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Schlagworte: education for sustainable development; teacher professionalization; internationalization  
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# Strengthening the Internationalization of Teacher Education through Education for Sustainable Development

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## Abstract

Higher education teacher education aims to equip future teachers with the skills needed to facilitate competent engagement among students in an increasingly globalized world. Due to a narrow, national perspective on the education system in Germany, teacher education has to a large extent remained domestically focused. This is evident in the low percentage of student teachers planning to engage in international experiences. Against this background, in what follows we examine how Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) can be integrated into teacher education in higher education and contribute to shifting the professional mindset of student teachers towards an international outlook on teaching and learning in schools. This, we will outline and also discuss possibilities for incorporating international perspectives into teacher education to broaden teacher education students' views on global crises and sustainable development in education.

Keywords: education for sustainable development, teacher professionalization, internationalization

## Outline

1. Internationalization of the Education System
2. Internationalization in Teacher Education
3. ESD as a Way to Internationalize Teacher Education
4. Outlook

## 1 Internationalization of the Education System

The establishment of the modern school and modern school systems is closely linked to the spread of the modern nation-state model, beginning with the French Revolution in 1789 in the old core of Europe and from there on worldwide (Adick, 1992), as the following data show: In 1940, the number of nation states worldwide was 65, today there are 193 (as of 2023). This considerable increase can be explained, among other things, by the dissolution of large political entities such as the Soviet Union, the transformation of colonial countries into nation states, particularly on the African continent, and the creation of new nation states resulting of wars. As a rule, nation-states set up

institutions that are typical for them, such as a legal, health or education systems. Today every nation-state also has its own school system (Meyer, Kamens & Benavot, 1992). This is a first form of internationalization of the modern school and modern school systems: their worldwide spread. A second form are the striking similarities of these school systems, particularly in terms of their organization, but increasingly also in view of their curricula. This is evidenced e.g. by international school performance studies such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS. A third form of the internationalization of the school system is represented by schools that are genuinely international, such as IB World Schools and European Schools, or schools that have adopted an international profile such as UNESCO Project Schools, ECO Schools or Europe Schools (Hornberg, 2010). Finally, a fourth form of internationalization of school systems and schools is the ethnic and language diversity of students due to worldwide processes of migrations (Mecheril, et al., 2016).

## 2 Internationalization in Teacher Education

Our presence is characterized by overlapping processes of (re)nationalization, internationalization, Europeanisation, transnationalization and globalization (Hornberg & Szakács-Behling, in press) and associated phenomena such as world trade, global migration and climate change. The “German Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs” (German: Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK) takes these developments into account in recommendations such as “European education in schools” (KMK, 2020), “Intercultural education and training in schools” (2013) or the joint recommendation of the KMK and the German UNESCO Commission (DUK): “Education for sustainable development in schools” (2007). On the one hand, these recommendations represent political intentions and position statements, on the other hand, they are intended to provide schools and teachers with initial guidance.

Although the internationalization of teacher education has gained increased attention in recent years (HRK, 2018), the learning processes of student teachers in higher education still tend to focus more on nationally oriented dimensions than other fields of study (Barsch & Dziak-Mahler, 2015). Wernisch explains this by noting that the everyday life of student teachers is rarely international (Wernisch, 2017, p. 10) with them being less mobile, except those studying a foreign language, and less represented in programs such as Erasmus (3.1%) (Wernisch, 2016). Their study environment is characterized by a low international appeal, and a perceived lack of relevance of international experiences (ibid.). This tendency is especially pronounced for student teachers aspiring to teach at elementary schools, where internationally oriented teaching offerings are less prevalent compared to other fields (Müller et al., 2023; Radhoff & Ruberg, 2020). However, efforts have been made to establish internationalization strategies in elementary school teacher education, with the quality and intensity of internationalization depending on the university location. The overarching goal is to enable elementary school students teachers to gain experience within an international context. At a conceptual level, the current focus lies on the professionalization processes involving other

cultures, educational systems, and teaching/learning opportunities (Kricke & Kürten, 2015). Christoforatu (2015) identifies the challenge of creating authentic occasions that establish an international context for the professionalization process of student teachers. One approach to address this challenge is through the cross-cutting task of “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD), which inherently carries an international focus.

### **3 ESD as a Way to Internationalize Teacher Education**

The aim of higher education for prospective teachers is to enable them to teach students in a way that equips them with the skills to competently navigate in an increasingly globalized world. The goal is to equip young learners with an international or global perspective, empowering them to proactively address the challenges and opportunities associated with globalization (cf. Ekanayake et al., 2020). ESD seeks to embed an engagement with the dynamically changing world, facing a continuous series of challenging events. The concept of ESD aims to enable individuals to engage in societal learning, comprehend, and influence processes for sustainable development, facilitate the implementation of the SDGs, and thereby foster the “Great Transformation” (Rieckmann, 2021, p. 13). This includes educational processes that can be situated within the aforementioned forms of internationalization of the education system, providing student teachers with opportunities to engage with them throughout their university teacher education. A critical and reflective analysis of global issues is central to ESD, so that it can encourage students to reflect on their own values and norms and contribute to an overarching discourse on values (Rieckmann, 2018). Following forms of internationalization as mentioned above, ESD is also about acquiring a “system competence” in order to understand relations and interactions in complex systems, such as education systems in nation states (Bollmann-Zuberbühler et al., 2016). Conversely, in the context of the internationalization of teacher education, sustainability skills are also coming into focus, as they involve a critical and reflective examination of other cultures, education systems and teaching/learning methods in order to question attitudes and values for one’s own role as a teacher (Kricke & Kürten, 2015). To promote sustainability skills such as critical thinking and systems thinking among student teachers, pedagogical approaches to ESD (elaborated in Rieckmann, 2018) are particularly beneficial in the context of the internationalization of teacher education, as they are participatory in character and enable the exchange of national and global perspectives. As a result, prospective teachers can experience being part of the world and being able to make a difference in the process of their own professionalization (Lang-Wojtasik et al., 2022). The shared focus on intercultural and global learning, promotion of systemic and critical thinking (Gregersen-Hermans, 2021), aligns the goals of both, ESD and internationalization, in teacher education. However, it is essential to provide prospective teachers, particularly those preparing for elementary schools, with practical methods and support (see e.g. Bürger & Enders, 2024, in this anthology; Morbach et al., 2024, in this anthology).

## 4 Outlook

Linking the concepts of “Internationalization of Teacher Education” and of “Education for Sustainable Development” can contribute to strengthening internationalization within teacher education. Thus, two lines of synergies can be identified, which in turn are considered together. On a content-related level, it is about the selection of central, global (educational) topics on which the student teachers enter into discourse with each other and which are simultaneously perceived by them as important for their own professionalization process. Linked to this, on a profession-orientated level, it is about promoting competencies that are closely linked to both concepts (see “critical thinking” and “systems thinking” above) and that are embedded in complex global contexts. The potential of both concepts lies in linking them by identifying overlaps and utilizing them for the development of internationally oriented ESD seminars. It is important to make these overlaps transparent to student teachers so that they can recognize possible links and adapt them for their own activities at school.

Access to international networks and cooperation is strengthened by a common focus on ESD content, which all potential partners worldwide are confronted with. Initiating international exchange can be supported by programs such as Erasmus+. Especially in the current program period 2021–2027, funded by the EU with 26 billion euros, various priorities such as “Environment and Climate Change” and “Digital Transformation” (Deutsche Nationale Agenturen im EU-Bildungsprogramm Erasmus+, 2023) are highlighted, closely related to ESD, offering opportunities for linking ESD and internationalization. This simultaneously builds a bridge to practical implementation in schools, as this program can be utilized both in higher education within teacher education and as exchange programs within schools.

As a first step, it is essential for instructors to engage with ESD and critically examine and reflect on their own global and intercultural perspectives in this context. This includes addressing their own prejudices, values, and assumptions, as emphasized by Gregersen-Hermans (2021). Networks currently emerging and growing at higher education focusing on ESD and the internationalization of teacher education offer a high potential. Connecting these networks could strengthen the implementation of both concepts within teacher education and, furthermore, increase their outreach. The integration of both concepts has the potential to not only incorporate yet another concept at university (in higher education) or school level but to become more deeply involved with what has already been developed.

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