1. Point of Departure: English Language Education for Sustainable Development

Over the past two decades, policy makers in education in Germany have acknowledged and promoted an understanding of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a central element of what constitutes quality education (KMK 2016). As a result, existing guidelines unanimously establish ESD as a cross-cutting topic of education in Germany and demand the implementation of global perspectives in all subjects taught at secondary schools, including English language education (KMK 2016; Deutsche UNESCO-Kommission 2017).

On a global level, UNESCO Agenda 2030 explicitly formulates education as a stand-alone sustainable development goal (SDG 4; UN 2015). Qian Tang, UNESCO’s Assistant Director-General for Education, highlights that education is both a goal in itself and a means for attaining all the other SDGs. It is not only an integral part of sustainable development, but also a key enabler for it. That is why education represents an essential strategy in the pursuit of the SDGs. (UNESCO 2017, 1)

Irina Bokova, then Director-General of UNESCO, specifies that

[a] fundamental change is needed in the way we think about education's role in global development, because it has a catalytic impact on the well-being of individuals and the future of our planet. […] Now, more than ever, education has a responsibility to be in gear with 21st century challenges and aspirations, and foster the right types of values and skills that will lead to sustainable and inclusive growth, and peaceful living together. (2017, 7)

SDG 4 is not only embedded in and intertwined with the other sustainability-related goals but sub-goal 4.7 explicitly establishes a connection between sustainability and global citizenship education in a list of key elements of what constitutes quality education in the 21st century:

SDG 4.7: By 2030, ensure all learners acquire 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. (UN 2015)¹

SDG 4.7’s clear focus on global education and the special role of cultural learning is mirrored in national guideline documents relevant for educators in Germany. For

¹ See also Römhild and Gaudelli (2021), who argue for the inclusion of climate change as a key element of SDG 4.7.
instance, the *Curriculum Framework Education for Sustainable Development* (KMK 2016, 89) assigns a central role to culture in its competence model for ESD, around which the four dimensions of sustainability revolve – the environment, politics, the economy, and social affairs. These, in turn, are framed by the concepts of global and intergenerational justice. The framework understands sustainable development as the most important of five guiding principles: "orientation towards the principle of sustainable development; analysis of development processes on different levels of action; appreciation of diversity; ability to change perspective; context- or *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld)-orientation" (KMK 2016, 89). There is also a version of this document specifically geared towards English, French, and Spanish language education (see KMK 2017), which, again, strongly emphasizes the significance of cultural learning for ESD (KMK 2017, 17-19).

Yet, there seems to be a gap between the theoretical acknowledgment of ESD as a cross-cutting topic promoted by these guidelines, along with the current volume, and the practical implementation of approaches geared towards ESD in English language teaching (ELT). As a case in point – despite the position represented by the national guidelines mentioned above – the federal policy document on ESD in secondary schools for Germany’s most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), curiously makes no mention of language subjects such as English (MSB NRW 2019b). Instead, ESD is only considered part of those subjects for which sustainability-related issues appear inherently appropriate, such as the sciences or geography. The reasons for the absence of English, however, may partly lie within the subject itself: In ELT, the environment and ecological issues are oftentimes still treated as just another topic among others, typically dealt with in one unit during 10th grade (typically fifteen or sixteen years old), rather than considered a truly cross-cutting theme. Küchler points out that,

[textbooks] have attempted to raise awareness about problems and imminent dangers. Yet, in stark contrast to other fields of study and its related disciplines, foreign language education has been reluctant to tackle these issues in a more encompassing fashion that would provide the field with a theoretical framework for engaging with the topic while learning foreign languages. (2014, 24; original emphasis)

The author asks whether language education can become a "contact zone […] where learners encounter and engage with different concepts of nature, the environment, or sustainability" (2014, 23) and whether ESD can, in turn, be conducive to the objectives of language education. Küchler’s call for a different approach to sustainability education within language education is embedded in a line of argumentation to view the climate crisis as a cultural crisis (Mayer and Wilson 2006, 1) and to thus work towards the cultivation of sustainability in literature and language pedagogy (Bartosch 2021). These calls are based on the fact that ESD entails a number of aspects which are also highly important for ELT in the 21st century, most notably in terms of cultural learning, global citizenship education and the ability to actively participate in the global discourse on sustainability and the climate crisis, in which English serves as a *lingua franca*. It could be argued that the existing national guidelines provide educators with
a clear mandate to design corresponding curricula and frameworks, but as Küchler notes, not much has been achieved yet:

It can be observed with some astonishment that foreign language education – defining itself as a discipline open to all matters of contemporary, inter/transcultural, and communicative affairs – has not followed suit in providing this subject with a theoretical and methodological framework. (2014, 23; original emphasis)

Thus, in order to comply with the guidelines and to take ESD seriously as a cross-cutting topic of education in Germany, we need to stop only asking what the environment and ESD can do for ELT. Instead, we need to also ask how and what English language education can contribute to ESD – in a sense, the question is aimed at the contours of an English Language Education for Sustainable Development. This notion points to the lack of social aims (see Dewey 1916, chapter 8) that beset schools throughout the 20th century and up to the contemporary moment; that is, schools are single-mindedly focused on academic preparation for some imagined future life, rather than focusing on the pressing social issues of the day in a way that honors the lifeworld of the child/student and recognizes their agency, as learners and social beings. We recognize that there are countervailing curricula that do address social problems such as civic education or social sciences; however, by and large, these are not the main state of student learning in K-12 schools. This 'academicization' has also contributed to the deep sense of anomie, or normlessness/norm rigidity, that saps children of their ability to navigate their endless wants within a context of limited means, towards the development of self-regulation (Durkheim 1897). The cut-and-dried manner in which curriculum is given to students becomes not a vehicle for individual growth within social norms, but an academic hodge-podge of contents that lack clear social connectivity and relevance. This disintegration of the links between the social child and the individual child, due in part to academic learning, leads to a greater disharmony in the life of children, of schools and of society. As Dewey (1897) notes:

If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass. Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, and habits. (Article One)

These conditions necessitate revisiting the very basic pillars of ELT, including the notion of culture(s) and corresponding questions of cultural learning. Contrary to Küchler’s approach of examining how intercultural learning can be related to sustainability-related concerns (2014, 24), we argue that while the national guidelines champion global education and ESD, they simultaneously thwart this goal by declaring Byram’s intercultural communicative competence (ICC, 1997) a key competence through which to achieve this goal. In teaching practice, this focus on ICC leads to a strong emphasis on nationalities, localities, and target cultures, which stands in stark contrast to the ideas of ESD and global citizenship education as outlined above. In this context, Gaudelli (2019) warns that

[w]e teach youth to think like states, or nations, in a time when global problems demand thinking beyond borders. The absurdity of the disconnect is stark – that despite mounting
problems that cross boundaries, including migration, global warming, infectious diseases, war – we continue to use the nation/state framework to solve problems that demand a different way of thinking.

This article, therefore, first critically examines the status quo of cultural learning in ELT in Germany on both a conceptual and curricular level, arguing that we need to reconsider how we teach about cultures in ELT for successfully pursuing the goals of ESD. It then suggests an alternative approach which is more consistent with the central demands of ESD. Taking a sideways glance to a discipline that has necessarily committed to global education, this contribution discusses teaching principles from Geography and possible implications for the ELT classroom on a curricular level, providing concrete examples of how alternatives to the currently predominant notion of target culture teaching could pan out.

2. Current Teaching Practice: The Formation of an Earlier Us and a Later Other

A closer look at current federal curricula and textbooks reveals a clear tendency toward target country and target culture teaching (Ziellandunterricht/Zielkulturenunterricht), which is expressed by a strong focus on localities, nationalities, and nation states. This approach directly contradicts the promises and demands of ESD in at least two regards: Firstly, global challenges can only be tackled through global efforts. Therefore, learning about one country at a time does not allow students to develop an understanding of the global interconnectedness of border-transcending phenomena. Even such universal topics as climate change or migration then appear to be national security risks, which have to be tackled by means of national efforts. Secondly, it teaches students to think in terms of national categories, which amplifies the effects of the first point as it subjugates people to a prescriptive identity by typifying and thereby reducing people to a (national) type. As such, it cements and perpetuates categorical ways of seeing, which limits understanding, nuance, and context while being fundamentally distortive. Furthermore, the need to call attention to what is ‘targeted’ illustrates the weakness of the concept from the outset. The very denotation of ‘target’ implies that there is another category, presumably the ‘non-target space,’ that lies outside of the desired, categorical match that is intended by ‘target.’ This sidelines or even excludes a plethora of examples

2 This phrase was used by Felix Westhoff, a student at the University of Münster, to describe his impressions upon analysing several federal curricula for English language education in secondary schools in Germany.

3 The practice of target country/target culture teaching is not only problematic with regard to ESD, as has been argued in the context of implementing Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT)/Teaching English as an International Language (TEIL)-informed approaches into ELT, where it leads to a myopic focus on inner and outer circle national standard varieties (see Römhild and Matz 2022). This is further substantiated by studies on learners’ attitudes towards English varieties. Meer, Hartmann, and Rumlisch (2022) find that native speaker varieties (Standard American English and Standard British English) are generally regarded more positively, whereas other varieties, for instance Indian English, are typically perceived more negatively in terms of competence, professionalism, and intelligibility.
which are potentially conducive to cultivating an understanding of global connections. Thus, target country/target culture teaching fails to meet the requirements for quality education in the sense of SDG 4.7.

With each of Germany’s sixteen federal states having its own educational system, curriculum designers and textbook publishers exhibit remarkable consistency throughout the country when it comes to the practical implementation of target country/target culture teaching: Generally speaking, learning scenarios for lower secondary school in Germany are centered around England in the 5th and 6th grades, the UK and Ireland in the 7th grade, the USA in the 8th grade, and either Australia/New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, or South Africa in the 9th grade. For the upper secondary level (11th-13th grades), scholarly attention returns to both the UK and the US, with some federal states adding countries of reference such as India or, in the case of NRW, Nigeria (see Römhild and Matz 2022, 142).

There are numerous examples of federal curricula displaying this order or a slight variation thereof, with textbook publishers following suit. For example, the books of two major publishers in NRW, Cornelsen (Rademacher 2017-2020b) and Klett (Weißhaar 2017-2020b), offer their customers this very order of target countries. There are a few exceptions to the rule. Schildhauer, Schulte, and Zehne (2020) found that, for instance, Klett’s Orange Line 5 (Haß 2017) course book features a world tour of Englishes, including Hong Kong and the Caribbean. The overall tendency remains, however, to focus on what would correspond to Kachru’s (1992) inner and outer circle countries. This is not surprising when examining the curricular guidelines of Germany’s sixteen states. Especially the guidelines of Baden-Württemberg (MKJS BW 2016), Bavaria (BSUK 2019a-h), Hamburg (BSBH 2009; 2011), Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (MBWK MV 2011; IQ MV 2015), Rhineland-Palatinate (MBWWK RP 2008; 2014), Saarland (MBK Saarland 2015a/b; 2017) and Saxony-Anhalt (Kultusministerium Sachsen-Anhalt 2012) leave no doubt about the predominance of the UK and the USA as countries to explore. Other states like Thuringia leave more room for alternative approaches in their formulations. In Thuringia, students are provided with "various, age-appropriate and authentic insights into geographical circumstances, political and economic basics as well as the socio-cultural reality in anglophone countries and cultural spheres" (TMBJS 2019, 53; our translation). Yet again, this is an exception to the rule, and this formulation, too, is indicative of a questionable understanding of nation and culture. This problematic conceptualization becomes very evident in formulations such as "Besides international situations of language use, English language teaching also provides insights into anglophone national cultures," (MBK Saarland 2014, 24; our translation). The following passage from the guideline documents of NRW, exemplifies numerous similar formulations to be found in other relevant documents:

Successful communication between interlocutors from different cultures requires knowledge about the other’s culture. From the outset, English language education at Gymnasium teaches orientational knowledge of the relevant target cultures, which is to

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4 The following list of federal curricula refers to the documents relevant to the most academically-oriented type of school in Germany, the Gymnasium.
be deepened continuously, especially with regard to the UK and the USA. An additional, important element is teaching basic general competences associated with respectful intercultural encounters and (self-)critically reflected, sensitively-led intercultural dialogue. (MSB NRW 2019a, 8; our translation)

Passages like these reveal that the focus on nationalities in German ELT classrooms is rooted in a highly essentialist and nation-focused notion of culture and cultural learning. **Target countries**, mostly the UK and USA, are frequently referred to as target **cultures**, thus equaling nation and culture. This is far from the idea of cultural hybridity and global citizenship education as embedded in SDG 4.7, and by extension, ESD. However, it is in line with the concept of ICC (Byram 1997), which forms a central concept of German curricula. Within the paradigm of intercultural learning, students are supposed to gain insights “into the cultural dependence of [their] own thoughts, actions and behaviour as well as the ability and willingness to perceive and analyze foreign cultural perspectives” (KMK 2004, 16; our translation). This includes being informed about differences between one’s own and another culture (often referred to as target **culture**; see Council of Europe 2001, 103) and being able to recognize these differences in concrete situations to facilitate mutual understanding by engaging with people of other cultures in a sensitive and appreciative way (Göbel, Lewandowska, and Diehr 2017, 108). Though it may not be intended, the concept facilitates generalization.5 The self becomes part of a generalized, romanticized version of an imagined community (Anderson 1983), ignoring the fact that this community is also characterized by internal hybridity, diversity, flux, contrasts and mechanisms of exclusion. Likewise, the foreign is assigned a uniform (often national) culture. With its promotion of categories such as the self and the other/the foreign, ICC is not only unfit as an approach to cultural learning in the context of ESD, but it actually harms the endeavour. It facilitates the curricular formation of an earlier "us" and a later "other" rather than a sense of global interconnectedness throughout.

There has been a heated debate in German academic discourse about which paradigm to follow for nearly twenty-five years (see, e.g., Matz 2021). Intercultural learning and Byram's ICC model have attracted heavy criticism by various authors (see e.g., Bîrzéa 2000; Blell and Doff 2014), and it appears as though the general discourse in language education in Germany has moved toward transcultural concepts which are based on fluid, hybrid notions of cultures as practice rather than static, fixed, and

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5 In the revised edition of his ICC model, Byram (2020) distances himself from this kind of reading. He insists that the strong association of ICC with an equalization of culture and nation has been the product of misunderstanding and misinterpretation (see, e.g., 2020, 23; 42 or 77). While he argues that his revised model, therefore, can and should be applied to both cross-national and intra-national contexts (2020, 23), the examples provided still invite the reader to think in terms of national cultures throughout the text. Byram refers to a variety of geopolitical entities as conceivable intercultural contexts, but never leaves the context of regionalization – there is no mention of other forms of cultural contexts which have become especially relevant for societies in the 21st century. Thus, even taking into account Byram's revised volume (2020), the line of argumentation presented in this contribution still holds, especially because the current German curricula, which are subject to this analysis, are designed on the basis of the first publication from 1997.
essentialist notions of national cultures (see, e.g., Treichel 2011; Delanoy 2012; 2014; Volkmann 2014; Freitag-Hild 2018). Yet, as has become evident in the analysis of curricular guidelines or textbooks, other ELT stakeholders in Germany still promote target country and target culture teaching; they have “neither adopted transcultural concepts nor do they allow for a more hybrid understanding of cultures” (Römhild and Matz 2022, 147). This perpetuates out-of-date ideas and teaches our youth to think predominantly in national categories, focusing on national consequences, seeking national solutions to global issues rather than initiating global efforts which transcend constructed national borders.

3. ESD and the Incompatibility of the Nation State

One of the primary reasons for having national school systems was an effort to create national identity. The iconic work of Eugen Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen, demonstrates this case abundantly: “First, the National Pedagogy. The Fatherland is not your village, your province, it is all of France. The Fatherland is like a great family. […] Your Fatherland is you. […] It is your family, your people, in a word it is France, your country” (Weber 1976, 333). States have a predominant and unexamined commitment to perpetuating their own identities through schools, in curricula, through ritual, by content. Schools, as such, are ill-fitted to a global age without actively interrogating the deep grammar that sits at their foundation. This is the project that we join with this work.

The porousness of national borders as a category creates an illusory sense of comfort and stability in what is actually an extremely interactional world. This illusion is being perpetuated by nationalist/populist leaders – from Trump to Putin to Duterte to Erdogan to Bolsonaro to Johnson – who propagate this mythology as it serves their political ends, however distorting these claims are to the hybridity of our social reality. Yet, these stories have indubitably appealed to many people at some level, as they provide comfort and stasis in a world of uncertainty and anxiety. While those politically moderate or with leftist leanings are surprised at the power of nationalist and populist political figures around the world, this is unsurprising in light of the social dynamic that creates their power. They are static and retrograde in a world of rapidity and fluidity that is discomforting to many people, even those who might otherwise benefit from the social changes under way. These leaders fit neatly into the 20th-century container of nation states, if only in an allegorical sense, as they symbolize the past and its apparent normalcy.

It would be an error to assume that there exists a sharp distinction between politics and curriculum, between ethno-nationalism and the absence of ESD. Hayward (2012, 9) writes: “Our sustainability crisis is a complex, multifaceted series of dynamic problems that we cannot address independently. In this sense, our sustainability crisis is also a deep political crisis.” Perhaps there is no greater arena of uncertainty than global warming and the multifaceted ecological crisis that is unfolding in the third decade of the 21st century. The occurrence of 100-year floods on an annual basis, the endless burning of forests in temperate zones, the searing heat of scorched summer seasons, the loss of arable land due to drought and desertification, all of these and more
are only the tip of a proverbial iceberg. The fact that climate change appears to be accelerating at a rate more than most atmospheric scientists expected only deepens the sense of crisis. Not surprisingly, the rapidity of the change has led to a robust, if woefully uninformed, climate denial movement, particularly in states that are carbon-dependent in terms of economic output and consumption. The uncertainty of what is to come, coupled with the insistence by many interest groups that the world cannot or will not adopt carbon-neutral policies, is a disastrous combination of wishful thinking meeting a dreadful reality.

Given the enormity of the challenge, one would imagine that there would be a widespread determination to adopt ESD frameworks globally. And yet, paradoxically, the opposite is true as states continue to roll out economic competitiveness curricula on the cusp of an epoch that will demand global cooperation of a magnitude never before witnessed. In short, despite the glaring need for more thought and action by young people concerning our common future and what is at stake for all of humanity, not to mention non-human species and ecosystems, the default curriculum continues to be dominated by economic competitiveness, which amounts to teaching youth to think in the vein of nation states.

4. Changing Perspectives: Toward a Revised, Topics-Based Curriculum

The question remains how teaching and learning practice can be coordinated with these theoretical insights and curricular objectives, that is, how a true sense of global interconnectedness can be cultivated without recurring to categories such as own and foreign culture or the nation state, and without creating a sense of "us" versus "other." We propose two mutually reinforcing entry points toward mitigating the effects of target country/target culture teaching: First, on a conceptual level, to orientate teaching and learning processes on the basis of those theoretical constructs which more clearly correspond to the premises of ESD than does ICC; that is, toward approaches generally framed by global citizenship education (GCED); second, on a more curricular level, to open the English language classroom to teaching principles known from other subjects, which have necessarily committed themselves to global education, such as, for instance, geography.

4.1 The Walk Within and the Journey Outside

The first entry point revolves around the objectives of global citizenship education, a central aspect of what constitutes quality education according to SDG 4.7. In reference to UNESCO (2015), Römhild and Gaudelli note that GCED "at its core aims to engage young people in learning about interdependencies that tie together injustice, ecological devastation, and human diversity, a discourse with a goal of promoting a more peaceful, harmonious, and just world" (2021, 106). They explain that

[a] broad range of practices falls within this framework, including efforts to engage students in the following: understanding the state of the world, particularly as it relates to interdependencies that bind the world together; understanding geopolitical forces that threaten the global order that has emerged in the 20th century; and learning about critiques and challenges to the injustices perpetrated by the same […].
To raise an awareness and understanding of global interdependencies and interconnectedness is a central element of GCED. With GCED having been introduced to the German discourse on English language education only rather recently – Christiane Lütge (2015) deserves recognition as one of the pioneers – the notion still needs more attention and research, particularly when it comes to concrete steps to implement a GCED-informed curriculum as well as teaching and learning practices.

With regard to the effort of overcoming target country/target culture teaching, Gaudelli’s (2017, n.p.) concepts of the walk within and the journey outside might yield great potential for classroom application and may serve as a point of departure for GCED-informed teaching approaches in language education (and beyond). Römhild and Gaudelli describe the notions as follows:

The “walk within” involves the individual self, body and mind. It is about developing an awareness and understanding of one’s own subjectivity and of how an individual person is situated in the world. The “journey outside” refers to the surroundings, in the shape of family, fellow citizens, and eventually the whole world. Learners trace aspects of their lives out in concentric circles [from the self to the interpersonal, local, national, regional, to the global (or the other way around)] to see how they are globally interconnected. Recognizing these different scales provides us with a deeper understanding of who we are in this world; it gives us a sense of belonging and shared responsibility in the global age. (2021, 113)

This idea relates to what Huckle and Wals (2015, 493) refer to as the scale dimension of their concept of Global Education for Sustainability Citizenship, which focuses on how local actions have impact on life elsewhere on the planet (for further discussion of scales and scale framing in the context of ESD and ecocritical readings of fiction, see also Clark 2015; Bartosch 2018). While it is impossible to avoid categorization, the notion of tracing experience and interconnectedness in concentric circles offers alternative ways of thinking. It highlights the coexistence and interrelation of different relevant categories or scales at the same time and, hence, contravenes the prioritization of one (e.g., the national) over others.

Applying these metaphors in the classroom might help learners become aware of how they are globally interconnected and how they might relate to a problem at hand. However, while these concepts serve as potentially helpful illustrations of how global issues might be addressed in language education, a second step is needed to apply GCED-informed practices to the English language classroom in more concrete terms.

4.2 Focus on Topics and Exemplary Learning

Against the background of a matrix of internal (walk within) and external (journey outside) interconnectedness, the second step is constituted by the adaptation and implementation of teaching and learning principles which inherently facilitate students’ engagement with their own positionality in the world and facilitate understanding their own positions in relation to other human and non-human beings when it comes to globally relevant phenomena and issues.

Pedagogical principles known from the school subject of geography may serve as an area of inspiration. Here, learners not only explore the physical conditions that frame
life on earth (physical geography) but they also engage in discussion about the socio-cultural dimensions of human activity on the planet (anthropogeography). Generally, they do so starting in year five or six on the local level of their familiar surroundings, gradually widening the scope and scale of their explorations via the regional and continental levels to the global in later years (typically years ten and later). Questions of sustainability and ecology as well as globalization are central to this subject. However, because of the abundance of available examples for any given topic, educators need to make choices of which examples to use in class to help students understand the underlying dynamics and principles as well as develop relevant literacies. Over the course of increasingly deep processes of learning, the literacies developed by engaging with certain examples are then transferrable to other examples around the globe, which may feature their own unique sets of circumstances and preconditions. The focus is on physical, socio-cultural, and ecological questions and phenomena rather than locations.

Language education for sustainable development can learn from this. A more consistently topics-based curriculum paired with the principle of exemplary learning may be adapted and applied to English language education as well: Learners would then be invited to examine a global issue, focusing on a few (increasingly self-)selected exemplary contexts. Students would not learn about a country or a culture via a tourist-kit approach, rather, they would learn about socio-cultural and linguistic phenomena in situated contexts. With English being a global *lingua franca*, there is an abundance of examples, too. However, current guidelines and textbooks restrict learning to inner and outer circle nations, most prominently the UK and USA, and therefore do not nearly allow students to engage with the considerable variety of socio-cultural and linguistic circumstances found in the anglophone world (and beyond).

The shift towards a topics-based curriculum could be conceptualized as a part of existing approaches in English language education, which resulted from the communicative turn. This development led to the adoption of topic- or content-orientation as general principles of language education (see Legutke 2020); but the implementation of a consistently topics-based curriculum as it is envisioned here could be regarded as a more global iteration of content-orientation that foregoes a prioritization of a myopic target country focus. The following example demonstrates how a topics-based curriculum and exemplary learning may be applied to invite students to trace their own interconnectedness in concentric circles and thus better understand the global scale of everyday issues or phenomena.

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6 Arguing from a slightly different perspective and inspired by the concept of learning areas practiced at vocational schools, Diehr (2021, 34) arrives at a similar suggestion for English language education.

7 The example also illustrates the general compatibility of a topics-based curriculum and exemplary learning with project-based learning, thus opening the English language classroom for inter- and transdisciplinary learning. Furthermore, different iterations of teaching and learning processes are possible: Topics may be approached by means of problem-based learning, where students are confronted with questions or problems which they have to solve in the course of the learning process (see, e.g., Hmelo-Silver 2004; Allen, Donham and Bernhardt 2011) or educators may opt for a more phenomenon-based approach.
Learners could engage with the topic of water shortage or water as a human right in different contexts. For instance, using the example of a young water hawker in Nigeria, young learners could engage in reflection on water use and water access in different contexts, including their own. This idea was developed by Matz and Rogge (2020) and invites the learners to trace their own water consumption over a period of time. Over the years, students could revisit issues surrounding water scarcity and equal distribution of water, for instance by examining the ecological context of restrictions on water use in California or when addressing humanitarian crises in situations where water scarcity has already contributed to civil war and forced migration.

Following the idea of tracing experiences out on concentric circles, as universal a topic as "water" can gain in complexity over the years, which corresponds to the idea of a spiraling curriculum. The opportunities for language learning, including literature and culture, are endless – but they would be geared towards specific, exemplary contexts rather than nation states. Over time, learners would acquire a portfolio of visited contexts, which would enable them to draw comparisons between those contexts in consideration of existing preconditions and circumstances. Crucially, they would be encouraged to regard themselves as a part of the bigger picture.

Other topics which might be subjected to learning processes principled by the walk within and journey outside (see above) as well as exemplary learning might include (but are not limited to) a school day, family, the world of work, planning trips or a holiday, community service, recycling, security, social movements/social (in)justice, communication, energy, migration, natural and cultural world heritage, and the like.

Crucially, tracing out one's own experiences and positionality in concentric circles always involves relating new insights back to oneself. An example, according to Wagenschein, one of the pioneers of exemplary learning in Germany, is not a step towards the whole but rather a mirror of it (1964, 4; see also Korsgaard 2019). This is true for the example of oneself as well. Thus, relating issues and phenomena back to oneself facilitates accessing more and more complex phenomena over time, and it helps revisit global issues with a deepened understanding to identify new complexities which may previously have been invisible. Gradually accessing deeper, socially congruent levels of learning, students have to make sense and meaning when engaging with global issues. This might allow learners to understand more complex issues involving more complex interdependencies than nation-focused teaching would. A curriculum designed around topics rather than target countries is particularly promising in the context of ESD and GCED as complexities and interdependencies are inherent to questions associated with sustainability and global issues. The bigger picture in many of these cases escapes too myopic a focus and can only ever be approached when applying a wider perspective.
5. Towards Educating Social Beings

Designing learning processes according to the metaphors of the walk within and the journey outside, continuously tracing one's own experiences, subjectivity, and positionality in the world out in concentric circles and discursively relating insights back to oneself, might promote awareness for global issues and a capability of change of perspectives. The same issues or phenomena are seen in different contexts and necessitate different – or comparable – solutions worth discussing. Such an approach would be much more consistent with the ESD guidelines and with the requirements of the 21st century. It is not a completely new vision of how language education might be modelled in Germany; in fact, many federal curriculum guidelines for year 10 and the Abitur-stage (advanced learners from year 11) represent efforts to promote topics-based and exemplary learning (see, for instance TJMBS 2019). The latest edition of Saxony's curriculum for English (Staatsministerium für Kultus Freistaat Sachsen 2019) may serve as a guiding example as it has completely shifted toward topics-based learning rather than target country teaching. The precondition for consistent learning for sustainability is, in part, a change towards cultural learning in the sense of global citizenship education, which calls for more fluid, hybrid conceptions of culture and the acknowledgement of one's own interconnectedness in the world. As the example of Saxony shows, this topics-based curriculum would start as early as possible and, in the sense of a spiraling curriculum, it would allow learners to revisit familiar topics over time, with gradually increasing levels of complexity and abstraction. Thus, change of perspectives is included by design from a very early stage, and, for each topic, learners are encouraged to draw connections to themselves and others on different concentric circle levels. To do so, they may fall back onto knowledge and literacies acquired in the years prior to eventually make the transfer. In this way, English as a subject, too, can contribute to ESD without prioritizing nation-statism and thinking in national categories.

The wider intention of this effort and the type of education that needs to be carried out is one that seeks a harmonious unity of student and society, or individuals in the fullness of their social being. ESD is an ideal space to engage this type of curriculum given the inherent biosphere focus, which reorients students away from the myopia of anthropocentric curricula and towards a more balanced and integrated way of seeing themselves in the world. Learning founded on topics rather than target cultures/countries underscores that the significance of an issue or topic is not neatly categorical but quickly escapes those human-centric compositions, especially with regard to ecological concerns. The incongruence of the culture-specific way of thinking the world and language education in the world is now altogether obvious, and it is high time we act urgently to reconcile the onerous social reality with a social education worthy of the seriousness of the contemporary world. Time is indeed running out.

Works Cited


Federal Guidelines


Textbooks