



FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

# A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC STUDY EMBRACING THE ‘WICKEDNESS’ OF EDUCATION AS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:

Mapping the qualitatively different ways in which South-East European immigrants in Sweden understand the concept of Sustainable Development

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# Abstract

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- Aim:** This research is situated in education *as* sustainable development. It, therefore, aims to embrace the "wickedness" of sustainable development by allowing for qualitatively different ways of understanding to emerge from the participants' descriptions. The selected group of participants come from the South-East European region, which research describes as having a unique structure in terms of culture, politics, economy, and education in comparison to the rest of Europe (including Sweden). These people now live in a society which research describes as sustainably developed society. Therefore, it is assumed that the qualitatively different ways in which South-Eastern European immigrants in Sweden understand the phenomena embrace the "wickedness" of said phenomena by providing unique points of view.
- Theory:** The conceptual framework of this research is the overarching notion that guides the entire research process. The concept of "wicked problems" is, therefore, selected as the sensitising concept of the whole study. However, while this concept does encourage explorative research, it does not necessarily provide a scholarly support for the way data is interpreted and presented. This is where the theoretical framework comes at play as the structure which supports the way theory is related to the data analysis. Therefore, research acknowledges the use of phenomenography as a theory of human cognition and understanding on the basis of its epistemological and ontological assumptions.
- Method:** This research is explorative in nature, and it is conducted under the methodological implications of phenomenography as a research approach. Therefore, individual phenomenographic semi-structured interviews is the data collection method of choice. And data interpretations are *fished out* from the pool of meaning and presented in the outcome space of the research in the form of categories of description.
- Results:** The participants displayed an extensive awareness and an array of understandings about the complexity and "wickedness" of sustainable development and its educational equivalent. The qualitatively different ways of understanding were organised in six categories of description. Hence, sustainable development and/ or educational forms in relation to sustainable development were understood as: a responsibility, a concern of the rich and developed, a capitalistic propaganda, a core of Swedish society, a holistic approach, and a wicked problem. This research essentially shows an "acceptance of coexisting ontologies" that illustrates how a specific group forms the knowledge and understandings of complex phenomena against a background of different actors and social spaces (including education).

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# Preface

The concepts of Sustainable Development (SD), and its educational equivalents (whether that be education *for*, *as*, or *about* sustainable development) have been a focal point of extensive research worldwide. The concepts are complex yet urgent for the sake of humans and non-humans on our planet. There is, however, a scholarly consensus that the concepts are defined by *contested* understandings and are considered *wicked problems*. By “wicked problems” is meant a special kind of social issues that beat our present capacity to re-solve them. This research will embrace said *wickedness* by exploring how the participants understand those concepts following a pluralistic tradition. Therefore, it can be said that this research as a whole is situated in the field of education *as* sustainable development. On the assumption that **qualitatively different ways of understanding** will emerge, this research aims to explore the phenomenon of SD, and consequently, its educational equivalents, from the perspective of people who have emigrated into Sweden from the South-East European (SEE) region. Although this research is indeed situated in education *as* sustainable development, it does not reject findings from research in the form of education *for* sustainable development (ESD) because such a rejection of a well-established thematic label which is used across disciplines would significantly restrict my research. Additionally, because of the epistemological assumptions underlying my study, in the formation of the categories of description, education in relation to SD will not be restricted to any specific educational form and, thus, allow for the descriptions to emerge from the participants’ understandings. Hence, categories will emerge from the participants’ descriptions rather than be placed onto them. Research shows that the implementation and understanding of SD and ESD in the SEE region vastly differs from the rest of Europe because of various cultural, economic, political, and educational factors. The initial motivation for conducting such research is primarily personal since I am an immigrant in Sweden myself. I have had the opportunity to observe the difference in how these issues are approached first-hand. As someone who has finished most of my education in a SEE country and have then had the opportunity to continue studying in the Swedish context, I have recognised a gap in the research. Swedish society incorporates SD as an important aspect in most of its spheres, including education (usually in the form of ESD), whereas SEE countries prioritise other issues and not much is done to support implementation of SD or ESD. Therefore, I wanted to explore how these different educational systems are reconciled in individuals who are now familiar with the concepts but come from different backgrounds. Where have they heard about it and how do they make sense of it? Thus, it can be said that this study contributes to research in Sustainable Development from an educational perspective. What makes my research educational is twofold: 1) the selection of participants is based on research that suggests the existence of fundamental differences in the educational systems of SEE countries and Sweden due to a variety of factors and the history of the region (including, but not limited to, differences in the implementation of ESD), and 2) most of my participants are mother tongue teachers in Sweden, who have completed their initial education in the SEE region. This makes their understanding of the concept important, especially since they are expected to include knowledge related to sustainable development issues in their subject content.

## **List of abbreviations**

- Sustainable Development = SD
- Education for Sustainable Development = ESD
- Environmental Education = EE
- South-East Europe = SEE
- European Union = EU
- Sustainable Development Goals = SDGs

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

I introduce the topic of research and establish its relevance for present and future academic endeavours with a quote from a report titled “Our Common Future” published in 1987 by The World Commission on Environment and Development, known as the Brundtland Report. It is written in the report that “humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 24). Sustainable development (SD), thus, became a concern at a global and local level in contemporary society. Therefore, according to Grice (2022), education for<sup>1</sup> sustainable development is an educational response to dealing with issues that emerge from the field of sustainable development.

Before continuing further, I will establish the groundwork and lay out the field of research under which this topic falls. Therefore, a distinction between education *for*, *about*, and *as* sustainable development (Jickling & Wals, 2012) is deemed important and needed. The purpose of this brief, yet essential explanation is to illustrate why my thesis is situated in education *as* sustainable development. Jickling claims that “education *for* any cause is not true education” (Jickling & Wals, 2012, p. 49), but it is rather *indoctrination*, regardless of how noble the aim for such education is. Therefore, Jickling’s (Jickling & Wals, 2012) statement can be seen as a critique to the behaviourist approach characterising education for sustainable development (ESD), and as an argument for a pluralistic approach where education is seen *as* sustainable development. Wals agrees with this claim, nonetheless, he cautions against “becoming a part of the neo-liberalist project, especially now that we are entering ‘post-normal’ times” (Jickling & Wals, 2012, p. 53). What is meant by this is that in our own era “*facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent*” (Ravetz, 1986, as cited in Block et al., 2018, p. 1472). Situating my research in Jickling’s education *as* sustainable development (Jickling & Wals, 2012) is interwoven in personal assumptions about how knowledge is formed in the world. These epistemological assumptions are equally correlated to the problematisation of the “wickedness” of the concepts from multiple perspectives. This explorative research embraces a variety of viewpoints. Marton and Booth (1997) acknowledge that because of its complexity, phenomenography can be used as both a theory and a method, which is why they define it as a research approach with particular theoretical and methodological implications. Hence, as a research approach, phenomenography explores the *qualitatively different ways of understanding* aspects of a phenomenon from multiple perspectives. Phenomenography can also be used as a theory of human understanding and cognition based on its ontological and epistemological underpinnings. Consequently, the design and execution of this research as a whole is situated in education *as* sustainable development because of how the problem was approached, data collected, and results presented- from a pluralistic perspective. Education as sustainable development in this study is considered a holistic way of teaching and learning, that embraces the complexity of the phenomenon, while not assuming an “anything goes” approach. A clarification needs to be made here on two levels.

Firstly, it might appear strange, or even messy, that I continue using the abbreviation ESD which stands for education *for* sustainable development throughout this paper even though I have just emphasised the reasons why my research is situated in education *as* sustainable development. ESD is a thematic label which is well established in research across disciplines, and it is used as such in most of the literature. Criticism concerned with the implications surrounding the prepositions *for*, *as*, and *about* does not necessarily constitute the large majority of research in that field. Probably because there is a consensus that the most important thing is that educators are doing a lot in terms of teaching and learning (Grice, 2022). Such a distinction is essential for my thesis because it denotes the need for

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<sup>1</sup> Education *as* sustainable development in my research.



a pluralistic perspective- one which characterises this research as a whole. But a decision to not use the well-established label ESD would inevitably result in excluding the vast majority of research in the field.

Secondly, this Master's thesis is concerned with exploring the qualitatively different ways in which South-East European (SEE) immigrants in Sweden understand the concept of Sustainable Development (SD) and/ or Education in relation to Sustainable Development. The complexity of the phenomena is once again highlighted when the presentation of the results is concerned. This will be elaborated in detail in Chapter 4. I will briefly explain here that a decision has been made to not restrict understandings of SD in relation to any educational form, and, in turn, allow them to emerge from the second-order perspective. Therefore, while the focus of this research is educational, in the outcome space<sup>2</sup> of this research I use both the terms SD and education in relation to SD interchangeably- when talking about the participants' understandings. This is done because some participants might only be familiar with the concept of SD. Nevertheless, the implications for the variation in understandings are based on differences in the educational backgrounds and systems from which the participants come. Moreover, by not restricting education in relation to SD to any educational form, categories will not be put onto the participants, but instead emerge from their own understandings.

The concept of SD is one phenomenon around which this study is centred. It has been given the attribute of a "wicked problem" (Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021) and a "contested term" (Connelly, 2007). "Wicked problems" is a concept used to describe social issues that cannot be readily resolved. Such issues often carry multiple definitions that result from conflicting opinions. The conflicting attitudes can make the understanding of the phenomenon somewhat obscure, but they can also provide alternative perspectives on what the phenomenon entails. SD is a "wicked problem" embedded in values and norms. Therefore, it becomes somewhat difficult to free it from conflicting stances and opinions on how it should be approached. The same is true for its educational equivalent<sup>3</sup>. This research, in turn, becomes intertwined with the "wickedness" of education as sustainable development but it does not advocate for an "anything goes" sort of education. Which is why the conceptual framework of "wicked problems" was carefully chosen to be used as a sensitising tool that will enable an openness to the alternative ways of making sense of SD and its educational forms, while still bearing specific traits of what constitutes "wicked problems" as defined by Rittel and Webber (1973)- explained in further detail in Chapter 2. It is thus expected that mapping the variation in understandings will provide the basis for emerging "re-solutions" to problems that education *as* sustainable development<sup>4</sup> covers. We cannot talk about *re-solutions* without first recognising how the problem is defined, argue Rittel and Webber (1973). And different stakeholders have different ideas about what issues are SD issues (Kerekes, 2021). The goal is not to find the absolute and universal truth, but to make an improvement (Rittel & Webber, 1973) by enriching SD knowledge (Head, 2019). Along these lines, this research contributes to the formation of such knowledge by exploring the *qualitatively different ways* in which the group of participants (stakeholders) understand SD and/ or education in relation to SD.

Phenomenography as a research approach originates in empirical studies that explore the different ways in which people understand a phenomenon and/ or aspects of that phenomenon. In the phenomenographic approach, Marton and Booth (1997) claim that "what appears as misunderstanding or a wrong (and what is indeed misunderstanding and wrong if we take the author's intention as the norm) can equally be seen as partial understanding" (p. 18). But who is to say what norm is to be

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<sup>2</sup> The term "outcome space" comes from phenomenographic vocabulary and denotes the space in the research where the "categories of description" are presented.

<sup>3</sup> Since no educational form in relation to SD could possibly occur in isolation from SD, then any forms of education related to SD would equally be labelled as "wicked problems".

<sup>4</sup> As the educational form that embraces such openness and argues against the potential indoctrination of learners.

accepted when dealing with such contested and “wicked” phenomena? How do we teach sustainable development without indoctrinating the learners? I would propose that one way of doing this is by embracing the complexity and “wickedness” of SD as a concept. Phenomenography allows for such exploration through research from the second-order perspective, where the researcher (myself) consciously and actively brackets personal judgements about what SD is or should be, or what educational approach should be used to deal with SD issues. Therefore, it can be concluded that while the research as a whole is situated in the field of education as sustainable development, the data analysis does not necessarily assume any “right” or “wrong” educational form in relation to SD, but it rather allows it to emerge from the data and in the participants’ own descriptions.

Research shows that Swedish society is a society that aims to integrate sustainable development in most societal domains, primarily through education (Berglund et al., 2014; Hedefalk et al., 2014). However, the same is not the case for South-East European (SEE) countries. It, therefore, becomes important to investigate how this concept is understood; how do SEE immigrants in Sweden make sense of SD which is, in turn, netted in ESD?<sup>5</sup> The reason for selecting this particular group of participants is research that shows a difference in the tradition of understanding and implementing ESD in North-Western Europe (Berglund et al., 2014; Hedefalk et al., 2014) and South-Eastern Europe (Dlouhá et al., 2017; Nikolic et al., 2017; Maruna et al., 2018). Additionally, research shows differences in the planning of education in Western and Eastern Europe (Sadlak, 1986). These differences are mainly marked by a teacher-centred education system in the SEE region and a learner-centred in the West (Biasutti, 2014). Education is assumed as one of the social spaces<sup>6</sup> where understandings of SD are formed. Marton and Booth (1997) note that “a capability for acting in a certain way reflects a capability for experiencing [or understanding] something in a certain way” (p. 111). They argue that although such a statement does not imply causation, it does imply a logical connection between the two notions. Therefore, exploring the different ways in which the participants understand the phenomenon might give us some insight into how they navigate in a society that emphasises and invests in SD and ESD at a large scale.

## Research aim

The aim of this study is to explore and map the qualitatively different ways in which SEE immigrants in Sweden understand the concept of SD and/or education in relation to SD. Thus, an alternative for *re-solving* the “wicked problem” that is education *as* sustainable development can be provided. The purpose is based on the idea that adult immigrants carry invaluable knowledge, obtained both in a formal and informal learning environment (English & Mayo, 2019), that contributes and expands the meaning of education as sustainable development by integrating a global perspective<sup>7</sup> in a local-Swedish context. Due to observed and previously researched differences between the educational, economic, and cultural systems of Sweden and SEE countries, it is expected that the perspectives and meaning-making of SEE immigrants in Sweden about SD and/or its educational equivalent will provide a unique point of view.

## Research question

This research centres around one main research question, which informs and is informed by the theoretical framework and research approach. The researcher (myself) is trying to find out ***What are the qualitatively different ways in which a group of South-Eastern European immigrants in Sweden understand the concept of Sustainable Development and/ or Education in relation to Sustainable Development?*** The research question aligns with the tenets of phenomenography and is formed in a

<sup>5</sup> Or in the case of this research- any form of education in relation to SD.

<sup>6</sup> Socio-cultural and geopolitical factors also account for the way SD and ESD are approached in the SEE region.

<sup>7</sup> Being open to changes, new ideas, new solutions and re-solutions, and even new issues that might emerge as symptoms of some solutions; it denotes a willingness to learn from others, especially those coming from different backgrounds.

way which makes this study explorative in nature. It enables the researcher to explore the phenomenon from the second-order perspective, focusing on the different ways in which the group of participants understand the phenomenon in question (or aspects of it), instead on the phenomenon itself. Although the interview questions did not explicitly ask about ESD, education has been identified as one of the social spaces where SD understandings are shaped. The participants also noted different understandings about what the purpose of education in relation to SD is and how it should be approached. Therefore, the research question must incorporate this amalgamation of SD and/ or education in relation to SD because in the context of my research the two are mutually dependent.

## Thesis structure

The remainder of this thesis unfolds as follows.

The second chapter is divided into three main sections. It starts with grounding this thesis into the constructivist/ interpretivist research paradigm. The second section discusses the significance and use of the selected conceptual framework. The third and last section of this chapter is the literature review. The literature review serves two purposes for my research, which is why it consists of two separate sub-sections written under different headings. On the one hand, the shift from Environmental Education (EE) to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is outlined. On the other hand, an overview of the ways of understanding and teaching ESD in the SEE region is reviewed. Thus, the second part of the literature review also covers the complexity of the SEE region.

The third chapter covers the research methodology. First, the research approach- phenomenography is explained, followed by a thorough account on the reasons for choosing it. Consequently, the use of phenomenography as a theoretical framework is established. The theoretical framework provides scholarly support for the way data analysis will be conducted, and the results presented. Then the data collection method is presented, and an overview of the pilot and its outcomes is described. Moreover, the sampling technique and selection of participants is explained. Further, the process of data analysis is accounted for in great detail. Because data analysis is an iterative process in phenomenographic research, which requires a back-and-forth exchange with data collection, I think it is best suited for Chapter 3 to include an in-depth explanation and overview of what constitutes data analysis in phenomenography. Whereas Chapter 4 will be considered the outcome space of the research, dedicated to an in-depth presentation of the results from this study. The third chapter also includes sections on the limitations and criticism about the reliability and validity of phenomenographic results, respectively. The ethical considerations are then disclosed, and the chapter ends with a sustainability statement.

The fourth chapter, as I said, can be seen as the outcome space of the phenomenographic research, where the categories of description will be presented. The categories of description are discussed extensively. The results are presented by the researcher (myself) and *fished out* from the pool of meaning. The interpretations are done from the second-order perspective, while consciously bracketing personal bias with full transparency. The focus, in true phenomenographic fashion, is on the collective voice. Moreover, the various ways of understanding which constitute the categories of description are supported by participants' quotes.

The fifth, and last chapter, contains a discussion section. This is then followed by a conclusion, which is, in turn, accompanied with a statement about the limitations of the study as a whole, as well as suggestions for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Philosophical worldview

A research paradigm is the equivalent of a philosophical worldview, or a lens, through which the researcher makes sense of the world, argue Kivunja and Kuyini (2017). They highlight the importance of defining the research paradigm because such a categorisation of the research will guide methodological decisions and the construction of the research question. However, I consider the paradigm to be both the predecessor and successor of the research design; and within the constructivist/ interpretivist research, the paradigm and research design complement and influence one another. This study falls under the tradition of qualitative research, within the interpretivist/ constructivist paradigm. In phenomenography, the different ways of understanding a phenomenon depend on “understanding the individual and their interpretation of the world around them” (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 33). Therefore, reality is considered **to be** socially constructed. Moreover, the participants are recognised as the experts, because it is their understandings of SD/ Education in relation to SD (or aspects of it), that I am interested in. Hence, the interpretation of results is done from the second-order perspective, as proposed by phenomenographic tenets. In this study, and qualitative research in general, the researcher is considered an instrument through which the participants’ perspectives are filtered (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017); which is why self-reflexivity and critical reflection are crucial for the validity of the research. Consequently, rather than the traditional criteria of validity and reliability required in quantitative research, this study will operate under the “trustworthiness criteria”. These alternative criteria were pioneered by Guba (1981), and referenced in Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) who list “credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability” as the qualitative counterparts to the “internal validity, reliability, objectivity, and external validity” of quantitative research, in that same order. In this paper, I have discussed the criticism and limitations of the reliability and validity of phenomenographic results because they were criticised in such manner in the literature. Such overlapping of concepts used to evaluate the quality of research is not uncommon, and since these concepts come from a distinguished research tradition they are preferred by some researchers.

### Conceptual framework

When choosing the conceptual and theoretical framework employed in a given research, an effective distinction between the purpose and use of the two is, in my opinion, best presented through an analogy Kivunja (2018) puts forth. He explains that the conceptual framework can be considered a house- an overarching concept that embodies the whole research substance. Whereas the theoretical framework is a specific room in that same house- which serves a particular purpose and thus provides the scholarly support for the ways in which the research is conducted, and data analysed. The underlying message of Kivunja’s (2018) analogy is that our research can only have one conceptual framework but depending on the intended outcome, multiple theoretical frameworks can be utilised (within reason, of course) that essentially serve a different purpose. Smyth (2004) further states that the conceptual framework “should be intended as a starting point for reflection about the research and its context” (p. 168). Since it is an outcome of reflective reasoning, it is expected that part of it is based on observations in the world made by the researcher herself<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, when first designing and identifying what I perceived as a gap in the literature, the observation was made on a primarily personal experience, followed by a scholarly observation based on reviews of existing literature that covered the differences in how SD, and consequently ESD, is approached in Sweden versus the SEE region. An account of this was given in the introduction of this paper. Further elaboration on the complexity of the SEE region itself, as well as an overview of empirical research denoting the assumptions for such differences is written in the second part of the literature review. Additionally, a

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<sup>8</sup> The gender specific pronouns *she/ her/ herself* are used because of the gender in which I identify, and I consider myself the researcher of this study.

key concept was identified in scholarly work- that of SD and ESD as “wicked problems”<sup>9</sup>, which will be used as a sensitising or creative tool in my thesis (Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021). Therefore, the conceptual framework is considered as “a metacognitive, reflective and operational element of the entire research process” (Kivunja, 2018, p. 47). “Wicked problems” when used as a sensitising and creative concept can encourage exploration in a “specific direction without locking us into a certain understanding of the phenomenon” (Flemmen, 2017, as cited in Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021, p. 492). Phenomenography was selected as a theoretical framework and research approach enabling such exploration of this “wicked” phenomenon from multiple perspectives. Phenomenography pioneered empirical research on the *qualitatively different ways in which people understand phenomena (or aspects of it)*, done in the second-order perspective, while bracketing personal judgements, and, thus, focusing on the collective voice presented in the outcome space of the research. Consequently, it can be argued that while the conceptual framework can emerge from personal reflections and observations, the theoretical framework must be established in scholarly work since it provides the basis for how data will be analysed and research results presented (Kivunja, 2018). Therefore, while the conceptual framework of “wicked problems” which is used as a sensitising concept enables and encourages the exploration of the “wickedness” of the phenomena and does not restrict such exploration, it does not provide a scholarly support for the way in which data is interpreted and presented. This is where phenomenography as a theoretical framework in qualitative research (Ornek, 2008), embedded in phenomenographic epistemological and ontological assumptions, comes at play. The epistemological and ontological underpinnings of phenomenography will be explained in the following chapter.

Moreover, an explanation of “wicked problems”, supported by a brief outline of the history of the concept to show how it became relevant for the fields of SD and ESD is needed. Namely, “wicked problems” is a concept that originated in the context of urban planning and was coined by Rittel and Webber (1973) in their seminal work. Rittel and Webber (1973) distinguished between what they called “tame problems” and “wicked problems” in the sense that the latter cannot be solved by traditional reasoning and can never be truly solved, but only **re-solved**. Moreover, Rittel and Webber (1973) elaborate on the 10 traits of such problems (or issues) and list the following characteristics: 1) “the formulation of the problem is the problem!” (p. 161); 2) have no stopping rule- we can always try and do better in coming up with a solution; 3) no true or false answer to a wicked problem- only a good or bad one which depends on the values held by the decision makers; 4) no way of testing a solution to a wicked problem without consequences; 5) every attempt of solving a wicked problem leaves a significant impact that cannot be undone- every attempt at a solution poses a new problem; 6) no criteria for identifying all the possible solutions of a wicked problem; 7) despite some similarities; every wicked problem is essentially unique; 8) every wicked problem can be considered a symptom of another problem; 9) discrepancy found in wicked problems can be explained in various ways and the explanations determine the re-resolution of the problem; 10) decision makers are responsible for the consequences arising from their proposed re-solutions, however, the aim is not to find the absolute truth, but to make an improvement. They further acknowledge that in diverse societies, which are most societies after the industrial age, “what satisfies one may be abhorrent to another, that what compromises problem-solution for one is problem-generation for another” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 169). Moreover, since the “wickedness” of social problems was established, the concept has been applied to a variety of social issues. The variety of disciplines in which the use of “wicked problems” resurfaced is a testament to a renewed scholarly interest in the concept. Interestingly, Rittel and Webber (1973) predict the prospective power of “wicked problems” on the basis of an increased heterogeneity in the Western World. This prediction is echoed in Kerekes’s work (2021), where he writes that “everyone wants the world to develop in a sustainable way, but it soon turns out that everyone thinks about the future in a different way” (p. 1). Therefore, Lönngren and van Poeck (2021) recognise that sustainability issues are widely considered as “wicked”. However, one must be

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<sup>9</sup> I, however, argue that any form of education in relation to sustainable development (not only the well-established ESD) is also considered a “wicked problem”. And education *as* sustainable development is, in my opinion, the educational form that best embraces said “wickedness”.

cautious to not make the concept an umbrella term for all difficult problems, as a *one-size-fits-all* social issues. What I mean by this is that there is a danger of “overusing” and “stretching” the concept for problems that are not truly “wicked” (Peters & Tarpey, 2019, as cited in Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021). As a re-solution to “wicked problems”, Head (2019) proposes the inclusion of multiple stakeholders’ perspectives when dealing with such issues. My research, therefore, explores the perspectives of one specific group of stakeholders- a group consisting of individual human beings that navigate their way into today’s society in the Swedish context. This decision is based on the belief that it is the individual who also has an interest and concern in the outcomes and future of this world. Common people might be the biggest stakeholders in issues concerning SD. Which is why how the phenomenon is perceived, or understood, by the selected group, might inform us about different ways in which people from different countries approach it. Moreover, it might be a testimony of worries that SEE immigrants in Sweden have about this problem. This will hopefully, emphasise and solidify an awareness of the variety of understandings people have about SD and/or education in relation to SD. This might, in turn, inform future practices on how to approach teaching *as* sustainable development to immigrants in the Swedish context.

As previously discussed, in my thesis phenomenography developed by Marton and associates in the late 1990s at Gothenburg University is not only used as an empirical research approach, but equally as a theoretical framework (Ornek, 2008). It was argued that phenomenography as a theoretical framework provides a scholarly foundation for the way data is interpreted, the analysis presented, and the findings discussed (Kivunja, 2018). However, a detailed discussion of phenomenography- which Marton and Booth (1997) label as a research approach (with methodological and theoretical underpinnings), will be presented in the following chapter.

## Literature review

Marton and Booth (1997) advise that before exploring the qualitatively different ways in which the selected participants understand the phenomenon, it is important to consider the “phenomenon’s treatment” in other research traditions; for example, its past, how is it approached in the literature, and/ or how is it constructed or implemented in different cultures. They claim that “a specific way of experiencing [understanding] something (...) can reflect a feature of a culture in the past or present” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 116). Therefore, the purpose of this literature review is twofold: it will 1) outline the history of ESD and its purpose in Western societies; and 2) illustrate how ESD is approached in the SEE region, while laying out the some of the reasons why that might be the case.

## **A shift in discourse from Environmental Education to Education for Sustainable Development: What is the purpose of ESD in Western societies?**

Gough (2013) outlines a “history” of the field that documents the rise of environmental education (EE) and the shift towards education for sustainable development (ESD). Environmental education was established in the late 1970s based on rising concerns that emerged from wide-spread information and awareness about the declining state of the environment as a result of human action (Gough, 2013). However, in the late 1990s there is an evident shift in discourse that leans towards education for sustainable development (Gough, 2013). This shift in discourse began with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which was later cemented with the UNESCO’s Bonn Declaration in 2009, explains Gough (2013). Therefore, most scholars who researched in the field of EE have shifted towards ESD, making ESD seen by many “as a contributor to an enhanced relevance of environmental education” (Gough, 2013, p. 13). By others it is considered as a replacement, or a dominant perspective of EE (Kopnina, 2012). In the beginning, issues concerning the field of EE were seen as purely scientific ones (Gough, 2013), which is why at its early stages this field of research was “dominated by positivist methodologies” (Mrazek,

1993, as cited in Jickling & Wals, 2013, p. 74). Nonetheless, the 1990s are characterised by a broadening of the scope of the field documented by publications in the interpretivist, constructivist, and critical traditions (Gough, 2013). This academic inclusion can be exemplified by Jickling and Spork's (1998) paper (as cited in Jickling & Wals, 2013). In today's society, a plethora of perspectives are included- "indigenous, post colonial, and feminist, among others" (Gough, 2013, p. 19). Such methodological advances in an educational context resulted with the inclusion of environmental or ecological content in curricula across all educational levels, along with technical teaching, and an encouragement for environmental awareness, explains Gough (2013).

Moreover, normative values embedded in an ambition to change human behaviour towards addressing either EE or ESD concerns, can be observed both in EE and ESD discourse. With "responsible environmental behaviour (...) cited as the ultimate goal of environmental education" (Ramsey & Hungerford, 1989, as cited in Gough, 2013, p. 17) on one side. And the narrative of Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992), as cited in Jickling and Wals (2013) on the other side:

Both formal and non-formal education are indispensable to changing people's attitudes so that they have the capacity to assess and address their sustainable development concerns. (p. 77)

Because of this perceived purpose of education as a conductor of change, Jickling and Spork's (1998) paper raised questions about "what constituted good education" (Jickling & Wals, 2013) in the context of EE. This paper started a debate among researchers in the field, and scholars at that time became worried that Jickling and Spork's (1998) paper implied "that education should be free of specified ends" (Ferreira, 2007, as cited in Jickling & Wals, 2013, p. 75). And rightly so, if we call attention to Marton and Booth's (1997) claim that "education has norms- norms of what those that are undergoing education should be learning, and what the outcomes of their learning should be" (p. 2). However, as Jickling continues to argue- even today in the context of education *for* sustainable development (ESD), that education *for* something is not "true education" but indoctrination (Jickling & Wals, 2012). Shifting one social hegemony into another. The "wickedness" of SD as a conceptual framework is, therefore, central to this context. Consequently, any educational form related to SD are also considered "wicked problems" and are embedded in values and norms. Such social issues belong to the category that Rittel and Webber (1973) call "wicked problems" as opposed to "tame" ones. The question then is- as I write in the introduction of this paper- how do we decide whose norms and values to follow when implementing education *for* sustainable development? There will always be someone who disagrees with the outcome, and it is almost impossible to free ESD from conflicting opinions on how it should be approached. Those two aspects are, essentially, among the central characteristics of "wicked problems". Therefore, trying to educate *for* something, rather than *as* something, disrupts the heterogeneity of today's society. Which is why multiple perspectives should be taken into consideration, and why education as sustainable development cannot comply with traditional teaching approaches.

A criticism to this pluralistic co-creation of knowledge which encourages multiple perspectives and a critical dialogue around the aspects that constitute SD and ESD, can be found in the work of Kopnina (2012). While pluralistic interpretations of ESD are encouraged by EE researchers, the shift in discourse (from EE to ESD) "can lead practitioners into an essentially anthropocentric paradigm" claims Kopnina (2012, p. 700). Moreover, she argues that such an approach might lead to "ecologically ill-informed teachers" (Kopnina, 2012, p. 669). Which might further lead to ESD practitioners who seem irresponsive to the concern of ESD becoming "a radical change of focus from prioritizing environment protection towards mostly social issues, which may or may not be related to environment" (Kopnina, 2017, p. 701). This is an interesting point of departure, since it essentially contradicts my bias about having participants who mostly focus on the environmental pillar of SD, as stated under the heading where the role of the phenomenographic researcher is explained. Therefore, the best way to explore how stakeholders- in this case a group of SEE immigrants in Sweden, make

sense of SD and education in relation to SD, is to ask them directly rather than make our own assumptions. Kopnina's (2012) criticism and my personal bias suggest a disruption in the balance of ESD (or any educational form in relation to SD). Hence, the outcome space will present whether the balance between the 3Ps<sup>10</sup> is indeed lost.

An interesting starting point for the next section that outlines the complexity of the SEE region and the approach SEE countries employ towards ESD, can be said to lie in the history of EE. Namely, The Belgrade Charter held in Yugoslavia in 1975, which was followed by the Tbilisi Declaration in 1977, addressed environmental issues worldwide (Kopnina, 2012). Countries in the SEE region were involved in the formation of EE discourse. However, the period of the 1990s was defined by an economic and educational retrogression after the fall of The Yugoslav Republic (affecting the whole region), during which when the rest of the Western world was leaning towards ESD discourse.

## Understandings and teaching of ESD in South-Eastern Europe

The South-Eastern region of Europe (SEE) has a unique structure in terms of culture, politics, economy, and educational systems in comparison to the rest of Europe. This difference, as an overview of the literature shows, can be attributed to the history of the region. First, it is important to outline the geographical range that constitutes the SEE region, which as Papadimitriou (2004) explains, is not as straightforward as it may seem. Therefore, while this research includes Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece<sup>11</sup>; the countries Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Moldova, and Romania were excluded from this research, not because they are not considered SEE countries, but due to limited access<sup>12</sup>.

The complexity of this region is not new, on the contrary, it dates back to the Cold War. During that time Yugoslavia became a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito. The Yugoslav Republic represented a more liberal and decentralised governing system in comparison to other Eastern European countries. However, even at that time, political and economic communication between the countries in the SEE region, or more specifically between Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania, was minimal despite their "geographical proximity" (Radosevic, 2009). Furthermore, at a time when Central European countries were becoming European Union (EU) members, political and economic unrest due to a post-socialist transition characterised the region after the collapse of the Yugoslav Republic, and constrained SEE advancements towards EU (Radosevic, 2009). The transition period, still ongoing for most SEE countries, shifted the concept of economy towards a more market-based direction. The transition and the armed conflicts that ravaged former Yugoslavian territory, resulting in environmental, social, economic, and cultural hardships, make the measurement of implementation of ESD on the same terms as in developed countries impossible and unfair (Lior et al., 2018). Because of the geopolitical situation, the fall of the Yugoslav Republic has also affected, in one way or another, other countries in the SEE region. Therefore, Lior et al. (2018) suggest that measurements of sustainability and ESD

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<sup>10</sup> People, planet, profit.

<sup>11</sup> Slovenia, although a former Yugoslav country, is geographically considered as part of Central Europe by most researchers and is considered as such in this study.

<sup>12</sup> The geographical parameters of the SEE region can vary, as shown by the reviewed literature. So it may be a case that at any one point in the study, a little more information is given on some rather than other countries in the region- this is not intentional. The goal of the review is not to show a thorough representation of each country in the region, but to show that at the upper general category (the macro level) there are similarities for all countries in the region in how they deal with SD and ESD. This is not to say that the countries in the region do not have their individual differences.



practices- with all its unclearness and non-uniformity<sup>13</sup>, ought to correspond to the levels of development of each country. Moreover, after the collapse of the Yugoslav Republic, each independent county was left with various problems and chose different ways in addressing them (Papadimitriou, 2004; Nikolic et al., 2017). Additionally, the geopolitical situation in this region is in a state of constant change and tension. At the height of the crisis, politicians de-prioritised environmental and cultural issues. Biasutti (2014) declares a sense of “environmental urgency” that characterises the SEE region. In his research, Biasutti (2014) proposes the implementation of a “learning-centred approach based on an interactive learning methodology and cooperative learning” (p. 738). This approach, as Dlouhá et al. (2017) suggest, is absent from the educational systems in the region. Furthermore, in the educational context, one of the problems in the SEE region is the “emphasis on acquisition of large amounts of factual knowledge rather than competence” (OECD, 2003, p.16), and, I would argue, a downplay on critical thinking and fact-checking. Therefore, Dlouhá et al. (2017) suggest that this “knowledge-oriented teaching” will most likely result in alternative pathways towards ESD in the SEE region, in comparison to other European countries. Other issues of SEE countries relate to the reduction of funding for education, which is actually a “retrogression” from the developed education system that existed in most countries of the region during the late 1980s (OECD, 2003)- or before the break from Yugoslavia in the 1990s (Nikolic et al., 2017). Thus, it can be concluded that despite a general focus on ESD strategies among SEE countries, there are no particularities *in situ* that will make the implementation of ESD a genuine target (OECD, 2003; Nikolic et al., 2017; Dlouhá et al., 2017; Anđić, 2020).

When it comes to the history of ESD, discussed in the previous section, it is important to note that research shows that the SEE region is lagging behind in this discourse shift which for the rest of the world took place during the 1990s and early 2000s, and SD knowledge is still treated as part of environment knowledge; this urges for the inclusion of the economic and social pillars in order to establish a more holistic knowledge base that includes “critical thinking, and pluralistic approaches to education” (Nikolic et al., 2017, p. 935). Dlouhá et al. (2017) share the same findings in terms of equating ESD to environmental protection, as shown by the struggles their South-Eastern European research participants had in understanding the concept.

From this overview of the literature from and/or about the SEE region, it can be concluded that although there are indeed individuals and enthusiasts<sup>14</sup> who take personal initiative to become informed, understand, and practice SD or ESD, the systematic element that helps in this pursuit of such practices is neither an integral nor explicit aspect in educational structures in the SEE region. Therefore, it becomes important to explore the understandings of people who have had most of their education in that context, but have in some ways heard about the concept of ESD/ SD. It is important to explore on what background they construct such knowledge and what these concepts mean to them. Especially, if we take into consideration that these people now live and integrate into Swedish society- which perceives itself as sustainably developed. A society that devotes time and resources into the planning of ESD implementation into multiple spaces of its educational system (Berglund et al., 2014; Hedefalk et al., 2014). If we go further into the nature of the participants’ profile within the scope of my research, then another layer is added to the importance of this study since half of them (6 out of 9) are mother tongue teachers in Sweden who completed their teacher education in SEE. How they make sense of the phenomena in question will be interesting to explore, because as Anđić (2020) argues, initial teacher education indicates a “poor implementation” followed by a limited “professional development of teachers in ESD” (p. 159) in the SEE region.

Lastly, it can be argued that “all contemporary societies are facing environmental crime” (Eman et al., 2013, p. 341). However, what makes the notion of environmental crime in the SEE region profoundly ethically complex is the fact that environmental crime is committed not only on the basis

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<sup>13</sup> Corresponding to the conceptual framework of “wicked problems” used in this research.

<sup>14</sup> As Nikolic et al. (2017) talk about people who are concerned with ESD in the SEE region.

of using the environment “as a resource for profit” but also “as a source of resources for survival” (Eman et al., 2013, p. 344).

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This literature review illustrates the complexity of SD and ESD across traditions. It outlines the history of the concept of ESD, and the contestability embedded in its core. Thus, it becomes evident that we are truly dealing with a “wicked problem”. Moreover, the literature review highlights that geographical location, cultural, economic, and educational factors, are among the key elements why the concept/s are approached differently in the SEE region in comparison to Sweden. After such observations have been made and outlined, it becomes not only important, but also logical to explore the *qualitatively different ways in which SEE immigrants in Sweden understand the concept/ phenomenon of SD and/or education in relation to SD (or aspects of those concepts)*.

## Chapter 3

### Research approach

The research approach is phenomenographic and embedded in the interpretivist/constructivist tradition. Specifically, this study was led in the tradition of Gothenburg phenomenography- established and developed as a distinct research approach by Ferance Matron and colleagues at the University of Gothenburg in the late 1990s. Because of the controversy that surrounds this approach, which has come as a criticism both from and to phenomenographers, I find it important to provide a brief outline of its history. Etymologically, the meaning derives from two Greek roots<sup>15</sup>, roughly translated to mean a “description of appearances” (Marton & Booth, 1997). Hasselgren and Beach (1996; 1997) accredit Sonneman (1954) with the first mention of “phenomenography”, while as Cibangu and Hepworth (2016) argue, the term dates even farther back to Falcomer (1902). Whatever the case may be, it is true that both Sonneman and Falcomer use of the term follows Husserlian tenets. Therefore, it can be argued that Gothenburg phenomenography- in its true Martonian form, originated in educational research in Sweden, and it sought to “combat Cartesianism or<sup>16</sup> positivism” (Cibangu & Hepworth. 2016, p. 152).

Phenomenographic research focuses on variation and its goal is to describe the qualitatively different ways in which a group of people experience or understand aspects of the world or a given phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). Marton and Booth (1997) further explain that when a person experiences or understands a phenomenon, that does not mean that their experience constitutes the whole of that phenomenon, it rather presents one facet that is dependent on that person’s biography. Equally, Marton and Booth (1997) argue that even when the researcher is describing the phenomenon through the collective voice in the outcome space of the research, the description is still only a partial one since it reflects the experiences of one group of people. Therefore, the statements made by the researcher are not statements about the world per se, but rather statements “about the world as experienced by people” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 118). Criticism about the weakness of phenomenography is discussed under the headings of reliability and validity in this chapter.

Furthermore, the variation, or differences in experiencing/ understanding can be found both within and among individuals, claim Marton and Booth (1997). I have used interchangeably the words *experience* and *understandings* when talking about how individuals form assumptions about aspects of the world, or a given phenomenon. This was done because Marton and Booth (1997) themselves use the terms interchangeably. They explain that while “a way of experiencing something (...) is an internal relationship between the experiencer and the experienced” the terms “conceptions, ways of

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Phenomenon’ and ‘Graph’

<sup>16</sup> “and” instead of “or” should be used here because phenomenography actually sought to combat both.

understanding, ways of comprehending, and conceptualizations, have been used as synonyms for ways of experiencing” (Marton & Booth, 1997, pp. 113-114).

Phenomenography, as an approach is of special value whenever we are dealing with a phenomenon that “is something that is hard to define precisely, complex, or that might have variable meaning in various contexts” (Cossham, 2017, p. 21). As is the case with the concepts **Sustainable Development** and **any forms of Education related to Sustainable Development**, which are labelled in the literature as “wicked problems”.

## Theoretical framework: Why phenomenography?

Before continuing further, it is important to acknowledge and anchor the uses of phenomenography in my research. Because phenomenography has specific methodological and theoretical underpinnings it can be used as both a theory and a method- which is why it is labelled as a research approach, claim Marton & Booth (1997). Moreover, Ornek (2008) argues that phenomenography can be used as a theoretical framework in qualitative research. Thus, in my study, phenomenography is used as both an empirical research approach and a theoretical framework. It is used as a theory of human cognition and understanding because of its epistemological and ontological assumptions. This, in turn, correlates to Kivunja’s (2018) definition of a theoretical framework as “the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study” (Swanson, 2013, as cited in Kivunja, 2018, p. 46) which denotes the scholarly support for the way data is interpreted and the results presented. But it is also an empirical research approach that carries specific methodological implications about the way the research is conducted.

Moreover, unlike research suggests (Stolz, 2020), the similarities between Husserlian phenomenology and Martonian phenomenography have been acknowledged by phenomenographers. Among phenomenographers, the claim of phenomenography being a distinct research approach remains solid. Although both approaches share the same “object of research [which is] human experience and awareness” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 117), phenomenography deals with the variation in the different ways a group of people understand a given phenomenon, while phenomenology is concerned with denoting “the essence” of the phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). Therefore, as Marton and Booth (1997) argue, phenomenography can be seen as a “child of phenomenology” only in terms of their shared object of research, otherwise, based on the theories and methods in which the approach is grounded- which, if any, have loose connections to their phenomenological equivalents, phenomenography is “no more than a cousin-by-marriage of phenomenology” (p. 117).

Phenomenography takes a non-dualist ontological view of nature (Marton & Booth, 1997, Hajar, 2020) that assumes the internal and external worlds to be mutually dependant and interrelated. For example, in phenomenography, SD and someone who knows of it are not independent of each other, both are in the world- but the way SD is understood by someone does not necessarily mean it is how SD is for everyone in the external world. Someone’s understanding of SD is only a variation in how SD occurs in the external world. We cannot say that SD is the same for everybody because each person understands the phenomenon based on their own perspectives, which are, in turn, dependant on personal histories. Hence, phenomenography explores a given phenomenon from the second-order perspective, meaning that how the person experiences/ understands the phenomenon is one aspect of reality, as influenced by that person’s own biography. The second-order perspective puts its focus on describing the different ways in which the people experience or understand various aspects of the world (Marton, 1981).

Moreover, phenomenography considers reality to be socially constructed (Marton & Booth, 1997). Therefore, individuals can only be aware of their own ways of experiencing/ understanding in the world, mirroring Meno’s paradox “How can you search for something when you do not know what it is?” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 2). Hence, phenomenographic descriptions are inevitably partial understandings about aspects of the phenomenon, since participants can only describe that which they

know. It becomes the task of the researcher to interpret, as true to the participants' testimony, the ways in which they understand or experience aspects of the phenomenon, whilst bracketing her personal judgements on what the right or wrong way of understanding is. In this way, the categories of description are formed by the researcher from the pool of meaning and are presented in the outcome space of the research. But this task becomes even more complex when we ask ourselves: who is to say what is a right or wrong way of understanding something? Such interpretations are especially difficult, if not impossible, when dealing with a "wicked problem" (Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021) and a "contested concept" (Connelly, 2007) embedded in values and norms (as in the case of SD and its educational equivalents). Therefore, the goal is not to judge a right or wrong understanding of SD and its educational equivalents. The outcome space of the research contains second-order interpretations which focus on the collective voice, rather than the voice of individuals. But this effort is not as simple as it might appear, and it requires a careful utilisation of phenomenographic guidelines.

Which is why bracketing is a central tenet of phenomenographic research. The literature shows that this concept is equally present and immensely valuable for Husserlian phenomenology. However, there is a difference in the way the concept is used in the two approaches. For in phenomenology "the world is focused on and experience [the researcher's own] bracketed [while in phenomenography] experience (of others) is focused on and experience (the researcher's own) is bracketed" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 120).

It is important to emphasise that the focus of this paper is not to provide a history of either approach. However, this section is intended to provide support, and illustrate the reasons for which phenomenography, apart from being the empirical approach under which this research was conducted, it was also selected as the theoretical framework governing this study on the basis of its epistemological and ontological underpinnings about how knowledge is formed and understood.

## The role of the phenomenographic researcher

The role of the researcher is to explore participants' understandings of the phenomenon while bracketing personal judgement. Assuming as little as possible (Hajar, 2020) is the best approach. Therefore, checking with participants if I successfully interpreted their descriptions, accompanied by follow-up questions to combat any uncertainties was the strategy I took when conducting the interviews. This was done as an alternative of otherwise recommended member-checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and it was done in the duration of the interview, checking interpretations of statements and descriptions provided at that time. However, because the outcome space of the research holds the collective voice in the spotlight it was considered futile to check the final interpretation with individuals (Hajar, 2020). Nonetheless, in order to comply with Guba's (1981) "trustworthiness criteria" (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) for ensuring the quality of the research results, quotes will be used as a support for each category of description. This will enable the researcher to ensure that the interpretations are not made on personal judgements but are indeed *fished* out from the pool of meaning.

Therefore, it is important to state my personal bias<sup>17</sup>, going into this study. Namely, I was of the perception that the participants will most likely focus on the environmental part of sustainable development, while disregarding the social and economic pillars. An element of this bias comes from my personal biography and educational history. Coming from the same South-Eastern region in Europe as my participants, and completing most of my education there, I was aware that the formal focus, if any, was mostly on climate change and environmental aspects. Another element of this bias is grounded in existing literature that supports this assumption. As discussed in the literature review,

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<sup>17</sup> As written in my reflective notes.

there is a different focus on ESD in South-Eastern Europe, which is mostly environmental. This is a consequence of cultural and political differences. Moreover, the fact that Education for Sustainable Education originated in Environmental Education explains, to some extent, why I went into the study with the idea that I did. I, however, remained cautious to not let my judgements guide any part of this research, but I was the most careful and focused on “bracketing” during the process of conducting data collection and data analysis in this study.

## Data collection method

The prevailing method of data collection in phenomenography is the individual semi-structured interview. In phenomenography, as is the case in most qualitative research, it is the researcher who forms the interview guide based on what she is trying to uncover or explore in her research question. Therefore, the interview guide developed for this study included an oral briefing about the purpose of the research, highlighting the ethical considerations. This was followed by a set of background questions, content questions, and explorative questions- meant to reinforce or circle back to the content questions. The questions asked during the interview were entirely open-ended and allowed the participants to provide a description of their own understandings about aspects of the concept, or phenomenon, researched. The interviews, all but one<sup>18</sup>, were conducted in a café. The setting was chosen to ensure a relaxed atmosphere and decrease any perceived imbalances or inequalities between the researcher and her participants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed following phenomenographic guidelines. Most of the transcriptions were done by hand, while some were supported with the use of Microsoft 365. Because of the multilingual nature of the data, only the parts of the interviews used in the formation of categories of description were translated in English, if necessary, by the researcher. To ensure full transparency in the data collection and analysis process, I will state which quote is used verbatim and which one is a translation by the researcher when presenting the categories of description in the outcome space of this research<sup>19</sup>.

A phenomenographic, semi-structured interview, is very intricate in its nature. As Marton and Booth (1997) suggest, to be successful, it needs to simultaneously take place on two levels: 1) resembling a social discourse, and 2) a so-called “metalevel” in which the participant reflects on personal understandings, assumptions, and experiences in a state of “meta-awareness”. Another peculiar aspect about this particular way of interviewing is that while the “boundaries are laid at the start”, in the interview guide they will most likely be shifted and expanded with every following interview, argue Marton and Booth (1997). This means that data analysis essentially starts from the moment the first interview is conducted, after which new aspects of the phenomenon come to the surface and enable the researcher to use that information, if and wherever appropriate, to check for differences or similarities in the forthcoming interviews. Of course, on the presupposition that the aspect to be compared was mentioned first by the participant. Making this process an iterative one, where the researcher goes back and forth between data analysis and data collection until data saturation is reached.

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<sup>18</sup> One interview was conducted on a video call per the participant’s request.

<sup>19</sup> See: Chapter 4.

## Pilot

The interview guide was piloted with a person that fulfilled the criteria for participation in the study. During the pilot two probes<sup>20</sup> were used that intended to elicit the participant's understandings. However, after gathering the data and discussing it with my supervisor a decision was made to proceed further without the use of such probes in order to ensure that the descriptions of different ways of understanding of SD and/ or education in relation to SD were coming from the participants' personal encounters, or lack thereof, with the concepts, as well as their own personal biographies. Furthermore, the interview questions were significantly downsized to enable the participants to describe their own understandings of the phenomena, rather than be guided by already framed assumptions of what the concepts mean. Therefore, as explained in the section above, a limited number of open-ended questions were used that elicited a plethora of different understandings and descriptions of SD and/or any educational forms in relation to SD, both within and among individuals. Conducting the pilot was essential for polishing the interview guide, however, data gathered from this participant was not used in the official data analysis process because it was assumed that the way in which the interview was conducted obstructed genuine descriptions about how the participant understood aspects of the phenomena.

## Sampling technique and participant selection

In this study the sampling was purposive (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Namely, a combination of criterion sampling<sup>21</sup> and snowball sampling<sup>22</sup> was employed. Research suggests that the phenomenographic approach calls for 15 to 20 participants (Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Hajar, 2020). However, in qualitative research, as Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest, there is value for the particularity of participant selection rather than that of generalizability. Therefore, the number of participants can vary, depending on the quality and “thickness” of data collected. Hence, data collection should stop when the researcher identifies saturation in the data. In this study, I identified a repetition in the variation of understandings among the participants, in the sense that no new categories of description could be formed based on their narrative descriptions, after 9 interviews (excluding the pilot). This indicated data saturation. The cohort of participants varied in terms of age (from 21 to 53), gender (2 males and 7 females), and country of origin (1 Croatian, 1 Bulgarian, 1 Greek, 2 Serbian, 2 Bosnian, 2 North-Macedonian). The descriptions forming the “pool of meaning” came from people within teaching circles, and outside of them (6 mother- tongue teachers with initial teacher education in SEE, 1 teacher with initial teacher education in Sweden, and 2 outside the teaching profession).

## Data analysis

Marton and Booth (1997) explain that once the data has been collected and transcribed, a “pool of meaning” is formed; within this pool of meaning two types of materials exist: 1) ones belonging to the individual, and 2) others belonging to the collective. All the possible and relevant information is already in the pool of meaning, and the only thing the researcher needs to do is find it (Marton & Booth, 1997). Phenomenographic research focuses on the collective voice (Marton & Booth, 1997; Cossham, 2017; Hajar, 2020). Therefore, the formed categories of descriptions focus on the collective voice because in phenomenographic research we are dealing with describing variations/ different ways in which the participants understand the concept of inquiry, or the phenomena around which this

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<sup>20</sup> a) a heuristic that represents a continuous triangular field to which any solutions to either the environmental, social, or economic aspect of SD can be located “including those that will count as sustainable development but extending way beyond these” (Connelly, 2007, p. 268). b) the Venn diagram of SD to elicit the ways participants understand each aspect.

<sup>21</sup> a) to live in Sweden at the time of the interview, b) come from a country in the South-Eastern part of Europe, c) to have moved to Sweden after the age of 18, and d) have some knowledge about the concepts of inquiry.

<sup>22</sup> I had a contact person that provided access to the majority of participants.

research centres. In my study, the goal was to explore the variation in the understandings of SD and/or any educational forms in relation to SD. In this sense, the individual voices become netted in the collective. The “outcome space” of the research contains the categories of description and the logical relationships between them, often (albeit not always, see: Hakvoort et al. 2020) organised in a hierarchy (Marton & Booth, 1997).

After an in-depth initial reading of the transcripts, I was able to thematically identify certain aspects of the phenomenon that the participants put into focus. Then, the transcripts were re-read many a time until the categories of description indicating critical variation in how the participants understood the concept, or aspects of the concept, were formed. This was done by focusing on one aspect at a time and looking for its dimension in variation either among participants, or within participants (Marton & Booth, 1997).

A conception is the unit of description in phenomenography, and conceptions of a phenomenon are the equivalent of understandings of a phenomenon (Marton & Pong, 2005). I mention above that the categories of description were formed by focusing on one aspect and looking for its dimension in variation after an initial (first stage) thematic analysis. In the second stage, as Marton and Pong (2005) elaborate, the goal is to find the “structural aspect”. The structural aspect “refers to how an individual thinks about phenomenon” while the “referential aspect focuses on *what* is being experienced” (Hajar, 2020, p. 4). Thus, the referential aspect denotes “the specific meaning attributed to a particular way of understanding” (Hakvoort et al., 2020, p. 39). Because the structural aspect is concerned with how “a way of understanding is constituted” it consists of “two elements” (Hakvoort et al., 2020, p. 39) or “horizons” (Marton & Booth, 1997). It consists of the “internal horizon [which] denotes the web of meaning-bearing components” (Hakvoort et al., 2020, p. 39) and “refers to the internal relationship between the different parts (...) how the parts are distinct from each other and how they form a cohesive unity” (Hajar, 2020, p. 4). The other element is the “external horizon [which] denotes what constitutes the background against which the way of understanding appears and to which it relates” (Hakvoort et al., 2020, p. 39) and it discerns “the whole from the context” (Hajar, 2020, p. 4).

Marton and Pong (2005) point out that the referential aspect of a phenomenon can be captured by simply interpreting what the participant is saying, while identifying the structural aspect is more arduous and it involves, among other things, looking for linguistic markers, such as the singular-plural dichotomy in the participants’ descriptions.

The following criteria are important to ensure the quality of the categories of description:

- each category needs to describe something that is distinct to that particular way of understanding the phenomenon, or an aspect of the phenomenon;
- the relationship between the categories needs to be logically determined; and
- the researcher is responsible for presenting as few categories as possible, without limiting the difference in understanding, for the sake of capturing the critical variation in the data (Marton & Booth, 1997).

It can be argued that because the categories of description developed in phenomenography focus on the collective rather than the individual voice, they can be considered an advantage of the research approach. In the sense that in most qualitative research, results are conditioned by the richness of data to the degree in which a participant is willing to share, or even able to express their ideas and understandings openly. In such cases the quality of the interview is equally dependent on the participant’s personality and the researcher’s interviewing skills. This is also true, to a great extent, for phenomenographic interviews. However, the difference is that by focusing on the collective voice, this approach allows for a variation in the richness of individual descriptions about aspects of the phenomenon, as long as differences or variation can be identified- either among or within participants,

in the ways they understand the central concept of inquiry. Nonetheless, we have to remember that although the categories of description can present a more coherent picture about how a group of people understand the phenomenon, such understandings are partial on two levels: 1) we might identify different ways of understanding by asking a different group the same questions, or even the same group different questions, and 2) even those understandings are still a partial description of the phenomenon, and do not reflect its “essence”- this is not the goal of phenomenographic research.

Data analysis is an iterative process in phenomenographic research which is why it was included in this chapter. Further elaboration on the results from this study will be presented in Chapter 4 i.e., the outcome space of this research which contains the categories of description.

## **Limitations and criticism about the reliability of phenomenographic results**

In her *Evaluation of Phenomenography*, Cossham (2017) raises two issues concerning the reliability of results. These issues, as Cossham (2017) points out, were originally addressed by Marton (1986) himself. The first one is a concern about whether other researchers would arrive at the same categories of description as the original researcher. Whereas the second concern questions whether other researchers would agree and recognise the same understandings described in the categories of description as the original researcher.

Therefore, when we consider the first concern, Cossham (2017) explains that it is highly unlikely for another researcher to identify and form the same categories of description as the original one because “interview data are always constituted through unique conversations between the researcher and the participant” (p. 22). Or in other words, it is both the established interpersonal relationship between interviewer-interviewee, and the situated conditions under which the interview takes place that condition the interview data (Marton & Pong, 2005). Thus, it is essentially the understandings and descriptions by the participants that steer the direction of the interview; and the interview guide, as important as it is, it is just that-a guide. Hence, follow-up questions will likely be conditioned by the aspects of the phenomenon on which the participants focus, and equally by the researcher’s own background and interests, even when she is consciously bracketing biases. Which is why reflexivity, is of great importance for the quality of results. On these grounds, I previously stated my personal bias going into this study and tried to explain its roots. Moreover, during this study I kept reflective notes that ensured I tread lightly at each step. Starting from the choice of the topic to the data analysis. I hope to have been able to illustrate the reflexivity and decision-making processes in the writing of this paper.

As for the second concern, if other researchers cannot recognise the same understandings described in the categories of description as the original researcher, then it probably means, as Cossham (2017) argues that the categories of description were poorly formed in the first place. There are, of course, ways to ensure this does not happen. One way to avoid this is to adopt the stages for forming categories of description, explained in the section above. Another way is to discuss the categories of description and see if others are able to recognise the different understandings identified. Which is why phenomenographic studies are often done by groups of researchers. However, a Master Thesis is an individual work, therefore, in-depth discussions with a group of researchers are not possible. The insight and support I got from my supervisor, as well as discussions with peers at the programme, in my opinion, counteracts this limitation to a certain extent.



## Limitations and criticism about the validity of phenomenographic results

When it comes to criticism about the validity of phenomenographic results, Hasselgren and Beach (1996) write “it seems more to us that the meanings are given by the researcher, his/ her history/ biography and the manipulative situation of the interview conversation” (p. 13). Indicating, in a sense, that phenomenographic research is essentially research from the first-order perspective operating under the guise of the second-order perspective. This criticism questions the whole relevance and standing of phenomenography as an independent and distinct research approach in educational research. Throughout this paper, steps undertaken by the phenomenographer to ensure this does not happen, were explained. For the sake of conciseness, some of those steps will be revisited. 1) Firstly, the researcher should bracket her personal bias by being transparent and reflexive when conducting the research and data analysis. 2) Second, multiple readings of the interview transcripts should take place, occurring at various stages of data analysis, to form the categories of description. And aspects presented in the categories should be supported by participants’ quotes. 3) Further, the categories of description should be discussed with other researchers, to ensure a correct interpretation of participants’ understandings, and mimic, to some extent, inter-rater reliability. 4) The fourth step is largely related to the philosophical tradition in which this study is situated. According to the constructivist/interpretivist worldview, “no researcher is nor could ever be a blank canvas on which interviewees draw their pictures” (Hajar, 2020, p. 7). For it is the case of any research, even those done in the positivist tradition, that the researcher herself chooses the tools and methods which she deems most appropriate<sup>23</sup> when working with her data, therefore, any dishonest<sup>24</sup> researcher could manipulate their data, regardless of the research approach. 5) Lastly, ethical considerations were carefully followed to ensure any perceived power imbalances between the researcher and her participants were extensively minimised. Thus, it was the participants who were considered the experts in this study, since it was their understandings about aspects of the phenomena I was after.

To summarise, Marton and Booth (1997) clarify:

The validity claim [in phenomenographic research] is made in relation to the data available. Thus we argue the category of description is a reasonable characterization of a possible way of experiencing [understanding] something given the data at hand. (p.136)

## Ethical considerations

This whole thesis spans over multiple ethical dimensions. The epistemological underpinnings, the way the problem is approached- embracing the plethora of values, broaden the scope of ethics way beyond methodological ethical implications. Hence, the treatment of the problem highlights its complexity. Thus, situating this research in the tradition of education *as* sustainable development can be seen as a support of the criticism towards education *for* sustainable development (Jickling & Wals, 2012). And in this way, another ethical dimension is highlighted, in the sense of *whose approach to choose* when dealing with a “wicked problem” without indoctrinating the learners? At the same time, it is paramount to not succumb to “becoming part of the neo-liberalist project” (Jickling & Wals, 2012, p. 53). Moreover, the participants’ selection also carries a set of ethical dimensions. Thus, I am not trying to force categories onto the participants, but rather allow for the categories to emerge from the participants’ understandings. Therefore, allowing for a presentation of the clash of knowledges and giving voice to underrepresented groups is, in its core, a part of ethics. Further, the selected SEE region, as the place where the participants have spent a good portion of their lives and that has in some way shaped their personal biographies, is ethically charged in itself. As discussed in the literature review, the consequences from the transition period (still ongoing for many countries in the region),

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<sup>23</sup> Often based on previous research, and conceptions about the world.

<sup>24</sup> I mean dishonesty in research ethics.

not only created different ways in which SD and ESD issues are approached, but also created economic hardships which can relate to a fight for survival in many instances, making SD research in relation to this region even more ethically complex. This research is intertwined in normative questions and the problematisation of “wickedness” in relation to SD and its educational equivalent. It is also important to highlight that this research does not claim to have solved the problems connected to SD and its educational responses. It does, however, provide an alternative for approaching such issues from a pluralistic perspective, with an openness and “acceptance of coexisting ontologies” (Du Puis & Ball, 2013) where, as following Du Puis and Ball’s (2013) course of thought, the *what* of sustainable development and its educational equivalent, emerges from the *how* knowledge is created- the background against which meaning, and understandings are formed. Therefore, the research results do not present one objective knowledge, but rather, as the philosophical worldview and theoretical framework of this study suggest, it illustrates the ways in which reality is socially constructed. On these grounds, the results from this research can help enrich the knowledge structure and understanding of SD issues and its educational forms, from the perspective of the participants that now live and work in Swedish society but come from different cultural, economic, political, and educational backgrounds. A group of people who carry previous knowledge cemented in their personal biographies (English & Mayo, 2019).

When it comes to the ethical considerations in relation to the research methodology, Silverman (2010) writes that when working with human participants informed consent is an integral part. Therefore, consent forms were provided to the participants, alongside the reassurance of having the possibility to refuse participation at any given point, thus ensuring a continuous guarantee of informed consent. These ethical considerations were pointed out by the researcher at the start of each interview. The anonymity of participants in the presentation of the results was guaranteed by the researcher (myself) by making sure their names and personal information were redacted from the transcriptions. Microsoft 365 was used to support transcriptions, to a certain extent. Such a decision was made to ensure the feasibility of the thesis in relation to the time frame assigned for completion. Copies of the transcripts and audio files were immediately disposed of and kept only in physical format by the researcher until the completion of this thesis. The participants are regarded as the experts in the topic the research is aiming to investigate since the only way of exploring how they understand the phenomena is by asking them directly. Thus, voice is given to the participants and knowledge is formed from “the second-order perspective” i.e., from their own ways of understanding.

The first step to ensure informed consent was by emailing letters for participation<sup>25</sup> to the participants, after which a time and place was arranged for the interviews. The letters contained detailed information about the purpose of the study and information about the ethical guidelines. The interview meetings were arranged according to the participants’ schedules, demonstrating a generous flexibility by the researcher in terms of time- as a valuable resource. According to Marton and Booth (1997), the phenomenographic interview is a process that benefits both the researcher and participants, since one-on-one interviews are considered a learning opportunity for both the participants and the researcher. Therefore, the researcher is learning about the phenomenon she is researching through the different ways in which her participants make sense of it. Moreover, the participants are in a state of learning themselves; through their own focused reflection on aspects of the phenomenon, they are becoming conscious of their awareness about the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). A limitation of the phenomenographic interview, that I would argue is a limitation for most- if not all qualitative interviews, is the fact that both the interviewer and interviewee are in a position to manipulate the interview. This, however, is not a central concern of my study, because the data results highlight the collective rather than the individual voice.

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<sup>25</sup> Written in English and in Swedish.

## Sustainability statement

The whole research focuses on Education *as* Sustainable Development; therefore, it incorporates the majority of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the most notable SDG that the research is aiming to account for is target 4.7- “Education for sustainable development and global citizenship”. Keep in mind, as discussed in the introduction of this paper, that ESD with the preposition *for* is a thematic and well-established label, which is why it is continuously used. Otherwise, this research complements previous research in the education *as* sustainable development tradition in the sense that it correlates with the idea of SD being a “wicked problem” (Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021) and a “contested concept” (Connelly, 2007) researched from a pluralistic perspective. And since no educational form in relation to SD can occur in isolation from SD, then any educational form in relation to SD would also be considered a “wicked problem” and a “contested concept”.

Additionally, the phenomena are explored from a pluralistic perspective. The Swedish immigrants’ perspective adds another layer to the understanding of SD and its educational equivalent and expands the knowledge. It merges the global perspectives in a local setting. This research aims to identify the social, cultural, environmental, economic problems<sup>26</sup> that concern South-Eastern European immigrants in Sweden by exploring the qualitatively different ways in which the participants understand Sustainable Development and/ or Education in relation to Sustainable Development.

## Chapter 4

This chapter is the outcome space of this research, where the results of the data analysis will be presented in the form of categories of description. Each category will be discussed under a separate heading. However, before presenting the categories of descriptions, some elements and decisions made for the presentation of the data need to be highlighted. As I briefly touched upon in the introduction of this thesis, even though my research as a whole is concerned and situated within education *as* sustainable development, the data results in relation to education will be presented under the umbrella term “Education”- which denotes any potential role of education in relation to SD (whether that be understandings of education *as*, *for*, or *about* sustainable development). Furthermore, because any form of education related to SD cannot be discussed without SD, the qualitatively different ways of understanding SD are also presented in the data analysis. Therefore, the plethora of understandings shown in the table below, and discussed in each category of description, emerged from the “pool of meaning” (Marton & Booth, 1997). The variety of understandings were neither restricted nor confined by any epistemological or ontological assumptions of the researcher about what issues are SD issues or what educational forms should be used when dealing with SD issues. Hence, the categories of description are formed from the perspective of the participants who, as shown in the outcome space of this research, displayed an array of behaviouristic, pluralistic, and normative understandings about aspects of the phenomena. And such understandings displayed variation both among and within participants.

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<sup>26</sup> Or, stated in true phenomenographic vocabulary, aspects of those problems.

Table 1: The six categories of description presented in the outcome space

<b>A way of understanding</b>	<b>Referential Aspect: <u>SD/ Education as...</u></b>	<b>Structural Aspect (External Horizon)</b>	<b>Structural Aspect (Internal Horizon)</b>
<b>A</b>	SD/ Education as a responsibility	micro and/or mezzo actions= macro effects	personal; transferable; autodidactic; familial; organisational; institutional; professional; selective; educational; studently; social; collective; governmental; legislative;
<b>B</b>	SD/ Education as concern of the rich and developed	a practice hindered by economic and other hardships	old cars; war; survival; corruption; lack of education; destruction of the environment; inequality; stigmatisation; exploitation of resources; inability to implement the use of green energy; critical thinking is discouraged; cultural preconceptions; exclusion of vulnerable groups; limited freedom of speech; lack of interest about the SD in SEE;
<b>C</b>	SD/ Education as a capitalistic propaganda	hyper-consumption	online shopping; over-production; product placement; fast fashion; lack of market knowledge by the consumer; the negative effects of consumption; low product durability; consumers' increasing demands; rapid-production; no profit for investors; clothing companies become trend-makers; consumer society;
<b>D</b>	SD/ Education as a core of Swedish society	a sustainably developed society	days marking ESD; ESD starts from the kindergarten; SD as a theme in schools; SD is omnipresent; no borders in nature; strong focus on the environmental pillar; social pillar; economic pillar; advanced recycling practices; integration into SD society;
<b>E</b>	SD/ Education as a holistic approach	a way of life	beyond education; give a new purpose to recycled materials; lifelong learning; lifewide learning; educate critical thinkers; across the school; engage in deep learning; make practice purposeful; outdoor learning; education as sustainable development; the purpose of education;
<b>F</b>	SD/ Education as a wicked problem	choosing the lesser evil	whether you should consume meat or not; the cost of organic products; the more unsustainably we develop the more focus is put on SD issues; resources used as sustainable alternatives have damaging effects on certain regions; recycling as part of consumerism;

## Category of description A

As discussed, the referential aspect corresponds to the meaning which is given to the phenomenon by the participants. Therefore, in category A, **SD/ Education** is understood **as a responsibility**. Moreover, there is a variety in the ways denoting who is to be considered responsible, illustrated by the “web of meaning-bearing components” (Hakvoort et al., 2020) that forms the internal horizon of the structural aspect.

Individual and personal responsibility for SD and Education in relation to SD was raised by the participants, which is in a way opposed to the governmental and institutional responsibility, also described by the participants, as shown in the following excerpts:

*Interviewer*: “What how about now? What do you think about it? How do you understand it as a whole... like the concept of sustainable development?”

*Participant08*: “I understand the individual responsibility because if everyone thinks well if I don’t do it it’s not gonna make a difference, if we changed to the exact opposite (...) individuality makes a big difference at the end” [quoted verbatim]

*Participant07*: “We cannot change anything by changing those in power, but by changing ourselves” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant03*: “It’s all dependant on government and legislation, parliament, and all... political system (...) I don’t see how people on the private level shall be aware, especially companies” [quoted verbatim]

Furthermore, family and the role of the family was given meaning by the participants, in a context of SD and education in relation to SD, as a component surpassing geographical borders. As shown in the following examples:

*Participant09*: “Parents have a huge responsibility in all this process because umm... they most of all have to... to show what to do, not to talk” [quoted verbatim]

*Participant01*: “It is important to include the family as well because education... formal education is just one part of humanity’s development” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

An interesting perspective of autodidactic responsibility for sustainable development emerged in the context of my research, shown in this excerpt:

*Participant08*: “If you don’t get the education you think you need. Do it yourself. Now you have the Internet, go and educate yourself. Choose correctly the correct sources and educate yourself. Because I was always hiding behind the fact that because I didn’t get the right, like education, I didn’t know about this, but there comes a point in life and I’m like yeah... but then I’m not my educational system, it’s me, I’m me and it’s up to me now. They didn’t give me what I think I needed. I’ll get it myself” [quoted verbatim]

When discussing the responsibility students have, and how they respond to it, the participant who teaches mother-tongue in a Swedish school said:

*Participant01*: “They experience all that as a micro, micro, and they as an individual are not a problem” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

An interesting internal horizon, which contributes on the quote above, is connected to the transfer of responsibility. Thus, during one of the interviews with a mother-tongue teacher they described the importance of the social pillar of ESD, however, they understood it as something that is out of their personal and professional responsibility:

*Participant03*: “I wouldn’t take into question about politics because books don’t talk... they never ask me about it. For instance, how you should organise political society” [quoted verbatim]

The next example shows a chain-reaction of transferring responsibility:

*Participant01:* "It is simply transferred from one onto the other. Or let's say, the parents transfer onto the school, the school onto the parents (...) my students say well my mum bought it for me, or my dad bought it for me (...) I think the biggest problem is the transfer of responsibility onto society" [translated from another language; summarised by the researcher in the words of the participant]

A final example of meaning-bearing components that form the internal horizon is presented through descriptions of professional, or expert responsibility:

*Participant02:* "I would like those who care about what we are going to teach the kids, those who develop the curriculum to also take care of which books to use and where" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant09:* "Maybe the people who are working exactly the... it's their job to work with these things. They're maybe more responsible to... to give you the information to educate the people who doesn't have this kind of information" [quoted verbatim]

Furthermore, the external horizon of the structural aspect denotes the background against which the "web of meaning-bearing components" is formed (Hakvoort et al., 2020). Therefore, in category of description A, **micro and/or mezzo level actions leading to macro effects** is the background against which different components of SD/ Educational responsibility are formed. What is meant by this is that regardless of whether it comes from the micro or mezzo level, awareness and recognition of responsibility leads to sustainable development, and equally education as sustainable development.

When talking about responsibility as a catalysator of change, a participant gave an example of the macro effects resulting from small actions:

*Participant09:* "I heard some examples like here in Sweden. It was like a bakery or café... they were like... students were working there and they were not paid enough, and they heard about it, so people were... so they... they were not going there anymore. They... they changed their policy then. So I think it's everyone... be aware of that then like... see it like: okay, I can do something. So it's really... it's going to happen" [quoted verbatim]

Moreover, another participant gave a similar example:

*Participant07:* "if I clean my backyard I can lead by example and maybe influence my neighbour to do the same. When he sees what I've done, how nice my backyard looks, he might do the same. And then if another, and another... and all the rest will have to follow, or they will be the only ones left with dirty backyards. And then when we all fix our backyards, we can even fix our street, our village, our city, and maybe even our country" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

A third and final excerpt denoting the external horizon is the following:

*Participant08:* "Every action has a consequence in life that follows everything (...) like all the everyday small habits. If you just swift like... switch them a little bit can make a big difference in the big picture" [quoted verbatim]

## Category of description B

In category of description B, the referential aspect bears the specific meaning of **SD/ Education as a concern of the rich and developed**. Its interpretation can be considered an inverted reflection of the external horizon in the structural aspect defined as **a practice hindered by economic and other hardships**. Which is essentially the background against which the variation of "meaning-bearing components" (Hakvoort et al., 2020) of the internal horizon are formed. I will start by discussing some of the parts that construct the internal horizon.

Therefore, when talking about why the participants perceived the SEE region, and their own countries as lagging behind in relation to sustainable development (especially in comparison to Sweden) similar descriptions were given. Such struggles, in turn, can prevent any form of education in relation to SD to be prioritised. The excerpts below illustrate one perspective that has to do with economic status and financial struggles:

*Participant05*: “People are not so interested in hearing about these things. But then again, they have other problems. They have problems with the economy, they have problems with finding work and similar things” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant09*: “They live from today... from today to tomorrow they... they have a bigger problems to think about their own existation, and so they don't think about the planet in the future when they have some big problems, so it's not easy. I think it's not easy to fix this” [quoted verbatim]

*Participant01*: “I think that what has the most effect on the lack of sustainable development is our social class. There are people there who live on the verge of financial misery... so they have to gather all sorts of unsustainable materials, like rubber and stuff, to keep warm during the cold periods. So air pollution is terrible, especially in the winter... but they don't think about what it does to the planet, they only care to survive” [translated from another language; summarised by the researcher in the words of the participant]

Furthermore, when discussing some advances individuals in SEE countries have made which were supported by Western investments in projects for green energy production, the government has prevented such initiatives in said SEE country:

*Participant07*: “And then of course corruption or whatever... made that project just simply disappear” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

Distrust in government is highlighted on various other occasions, such as shown here:

*Participant02*: “Our politicians are so corrupted (...) there are no laws in place to regulate import of extremely old cars that cause air pollution” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant09*: “The people are following authorities... that's happening in the now it's like, don't they... they lose... they don't trust the... they don't have like this relation with the authorities no more” [quoted verbatim]

On the other hand, participants described a perceived lack of interest about whether SEE countries will develop sustainably, mirroring in a sense an environmental crisis and urgency that characterises the region. The following excerpts illustrate such understandings:

*Participant02*: “If a COUNTRY uses our natural resources, and thus destroys our environment, brings upon some serious consequences on the environment in the Balkans today, that doesn't mean that tomorrow the same effects won't transfer to their territory as well” [translated from another language; country redacted]

*Participant07*: “I honestly think that it has to do with our countries being poor, and that our countries have natural resources, and that other countries that are more powerful, in fact use our resources, and use some other country to produce enough energy, but to have their own country still stay in somewhat green conditions, or something like that...” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in translation]

*Participant08*: “Tourists that come to COUNTRY, they are sustainable in their countries, but when they go on vacation they don't care” [quoted verbatim]

Moreover, the participants, as shown by the following excerpts, were aware about the stigmatisation of certain sustainable practices that in the SEE countries were related to the notion of social class:

*Participant01*: “When I say I buy second-hand, they take it as something to do with a low income, my family’s low income” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant08*: “And I started thrifting, which is such a stigma where I come from. Here everybody does it and everybody is so proud, but in my home... in my hometown is like... I told them that this is thrifted, and mum, even my own mum she’s like oh my God you’re wearing second hand things” [quoted verbatim]

Furthermore, even recycling has shown to be a problem in some SEE countries, in the sense that recycling containers do not exist, or are not as widely used as in Sweden. How can then any form of education in relation to SD take place when spaces for such practices are not even a priority? This perspective is shown in the following excerpts:

*Participant02*: “We don’t have recycling containers in COUNTRY” [translated from another language; country redacted]

*Participant06*: “They don’t select the garbage, so they umm...”

*Interviewer*: “Is it all thrown in the same trash can?”

*Participant06*: “In the same trash can. And then I don’t know if the places they throw it later is very safe for the people around” [quoted verbatim]

*Participant01*: “I saw it on the news or something... it was I think in COUNTRY about people throwing trash in the woods, and when they asked them why they do it, they said it’s because they can’t afford those 5 euros every month to pay for the garbage truck to transport municipal waste to a waste treatment facility” [translated from another language; country redacted]

Lack of finances in SEE countries is given as the most common description about what prevents SD practices:

*Interviewer*: “Do you think there is any particular reason for that?”

*Participant03*: “Yeah... they don’t have money, and they don’t have... yeah money. Because it’s expensive to develop electric cars” [quoted verbatim]

*Participant05*: “People drive fossil fuel cars. There is no option to buy electric cars... I mean there is, but it’s the economy that affects that a lot (...) there are a lot who don’t work, it is... their salary is very low, they don’t earn a lot of money” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

On the other hand, a participant thinks financial issues are not the biggest hindrance to SD practices, instead it is the education, or lack thereof, especially a kind of education that encourages critical awareness:

*Participant08*: “We don’t have a holistic understanding of the situation (...) but COUNTRY wasn’t always poor as it is now (...) let’s not forget that a lot of our population is uneducated (...) so the reason is the awareness, the awareness isn’t really there” [quoted verbatim; country redacted]

Inequality and exclusion as cultural preconceptions were also described, as shown by this excerpt:

*Participant05*: “There are still some professions considered... in COUNTRY women don’t work as much for example, or it might be a cultural preconception... it is not a job for a woman but a man”

*Interviewer*: “Could you give me an example?”

*Participant05*: “Yes, it’s mostly like a driver for example... to drive a truck, or a cab, or a bus, it is mostly man... and then not even there... we can talk about higher position if we take the government for example or the party leaders. I don’t see a lot of women as party leaders” [translated from another language; country redacted]



*Participant05:* "Children with special needs don't get the support they need, it is available only in the capital, but not everyone can afford to move. Their parents can't go... and they need their parents" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

The external horizon of the structural aspect, **a practice hindered by economic and other hardships**, has defined the SEE region since the fall of Yugoslavia. It is, therefore, best presented by the following excerpts:

*Participant07:* "We were living in a difficult economic situation, war politics on every level" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant02:* "So since the end of the war people started importing cars from foreign countries that people didn't want any more or were supposed to be tossed" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

## Category of description C

In category of description C, the referential aspect, as described by the participants, considers **SD/ Education as a capitalistic propaganda**. As in the previous categories, the internal horizon of the structural aspect denotes the ways in which meaning is formed in relation to the various aspects of the phenomenon on which the participants focused (Marton & Pong, 2005; Hajar, 2020). Therefore, those "meaning-bearing components" (Hakvoort et al., 2020) will be presented and discussed, followed by an explanation of the external horizon of the structural aspect.

Thus, Swedish society, although as shown in category of description D is perceived as a sustainably developed society by the participants, it is equally considered a consumerist society, as illustrated by these excerpts:

*Participant01:* "Especially concerning is the fact that Sweden is one of the biggest consumers... that is statistically shown" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant02:* "I really think that consumption of all sorts of stuff is the biggest problem of today's society" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

The component described above is further supported by a perceived increase in product demand, as well as a free-shipping policy that companies promote to encourage online shopping, as illustrated by the participants' quotes:

*Participant02:* "Let's say Sweden... one average family... back in the day... there was one car per family. Now I think it's practically one car per head in each family (...) and the cost of cars constantly increases, especially since people want it... to be constantly updated... to have a new car... and so on" [translated from another language; summarised by the researcher in the words of the participant]

*Participant07:* "I have noticed that more and more we develop online shopping habits. And I have noticed that there are more and more heavy vehicles or trucks on the roads that are in fact transporting our orders. And our orders get delivered without us having to even pay for that transportation. And then the orders might even get returned, who knows (...) I think it is a policy that companies are pushing forth to continue developing... just by providing free shipping. The free shipping itself causes problems and destroys our... our environment" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

As the quote above shows, the environmental impact of the cost of transportation is not a primary concern for the consumerist society.

Over-production, alongside the negative effects of consumption, were two components, or aspects, equally highlighted by participants as having an especially negative effect on the people and planet:

*Participant02*: “A lot has changed especially in the last 10 to 20 years. We can see how much is produced, how much we are spending, how much we are throwing out, and so on” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant07*: “We want to have a great phone, or I don’t know... a great electric toothbrush, or we all want to have a certain blender or a coffee machine. And when we purchase, we don’t really think about the resources that go into the production. When maybe in fact... a lot of those things that we buy we don’t really need (...) thousands of people lose their lives in wars over the control of resources that we take from nature... but no one reads in the manual... for an appliance they bought... does it even say where it was produced? Where were its parts produced? Does it say that the battery was made by a resource coming from a country at war over that resource?” [translated from another language; summarised by the researcher in the words of the participant]

Moreover, fast- fashion is considered as one of the major problems that is founded in consumerism and concerns the people and the planet. Some participants connected such unsustainable practices to a lack of education in relation to SD. Such understandings are presented in the following excerpts:

*Participant08*: “Now we live in such a capitalistic society that the demand and the needs of the cost of consumers are so big, especially when it comes to clothing and stuff. We shop a lot. Me, myself included. But I... but nobody teaches you. Where does clothes come from? How the people are working? And if there is so much variety... nobody can possibly wear so much clothes. So what do they do with the clothes and how are they then absorbed by the... like the earth... or whatever they do with them” [quoted verbatim]

*Participant05*: “The fashion industry develops very fast, it’s like there is a collection for almost every... not just the four seasons... it’s almost like there is a new collection each month. And then there are the rich countries with big production names that take advantage of poor countries and they sew and produce there, and they take their water. Poisonous waste is released into their water from the factories. And then the workers... they work for very low wages...I can give an example, let’s say in COUNTRY or COUNTRY where most Western-European countries produce their clothes... And then when people swim in the rivers where factories release waste they get body rash, a lot of diseases... I even read that there is a sea that no longer exists because of the textile industry (...) and it affected the whole climate. No birds- they migrated, no marine life- it all died. And it even affected the people, and people started to get sick... so, such problems... I consider the development of the textile industry as one of the biggest problems” [translated from another language; countries redacted]

Furthermore, the same textile industry is also one of the biggest trend setters, as illustrated in the following quote. Such trends are then supported by influencers that are paid for product placement on social media.

*Participant01*: “Let’s take COMPANY for example... it influences the way young people dress... and if you go shopping you can find the same trend promoted in 5-6 different stores” [translated from another language; company redacted]

*Participant02*: “And it’s the job of those people [on social media] to promote product... even if you don’t need it, they can make you want to get it” [translated from another language; clarification made by the researcher]

Also, the lack of knowledge about how the market works was considered a big disadvantage.

*Participant08*: “We don’t know how the market works. So you can’t be the right consumer if you don’t understand how the market works, because your needs are created by the marketing people and if you’re not critical they can create for you any need they want and you’ll just as a sheep follow it and buy it” [quoted verbatim]

Accordingly, the external horizon of the structural aspect is defined as **hyper-consumption** by the participants. Therefore, it denotes the context (Marton & Booth, 1997), or background (Hakvoort et al., 2020) against which the understanding of aspects of the phenomenon is constructed, as shown in the excerpt below:

*Participant01*: “Unfortunately, I think all of this political era, if we can call it capitalistic... affects people’s spending. So people spend a lot, and they want a lot. I think the fast pace in which products change, let’s take the phones as an example and... so the fast pace of products change contributes to us caring about it much less (...) They say that appliances lasted longer back in the day (...) Capitalism is that we have everything in abundance, we use everything in abundance” [translated from another language; summarised by the researcher in the words of the participant]

## Category of description D

In category of description D, the specific meaning given to a way of understanding i.e., the referential aspect (Hakvoort et al., 2020) considers **SD/ Education as a core of Swedish society**. As it is the case with all other categories of description, I will begin by discussing some of the “meaning-bearing components” (Hakvoort et al., 2020) denoting the internal horizon of the structural aspect.

First, sustainable development in the context of Sweden was considered to be omnipresent by the participants in this study, both within education and extending well beyond education, as it can be seen from these excerpts:

*Participant05*: “It is everywhere. Not just in my work [as a teacher] but also in our everyday lifestyle or life, and it affects... it completely affects our day-to-day lives in one way or another. And not just at the workplace, but home as well” [translated from another language; clarification made by the researcher]

Also, it is described that there are days which mark sustainable development in Sweden:

*Participant02*: “It’s a good thing that in Sweden still exist days that mark certain themes [as mother-tongue day] and sustainable development as a theme always finds a way to be incorporated... it always threads across” [translated from another language; clarification made by the researcher]

Moreover, educational forms in relation to SD are deemed present in Sweden from early-childhood education onwards:

*Interviewer*: “Have you heard about the concept hållbar utveckling, or sustainable development before today?”

*Participant09*: “Yes, we’re working all the time in school with this (...) they’re talking a lot about that in schools, from the earliest age, from the kindergarten, so the kids are very aware of this, they are learning a lot of that” [quoted verbatim]

*Participant05*: “Then in school they work a lot with sustainable development as a theme. Students do their own research about an issue they find important” [translated from another language; summarised by the researcher in the words of the participant]

Therefore, integration into Swedish society is something that is discussed when a participant recalls how they were told that if they do not understand why recycling is so important, integration into society would be very difficult:

*Participant08*: “My aunt she was like really obsessed with recycling and we had huge fights in the beginning because I didn’t really see the point like... the importance. It wasn’t something that I grew up with, as a concept it was really far away from me and I felt really pressured too because she kept telling me you won’t be able to integrate if you don’t do that” [quoted verbatim]

Swedish society was also perceived as a society that implements advanced recycling methods, as presented by the interview excerpts:

*Participant07*: “Recycling in Sweden is at a very high level... Sweden buys recycled trash from other countries and uses it to produce the energy we need. So some countries have not yet reached the same level... most countries haven’t reached that level in fact” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

However, participants highlighted the fact that the SD practices of one country cannot save the whole planet. Equally, since there are no concrete borders in nature the effects of non-SD actions will inevitably reflect onto Swedish territory, as presented here:

*Participant01*: “Sweden reuses the trash to create energy, but all that at a global scale, all that is still too little” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in translation]

*Participant07*: “Regardless that Sweden is a country that is a leader in sustainable development in comparison to many other European countries, and, of course, other countries worldwide. One country cannot protect the planet” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in translation]

*Participant09*: “If other countries followed the same rules as Sweden does... As we know, there are no borders in nature, they exist only between countries. Otherwise, everything is... everything occurs in cycles in nature... so if someone for example throws trash in COUNTRY, it will surely come here in some form” [translated from another language; country redacted]

Nonetheless, although the participants feel like Sweden implements the social, economic, and environmental perspectives, they consider the strongest point of Swedish SD to be the environment. This understanding is presented below:

*Participant05*: “When it comes to the climate, I think that Sweden is doing good, and it is maybe her... Sweden’s highest point. Sweden is doing everything for the climate through encouraging people to cycle, to use public transport” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant06*: “I can say that people in Sweden, and even the children... so they are very well informed about climate change. They try and do their best (...) And as I said, my pupils at school they come by bike. People ride bikes even in winter. Even if they live very far away. Even the directors of the schools” [quoted verbatim]

Therefore, the “web of meaning-bearing components” (Hakvoort et al., 2020) was formed against the background of a **sustainably developed society**, which outlines the external horizon of the structural aspect, as presented in the excerpts below:

*Participant02*: “This [Swedish] society is governed by a care for... talking about it [sustainable development] first and foremost” [translated from another language; clarifications made by the researcher]

*Participant07*: “What I really liked [about Sweden] is that I noticed that it [sustainable development] is talked about everywhere. So it’s not just the school... it’s the whole level of awareness that exists in Sweden in comparison to the country from where I come... it’s on a higher level. And the topic [of SD] is present and put at use in all domains” [translated from another language; clarifications made by the researcher]

## Category of description E

The referential aspect, or the specific meaning which is given to the understanding of SD and/ or educational forms in relation to SD by the participants in category of description E, defines **SD/ Education as a holistic approach**. First, the variety of “meaning-bearing components” (Hakvoort et al., 2020) that form the internal horizon of the structural aspect in the same category will be laid out and supported with participants’ own descriptions.

Therefore, the participants consider that educating as sustainable development, by making learning purposeful and practice based, as well as extending across all segments of the school is much more efficient, as it can be seen from the following excerpts:

*Participant01*: “When we plan our lessons in relation to sustainable development or for the whole year, we have agreed to do some research individually, and then chose together what we think it would suit our students most” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant01*: “Developing an environmental awareness in the young people is supposed to be a task of all teachers... all teachers and all aspects of society. And not only of teachers, and I don’t know... biology teachers... because for us in the Balkans it is usually the task of the natural sciences teachers” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant05*: “sustainable development is not something that you can have during one lesson and that’s it. It’s something that probably needs to be spread across a longer period, maybe a couple of weeks as a theme work. All students can maybe choose by themselves an aspect to focus on... they can research on their own (...) and then when we have the presentations, they can learn from each other... So maybe they will get more knowledge and become more aware of sustainable development” [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant05*: “[In Swedish schools] the students have to create their own understandings, they must think for themselves (...) everyone’s opinions are worth equally, one has to respect them, their religion, their physical appearance, their style” [translated from another language; clarification made by the researcher]

*Participant05*: “It starts with the kindergarten, and everyone becomes aware already from there that trash should be sorted and recycled, to not take too much food, to not waste food, to reuse the plastic and make something fun with it. Even the toys, they have a lot of wooden toys. Kids are out in the woods and they learn about nature outdoors (...) in school they work a lot with the theme sustainable development, they research by themselves, they learn about nutrition, and the options we have” [translated from another language; summarised by the researcher in the words of the participant]

*Participant08*: “I think it’s important at school, if you’re like at the Bamba [the school canteen], you know the restaurant. It’s great that here some Bambas have the separation (...) some say just leave the tray here. I think that is really important” [quoted verbatim; clarification made by the researcher]

*Participant06*: “We talk even at school with the children. So what is the best way to come to school... we have even gratis bus card that we give to the children to come to school with the bus, but some of them even say no. So they take the bike instead. That’s even more like better option for our climate” [quoted verbatim]

*Participant02*: “I remember when I was young [in Yugoslavia], we had school excursions to the local paper factory to see how we get our notebooks (...) I think practice is best... practical activities where the kids will be able to see the results... is always the best life lesson which will stick with them... not just theory” [translated from another language; clarification made by the researcher]

The first quotation from the excerpts presented above acknowledges that education in relation to SD works best when pluralistic perspectives are involved, which enrich the knowledge base of what and how SD issues should be covered in an educational context. Similarly, the third quotation expresses a stance where approaching education from multiple perspectives is the most efficient way for constructing knowledge in relation to SD. Hence, the participants argue that SD education should be incorporated across the school and well beyond it. It is seen as lifelong learning that integrates and relates to all aspects of society. It is something that occurs in collaboration with others and with respect toward others. As opposed to educating *for* or *about* sustainable development, exemplified below:

*Participant02*: “The placement of it onto young people, I am talking about Sweden now is... it is placed really nice through the school, and through some kids’ programmes, such topics [SD] are nicely processed... so when you ask them [students] about it, they know some stuff. They can tell you the right answer. What I fear is that when the time comes, when they mature and come into their own, and earn their own money... how will they implement such practices?” [translated from another language; clarifications made by the researcher]

*Participant01*: “Well it seems to me that despite talking a lot about sustainable development, which is a theme in schools and everything... but it seems to me that it doesn’t give as good of a result. Which means that there might be a need for another system where... to be able to process

the received information and not only... but to process it" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

Moreover, from the interviews the component of giving purpose to recycled materials and reusing such materials in an educational context, also emerged:

*Participant01*: "I have a doll that I made from recycled material, and I use that doll to practice reading with my pupils. Because sometimes the kid will not want to read, it might feel boring. And then I say, well you don't have to practice it, but we have to help the doll learn how to read. And then the pupil takes the doll and uses it to practice reading (...) My goal was to show that the dolls that I make from recycled materials can be fun, open their mouth and have human-like movements... those can be made from something we consider trash" [translated from another language; summarised by the researcher in the words of the participant]

Furthermore, the participants emphasised the perception that sustainably developed teaching and learning must be life-wide, and resemble a puzzle in a sense, as illustrated by the excerpts here:

*Participant01*: "It has to be not a river that is canalised but a lake that overflows" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant01*: "We have to be like a puzzle, and every domain of society needs to contribute in some form, each and every one of us (...) so not just in school, but everywhere, from the news and onwards" [translated from another language; summarised by the researcher in the words of the participant]

Another interesting component that emerged was the perception that a propaganda of any kind is not going to be a solution, as presented in the quote below:

*Participant08*: "With the consequences and the fines, that you have to pay and stuff like that. I don't think you need to terrify people or like take away their liberties in any way... If you try to teach them something, then you need to incorporate it in small aspects in life (...) There are other ways to talk to people" [quoted verbatim]

Therefore, the external horizon of the structural aspect in this category of description is **a way of life**; as the background against which the meanings were formed in the internal horizon of the same aspect.

*Participant01*: "I wanted to say that in some way, when a person starts thinking about this, and use it in practice. That becomes in some form a way of life" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

## Category of description F

In the category of description F, the group of participants understood **SD/ Education as a wicked problem**, also known as the referential aspect. Therefore, the internal horizon of the structural aspect is denoted by a variety of "meaning-bearing components" (Hakvoort et al., 2020), some of which will be presented in this section.

Firstly, participants explained that the more we develop, thus increasing the negative impacts of human production on non-human life on this planet, the more the concept of sustainable development is prioritised in all areas of social life. As shown by the following excerpt:

*Participant07*: "The more we develop, the more resources are needed. And the greater the need for resources the more we drain the already diminishing resources. And in this way, we destroy our planet, our environment" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

*Participant02*: "So us today, we pollute more, which is why we must also talk about it more than back in the day" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

The previous component of the internal horizon finds support in the component presented next. In the sense that the advanced recycling practices can be connected to an increase in production and

consumption. Participants were claiming that certain things, like the perceived low quality of production today, were done to enable a continuous flow of money in the consumer market; low quality products usually break sooner. Therefore, advanced recycling practices don't necessarily have to show greater sustainable development, as illustrated by conversations with participants:

*Participant02*: "People buy much more today than they did let's say 20 to 30 years ago. Which is why I don't know if we could call that a development so... I would rather say that or... I wouldn't say that it is a development. I would rather say that we consume more, and we throw out more... because even recycling itself it is maybe a process that requires a certain amount of energy" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

Furthermore, awareness about the effects nutrition has on humans and non-humans is evident for some participants:

*Participant05*: "Eating less meat is beneficial for the people's health. It also saves the animals, and prevents the extinction of certain endangered species" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in the translation]

While for others, food production and nutrition are complex issues, and choosing the "right" way for approaching a solution is difficult, as exemplified in the excerpt below:

*Participant03*: "They say you should eat less flesh [meat]... okay, I agree, but if you want some corn you have to destroy Amazon, you know. If you have cheap corn which is um... which shall... which we shall use in our meal instead of meat, and you have to produce on the great scale and you have to produce corn cheap, you know, because food must be cheap, you cannot produce umm..." [quoted verbatim; clarification made by the researcher]

*Interviewer*: "Why must it be cheap?"

*Participant03*: "Because it... who will survive, how will people survive? You'll have social unrest in 2 days you know... you have to produce cheap food. So if you want to produce cheap corn on the great scale, you have to take away the jungle and the plant corn, or soy, or something like that (...) So it's always the question, when you speak on a social level, it's always the question of choosing that of what is... umm less damaging, to say" [quoted verbatim]

Additionally, the notion of digitalisation and the sustainability of such developments was discussed. When recalling the digitalisation push made in efforts to reduce the waste of paper at their workplace, the participant described a certain extent of confusion about the actual benefits of such a solution, presented in this excerpt:

*Participant02*: "And then I don't know, I say again how much of a solution that really is? We transferred to digital, and I think... let's make one thing clear... digital media also requires some sort of energy. Therefore, generally speaking, it might be a little more sustainable than paper because for paper you need to... cut a tree, transport it to a factory, produce it, and then transport it again... I have no idea... it cannot be fully... but if it is a better solution... I don't really know" [translated from another language; no adjustments made in translation]

Hence, the external horizon of the structural aspect, that is considered the background against which meanings are formed (Hakvoort et al., 2020), for this category of description was **choosing the lesser evil**. In a sense, the "meaning-bearing components" (Hakvoort et al., 2020) correspond to most traits of "wicked problems". Each component is essentially unique, its re-solutions had consequences, and often became the symptoms of new problems. Moreover, the components outline a difficulty in deciding how to solve an issue because there will always be someone who disagrees, and "right" or "wrong" re-solutions are grounded in the moral values of the decision makers. Therefore, the effects that follow can never be fully reversed. Lastly, we should always come up with new solutions, which is listed as the second trait of "wicked problems" in Rittel and Webber's (1973) seminal paper. A participant explains how this can be achieved:

*Participant09*: "This **critical opinion**. They're trying to learn the kids that nothing is just positive or negative. So everything in this world has also umm... also positive or negative effects. So the

question is what is the... the best alternative to get from something, so what effects it's going to have. So if it's going to be more positive or negative effects" [quoted verbatim]

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

In Chapter 3, under the data analysis heading, I present Marton and Booth's (1997) criteria for ensuring the quality of the categories of description. Therefore, in the outcome space of this research, each category describes a particular way of understanding. The relationship between them is logically determined, in the sense that all understandings are understandings about aspects of either SD or Education in relation to SD, or both. Although, as Marton and Booth (1997) suggest, categories of description should be written parsimoniously in order to focus on the critical variation in understandings of the phenomenon in question, in my research, six distinct categories of description were identified. This, in my opinion, indicates the complexity and *wickedness* of the phenomena in question. Moreover, Marton and Booth (1997) argue that the categories of description should be organised hierarchically, which is a common practice in phenomenographic research. However, this is not always the case, especially when dealing with phenomena where no understanding is assumed to be more complex than another, a hierarchy of understandings is, therefore, ill-advised, and the categories can instead be organised horizontally (Hakvoort et al., 2020). Such horizontal, rather than hierarchical organisation, stands true for my research as well. In my opinion, presenting the categories of description in a hierarchy and attributing one understanding as more valuable than another is especially ill-advised when dealing with "wicked problems". Such a decision would negate the value attributed to each way of understanding as essentially unique. Moreover, it would also negate the idea of this research being done in the tradition of education *as* sustainable development, in which multiple perspectives are acknowledged, where the participants describe what issues are SD issues and what forms of education are related to such issues. It would essentially put the weight of "right" or "wrong" understandings onto the participants' descriptions, when it is the exactly opposite what this research is trying to achieve. The outcome space of this research can, therefore, be seen as a representation of the "acceptance of coexisting ontologies" (Du Puis & Ball, 2013).

The variation of understandings was observed not only between the group of participants, but also within participants. The possibility of this occurring was pointed out by Marton and Booth (1997). For example, in my research such variation was observed in *Participant07* who understood **SD/ Educational responsibility** as both an individual responsibility that governs our own change and SD actions, and as a responsibility of the government and people in power to initiate change in behaviour. The same variation is observed within *Participant05* with a personal responsibility for one's own health (through SD actions) and treating others with respect, and the same responsibility directly transferred onto institutions- such as hospitals, media, and the school, for the same rationale. Moreover, *Participant01* displayed a variation within understandings of **SD/ Education as a holistic approach**, and on one occasion considered it an institutional and behaviouralist duty, and on another occasion the participant saw it as a "puzzle" [quoted verbatim] and a duty across all systems from a pluralistic perspective. The same variation was observed within *Participant08*. Another variation is observed within *Participant03*, when it comes to the personal concern about issues that are at the core of contemporary Swedish society. In the sense that the participant showed a thorough understanding of the policy-governed definition of SD- that includes social, environmental, economic pillars. However, the participant did not engage much with it, outside of fulfilling their social and professional responsibilities "I follow it but I don't participate much" [quoted verbatim]. Therefore, these variations are an important observation because they illustrate, in a sense, the confusion stakeholders have about questions such as: whose solution is the best solution? Whose initiative to follow? Who is responsible for what aspect? To name a few. These uncertainties and ambiguities can be linked to the concept of "wicked problems"- where there is no one universal solution to some social issues, no apparent stopping point, no consequence-less solutions, and no real way of freeing it from the



embedded values and norms (different depending on who the decision makers are), among other things. Such is the case of SD issues. I emphasised that any educational form related to SD, shares the same “wicked” characteristics. My research, as a whole, is situated in education *as* sustainable development, which is why I propose that a space where such issues are discussed from a pluralistic perspective is needed in formal, non-formal, and informal environments. This research provided such a space for a group of SEE immigrants in Sweden. The aim, as corresponding to the conceptual framework, was not to find one definite understanding of sustainable development nor its educational equivalent, but to provide some alternative understandings of the phenomena as described by the group of participants.

Most importantly, the outcome space of this research portrayed the qualitatively different ways in which a group of SEE immigrants in Sweden understand SD and/ or education in relation to SD. Such understandings were formed by considering SD or Education in relation to SD as an array of responsibilities, a concern for the rich and developed, as a capitalistic propaganda, as a core of Swedish society, as a holistic approach, and lastly, as a wicked problem. It is evident from the outcome space of this research, that the understandings emerge and are conditioned from past and present knowledges that were formed both in the context of the SEE region and Sweden. The categories of description, therefore, can be seen as a representation of how these two contexts are reconciled within this particular group of participants. Moreover, when referring back to my personal bias about having environmental issues as the focal point, in contrast to Kopnina’s (2012) criticism of “turning our back to environmental issues” in SD discourse, it is evident that the balance between the three pillars of SD (environmental, economic, social) is not lost in the participants’ descriptions. The participants display a wide range of understandings that include aspects of each pillar. Nonetheless, as discussed in category of description D, a strong focus on the environmental pillar was observed by the participants in the context of Sweden. Such observations can, of course, be connected to the personal biographies of the participants, in the sense that the region from which they come still has a long way to go for integrating the economic and social pillars in the same way as they are integrated in other parts of Europe- as stated in the literature review. This can further indicate to the proposed “wickedness” of SD and its educational equivalents. Where the context in which understandings are shaped can contribute to the ways in which the problems are defined, corresponding to traits one and three (Rittel & Webber, 1973). It can also indicate that the environmental discourse has been present for much longer and has, therefore, become more established. However, the participants’ descriptions included, at some point or another, various aspects of SD and showed an extensive understanding about the variety of social, economic, and environmental issues, among other things. I would, therefore, argue that the outcome space is a representation of qualitatively different ways of understanding SD issues and education in relation to such issues, which demonstrates an inclusion of multiple “meaning-bearing components” (Hakvoort et al., 2020) that, to a great extent, relate to the three pillars.

A critical evaluation of the categories of description to the extent they provide evidence the *wickedness* of SD and education in relation to SD as social challenges unfolds here. The outcome space of the research embraces the *wickedness* of SD and its educational equivalents. *Re-solving* “wicked problems” requires a thorough understanding of the ways in which stakeholders think about such problems. As Rittel and Webber (1973) claim, “the formulation of the problem is the problem” (p. 161). The outcome space of this research gives us exactly such a contribution to a *re-solution* because the empirical results provide a deep understanding in how a group of SEE immigrants in Sweden (as stakeholders) make sense of SD and/ or education in relation to SD. The variations themselves are a testament to the 10 traits of “wicked problems”. Moreover, if we revisit the 10 criteria proposed by Rittel and Webber (1973), it becomes clear that the data collected does indeed evidence for such *wickedness* of SD and/ or education in relation to SD. The internal horizons in each way of understanding show, despite some similarities, a uniqueness of the issues raised (trait 7). The variation observed among and within participants on what issues are SD issues confirms the extent to which the definition of the problem is the problem (trait 1). Moreover, the categories of description

illustrate how a specific understanding will determine the re-resolution of the problem (trait 9). An example of this can be found in category of description A, in the *autodidactic responsibility* as an internal horizon of the structural aspect. The participant understood the problem of not understanding or caring for SD as a *failure of their educational system*, so a re-resolution to become in charge of their own education has been made as a response to the initial understanding of the problem. Furthermore, the variation accounted for in the outcome space of this research clearly shows that it is impossible to establish fixed criteria for identifying all the possible solutions (trait 6) because it is difficult to even define all the possible issues- but that does not mean we should stop and give up (trait 2). The definitions of “wicked problems” depend on the moral values of the stakeholders (trait 3) which is why this particular group of stakeholders- SEE immigrants in Sweden, can only account for a partial understanding of the phenomenon. Yet, the goal is not to find the absolute truth, but to try and make an improvement (trait 10)- a point specifically highlighted by the participants in category of description A. The data collected further provides evidence for the *wickedness* of SD and/ or education in relation to SD by embracing traits 4, 5, and 8. For example, in category of description F, participants question whether *digitalisation in the workplace* really is a solution or rather a symptom of a new problem. Additionally, in this *capitalistic era* described in category of description C, the more we develop and consume the more we talk about these issues- explain the participants. Therefore, they question if our way of living should even be considered a “development”. When it comes to the issues raised by the participants of this study, their *wickedness* becomes evident because we can never truly satisfy everyone in the same way, as noted Rittel & Webber (1973).

Some underlying questions were raised in this thesis concerned with where participants that are coming from the SEE region have heard about the term sustainable development and/ or education in relation to sustainable development? How is such knowledge formed when coming from a different cultural, economic, and educational background? The interviews illustrate that such transition- from one social context to another, was perceived as “cultural shock” [quoted verbatim] by *Participant08*. The same perception was described by *Participant05*. It is interesting that none of the participants, all of whom have attended adult education in Sweden both in formal and non-formal learning environments, have had their knowledge constructed in that context. SD knowledge was mostly formed through projects at their workplace<sup>27</sup>, following societal examples, the media, and discussions with friends and family, were among the primary things that were described by the participants. Their understandings were, therefore, shaped by a variety of actors and social spaces. But if a person, for whatever reason, has not had the opportunity to create knowledge in such a way, what happens then? I will highlight a limitation of my research to illustrate such an example. Namely, *Participant04* did not fulfil participation criteria on the basis that the concept SD and/ or any educational forms in relation to SD were not in their personal vocabulary. After asking alternative questions with the goal to uncover any possible subconscious awareness or understanding about aspects of the concepts (even if the exact meaning of the term was unknown), it seemed that issues concerned with SD did not play a significant role in the life or education of the participant. This can, of course, indicate a failure from my side to establish a connection that could possibly identify underlying understandings. But it can also mean, as I said, that this is not something that is significant for the participant’s lifestyle. It was described by the participant that those terms were not a learning point in their educational background, including adult education in the Swedish context. Nonetheless, I think this is an important example. I am not claiming that it is a rare or a common occurrence for people who come from different backgrounds where SD and ESD issues are not at the core of that society. I am simply stating that it is possible for people to not know what it means. Therefore, it might or might not affect life in Swedish society, that as category of description D illustrates, incorporates SD and its educational equivalent, at the very core. That is a question for another research.

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<sup>27</sup> Six out of nine participants work in education.

## Conclusion

This research was situated in education *as* sustainable development because of how the problem was approached, data collected, and results presented. “Wicked problems”, generally speaking, are contested social issues that defy our present capacity to re-solve them by using traditional (cause and effect) reasoning. Sustainable development (SD) was identified as a “wicked problem” in the literature, mainly because of the multitude of definitions surrounding the concept, as well as the fact that after thoroughly comparing the 10 traits of “wicked problems” to issues concerning SD, it became evident that SD issues were indeed “wicked issues” on the grounds that they share the same traits. And since any forms of education in relation to SD cannot occur in isolation from SD, the same “wickedness” is assumed for SD education. Therefore, it has been supposed throughout this study that the concepts SD and its educational response are mutually dependent.

Hence, this research proposed an exploration of the qualitatively different ways in which stakeholders understand the phenomena- SD and its educational equivalent, or aspects of it. The stakeholders around whose understandings this research centred were the people, or specifically, a group of people who have spent a large amount of their “formative” years in the South-Eastern European (SEE) region and who have in adulthood emigrated to Sweden. The parameters of this research are important on two levels: 1) research shows that Swedish society implements ESD in the majority of societal aspects, and 2) the SEE region has a complex history which resulted in different approaches towards dealing with SD and ESD. I find it paramount to once again emphasise that the continuous use of the thematic label ESD is done because, as discussed in the introduction of this thesis, most of sustainable development research labels the educational form as education *for* sustainable development (ESD). And deciding to exclude such research, would greatly limit this study.

This research embraced the “wickedness” of the concepts which, in turn, encouraged an exploration in a specific direction, while allowing for freedom in the acceptance of pluralistic perspectives. Phenomenography was employed as research approach and theoretical framework that provides a scholarly support for the way data was analysed and as underlining a theory of human cognition and understanding.

Moreover, in this phenomenographic research which embraces the “wickedness” of the concepts, I did not attempt to put categories onto the participants, but rather allowed for the categories to emerge from their own understandings. Which is why, while the whole research remains situated in education *as* sustainable development, I refrained from restricting education in relation to SD to any educational form when forming the categories of description. Therefore, in the presentation of the categories of description, I opted for the umbrella term “Education” that can relate to any educational form of sustainable development as described by the participants themselves. Thus, the phenomenographic tenets of “bracketing” personal judgements and conducting research from “the second-order perspective” were respected.

The participants displayed an extensive awareness and understanding about the complexity and “wickedness” of SD and its educational equivalent. The variation identified in the outcome space of this research highlights the difficulty in defining “wicked problems” because what is a solution for one can be a problem for another (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The uniqueness of such issues, and the consequences that come with each attempt at a re-solution correspond to the 10 traits listed by Rittel and Webber (1973). The goal is to try and make an improvement at the best of our capacities, claim the participants. At the same time, their confusion around who is to make such an improvement is a dilemma that corresponds to the traits of *wickedness* that Rittel and Webber (1973) list. These understandings were organised in six categories of description presented in Chapter 4 i.e., the outcome space of the phenomenographic research. This research essentially showed how an “acceptance of coexisting ontologies” (Du Puis & Ball, 2013) can illustrate and enrich the knowledge about how a specific group of SEE immigrants reconcile their past and present biographies in the formation of SD knowledge in and beyond the educational context. The different ways of understanding, as the

outcome space shows, are being shaped against a background of different actors and social spaces (including education). Therefore, descriptions of the structural and referential aspects of SD and education in relation to SD, provide alternative perspectives about how a *re-solution* of “wicked problems” can be approached by outlining a deep understanding of how a group of stakeholders make sense of such problems. We cannot pose suggestions for re-solutions before we know what exactly we are trying to resolve. In a diverse contemporary society, we need to embrace such “wickedness” and understand that “the formulation of the problem is the problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 161). Otherwise, we are just shifting one social hegemony into another. This study is a small contribution that embraces such “wicked” variation in understandings. Its underlaying aim is to show that what works for one context can be different for another and we need to start by understanding first and acting later if we want to have any chance at re-solving the “wicked problems” that torment our world.

## Limitations of the whole study & Suggestions for future research

This research, as discussed, aimed to provide alternative perspectives about how the concepts of sustainable development or education in relation sustainable development can be understood. It enabled a space for presenting a variety of opinions that were interpreted by the researcher, with a focus on the collective meanings. Such interpretation, according to phenomenographic tenets, was done from a second-order perspective. It married the global with the local by focusing on the descriptions provided by a group of South-Eastern European immigrants in a Swedish context. It was interesting to explore how this group of people that come from a region which is different to Sweden on many levels understand and merge their history and present when it comes to understandings of issues concerned with SD and its educational equivalent. This research did not aim to explore the *essence* of SD and/ or education in relation to SD as understood by the group, but it rather focused on exploring the *qualitatively different ways* in which the group understood aspects of SD and/ or education in relation to SD. Therefore, not a limitation *per se*, but imperative to remember is that the categories of description formed in the outcome space of this research are partial representations of understandings of the phenomenon (or aspects of it). It is not assumed that all SEE immigrants in Sweden understand the concepts in the same way. A recommendation for further research would be to explore how different stakeholders understand the same phenomena. Hence, it could be valuable to explore the qualitatively different ways of understanding SD and/ or education in relation to SD created by a group of people who have received education at all levels in the Swedish educational system and, thus, observe the categories of description that would emerge. Especially, since the Swedish educational system is largely decentralized. The inevitable truth is, however, that Swedish society does indeed invest resources in the pursuit of ways to implement SD and ESD<sup>28</sup> in all societal spheres. This is illustrated by previous research, as well as by the outcomes of this one. Yet, this research showed that adult education was not one of the social spaces where SD knowledge was created for this particular group of people. Therefore, a logical suggestion would be to make implementation of education as sustainable development in adult education explicit. Especially at Swedish tuition for immigrants (SFI), which is a multifaceted programme mainly concerned with integration, transition to the labour market, and language learning. A programme that each immigrant in Sweden is required to attend. Such explicit implementation at the moment is not prioritised by either researchers or practitioners. Maybe an inclusion of such knowledge, from a pluralistic perspective, could make language learning more effective by making it more personal, as well as ease integration and transition to the labour market in a sustainably developed society. It could provide a space where learning occurs in an acceptance of “coexisting ontologies” (Du Puis & Ball, 2013).

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<sup>28</sup> Used as a thematic and well-established label in research across disciplines.

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# Appendix 1: Invitation to participate in research (English)

**Hello and a big thank you for taking the time to read this invitation!**

My name is Martina Lazarevska, and I am a Master Student at the University of Gothenburg at the International Master Programme in Educational Research.

I am sending this message in the hopes that you would be willing to participate in the research project for my thesis.

The research aims to explore the ways in which people understand sustainability and/or sustainable development. The results are intended to inform future research and provide a deeper awareness on how people who moved to Sweden from the South-East European region understand this concept.

The interviews are planned in a way that should not take more than an hour. The interviews will be held in a café in Gothenburg, at a time that is suitable for you. The coffee and travel expenses will be covered by the researcher.

The benefits of the information gathered will enrich research on this topic and include your voice and opinions in the conversation.

Participation is voluntary and your identity is guaranteed to remain anonymous. Before starting the interviews, I will also provide consent forms approved by my assigned supervisor, who is a professor at the University of Gothenburg.

The questions and consent forms are in English, and the majority of the interview is planned to be in English. However, if at any point you feel that you are struggling to find the words, you are welcome to switch and answer in either your mother tongue or in Swedish.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Kind Regards,

Martina Lazarevska

0793370568

[guslazarma@student.gu.se](mailto:guslazarma@student.gu.se)



## Appendix 2: Invitation to participate in research (Swedish)

**Hej och ett stort tack för att du tog din tid att läsa denna inbjudan!**

Jag heter Martina Lazarevska och jag är Masters student på Pedagogen med inriktning mot utbildningsvetenskaplig forskning vid Göteborgs universitet.

Jag skriver till dig i hopp att du skulle vara villig att delta i forskningsprojektet för min avhandling.

Forskningen syftar till att utforska hur människor förstår hållbarhet och/eller hållbar utveckling. Resultaten är avsedda att informera framtida forskning och ge en djupare förståelse om hur människor som har flyttat till Sverige från Sydöstra Europa förstår detta koncept.

Intervjuerna är planerade på ett sätt som inte bör ta mer än 1 timme. Intervjuerna kommer att hållas på ett café i Göteborg, vid en tidpunkt som passar dig. Kaffe och resekostnader står forskaren för.

Fördelarna med den insamlade informationen kommer att berika forskningen om detta ämne och inkludera din röst och åsikter i konversationen.

Deltagande är frivilligt och din identitet förblir anonym. Innan jag påbörjar intervjuerna kommer jag även att tillhandahålla samtyckesformulär godkänts av min tilldelade handledare, som är professor vid Göteborgs universitet.

Intervjufrågorna och samtyckesformulären är på engelska. Men om du börjar känna att du kämpar med att hitta orden i engelska är du välkommen att byta och svara på antingen ditt modersmål eller på svenska.

Jag ser fram emot att få höra från dig!

Med vänliga hälsningar,

Martina Lazarevska

0793370568

[guslazarma@student.gu.se](mailto:guslazarma@student.gu.se)

## Appendix 3: Interview guide

### Information provided during the interview

Hello, as you know my name is Martina, and I want to thank you once again for agreeing to answer my questions. This interview will be audio recorded as you read in the consent form, and I will delete the recording immediately after I transcribe it. As you already know the purpose of this interview is to explore how you understand sustainability and sustainable development. The research results will be published in the Master Thesis I am working on, but your identity will remain anonymous. The questions are very open-ended which allows you to take the conversation in the direction that you find appropriate. If at any time you feel that you are struggling to find the words in English, feel free to fill in the gaps and switch to either your mother tongue or Swedish. And do please ask for any clarifications of the questions if and when needed. Do you have any questions before we start? / Do you feel ready to start now?

### Background questions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? (What is your age, where were you born?)
2. How long have you been living in Sweden? (At what age did you move here?)
3. What is your educational background? (level of education; in which country)
4. What is your profession? (how long have you been doing that? In Sweden and home country?)
5. What kind of education have you attended in Sweden?

### Content questions

1. Have you heard about sustainable development (or you might know it as hållbar utveckling) before today?
2. If you have heard about it, where was it? (at school, at work, everyday life, informal conversations, media, social media) (focus: how was this knowledge built?)
3. Can you tell me how you understand sustainability/ sustainable development? (What does it mean for you?)

### Explorative questions

1. If you were to explain sustainable development to someone else, how would you do it? What would you say about it? (To build on the previous question, if the participant is not sharing a lot/ if the previous question doesn't seem to work for the participant. This is an alternative)
2. Do you think there is any difference about what sustainable development is in Sweden and in HOME COUNTRY?
3. Can you explain how it is similar/different? Can you explain what you mean by this?

### Finalising the interview

1. Is there anything else that you think it is important to mention?

Thank you again for taking the time to answer my questions today. Before I stop the recording are there any final questions that you would like to ask me?

## Appendix 4: Consent form

**Research Project:** Master Thesis on how South-East European immigrants in Sweden understand sustainable development or education for sustainable development

**Researcher:** Martina Lazarevska (Master's student at the University of Gothenburg)

**Supervisor:** Adrianna Nizinska (Senior Lecturer at the Department of Education and Special Education at the University of Gothenburg)

**(Please tick the relevant box in the table below)**

	YES	NO
I confirm that the researcher has given me information about the purpose of the research both in written and spoken form.		
I confirm that I am aware that my participation in the research is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any given time without consequences. Additionally, I am fully aware that I can refuse to answer questions and/or stop the interview at any point.		
I confirm that the researcher has informed me that the interview will be audio recorded, the tape will then be immediately transcribed and anonymised, after which the original audio will be deleted. The researcher will keep the anonymous transcription of this interview until the completion and publication of the thesis and then delete it.		
I confirm that the researcher has informed me that my personal information will be made anonymous and has guaranteed full confidentiality of personal information.		
I confirm that I am aware that the thesis will be presented at a public defense held at the University of Gothenburg, and perhaps published in scholarly journals and/or the library electronic database.		

**Turn the page>>>**

Name of Participant:

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Date:

---

Name of Researcher:

---

Date:

---

**Contact details:**

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