



Article

Humanistic Thought and Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an education concept, central to what is globally understood as quality education and endorsed by the United Nations as a key enabler of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). ESD has been around for more than three decades and has sparked its own academic discourse and field of research. Yet, ESD is not fully embedded in all education systems and within societies. Although stakeholders from academia and practice are engaged in addressing ESD since its inclusion in Agenda 21 in 1992, there has been a struggle to develop a shared conceptual understanding. The discussion in theory and practice is still underway, with researchers grappling in depth with the understanding of ESD, its thematic width, concrete implementation, and tangible outcomes. Following the current quest by UNESCO to reconsider existing ways of knowing and to question where knowledge comes from and how we add to it, the authors of this article examined a sample of ESD literature on whether epistemic foundations of ESD including its role as a program within UNESCO are considered in the discourse. They concentrate in their review on humanist approaches as an important perspective for



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UNESCO. The results point to a gap in the current literature. The authors also show that, if ESD was grounded in humanistic thought, it could pose a barrier for certain worldviews to engage with or implement ESD. Therefore, ESD's foundations require further examination. This paper is a first step in drawing attention to the need to make ESD's foundations more explicit.

Keywords: education for sustainable development, humanism, education philosophy, quality education, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Introduction

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an education concept, recognized as an integral element of quality education and as a key enabler of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015; 2017; 2019; 2021; 2023). ESD is understood as a framework that

...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, 2020, p. 8)

The potential of ESD to transform societies today and to achieve the global sustainability agenda in the future has repeatedly been acknowledged by the United Nations (United Nations, 2017; 2019; 2021; 2023). With only 15 % of the SDGs on track in 2023, the world is far from achieving sustainable development (United Nations, 2023; WMO, 2023). Quality education, with ESD at the core and as stated in SDG4 Quality Education, could elevate action towards all SDGs.

However, ESD is not a priority in many countries (UNESCO, 2023a). Despite years of UNESCO-coordinated global efforts in implementation and a recent UN-wide summit, focusing on transforming education (United Nations, 2022), the implementation of ESD in education and training systems still falls behind expectations (De Haan et al., 2010). A variety of barriers to implementing ESD is known (McKeown, 2002; UNESCO, 2006), e.g., lack of knowledge in content and pedagogy (Kang, 2019), lack of readiness of teachers (UNESCO, 2021a), but not yet overcome (Foley, 2020; Gross & Nakayama, 2010). Public awareness of sustainability is growing but limited.

UNESCO's Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda calls on academia to engage at a deeper level with existing knowledge systems, reconsider which knowledge is used, and further integrate diverse cultures to advance transformation (UNESCO, 2022b). Following this call, this article analyses a sample of the academic discourse that engages with UNESCO's efforts concerning the understanding of ESD. The authors aim to determine whether the ESD dialogue has yet addressed foundations, especially in relation to humanist approaches. UNESCO is – among other principles – historically grounded in humanist thinking (UNESCO, 2024). As a relevant philosophy for UNESCO's

programs including ESD, the implications of humanist approaches could be significant for the engagement with and/or the implementation of ESD.

Research question and methodology

ESD is continuously shaped by policies at global, national, and local levels, academic discourse, and through application in practice (Sinakou et al., 2019). Following a negotiated writing process and emerging as a UN-borne concept (Gadotti, 2008), ESD elements were first stated in Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992) and implemented through UNESCO (United Nations, 1993). Since then, a field of research has developed, but the policy and academic discourse have not led to a shared understanding of what ESD means and entails.

In an ongoing research project, analyzing the UN-wide documentation of ESD between 1992-2021, a literature review was undertaken that screened 430 scholarly articles. 209 articles addressed the understanding, functions, and intended outcomes of ESD in the years 1992-2021. They were screened for references to philosophical frameworks, education philosophy, references to UNESCO's philosophy, and humanism/humanistic education, following the question: Does the ESD discourse engage with underlying philosophical foundations for ESD, and/or is it built on the humanistic foundations of UNESCO?

The summary of the literature demonstrated a multitude of perspectives on ESD, its understanding, its functions, and intended outcomes, but the discourse does not explicitly address any philosophical foundations of ESD or those that UNESCO, as the norm-setting global agency and therefore a major influencer in the discussion, is built upon. Although a specific UNESCO philosophy was omitted in the founding process (McKeon, 1948), UNESCO is grounded on shared principles aligned with humanism (Huxley, 1946). There is no explicit grounding within education philosophy for neither the education program as a whole nor ESD in particular, yet publications and programs regularly reference humanistic education (e.g., Machado, 2006; UNESCO, 2020a).

The current discourse might benefit from fully understanding if UNESCO's philosophical foundations in humanism and references to ESD's conceptualization (United Nations, 1992; 1993) have implications on engagement and/or implementation. This is especially relevant if humanistic thinking poses barriers to worldviews that do not align with solely human-centered reasoning. In this case, ESD might currently not be as locally relevant nor culturally appropriate for all societies to implement quality education and achieve SDG4 as well as realizing ESD's important key enabler function for all other SDGs. This article encourages further discussion on the epistemic foundations but does not aim to offer solutions.

Addressing the understanding of ESD within UNESCO's efforts

Today's understanding that education has a vital role in promoting sustainable development and in improving the capacity of people to cope with sustainability issues, was developed during the preparations for the 1992 Earth Summit. This was a time of newly found awareness that humans would not be able to carry on as usual without causing a considerable negative impact on the planet (IPPC, 1992). The realization initiated a change in the global development discussion, from supporting any economic progress towards an integrated approach to development and environmental protection. A conceptual foundation for the Earth Summit was the Brundtland Report, defining sustainable development as aiming to meet "...the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987, pp. 3-27).

The outcome document Agenda 21 addressed education as a means of implementation in Chapter 36 'Promoting Education, Public Awareness and Training' (United Nations, 1992). Chapter 36 defined (1) access to basic education; (2) reorienting education towards sustainable development; (3) increasing public awareness; and (4) promoting training (United Nations, 1992). Earlier efforts on outdoor education and environmental education had proven to be insufficient to change human behavior in tackling global crises (Fang et al., 2023). For the first time, the authors of Chapter 36 brought together different country and regional perspectives as well as environmental, outdoor, and development education expertise. Authors linked the core disciplines of formal education with training, as well as public awareness, and directed efforts towards the broader goal of education 'as a whole' contributing to sustainable development.

In 1993, UNESCO became the task manager for the implementation of Chapter 36 (United Nations, 1993), so "The experience gained in that context would be fully brought to bear on education for sustainable development." (United Nations, 1993, p. 9). Under the impetus of the 1993/94 International Conferences on Population, Education and Development, UNESCO initiated a transdisciplinary and inter-agency cooperation project 'Environment and Population Education and Information for Human Development' (EPD) to address the role of environment and population education as well as information for development to advance the role as a means of implementation for Agenda 21 (UNESCO, 1996).

Following UNESCO's efforts to implement Chapter 36 in a transdisciplinary manner, it soon became a point of discussion as to what kind of education was aimed for and UNESCO was tasked to clarify (UN CSD, 1996). With early articles on the concept displayed in Chapter 36, 'Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)' (Hopkins et al., 1996) was becoming a new term (Hopkins, 1997). During the 1997 Thessaloniki International Conference, ESD as a technical term was used for the first time with a focus on FOR instead of

'about' (Mayor, 1997; Lopez Ospina, 1997). In the same year, an evaluation of the UNESCO EPD Project acknowledged the relevance and future-orientation but documented numerous barriers in dealing with the traditional UNESCO sectors and in collaborating with other UN agencies towards a transdisciplinary understanding and implementation of ESD (UNESCO, 1997).

Subsequently, the clarification process of what ESD meant, evolved into a continuous policy and academic dialogue. Over time, UNESCO used various descriptions, functions and/or intended outcomes in their program efforts. At first, the global UN Decade on ESD (2005-2014) (UNESCO, 2014a) intended to raise awareness. UNESCO acknowledged ESD as a dynamic concept addressing all aspects of public awareness, education, and training toward a holistic understanding of sustainable development through knowledge, skills, perspectives, and values (UNESCO, 2003). During that time, the four initial elements of Chapter 36 became widely known as the four thrusts of ESD (McKeown, 2002; UNESCO, 2006).

Following the UN Decade, the Global Action Programme on ESD (2015-2019) (UNESCO, 2014b) positioned ESD as one out of three specific thematic areas: education for peace and human rights, ESD, and health education (UNESCO, 2013a) in a rather disciplinary way, away from possible outcomes and hoped-for societal benefits. Since the launch of the ESD for 2030 Roadmap, UNESCO has been fostering the potential of ESD for the SDGs (UNESCO, 2020a). The effectiveness of this recent program and the implications for the global understanding of ESD are yet to be determined. UNESCO addresses in the roadmap that ESD remains criticized for its vagueness (UNESCO, 2020a).

In 2023, this conversation has received renewed relevance for education systems as ESD was again defined with specific reference to the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2016) that determined SDG4, with reference to the ESD for 2030 Roadmap, and as one approach to transformative education in a new legal instrument, the Recommendation on Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2023b). Overall, the UNESCO instruments, initiatives, and specific ESD programs do not address philosophical foundations beyond references to resolutions, approved programs, and budget cycles (e.g., UNESCO, 2022a).

Overview of the ESD dialogue

In response to the UN/UNESCO efforts since the adoption of Agenda 21, the academic discourse has grown with the rise in ESD's visibility in the public discussion, e.g. shown in national reports (DUK, 2015). This article does not claim to give a complete picture of the literature but touches upon major streams in the discussion on ESD's understanding, functions, and intended outcomes. While the academic discourse is independent of UNESCO's efforts, there is a considerable impact of UNESCO on the terminology discussion, e.g. in Canada (Blom & Karrow, 2024), and through UNESCO's role as the normative and standard-setting

UN agency in education. Vice versa, the breadth of the academic discussion has impacted the course of UNESCO's approaches to ESD and the framing of programmes (UNESCO, 2014a). Bibliometric research (Hallinger & Nguyen, 2020) identified 1,800 published articles between 1990 and 2018 with a dominance of European and Anglo-American contributions (Hallinger & Nguyen, 2020; Wright & Pullen, 2007).

In the 1990s, scholars began to discuss what ESD was, its descriptors, functions, and intended outcomes (Fien & Tilbury, 2002; McKeown & Hopkins, 2003; Sauvé, 1996; Tilbury et al., 2002). Some saw it as pivoting environmental education, others as a fusion of environmental education and development education, or as a new paradigm (Sterling, 1996). Building on the reference in Chapter 36 to the environmental foundations of the 1977 Tbilisi Declaration (UNEP, 1977), ESD was sometimes seen as a new form of environmental education, yet more serving human interest. It was suggested to build on existing structures by expanding awareness of other challenges in the world, all based on nature (Huckle, 1996). Social and economic challenges were going beyond traditional themes of environmental education, but in the end, all issues were symptoms of ecological phenomena. Yet, only environmental education was reaching the bottom cause (Bonnett, 1999). ESD was a new focus within environmental learning, and its purpose was already well served by the existing approaches (Sauvé, 1996). More authors would later join the conversation following the understanding that global efforts had to focus on environmental education at the core (Gough et al., 2001; Hesselink et al., 2000; Jickling, 1992; Scoullos, 1995). The perspective of ESD as a new form of environmental education was disputed by development educators who felt that sustainability was at least developed equally from the two pillars of environmental and developmental education if not grounded in the latter (Fien, 1995).

Alternatively, ESD was seen as a new concept for education that was going beyond the teaching 'about' a disciplinary subject in the classroom (Hopkins et al., 1996). These perspectives saw ESD as holistic, equally supporting economic, social, and environmental sustainability (Hopkins & McKeown, 2001; McKeown & Hopkins, 2003; McKeown & Hopkins, 2005). The difference between environmental education and ESD was more than teaching about broader themes. It needed new ways of addressing sustainability through curriculum and pedagogy to realize the role of ESD as an implementation tool for sustainable development (McKeown & Hopkins, 2003).

Further voices promoted that ESD had to remain pluralistic, in continuous need of improvement, and constantly evolving (Pedersen et al., 2022; Reunamo & Pipere 2011; Selby, 2006). Those authors emphasized the democratic aspects of education and that a multifold understanding would allow a broader basis for engagement. The focus should be on the practical lens rather than the theoretical definition (Öhman, 2006). While there was no shared understanding of ESD, its relevance grew, yet the struggle with definitions, functions, and intended outcomes led to a prolonged lack of research evidence on

implementation (Laurie et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2012).

Nowadays, authors at least mostly agree on the transformative potential of ESD (O'Donoghue et al., 2018; Singer-Brodowski, 2023; Wals, 2011). Scholars also engage in specific subthemes with a practical focus, such as competencies for students and teachers (Barth & Rieckmann, 2016; Beringer & Adomssent, 2008; De Haan, 2010; Fujii, 2021;) or focus on a specific level of education when researching ESD implementation.

Over time, the discussion on comprehending ESD, its functions, and intended outcomes has become less prominent as no singular or finite understanding is agreeable to the academic community. The findings from this research show that while continuously growing in quantity, the ESD dialogue has not yet explicitly addressed the existence of an underlying philosophical foundation, other than implicitly going back to what UNESCO has applied since its establishment in 1945 (UNESCO, 1945) – namely the understanding of scientific humanism “...in the sense of seeking to bring in all the peoples of the world, and of treating all peoples and all individuals within each people as equals in terms of human dignity, mutual respect, and educational opportunity.” (Huxley, 1946, p. 7).

If ESD is grounded in other education philosophies beyond humanism, their existence is not addressed. To date, the examined papers neither address these questions of philosophical foundations of UNESCO/ESD nor “... present a clear account of the values and beliefs of the researcher/educator and displayed a reliance on a positivist epistemology”. (O’Flaherty & Liddy, 2018, p. 1044). A singular management education perspective addressing UNESCO’s ESD stated ESD was “trying to make its way into educational philosophy” and called for humanistic values to be considered for higher education (Busoi, 2015, p. 155). Overall, the literature analysis of 209 articles from this research project indicates that authors do not yet critically engage with what philosophical frameworks underline ESD and the potential implications of UNESCO’s humanistic foundation for the engagement with and implementation of ESD.

UNESCO’s roots in and references to humanistic thought

During the aftermath of World War II (United Nations, 1945), the idea of the UN and especially UNESCO was built on the principles of lasting peace, international collaboration, dignity, equality, and mutual respect, recognition of science and history, (Huxley, 1946; Toye & Toye, 2010), based on a notion of humanism. The preamble to 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). Based on the hopes that all humans would contribute to a better world when having access to education, UNESCO has been supporting universal humanistic thinking in education and their other mandated areas (UNESCO, 1951; 2011; 2014c). The UNESCO logo, a stylized silhouette of the Greek Parthenon Temple is considered a nod to humanism (Singh, 2011). UNESCO, at times, referred to humanism as its theoretical foundation

(Elfert, 2017; Singh 2011). UNESCO's humanism meant a dedication to a culture of peace, mutual respect for human rights, diversity, culture, and a commitment to education and knowledge exchange (UNESCO, 1945).

Humanistic thinking is not an invention of the UN/UNESCO and was not a new idea in 1945 when the UN was established. Humanistic perspectives date back to the ancient Greeks and Romans grew to new recognition during the 14th century, became known throughout Europe in the 16th century, and more popular among those who were concerned with culture and education during the 18th century in Europe (Davies, 2008).

In its broad mandate, UNESCO aimed to have a strong but globally applicable foundation that would lead to consensus in educational, cultural, and scientific matters. Its founders – dominated by Western nations – drew from humanistic thought to describe objectivity in science and rationale to resolve religious divergences (Niebuhr, 1950). Within UNESCO, two different cultures of the rather humanities-oriented, philosophical intellectuals and the scientific fact-driven worldviews struggled to be united in cultural leadership (Toye & Toye, 2010). The latter was largely Eurocentric in nature and neglected others, e.g. Eastern influences (Mougey, 2021). At the time, it seemed necessary to focus on unifying the world as its diversity was perceived as a problem (UNESCO, 1949). Aspiring member countries wanted to overcome pluralistic views and aimed towards a unified world mind, deriving its perspectives from scientific evidence (Selcer, 2011). Therefore, research and science as a rationale were mainstreamed and led to the perspective of “scientific humanism” (Pavone, 2008; Singh, 2011; Singh, 2018). Julian Huxley, UNESCO's first Director-General, aimed for an organization that was not static or exclusive in its philosophy but would have the potential to evolve based on principles (Huxley, 1946). Huxley wrote that for UNESCO,

...its outlook must, it seems, be based on some form of humanism. Further, that humanism must clearly be a world humanism, both in the sense of seeking to bring in all the peoples of the world, and of treating all peoples and all individuals within each people as equals in terms of human dignity, mutual respect, and educational opportunity. It must also be a scientific humanism, in the sense that the application of science provides most of the material basis for human culture... (Huxley, 1946, p. 7).

Huxley and other early promoters of scientific humanism neither acknowledged nor denied the existence of supranatural dimensions (Bragg, 1933). Over the years, UNESCO never explicitly approved or denied other potential (religious or spiritual) doctrines (Singh, 2011) but engaged with enhancing the understanding of UNESCO's scientific humanism through conferences and publications (Brabyn, 1985; UNESCO, 1951; 2011). Focusing on unifying principles while accepting diversity and dignity for all has been important to UNESCO's mandate and actions from the beginning (Elfert, 2017). UNESCO may have falsely assumed that the post-war world was ready to be led by (one) rationale, provided exclusively by science and research (Niebuhr, 1950) and that there would be “...a single common pool of experience, awareness, and purpose is the

necessary prerequisite for further major progress in human evolution.” (Huxley, 1946, p. 17). However, a science-driven singular vision of humanity has continued to date (Stoczkowski, 2009). In 2011, the UNESCO Director-General at the time, Ms. Irina Bokova, stated that humanist values as a framework “...for our common thought and reflections on global issues (...) to be translated into practice, in every facet of human activity...” were the foundation of UNESCO. She did not allude to what humanist values concretely entailed (UNESCO, 2011, p. 5). In 2014, Ms. Bokova emphasized that building peace in the minds of men and women was humanism par excellence and religion was rather to serve a sense of belonging (UNESCO, 2014c). In continuously building on the Brundtland definition of sustainable development throughout three global implementation schemes (Agenda 21, Millennium Development Goals, SDGs), UNESCO might have missed out on addressing critical voices that say humanism is also implied in the underlying understanding of sustainable development, it centers human agency and understanding in and of the world (Davidson, 2021; Jeong et al., 2021). Equally, the understanding of scientific humanism or the recent movement of a new humanism within UNESCO (D’Orville, 2015) is not explicitly discussed.

One of the early protagonists that was relevant for UNESCO’s position on education, was the German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt. His ideas formed the foundation of liberal societies in their understanding of freedom and individual fulfilment. Humboldt contributed to the ground-breaking ideal of education as holistic self-formation (‘BILDUNG’). Education was seen as more than acquiring knowledge and skills. It entailed personal development throughout life and included early perspectives of what we today see as global citizenship (Humboldt, 1793). Humanistic education is aimed at educating the whole person while furthering human reason, freedom of thought, and implying a cosmopolitan worldview (Aloni, 2011).

UNESCO’s vision of education for the 21st century (Delors, 1996) followed the notion of BILDUNG and encouraged addressing individual values, attitudes, and the whole person developing their human potential and for everyone to be empowered (Aloni, 2013). At times, UNESCO encouraged the solution to the philosophic problem at the local level (McKeon, 1948). When it comes to education today, UNESCO still assumes humanistic values, e.g., for the more than 12,500 UNESCO schools worldwide (UNESCO, 2013b). In 2020, a publication that was intended to inform the vision for UNESCO’s education in 2050 was entitled ‘Humanistic Futures of Learning’ (UNESCO, 2020b) and stated a humanistic approach to education and development. The document was also used to inform the International Commission that issued the Futures of Education Report (UNESCO, 2021b) as a crucial document for the 2022 UN-wide Transforming Education Summit. Subsequently, humanistic values were carried forward for the future of education.

Repeatedly, UNESCO as an organization has endorsed humanism as a relevant philosophy including humanistic education values. Since ESD as an education framework not independently positioned with its

own educational philosophy, an interdependence of the ESD concept and UNESCO – as an organization/system but also as a network to build global consensus on education matters – is seen as likely. Each function of UNESCO may be carried out differently but always needs to be seen within the complex, broader decision-making process of the organization with its member states (Lyons, 1978; Omolewa, 2007). Therefore, the influence of UNESCO's humanism on ESD cannot be excluded, is rather seen as likely, but is not explicitly discussed in the ESD discourse. This is not surprising when considering the major source of ESD-related articles stemming from Western countries as shown before. This impression is in line with the number of members in Humanist organizations, such as Humanists International (Humanists International).

A critical discussion would be highly relevant if references to humanism/humanistic education in UNESCO's programs and specifically for ESD were suited to pose barriers for certain worldviews and religions to engage with or implement ESD. Its key enabler function for all SDGs demands the broadest application in education and beyond.

Humanistic thought is not aligned with all worldviews

Humanism as seen by UNESCO is not accepted by some, often religious, worldviews in the way knowledge is understood, what kinds of knowledge are available, and what role humans play in the world and subsequently how they are educated. This perceived conflict of human reason versus worldviews that believe in religion in teaching and doctrine has been repeatedly addressed in the literature (Bakewell, 2023). During the founding phase of UNESCO, rather non-religious perspectives became mainstream to humanism (Bakewell, 2023) and to date, humanistic outlooks come in various forms and are "...more than a system of thought in which human values, interests, and dignity are considered particularly important." (Law, 2011, p. 2). The current humanist understanding is characterized by evolutionary, ethical behaviors, individual uniqueness, and fulfilment in balance with civic engagement, mutual respect and promotes secularism (Humanists International, 2022). Humanists strive to be rational as "...the solutions to the world's problems lie in human reason and action..." (Article 2) and modern humanism can serve as a "...source of purpose to stand as an alternative to dogmatic religion..." (Article 4).

Promoters of stricter interpretations of religious doctrines and supernatural beliefs often categorically reject humanism, and even more scientific humanism, for its individualism and importance of reason and fact. Because human reason is highlighted, it is often characterized as a secular movement and sometimes humanistic thinking is seen to aim towards achieving happiness and fulfilment in the absence of religion (Firdaus, 2017). Scholars also criticize the whole concept of humanism as it puts humans at the center of reason which can create direct contradiction to religious belief (Poole, 2019). How far can religious

perspectives and the belief in the supernatural be aligned with the concept of humans as a major source of reason (Mohd, 2019)? While religions often claim to be humanistic in themselves, this does not necessarily contain the perception of humanists today that are fierce, strong, and individual thinking with free will and reason (Mohd, 2019).

In Islamic knowledge systems, using reason as the sole basis of knowledge collides with the understanding of derived and revealed knowledge, where the latter is divine and cannot be achieved by reason (Azram, 2012). Islam regularly rejects humanistic thought due to that collision within knowledge systems as it cannot reconcile human autonomy with supernatural agency (Ljamai, 2015). Islamic authors demonstrate the challenges on how to integrate knowledge in education from Islamic perspectives (Ljamai, 2015; Robbani & Maragustam, 2022). In Islam, humanistic values are often limited to the recognition of human rights (Mohd, 2019), when enhancing individual development, good character, and a sense of care for society (Firdaus, 2017) which avoids contradictions between religion and being human (Alam, 2016).

The Christian religion also struggles with the understanding of human reason within its doctrine. Some were able to combine faith and human reason principles early on while others saw the limitations (Zimmermann, 2012). Other religions, such as stricter interpretations of Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Sikhism, hesitate to accept a superior role of humans in nature and criticize the consequences of how human-centric and rather individualist Western worldviews have caused the climate crisis and sustainability urgencies, the current 'Western Malaise' (Zimmermann, 2012). Indigenous views per se struggle with the perception of a different role of humans within the earth systems and a superior understanding of morality. Similarly, eco-centrists critique an elevated position of humans in the system of nature. Seeing humans as more significant forms of life is unacceptable and has been criticized since the early developments of environmentalism and found new support since the announcement of today's Age of the Anthropocene (Brannen, 2017).

While the concrete limits of human reason, knowledge, and non-knowledge differ as they integrate into overall worldviews (Ijiomah, 2011), it is also not always accepted that values underlie relative change (Islam & Fawaz, 2017). This creates another level of conflict with UNESCO, being designed as an organization to be evolving in nature (Huxley, 1946).

These challenges were known during the founding phase of UNESCO, the movement of Maritain's integral humanism aimed to reconcile the gap by acknowledging a spiritual dimension to human reason towards an inclusive vision (Barré, 2005; Maritain, 1936; 1939). Maritain believed that human nature did not function in dualism, but human reason was in alignment with the religious, particularly Christian, moral order of the doctrines following natural law. Maritain's positions avoided a too rational approach to human reason,

making them objectifiable and controllable human beings (Elfert, 2017). Unfortunately, Maritain did not get sufficient traction and Huxley's scientific humanism became the dominant UNESCO philosophy to create unity built on one version of reason. Since then, UNESCO has not addressed these potential barriers that humanism might still pose for the engagement with the agency as a whole and with specific concepts, such as ESD.

Reflections for a way forward: addressing the foundations of ESD

The discussion on the shared understanding of ESD is still underway and expected to further unfold over the years to come, influenced by UNESCO's position on ESD. With its relevance for the entire global sustainability agenda beyond education, unfolding every aspect of the ESD concept and addressing all potential barriers to engagement and implementation, is important for all those aiming to contribute to sustainable development.

The humanistic foundations of UNESCO that reach into the understanding of and positions on ESD and therefore considerably influence the global discourse might currently hinder ESD engagement and implementation. From the initial literature review, it appears that scholars engaging with UNESCO's ESD have not yet examined the question of a humanistic influence in the ESD discourse nor reflected on potential limitations posed by humanism for certain worldviews. But there are ways forward that this article aims to draw attention to:

Firstly, since ESD is recognized as crucial for a sustainable future, acknowledging that its philosophical foundations have not yet been explicitly discussed – for ESD as an education concept and for ESD in the context of UNESCO's principles – might lead to research for a more fundamental understanding of ESD's foundations.

Secondly, among other principles, humanistic perspectives have historically been influential for UNESCO's and ESD's developments as an education framework. UNESCO has long recognized the need for ESD to be both locally relevant and culturally appropriate (UNESCO, 2006). But humanistic perspectives, having created or potentially creating barriers to engagement or implementation with ESD are not explicitly addressed. Further examining the extent of limitations that humanism can pose could lead to new knowledge, engage new voices that have been reluctant to embrace ESD, or build pathways to allow overcoming the barriers, e.g., addressing challenges from future worldviews to open new opportunities to expand the implementation of ESD and the SDGs (Hassan & Hassan, 2023).

Thirdly, as UNESCO encourages to go beyond familiar systems of knowledge and to consider other ways of

knowing (UNESCO, 2022b), future (applied) research design must include positioning ESD within broader philosophical foundations of education and grapple with the implications of underlying frameworks of UNESCO's approach to education and UNESCO as an agency. New ESD research is to be transdisciplinary, following the call for transformation in education (UNESCO, 2021b; United Nations, 2022). The ESD concept was originally rooted in transdisciplinarity (McKeown, 2002; UNESCO, 1997) but transdisciplinary approaches have not been fully embedded in education research/sustainability science (Lang et al., 2012; Yanniris, 2021). This might also expand the global transferability and acceptance of research results beyond the academic sphere with communities involved in research from the beginning.

In closing, with ESD being recognized as a key enabler of a sustainable future, an integral element of quality education, and in light of the urgent call to transform education, there is a responsibility for educators and researchers to address ESD's epistemic foundations towards a shared understanding of ESD that is accessible to all worldviews. Acknowledging a knowledge gap is a first step towards enhancing ESD engagement.

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