

Hypothesis

Education for Sustainable Development in Germany: Governance and Inter-Organizational Perspectives—A Discussion on Qualitative Research Regarding the Municipal Level

Ronald Gebauer *, Anna-Luise Schönheit and Dieter Rink

Department of Urban and Environmental Sociology, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research–UFZ, Permoserstraße 15, 04318 Leipzig, Germany

* Correspondence: ronald.gebauer@ufz.de

Abstract: The background of this conceptual paper constitutes the manifold efforts in Germany to establish and continue to develop municipal ESD landscapes. Related research is directed toward identifying factors which are either favorable or unfavorable for ESD implementation. Against this background, we outline the process of deriving research questions for new qualitative research. This is realized by adopting a governance analytical perspective. On the basis of a literature review, we elaborate on the state of research and discuss two promising governance approaches, along with associated empirical findings. Along with a further literature review, we also address why we consider expert interviews to be an appropriate approach for data collection and analysis. We conclude that it is important to not only focus on the coordination of collaborations, but also include the history of municipal cooperation, existing ESD (self-)understanding of involved actors, and collaboration practices. On this basis, we identify research gaps and specify research questions, which can serve as a basis for further research on ESD. Corresponding empirical research may optimize municipal ESD implementation processes.

Keywords: Education for Sustainable Development; structural anchoring; municipalities; collective action; educational governance; collaborative governance; expertise; expert interviews

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1. Introduction

The transition of contemporary societies toward a sustainable way of life and economy is one of the key challenges of our time. With reference to selected core aspects of human wellbeing, humankind has already exceeded the planetary boundaries by a wide margin (see, e.g., [1], with regard to biodiversity loss; see, e.g., [2], with regard to the continued increase in carbon-related emissions which can be classified as worrisome; see, e.g., [3]). Quick solutions, if technically feasible, are frequently destined to fail due to political or social reasons. Although people are aware of the risks that threaten the foundation of human existence or at least the wellbeing of humankind, they do not behave accordingly. Thus, how can we bring about a decisive and essential transformation toward a sustainable world?

Following the political program of the UN and UNESCO, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is one of or perhaps even the key element to shape a sustainable world. In Germany, dealing with ESD has been a tradition of more than 20 years (see, e.g., [4]). In particular, the United Nations' proclamation of the UN Decade "Education for Sustainable Development" (2005–2014) [5], the UNESCO's "Global Action Program Education for Sustainable Development" (2015–2019) [6], and Germany's "National Action Plan on Education for Sustainable Development" [7] all offer favorable guidelines for a

growing public awareness and an increasing supply of relevant educational opportunities. The declared objective of the “National Action Plan”, however, is to complement and even transform the existing training and education landscape through ESD. Furthermore, the “National Action Plan” provides suggestions for appropriate action to bring about a reliable structural implementation of ESD at the local level. Specifically, it recommends the establishment of collaborative structures between several institutional actors that set up and form ESD landscapes, such as municipal administrations, educational institutions and schools, vocational training or universities, and the field of nonformal and informal education, offered for instance by civil society organizations (see, e.g., [7] (p. 25, pp. 80–82)).

It is within this context that the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research directs considerable efforts toward driving this process forward by running implementation projects and affiliated research on the municipal and county level. One of these projects is the “ESD Competence Center”, which was launched in 2020 [8] (p. 1). Its major objective is to assist German municipalities in their efforts to implement ESD in local educational landscapes by combining process support and process evaluation.

The paper at issue is an extended version of an earlier contribution in German language [9]. It is connected to this project and focuses on the preliminary work of qualitative research on ESD implementation in German cities and districts. In this context, we consider appropriate governance approaches (Section 2) to probe their analytical potential for our yet-to-be-defined research questions, which are elaborated later in this article. Below, the central theoretical frame of reference of the educational governance approach is outlined first (Section 2.1). Subsequently, we discuss a few empirical contributions related to this perspective. This step highlights the particular added value of this governance approach in revealing mechanisms that are relevant to anchor ESD within municipal educational landscapes. In terms of content, the discussed research is concerned with establishing collaboration between actors in order to implement ESD at the municipal level. The educational governance perspective is further complemented by a look at other approaches from interorganizational or governance research, which have so far been discussed less or not explicitly in the context of anchoring ESD within educational landscapes. The theoretical program of “collaborative governance” is central to this investigation (Section 2.2). This additional perspective offers relevant references that are related to establishing and fostering cooperation, and it ensures that the whole process of inter-organizational collaboration is taken into account. In Section 2.3, this perspective is further explored by focusing on the role of various institutional designs and forms of negotiation assistance that can significantly aid the implementation process. Then, in Section 2.4, the focus turns to expertise and expert research. This approach is fitting since governance analytical questions (such as policymaking with regard to developing municipal educational landscapes through programs such as “Lernende Regionen” and “Lernen vor Ort”, the development of data-based municipal education management, and the implementation of ESD) are often combined in empirical research using the methodological–empirical approach of qualitative expert interviews. In this context, this article investigates why it is useful to address participants as experts in the context of qualitative research.

In Section 3, we specify research gaps and present research questions obtained with the help of the discussed governance literature. As already stated, the research questions are answered with the help of qualitative expert interviews. In Section 4, we resume the outlined governance analytic considerations and describe how we drew on selected key aspects to determine the research questions and how these can contribute to new insights within our research. Likewise, we elaborate on how we can utilize the expected research findings or even where we intend to implement our findings to contribute to further scientific discussion and realization in practice.

2. An Inspection of Contributions to Governance Perspectives and Relevant Literature on Expert Interviews as a Basis for Qualitative Research on ESD

2.1. The Educational Governance Approach

The educational governance approach focuses on real-world actor relationships within collaborations with its theoretical–analytical and educational perspective, with regard to the introduction of ESD. According to Maag Merki, Langer, and Altrichter, the research program of the educational governance approach can be summarized as follows:

“The focus [of the educational governance approach] is on the analysis of the emergence, maintenance, and transformation of social orders and services in the educational system from the perspective of coordinating cooperation between different actors in and between different levels in the multilevel system” [10] (p. 11, own translation).

This particular educational governance perspective is based on more general assumptions that go beyond the simplistic notion of control and steering (like other governance approaches). For a long time, the premise was that the state officials (or, in the case of city or regional administrations, municipal) with extensive and far-reaching powers would ultimately implement the changes deemed necessary or arrange for their implementation (hierarchical governance).

More modern approaches to governance have since abandoned this idea. This broadens the view to include stakeholders whose influence on the implementation of educational, sociopolitical, or other programs has been neglected so far. Within the context of municipalities, these actors are, for example, municipal administrations who are responsible for the implementation of a specific policy measure. For the education sector, which is the focus here, actors are usually the departments of the municipal administration which specify the resources and products required for the intended implementation, also with regard to specific arrangements concerning the intended effects of the specific measure. However, municipal administrations in Germany are not in charge of school curricula.

The relevance of this newer perspective becomes even more apparent when addressing problems that, given limited legal and economic resources (e.g., in municipal administrations), can only be solved through cooperation with other stakeholders or actors (e.g., within the context of municipalities: actors such as schools, universities, civil society actors, or enterprises, which already offer ESD or intend to offer it). Such projects in the field of education can be seen as an attempt to produce a collective asset that would be impossible for a single authoritative actor (e.g., local politics and administration) to attain due to limited resources or skills or expertise.

Take, for example, the program “Lernen vor Ort” in Germany, which was intended to establish local educational landscapes (and not ESD) in Germany. Lindner et al. [11] (p. 101) characterized this program in a way that, in the cooperation process between municipalities and educational providers, tasks of inter-organizational governance were first addressed. In particular, this concerned networking by establishing contacts (bridge-building function, starting from the municipal administration to the cooperating actors in civil society and foundations which support this program). However, tasks of intra-organizational governance were also processed, which focused on the structural anchoring within the municipal administration.

As can also be seen in this example, the educational governance approach focuses clearly on the actors involved, since no action and, thus, no coordination of action are possible without actors. Here, however, a relational perspective dominates in educational governance research, which considers the relationships or the interaction of actors to be central (e.g., [12], p. 356). Thus, educational governance focuses its attention on constellations of actors rather than on individual actors themselves (ibid.). When it comes to analyzing action coordination in constellations of actors, one focus of the educational governance approach is on rights of disposal (ibid.). In a narrower sense, these are norms or standards (also denoted as legal resources), such as laws, regulations, and rules of

conduct, which can or must be referred to in decision making. We pay additional attention within the framework of the educational governance approach to capabilities of disposal (resources, such as money, time, and competencies), which significantly influence the behavior of actors in cooperative relationships. In contrast to resources (rights of disposal and capabilities of disposal), the analysis of performance and quality (provision of educational services) has not been addressed to the same degree so far (*ibid.*).

Moreover, the literature on ESD that focuses on its structural implementation within municipalities (predominantly empirical studies inspired by the educational governance approach and based on qualitative interviews or focus group discussions) has examined both actor constellations and disposable resources. Reviewing available contributions shows, for example, that the implementation of ESD is seen as advantageous by the actors involved if it is directly linked to already existing experiences and values of these actors (see, e.g., [13] (p. 12)). This is particularly problematic when ESD is introduced within a specific educational area, such as early childhood education, primary and secondary school education, vocational training, university education, or adult education. Here, it is helpful when a common understanding of ESD is developed in negotiations between relevant local actors and potential cooperation structures are explored (*ibid.*, p. 13).

Furthermore, studies have provided evidence that overburdening municipalities with additional tasks beyond their mandatory duties (as is the case with education in Germany's municipalities to a great degree) generally has a detrimental effect on the structural anchoring of ESD [14] (p. 2, 8). It is also disadvantageous when there is a high degree of formalization within specific education sectors, such as in school education or vocational training, or the existence of other organizational and structural hurdles or obstacles (*ibid.*, p. 13). Empirical network analyses reveal that the introduction of ESD has so far been dominated by non-school actors characterized by a high degree of autonomy. These communicate with each other frequently within their fields (city councils, NGOs, and churches) and their ties with each other are marked by a high degree of mutual trust [15] (p. 11) (see also [8], p. 7). In addition, it is beneficial to link other topics that are already being addressed in the local context with ESD [14] (p. 8, 12), as well as new forms of collaboration with other actors, e.g., networks, projects, or collaborations with other municipalities. Boundary work in the sense of crossing or bridging existing (socially constructed) demarcation lines between different areas, e.g., between employees of local government and civil society actors, has also been identified as particularly effective for the implementation of ESD (*ibid.*, pp. 13–15). Such demarcation lines are less pronounced for individuals who have worked in or gained experience in two or more relevant fields. For this reason, the creation of specialized educational training (on the technique of reframing, see also Section 2.4) is recommended, which are suitable for developing or expanding the competencies of the actors primarily involved or which will be involved in the municipal ESD implementation process (*ibid.*, p. 15).

2.2. Inter-Organizational Perspectives and the Collaborative Governance Approach

As can be seen from the discussion so far, the educational governance approach, with its theoretical–analytical and education-related perspective, focuses on real-world actor relationships in cooperation, with regard to the introduction of ESD. However, general inter-organizational research has also been interested in inter-organizational cooperation among public or governmental institutions, civil society, and/or private actors. This also applies to nonhierarchical and nonmarket relations (see, e.g., [16] (pp. 446–448)). However, so far, this perspective has not been used in the case of collaborations among actors involved in educational affairs. One way to study such collaborations with this research lens is by using the concept of “collaborative governance”, which Ansell and Gash defined as follows: “A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” [17] (p. 544). The analytical focus of this approach is not only

on rights and capabilities of disposal or performance and quality; instead, it considers the entire process of inter-organizational cooperation (see, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 548–550 and Figure 1).

Considering the starting conditions (previous history of cooperation and initial level of trust) as a point of departure, the institutional design (basic rules of cooperation or forms and quality of cooperation) and “leadership” or, more aptly, “negotiation assistance” emerge as varieties of negotiation support. Subsequently, increased attention is paid to the cyclically defined collaborative or cooperation process. At the end of this process, the achievements or, more generally speaking, the “outcomes” come into focus. The latter address not only the realization status of the intended goals, but also the unintended (positive, negative, and neutral) results or side-effects of this process. A key advantage of this process framework over other similar hypothetical models (such as in the management literature; see, e.g., [18]) is that it is based on empirical evidence. It was developed in discussion and with regard to numerous (initially, a total of 137) empirical cases within the course of a meta-analysis [17] (p. 548). Additionally, it differentiates into further stages, which are briefly presented here (see in the following *ibid.*, pp. 550–561):

(a) Starting conditions

The focus is first on the key starting conditions that can become resources or liabilities in the process of collaboration/cooperation. They encompass the history of the actors’ relationships (as the history of previous collaboration or any existing conflicts and, thus, in the narrower sense of the trust or mistrust that existed at the beginning). They likewise include power or resource imbalances between involved actors. Moreover, the actors’ incentives to participate in the new collaboration should be noted.

(b) Facilitative Leadership

After the onset of the collaboration process, one crucial challenge is the specific form of negotiation support (“assisted negotiation”), process management, or “leadership”. As an essential core component, this aspect is to be considered as “[...] a critical ingredient in bringing parties to the table and for steering them through the rough patches of the collaborative process” (Ansell/Gash 2008, p. 554). This task may be shared among the actors, or they may be the responsibility of a single actor in the concerning actor constellation. Negotiation support or related efforts can significantly facilitate the negotiation process.

(c) Institutional Design

With Ansell and Gash’s process model, the selected “basic protocols and ground rules” emerge as the specific institutional design of the collaborative process under consideration. The term “institutional design” refers not only to the rules by which decisions are made, but also to whether and how they are communicated. Of interest here are also the elements that support the negotiation process or the roles or functions that the participants assume, which facilitate the process of cooperation. The chosen form of institutional design can have a decisive impact on the acceptance of the cooperative process by the actors involved and, thus, on the formation and development of trust, as well as on further participation and commitment.

(d) The Collaborative Process

Eventually, the dynamic and cyclical cooperation process is considered in its specific design/dynamics, which, proceeding from the starting conditions, the chosen institutional design, and the chosen negotiation management and support, leads to intermediate and final results. For Ansell and Gash, the initial and further face-to-face dialogues are an essential stage for the actors involved, enabling them to explore the opportunities and advantages of cooperation. In the best case, this facilitates the building of trust, which is an essential prerequisite for developing a shared understanding of the problem and for agreeing on joint cooperation objectives.

(e) (Intermediate) Outcomes

Additionally, some of the case studies, reviewed by Ansell and Gash, suggest that positively evaluated intermediate outcomes are crucial for the cooperation process to continue to thrive and succeed. However, the achievement of the cooperation objectives is not debated in Ansell and Gash's model of the cooperative process. Instead, they are discussed in conjunction with a recently installed database of relevant case studies and some inspiring contributions of the Journal "Policy and Society" (see, e.g., [19]).

2.3. In-Depth Study of Institutional Design and Negotiation in Collaborative Governance-Inspired Research

One of the contributions of the abovementioned journal with the title "Taming the Snake in Paradise: Combining Institutional Design and Leadership to Enhance Collaborative Innovation" (ibid.) elaborates on the considerations outlined in the previous section even more profoundly. This article provides an overview of forms of institutional designs and types of negotiation management with regard to the successful implementation of innovative solutions. It, thus, focuses on the question of whether and how is it possible to tap into the diversity of perspectives, understandings of relevant problems, and the creative potential of those involved in order to define common cooperation targets. However, the risk of such projects failing is not negligible, if only because of the diversity of actors and their different understanding of the problem to be addressed. Therefore, it is important that "in order to prevent diversity from resulting in either destructive conflicts or a dialogue of the deaf, a certain degree of alignment between the diverse partners is needed" (ibid., p. 596).

As already mentioned, the term institutional design subsumes the ground rules for the collaboration and the decisions to be made, and it is supplemented by the degree of communication or transparency and inclusion of those involved. Moreover, this also encompasses the chosen way of conducting negotiations or leadership. Within this context, "leadership" does not primarily mean to achieve intended goals by influencing the motivation and attention of the participants. Rather the emphasis is on "[...] adaptive activities to bring actors together, create trust, enhance information sharing, facilitate collaboration, spur mutual learning, manage risk, and track results" (ibid., p. 597). With regard to conducting negotiations, the research team of Torfing recognized various functions/roles in the conduct of negotiations as decisive (ibid., pp. 595–598). This encompasses the roles of the following players:

1. The convener, who invites relevant actors to meetings, who presents the current problem and frames it in such a way that it can only be solved through cooperation, who paves the way to link perspectives, with regard to future cooperation targets, and who in the face of diverging interests sets the course for establishing the necessary mutual trust.
2. The steward, whose task is to safeguard the collaborative process against external pressure and adverse influences. This is to ensure that the actors involved have the necessary motivation and time to develop a common understanding of the problem and cooperation targets.
3. The mediator, who responds to emerging conflicts by offering help to mitigate or resolve those disputes. Likewise, they have the role of translator of different perspectives and vocabulary. This helps to establish a common basis for creative problem solving.
4. The role of the catalyst, who provides and addresses alternative perspectives and/or gets other actors involved to share their perspectives relevant to problem solving. This input encourages actors to think outside the box and taps into their creative potential to find innovative solutions.

Lastly, with their analyses of 32 empirical case studies, Torfing et al. (ibid., pp. 602–609) were able to substantiate that the roles of steward, mediator, and catalyst are essential to successful cooperation. Moreover, it appears that it is not always so important that the

decision-making process is transparent for all the parties involved. Nevertheless, the existence and communication of the processual ground rules of collaboration should not be dispensed with. This, however, seems not to be a necessary condition. Some collaborative processes seem to get along without explicitly stated ground rules. Here, it was apparently sufficient that the role of the convener is filled. This highlights the fact that building trust can, to a certain extent, be achieved both by communicating ground rules and through the efforts of a convener. In other words, the evidence seems to indicate that they are functional equivalents.

2.4. *The Role of Expertise and Expert Interviews within the Research of Collaborative Processes*

The above discussion of selected governance concepts suggests that these theoretical–analytical perspectives can be usefully combined with appropriate empirical approaches. One of these techniques is conducting qualitative expert interviews. The following can be regarded as a basic starting point of dealing with expert or expertise research: municipal administrative staff usually cannot manage the integration of ESD into the structure of regional and local educational landscapes without the help of others. They are rather dependent on “civil society activities [...] and the associated expertise” [20] (p. 20, own translation). Basically, it can be assumed that experts are to be encountered within the context of professional or vocational activities. However, as Meuser and Nagel pointed out, the experts are often not to be found “at the top ranks, but at the second or third ranks, since this is where decisions are usually prepared and implemented, and because this is where the most and most detailed knowledge on internal structures and operations is available” [21] (pp. 443–444, own translation). Hitzler stated, with regard to professional contexts within modern societies, that one can speak in “a profession-related sense of an ‘expert society’” [22] (p. 16, own translation). In addition, Meuser and Nagel pointed out that expert interviews can be used to “trace such knowledge stock that is relevant for explaining social change” [23] (p. 191, own translation), which is certainly not trivial for the analysis of social innovations such as ESD. Furthermore, special knowledge or expertise is not simply factual knowledge. Rather, the knowledge of the expert “encompasses typically non-ordinary knowledge, which ‘one’ needs, in order to act competently in a field” [21] (p. 26, own translation). These are decision-making competencies appropriate for solving specific (individual or social) problems of action [24] (p. 8–9).

When reading the literature on the sociology of knowledge, however, it becomes clear that self and external attributions of experts can be regarded as labels, “[...] which are made—by whomever—on the basis of specific claims and/or insinuations of competence” [22] (p. 6, own translation). The latter do refer to special knowledge or expertise. Nonetheless, the de facto possession or availability of knowledge and problem-solving capacity is only proven in practice. With extensive emancipation processes (e.g., women’s liberation, student movement, and antinuclear and ecological movement) and the strengthening of civil society actors since the 1970s, specific societal-relevant knowledge can be found more and more frequently outside the typical labor market context than before (see, e.g., [25] (p. 467) and [26]). Therefore, with a focus on researching local policy processes, experts per definition should also include people from outside of state and commercial organizations. This particularly applies to those with expertise on a local level (e.g., NGO activists, civil society initiatives, voluntary services, and self-help groups), since “all of these actors acquire specific knowledge because of their activity and because they have privileged access to information—not because of their formal education. Their expertise is also socially institutionalized and embedded within a specific functional context, albeit in a different way than the professionally based one” [25] (p. 468, own translation).

This particularly applies to the field of ESD. Certainly, against this background, it is not surprising that, within the research on ESD, civil-society and other actors are sought out as experts, be it in the case quantitative (e.g., Delphi-studies) or qualitative research (expert interviews).

For example, a Delphi study on the first UN World Decade in 2009 revealed that the experts interviewed in this course considered a positive development, i.e., that the population in 2020 would behave according to sustainability criteria, to be unlikely [27] (p. 14). The likewise desirable structural anchoring of ESD with regard to some educational areas (e.g., vocational training and universities) in a projection to the year 2020 was also rated to be implausible, as well as the scenario that ESD would be taught on a regular basis at that point (*ibid.*, pp. 10–11). Concerning selected educational aspects or fields, however, the experts assessed the anchoring of ESD far more favorably (e.g., pre-primary and primary education curricula). The expert survey also showed that the term ESD in relation to environmental education was a subject of controversial debate as early as the time the study was conducted (*ibid.*, p. 12).

Most recently, other qualitative studies were also based on expert interviews. As an exemplary study, Singer-Brodowski, Etzkorn, and Seggern conducted 66 interviews with experts from educational and other relevant fields, such as early childhood education, primary and secondary education, vocational training, tertiary education, and municipalities. The focus here was on the dissemination and the implementation of ESD (see, e.g., [13]).

For the following considerations two questions arise: What comprises the expertise of ESD-relevant actors? How can this expertise be used within the framework of the structural establishment of ESD or, rather, what are the major obstacles and hurdles that need to be overcome?

Ad 1)

What comprises the expertise of ESD-relevant actors?

Administrative municipal actors dispose of legal resources or capital, i.e., the authority to apply their own rules, and financial resources, i.e., their own or public funds. Civil society actors dispose of social capital in the form of network capital and trust, as well as their cultural capital in the form of acquired experience and specific knowledge. Bourdieu's theory of capital, which differentiates among economic, cultural, and social capital, is well suited for a research perspective that focuses on resources or capital (see, e.g., [28]). With regard to expert knowledge or expertise, Bourdieu's theory of capital has rarely been applied. By and large, this research field is dominated by psychological approaches that emphasize the value of talent/intellect, motivation, time expenditure, and disposal of resources (e.g., money and indispensable materials and instruments), which are necessary for the acquisition of expertise (see, e.g., [29]; from a practice perspective, see also [30] (pp. 41–45)). Those terms, maybe with the exception of talent and intellect, can be translated easily into Bourdieu's theory of capital (e.g., indispensable materials such as books as expression of cultural capital). This makes it possible to address expertise within a larger societal context. The varieties of capital mentioned are convertible and can be mobilized [28] (p. 231). Moreover, focusing on the acquisition of expertise in the course of primary or secondary socialization, the forms of capital are highly interdependent (e.g., as the combined effect of the acquisition of social capital or contacts through expertise as cultural capital qua incorporation of special knowledge (see, e.g., [30] (pp. 138–161) with regard to the emergence of digital expertise in young people).

Such expert knowledge has also developed in terms of environmental concerns and sustainability in the course of the critical examination of the deficits of the modernization processes in the last decades of the past century, with regard to topics such as “women in the Third World or women's health and self-help in the case of the women's movement, nuclear reprocessing in the case of the anti-nuclear movement, or water protection or ecological agriculture in the case of the environmental movement” [26] (p. 294, own translation). In this same context, educational processes started, which found their expression in alternative types of knowledge acquisition, as observed by Rucht: “An expression of the hunger for factual information is, among other things, the high level of participation in self-initiated and externally initiated educational events and conferences, the importance of self-organized conference venues, and the practical and symbolic relevance accorded

to institutions such as the 'Volkshochschule Wyhler Wald' or the 'Freie Volksuniversität Startbahn West', which had come into being in the course of exposed conflicts" (ibid., p. 295, own translation). Even though the environmental movement lost momentum intermittently, the processes of acquiring additional knowledge on environmental aspects continued, as well as subsequently on economic, social, and ecological sustainability. Here, a trend toward new fields and new forms of action, as well as toward professionalization and institutionalization, can be observed [31] (pp. 505–506), [32].

This provides a rich pool of incorporated factual knowledge of the civil society actors. In the case of the structural anchoring of ESD on the municipal level, it decisively depends on the mobilization of this special knowledge or edges in expertise by involving those civil society actors, "since they practically implement the concept [ESD] and it is also their contributions that are to be boosted by establishing structures on the one hand and by state actors on the other hand" [20] (p. 26, own translation). In addition to factual knowledge, successful implementation processes of innovative practices (such as programs with a core focus on sustainable development or education for sustainable development) depend on ongoing work which particularly concerns the process level, if one does not want to leave the progress of such processes to chance. With reference to the latter process, expertise is not to be underestimated and is currently a major desideratum of collaborative governance-inspired research (see, e.g., [33]).

Ad 2)

How can the expertise of ESD-relevant actors be used within the process of the structural establishment of ESD or, rather, what are the major obstacles and hurdles that need to be overcome?

In particular, the involvement of civil society actors in paving the way for the structural anchoring of ESD is all but self-evident for the following reason: in the recent past, civil society actors—due to their commitment and strong degree of networking with social movements—played a crucial role in creating learning opportunities in the fields of environmental education, global education, and ESD (Duvencek/Singer-Brodowski/Seggern 2020, p. 24). Moreover, they were involved in preparing the objectives and measures of the German National Action Plan [20] (p. 19).

With the World Action Plan's ambition to establish ESD within the municipal structures, there has been a change of roles. While the civil society actors involved have so far contributed to the conceptualization of the implementation of ESD, they are now required to participate in anchoring ESD within the municipal structures (ibid., p. 25). However, they are "ambivalent and even critical of these political determined structures, which are increasingly shaping this process in the course" (ibid., p. 19, own translation), and they are only inclined to use their own resources for this purpose under specific circumstances (ibid.). This ambivalent to critical attitude, however, may have deeper roots.

In turn, the concept of "ways of knowing" (WOK) can be discussed. Accordingly, each actor involved within a governance process "has (...) its own way of looking at a problem, thinking about a problem, and dealing with a problem" [34] (p. 211). More precisely, a "WOK is how one interprets the elements in a policy space and makes sense of the relationships among them. It is a narrative or story that holds all of the pieces together in a relatively coherent way. The elements include people, objects, ideas, and relationships among them" [35] (p. 2). Here, the concerned knowledge consists of (1) a factual component (aspects that are perceived in relation to a specific problem that is to be solved), (2) a normative component (worldview, belief system, and interpretative frame), and a (3) conative or behavioral component (decisions on how and what measures to develop or implement in the face of (1) and (2)) [34] (p. 211). Alternatively, as van Buuren aptly puts it, "a WOK, thus, defines what an actor sees (their 'policy space': the elements perceived to be associated with a certain issue or problem), how they see it (their normative interpretations of that policy space and their perception of the problem in relation to it), and how they deal with it (their actions as based on these observations and interpretations)" (ibid.). Against the background of this concept, whereby knowledge is an integral part of being,

the mobilization or commissioning of the competencies of experts (or expertise) appears as a highly presuppositional endeavor. One way of still tapping into this stock of knowledge for intended change processes is an approach that van Buuren refers to as “inclusive knowledge management” (ibid., pp. 214–217). The purpose of this technique is to nudge the actors involved to exchange their views about the problem and to encourage them to agree on a pool of aspects that are jointly considered relevant (“inclusive” or “joint fact-finding”, ibid., p. 214). Notwithstanding, this is often not sufficient to reach a shared understanding of the problem, since the differences between worldviews are too vast and seem unbridgeable. In those cases, van Buuren additionally suggests the technique of reframing, in which the actors involved are asked to put themselves in each other’s roles (ibid., p. 214–215). It is only when a common understanding of the problem has been reached that they can turn their attention to further cooperation issues (ibid.). From these considerations, it can be concluded that building collaborations is anything but certain, unless one systematically addresses different “ways of knowing”. Furthermore, it remains questionable whether they can be stabilized in the long term, which is a shortcoming with regard to legally regulated political interventions.

An investigation of the specifics of expert knowledge, particularly with regard to joint fact-finding and understanding problems in the local anchoring of ESD, within the framework of qualitative research seems definitely worthwhile in view of the literature analysis reported here.

3. Research Gaps and Research Questions

With the focus on the implementation of ESD on a local level, as it is intended, for example, within the framework of the “ESD Competence Center” in Germany mentioned in Section 1, it seems appropriate to discuss the presented empirical results of governance-inspired research, with regard to new qualitative research. As Schmachtel and Olk stated, in the context of the establishment of educational landscapes, “the objective is to improve the provision of local educational opportunities, which is to be achieved by the joint planning and collaboration of various actors within the framework of local educational networks” [36] (p. 10, own translation). To identify relevant research gaps, we used an analysis grid previously developed by the process evaluation team (see, e.g., [37]). On this basis and in consideration of the governance and research literature discussed above, research questions addressing these research gaps were derived.

The brief overview below provides an account of the research gaps found and the research questions developed.

Research Gap 1: Barely existing or limited empirical findings on previous ESD practices in municipalities, as well as on the expectations of involved actors for the municipal implementation of ESD.

In order to fill this research gap, we are interested in the starting conditions of collaborative processes (as outlined in Section 2.2 with reference to the empirically based analysis by Ansell and Gash [17]). In this regard, we focus on the initial stages of municipal ESD processes. One focus here is on the relevant framework conditions that are central to the desired implementation process, as well as on the available resources that can be provided and used for the implementation of ESD within the already existing local educational landscapes. Furthermore, this perspective allows accounting for expectations of relevant ESD stakeholders and which factors they consider to facilitate or hinder the implementation process. In this regard, it is also plausible to identify and further incorporate external influences on those assessments. For example, recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or migration flows in the context of the Russia–Ukraine War challenge municipalities such that, e.g., budget and personnel adjustments need to be undertaken. Against this background, we propose the following set of research questions:

Research Question 1

- (a) What framework conditions do the interviewed actors (as part of the municipal educational landscapes) face and what resources are available to them for ESD implementation? What opportunities and challenges in ESD implementation do they identify?
- (b) What positive effects do the involved actors expect from the municipal anchoring of ESD? Moreover, what effort do they see as necessary for their municipality? Additionally, according to the perception of the actors, how is the ESD process in the respective municipality equipped with financial resources and personnel? With regard to the implementation of ESD, what factors do they identify as success factors or obstacles?
- (c) With regard to the municipal anchoring of ESD, which difficulties (if relevant, also facilitations), if any, do the involved actors expect from the COVID-19 pandemic and what negative consequences do they fear from Russian invasion in Ukraine?

Research Gap 2: Lack of empirical findings on ESD (self-)understanding of involved stakeholders (actors from local politics and administration, educational institutions, enterprises, and civil society initiatives) in the investigated model municipalities.

With this research gap, we are again interested in the starting conditions of collaborative processes (see again Section 2.2 with reference to the empirically based analysis by Ansell and Gash). With regard to the municipal ESD processes under consideration, we direct our attention to already prevailing understandings of ESD among the most relevant local ESD actors (see again Section 2.1). Here, we focus on the existing knowledge, if any, of what is understood by ESD and how it is practiced by educational institutions or civil society actors. With reference to the findings of van Buuren and different ways of knowing [34] (see again Section 2.4), we consider ESD understandings to be one of the major resources, even if the process of reaching a common understanding is sometimes burdensome for the negotiating parties. Against this background, the question also arises whether and to what extent these understandings of ESD differ between actors of different fields of action, e.g., municipal administration, formal and nonformal education, and civil society. Therefore, our second research question and its encompassing aspects are as follows:

Research Question 2

- (a) Which ESD (self-)understandings exist among the involved ESD actors?
- (b) Are differentiation lines between the involved actors identifiable, running along ESD-relevant fields of action?

Research Gap 3: Lack of empirical findings on the organization of the ESD implementation process and on the practices of collaboration (e.g., communication of the rules according to which decisions are to be made and forms of negotiation).

In the course of addressing this research gap, we would like to draw attention once again to the findings of the educational governance perspective. This approach emphasizes the importance of actor constellations and focuses attention on the structures and mechanisms of joint action coordination. In this context, the use of disposal rights and capabilities is also brought into view (see again Section 2.1). To fill this research gap, we would also like to refer once more to the findings of Ansell and Gash [17] and further governance-inspired research literature (see again Sections 2.2 and 2.3). Here, we pivot our research focus to potential different formats of meetings that aim to gather relevant actors around the table. With reference to Torfing et al. [19] (p. 597), we support their statement that the effect of institutional design on collaborative networks' ability to coordinate and provide public services has already been well studied, but not with regard to innovations, such as ESD. Hence, we also address the institutional ground rules of the specific collaboration, as well as assess the inclusiveness of the ESD processes examined and how relevant ESD actors communicate, share information, and assess the transparency of the negotiations concerned (elements of institutional design). Additionally, various functions or roles which the participating ESD actors take on during the negotiations

(e.g., “convener” and “steward”; see again Section 2.3) may be considered. Furthermore, the focus may be placed on the management of the ESD process, on the questions of which forms of negotiation support are applied within the respective ESD implementation processes, and how intermediate outcomes (such as successful joint fact-finding, joint inventories of already existing ESD education offers, and achievement of common ESD understandings or cooperation objectives; see Sections 2.1 and 2.4) are tracked or evaluated by the interviewed experts. These aspects condense into a third set of research questions:

Research Question 3

- (a) What are the formats and elements that characterize the respective negotiations for the municipal anchoring of ESD? Are there forms of institutional design that promote or slow down the negotiations?
- (b) Are there forms of negotiation support that facilitate the processes’ progress or that get stalled processes moving again? Moreover, what is the effect of intermediate outcomes on the way to anchoring ESD in the participating model municipalities?

4. Conclusions and Outlook

In this paper, we discussed governance and inter-organizational perspectives and their implications regarding the implementation processes of ESD at a municipal level. We explored the potential of different governance approaches to address previously identified research gaps and, more narrowly, developed research questions on this basis. For this reason, firstly, we outlined the key theoretical reference lines of the educational governance approach (e.g., emphasis on actor constellations and less on individual actors, as well as on the rights and capabilities of disposal, which can lead to new structures of regulation that may be expedient for the implementation and further development of innovations, e.g., ESD) and discussed some application examples within empirical research, inspired by this approach. Secondly, we complemented this governance perspective by focusing on some central reference lines of the collaborative governance approach, which likewise relate to the establishment and continuation of cooperation, and which illustrate the processual nature of the implementation of innovations with the participation of different actors in more detail (e.g., starting conditions, further framework conditions, such as facilitating factors, negotiation assistance and institutional design, and last but not least outcomes). Thirdly, in an effort to substantiate the selected method of expert interviews, we discussed the potential scientific added value of this empirical data collection method and analysis approach by focusing on the expertise of relevant actors. We asked how their expertise can potentially be leveraged within the process of the structural establishment of ESD and what factors need to be taken into account.

Combining the two different governance perspectives and translating them methodologically in expert interviews represent as a suitable research repository that can be fruitfully used for answering the proposed and related research questions. Qualitative research results achieved in such a framework can contribute to a better understanding of the issues raised and can be used to optimize ESD implementation processes at a municipal level.

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