsistencies of the preamble are repeated in the definitions and dismiss that ESD is transformative per se.

Thirdly, the definition (No. 1 [f]) draws on the 'Education 2030 Framework', which itself lacked a formal definition and instead referenced the earlier 2014 'UNESCO Global Action

Programme’ (UNESCO, 2014b). While the latter emphasized ESD’s societal transformative role, the Recommendation shifts focus to individual-level outcomes, such as human rights, global citizenship, and fundamental freedoms, without explicitly naming societal transformation among its five core aims (p. 6).

Although an official explainer asserts that dispute has been resolved and the definitions, including ESD, have now been accepted by consensus (UNESCO, 2024), the Recommendation’s language remains inconsistent and contradictory.

Furthermore, the text recognizes the vital links between education and peace, human rights, freedom, as well as international understanding and determines education as a ‘humanistic’ process (p. 7). Abstract references, such as “education and learning as a continuous, lifelong, life-encompassing, holistic, humanistic and transformative process” (UNESCO, 2023a, p. 11) lack grounding and risk excluding diverse worldviews. Concepts like spirituality are included – yet without explanation (p. 15). The Recommendation encourages understanding of diversity, ways of life, worldviews, religions, beliefs and philosophies (p. 9) but omits direct engagement with any underlying philosophical foundations. This absence is significant in light of the concern about epistemic exclusion, hindering implementation as raised repeatedly throughout this study.

The visuals – the word cloud and a document portrait – reinforce the impression that the central elements of ESD are not among the most frequent terms. While sustainable development is intended, economic concerns are prioritized. ESD elements, such as access and retention in quality education, reorienting education (including ‘transforming’), public awareness and training, are not well represented in the text.

In summary, the Recommendation text fails to provide the clarity intended. Rather, the text reproduces the ambiguities in the understanding of ESD, implies humanistic thought as relevant to education while remaining silent on the why, and overlooks critical engagement with alternative philosophical foundations.

Figure 2

Word Cloud Visual of the UNESCO Recommendation (2023)

Processing Analysis

The adoption of the Recommendation followed a three-year revision process of the 1974 ‘Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms’. The review took place as an inclusive, participatory and transparent process with (1) a global survey, (2) a consultative process and (3) a negotiation process with an international group of experts, followed by formal consultations and negotiations with member states. Over 3,000 stakeholders were actively involved (UNESCO, 2022c).

The Recommendation was part of the response to advance the SDGs and expected to contribute to measuring progress for ESD (UNESCO, 2022c). Among the guiding references was the ‘Futures of Education Report’ (UNESCO, 2021b), building on the report from UNESCO Chairs, titled ‘Humanistic Futures of Learning’ (UNESCO, 2020b). In initial writings, when preparing for the review, UNESCO said that it was expected that “...education should be emancipatory, humanistic, holistic and transformative at the individual and collective levels...” (UNESCO, 2022c, p. 8) – language that was included in the final text of the Recommendation without attributing foundations, further background or rationale.

The thematic consultations included a meeting with ESD experts who underscored the need to integrate ESD principles. They also highlighted systemic transformation and the inclusion of diverse knowledge systems, such as Indigenous perspectives and intergenerational learning. They also stressed embedding climate change and addressing biodiversity loss across curricula through a transdisciplinary approach (UNESCO, 2022c). ESD experts did not question any underlying philosophical foundations of ESD but the recent perspectives from both the ‘Futures of Education Report’ and the ‘Humanistic Futures of Learning’ were assumed as relevant and included in an approach of institutional continuation.

The review process created a subtle contradiction: While the Recommendation aimed to inspire transformation, it continued to reaffirm various competing concepts without addressing or solving the contradictions, shying away from decisions or addressing foundational questions.

Social Analysis

The original 1974 Recommendation promoted the role of education in fostering justice, freedom, human rights, and peace. Rooted in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), it stated the right to education as a human right. Between 1978 and 2021, UNESCO member states reported every four years on their implementation progress. Report numbers varied with 37 (2008), 57 (2012) (McEvoy, 2016), 83 national reports (2017), and 71 reports in 2021 (UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO, 2021c). Although the 1974 Recommendation did not even conceptually include ESD (UNESCO, 2021c), national reporting on ESD and GCED was subsumed under the 1974 Recommendation in 2020.

In their reports, countries claimed ESD (and also GCED) to be mainstreamed in curricula, teacher education, as well as laws/policies. In 2020, over 90% of countries said to have mainstreamed ESD in laws, policies and curricula. Of these, 52% said to have extensively mainstreamed and 43% partially mainstreamed ESD in curricula. At the primary and secondary level, mainstreaming was almost universal (99%) and twice as likely to be extensive (67%). Furthermore, 89% of countries informed that they had mainstreamed ESD themes in teacher training and 86% of countries said to have mainstreamed ESD themes in student assessment (UNESCO, 2021c). However, several regions,

particularly from Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, Africa, and Arab States were underreported (UNESCO, 2017, 2021c).

Despite this significant achievement according to country reports, a UNESCO survey of 58,000 educators (2021) also found, that while over 90 % said they felt ESD (and GCED) were important, one in four were not ready to teach these topics and another 30 % were moderately prepared to do so (UNESCO & Education International, 2021).

When member states requested the review of the 1974 Recommendation, the preliminary study acknowledged historic shifts in education and the need to include a broader understanding of education's potential in addressing peace, climate change, and unsustainable ways of life in a revised version of the Recommendation (UNESCO, 2021d). This also happened in the wake of the UN-wide prioritization of education with the UN Secretary-General convening the 'Transforming Education Summit' in 2022 (UNESCO, 2023b). Although a new understanding of peace and education's role in building lasting peace (UNESCO, 2022c) was intended, ESD was not thoroughly addressed.

Despite extensive study of background documents, it also remains unclear what exactly the understanding of "humanistic" in the Recommendation text is, confirming the lack of in-depth critical engagement with underlying philosophical foundations. Further rapporteur documents did not provide substantial insight (UNESCO, 2022c). Explicit references (or footnotes) could have provided opportunity to elaborate on concepts and definitions.

The UNESCO Recommendation is now expected to serve three functions: a call to action, as an advocacy tool, and a benchmark tool (UNESCO, 2024). Its definitions, its guiding principles, and the long yet non-exhaustive list of learning objectives are considered to be accepted and recognized by UNESCO's member states. Yet, it is not likely that the remaining contradictions regarding ESD or the references to humanism were ever critically examined. This creates continued concern if the Recommendation – in light of locally prevalent worldviews – will inspire national and local engagement and if it will be at all implemented in education systems.

The first report on the Recommendation is expected in 2026-2027 and will cover the period 2024-2026 (UNESCO-UIS, 2024). According to the draft template, the eight topics to report on ESD progress include cultural diversity and tolerance, gender equality, human rights, peace and non-violence, climate change, environmental sustainability, human well-being, and sustainable consumption and production (UNESCO-UIS, 2024). However, the current template does not differ from the version in 2020. If ESD (and GCED) are described by the same list as before the revised Recommendation was in existence, it becomes unclear what exactly will change. In addition, UNESCO addresses in their recent Recommendation that climate change education (CCE) is a subset of ESD (No. 30, p. 10). Now there is a new level of confusion about the relationship between ESD and CCE, as interest in the latter is rapidly growing (McKenzie et al., 2024).

In summary, while the Recommendation further elevates ESD in relevance through its formal inclusion, the challenges around ESD – regarding understanding and philosophical foundations – remain unresolved.

DISCUSSION

The UNESCO Recommendation marks a significant step forward in embedding ESD within UNESCO's standard-setting instruments. However, this study finds that the two key challenges remain: there is a persistent lack of conceptual clarity and insufficient engagement with the

philosophical foundations to fully and universally embrace ESD. This continues to limit the transformative potential of ESD for SDG 4.7 and the SDGs in their entirety.

At first sight, the UNESCO Recommendation offers a formal definition and consensus on ESD. It appears to have solved the discourse for the future. However, it simultaneously includes divergent ESD definitions as it defines new text and equally builds on earlier yet conflicting documents within the policy discourse. ESD is alternately described as a cross-cutting enabler of sustainable development, a sub-category of transformative education, and a discipline placed alongside GCED and/or CCE. This raises questions about the nature of consensus reached among member states, especially given the Recommendation's role as a future reporting mechanism for SDG 4.7. As a result, the Recommendation reflects an attempt to secure institutional continuity but lacks the coherence needed to ensure a shared understanding of ESD in becoming universally applicable and inclusive for diverse worldviews.

The Recommendation's reference to humanistic values raises further questions about the philosophical foundations underpinning UNESCO's normative work in education. Although humanism is introduced as a guiding dimension, the underlying assumptions remain undefined. The CDA reveals that key terms such as "humanistic," "holistic", and "transformative" are employed without clarification, thereby reproducing a discourse of assumed agreement that may not reflect diverse worldviews. UNESCO has long relied on humanistic ideals as a normative anchor, and some member states may be reluctant to risk decades of policy continuity that has served some of them well. It remains unclear whether the inclusion of humanism contributed to the low engagement of certain regions, or whether its unexamined status may limit the Recommendation's global acceptance. While spirituality, for example, is mentioned as part of early childhood and adult education, no rationale is given for its inclusion, and no broader engagement with philosophical pluralism is offered. The document could have used its footnotes to clarify foundational concepts; however, this opportunity was missed. As such, the Recommendation does not resolve the deeper issue of what principles and values should shape ESD in a globally inclusive way. Absent critical reflection on these underlying dimensions, the Recommendation's language risks failing to promote a shared understanding and meaningful transformation in education.

Both findings point to a deeper issue: the lack of critical engagement with understandings of concept and underlying philosophical grounding hinders the global applicability. Current inconsistencies or scattered references to humanistic thought limit engagement instead of being explicit and finite to provide solid grounds for critical scrutiny or further contextualization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For achieving a shared ESD understanding, the authors recommend to advance research and engagement with the new Recommendation by academia and community stakeholders in education and beyond. Further inquiry is also needed into how the Recommendation is operationalized across different cultural and political contexts, and how this affects ESD dialogue, engagement and implementation. This could challenge the perceived consensus, make the inconsistencies explicit, and lead to decisions between conflicting approaches. It could further allow UNESCO to return to the global conversation on what are the actual key messages of ESD. This effort was ended in 2010, following limited success. Yet, with the new Recommendation, more research, grounded in epistemic pluralism, could support a renewed discussion. Clarification activities are especially relevant now as ESD – with its role for the achievement of all 17 SDGs – is to be implemented by stakeholders from education as well as other non-education sectors through training and public awareness. Effective,

action-oriented SDG communication and actionable implementation plans in societies of UN member states will require a good understanding of ESD to be successful.

Proper philosophical foundations, open to pluralistic perspectives, are important as they create cultural acceptance for potential engagement in the wider society. While the initial drafting process of ESD cannot be healed a posteriori, the authors recommend new dialogue and mapping to understand where the ESD community stands and what (education) philosophies inform or underlie contemporary ESD-related research. Conducting a landscape scan could provide valuable information on relevant and applied (education) philosophies influencing ESD research and policy. This could also serve as a contribution to epistemic pluralism. It would allow those who may reject the UNESCO-conveyed (often secular) humanist thought to advocate for or develop more integral approaches, e.g., the recently developed new strategy of tawhidic epistemology principles at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). This tawhidic epistemology is to engage in a deeper manner with current issues while considering what is culturally appropriate and religiously accepted.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, despite UNESCO saying otherwise, this study confirms the continued absence of a universally agreed-upon understanding of ESD and brings new attention to the lack of philosophical clarity. Although the Recommendation singles out humanistic values as the philosophical foundation, it fails to provide a coherent grounding that aligns with these ideals. Neither does the text engage with the potential limitations of such foundations. The conceptual vagueness and philosophical limitation of ESD will continue to hinder diverse worldviews to engage, limiting the Recommendation's practical impact. More research and dialogue are needed that explore diverse epistemological and philosophical traditions applicable to ESD. Intentionally addressing these gaps in understanding and achieving philosophical clarity is essential for the future in ensuring that ESD can be understood, accepted, engaged with, and effectively be implemented, to become the hoped-for enabler in achieving the SDGs and any post-2030 agenda.

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