Discussing Education for Sustainable Development among Teachers: the tension between qualification, socialisation and subjectification

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Abstract

In this paper the tension between qualification, socialisation and subjectification – as defined by Biesta - is discussed in relation to teachers' reflection about Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The point of departure is the discussions among teachers from an ESD certificated school (upper secondary), reflecting about their teaching. The desire to empower critical thinking as a key competence of the students is revealed as an important educational goal. How is critical thinking discussed in relation to qualification, socialisation and subjectification in ESD? What conflicts emerge? In educational research as well as in policy documents there is an ambition to put forward the complex and conflicting views of sustainable questions. Pluralism is put forward as a means of handling these 'competing visions of the truth'. What opportunities for students to develop their thoughts and ideas of sustainable issues (subjectification), do teachers formulate within the frame of formal education (qualification and socialisation)? The paper concludes with a discussion about the relevance this tension has in an educational context from a pluralistic approach of sustainability.

Keywords: Environmental education, education for sustainable development, subjectification, pluralism, teachers

1. Introduction

In educational research as well as in policy documents there is an ambition to put forward the complex and conflicting views of sustainable questions. The uncertainty and complexity of the future, and the many different cultural contexts makes a dynamic approach desirable. This highlights the need to reflect different opinions, knowledge and conflicting views when educating for sustainable development (Breiting, Mayer, and Mogensen, 2005; Jensen and Schnack, 1997; Lundegård and Wickman, 2007; Öhman 2006; Rudsberg and Öhman, 2010). Pluralism in environmental education has been stressed as a consequence of the many different conflicting voices on environmental questions currently flourishing in democratic societies. How this is put in relation to educational goals -when teachers discuss education of sustainability issues- is the focus of this study. The teachers' emerging views in a meaning-making conversation about education for sustainable development are discussed in relation to Biestas (2009) three purpose of education; qualification, socialisation and subjectification.

2. Methodology of Research

The empirical material of this study consists of discussions from two seminars (comprising three teachers in each group) between subject teachers from an upper secondary school in Sweden. The teachers in the seminars were put together due to their teaching subjects; the first group consisted of two science teachers and one geography teacher, and the second group consisted of three social studies teachers. During the seminar the teachers were reflecting on education for sustainable development with a point of departure from some semi-structured questions – constructed and put through by the researcher of this study. The teachers discussed ESD, in the light of a recently completed one week long thematic work with the students of the school. The school is working with sustainable development as a key concept and overarching educational goal, and are certified as an "ESD-school". During the thematic week the students worked in cross curriculum themes (genus/convention on the rights of the child), independently or in groups depending on what issues they were interested to work with.

Each seminar lasted during one hour and were audio recorded and transcribed (verbatim transcription). Biestas (2009) theoretical framework of qualification, socialisation and subjectification makes up the basis for the analysis of the teachers' meaning-making of education in relation to sustainable issues.

2.1-The research questions are:

• In what way are the teachers expressing empowering opportunities for students to construct their views (subjectification) of sustainable issues?

• In what way are the educational goals of qualification, socialisation and subjectification interrelating in teachers' meaning-making of education for sustainable development, and how could this be interpreted in relation to a pluralistic approach of sustainability?

3. Results

In the analyses of the conversations, some patterns are revealed in the meaning-making discussion. The first preliminary results show expression of different purposes of the teachers' educational goals. Different and conflicting goals are coming through in the discussion. The desire to empower critical thinking as a key competence of the students is revealed as an important educational goal. A broad definition of critical thinking is expressed; embracing the questioning of the subject based knowledge, media, authorities as well as questioning the teachers themselves. "To empower the students to think independently and by themselves" is a periodic statement from the conversation. At the same time the need for "basic" subject knowledge (fact-based) in the natural sciences is emphasised as a prerequisite *before* discussing issues of sustainability. This could be interpreted as the critical thinking is put forward as an emancipatory tool in the process of subjectification, at the same time the fact-based education representing the view of the science teaching is showing a normative rationalistic worldview, guiding the "right" way of decision making. This is an interesting tension from the preliminary results to work with in the continuing analyses of the study during this spring.

To be revised and continued when the results and the analysis expand during this spring…

4. Conclusions

In science education definitions of different concepts are an important part of traditional education. Science education is thereby often connected to a more fact-based tradition, based on a positivist, rational view of the world (Robottom and Sauvé 2003). The question of qualification is thereby emphasized, and the socialisation into "the nature of science" as a reflecting tool, is seen as a qualitative alignment to problem solving. When this is set in a context of sustainable issues this can make up a conflict between the socialisation goal of education - achieving science thinking as a way to guide us to the right answers of problem solving- and subjectification (the development of political ways of being and doing) of sustainability questions. This entails a lot of questions to be discussed, such as; purpose in environmental education. Who's purpose? Who is defining sustainability? Top-down from policy or from fact-based education, or by the students themselves?

To be revised and continued when the results and the analysis expand during this spring…

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