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Is It Easy to Do the Right Thing?: An Approach to Sustainable Development in Teacher Education in Sweden

Czy łatwo jest postępować właściwie?:
Podejście do zrównoważonego rozwoju
w kształceniu nauczycieli w Szwecji

Abstract: The essay deals with sustainable development in teacher education in Sweden. Using self-study of teacher educator praxis allows inquiry into practical experience informed by propositional knowledge. Using a curriculum theory approach, two dimensions of work on sustainable development at a university are presented, the intended and enacted curriculum. The intended curriculum is expressed in policy documents whereas the enacted dimension is exemplified by a Sustainable Development course addressing, among others, teacher educators at the current university. The two curriculum dimensions are well-aligned with one another. Policy documents ascribe the students and the teaching staff an active role as contributors to work on sustainable development from the point of view of three dimensions, environmental, social, and economic. The call for action dominates, and the rationale for the course is grounded in insights from natural and social sciences. The need to include insights from the humanities is proposed as they may enrich work on sustainable development with novel sensitivities. The essay invites teacher educators to discuss ways to prepare prospective teachers for work on sustainable development.

Keywords: sustainable development, teacher education, ecopedagogy

Abstrakt: W czasach globalnego kryzysu klimatycznego pojawia się ogólna potrzeba poszerzenia kompetencji nauczyciela akademickiego w ramach pracy nad edukacją dla zrównoważonego rozwoju. W odniesieniu do kierunków nauczycielskich, przygotowanie zawodowe przyszłego nauczyciela w Szwecji obejmuje umiejętności pedagogiczno-dydaktyczne w zakresie edukacji dla zrównoważonego rozwoju. Używając metodologii badań w działaniu, esej porusza zagadnienie przygotowania nauczyciela akademickiego do tego zadania w szerszym kontekście szkolnictwa wyższego, odpowiadającego na nowe wyzwania społeczne. Analiza dokumentów i materiałów szkoleniowych jest przeprowadzona z perspektywy doświadczeń czynnej nauczycielki akademickiej, uczestnika krótkiej wymiany kadr w ramach programu Erasmus+. Praca pedagogiczno-dydaktyczna w edukacji dla zrównoważonego rozwoju opiera się głównie na treściach poruszających kwestie ochrony środowiska, społeczne oraz ekonomiczne. Pomimo intencji przygotowania nauczyciela akademickiego w sposób wszechstronny i uwzględniający interdyscyplinarność, dominujące podejście

naukowe jest jednakże ugruntowane na naukach przyrodniczych, ścisłych i społecznych. Opierając się na wnioskach płynących z praktycznego doświadczenia nauczyciela akademickiego, esej zaprasza do szerszej dyskusji nad kształceniem przyszłych nauczycieli z uwzględnieniem refleksji humanistycznych w edukacji dla zrównoważonego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój, studia nauczycielskie, ekodydaktyka

Teacher educators need to sustain and nourish opportunities for learning from participation in short staff mobility programmes. The idea of going away and coming back home to one's institution of higher education stimulates a more principle-driven reflection that possibly extends beyond the obvious practice of sharing examples of best practices. As the former reaches outwards underpinned by a dissemination rationale, the approach adopted in the essay is inspired by the self-study methodology for an inquiry into the teacher educator's professional learning and developing the teacher educator's knowledge with others (LaBoskey, 2004; Kitchen et al., 2020). In self-study of teacher educators' practice, the need for improvement of, for example, teacher education, is explicitly acknowledged but the base for improvement is grounded in the interplay between propositional knowledge, such as curriculum theory, and the messiness of the teacher educator's experience to find ways to facilitate learning through experience (Kitchen et al., 2020; Martin & Russell, 2020). The essay draws on an example of institutionalised approach to sustainable development in the context of teacher education in Sweden from my perspective as a teacher educator. Having participated in a short staff mobility programme,¹ and coming back home to my university, Högskolan Väst, puts me in a privileged, that is, a somewhat distanced position, to reflect on ways teacher educators are encouraged to work with sustainable development (henceforth WSD). Environmental issues are highlighted in contemporary Sweden. Renowned as an environmental pioneer, Sweden is an active player on the international arena concerning climate change as a global challenge (Swedish Institute, 2022). Since 2003, sustainable development has been inscribed in

¹ Erasmus+ is the EU's programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe.

the constitution in the first chapter, second paragraph: “The public good shall facilitate sustainable development that leads to a good environment for the contemporary and coming generations” (SFS 1974:152).²

The issues of climate change and sustainable development appear high on the agenda for societal debate, exemplified by the folk movement³ initiated by Greta Thunberg. Her call to prioritise action to protect our planet thrived on and galvanized young people’s interest, prompting protest actions. School strikes for climate have spread globally since 2019, as it became clear that climate change captured imagination of young people, stirring their awareness, their hearts, and souls. Climate anxiety shows in the ways that children and young people use when coping with their worries, uncertainties, and concerns. How to handle climate anxiety in children and young people has become the concern of teachers, who are faced with various coping strategies that their pupils adopt (Ojala, 2012). Moreover, sustainable development has so far shown to be difficult to integrate with regular instruction, as it calls for novel ways to imagine what it is to be human, and these novel sensitivities also demand a new language of expression (Ochwat, 2020). Calls to intensify work on sustainable development steadily increase in the public opinion, making imprints on the Swedish national curriculum. The teachers are required to address WSD in instruction, therefore, teacher education, which is a national matter, must prepare them for that. The wider question is how prospective teachers can be made ready for WSD in instruction and other pedagogical activities, sensitized to its complexities, and, at the same time, being supportive of the well-being of their pupils. A much narrower approach that I propose is to scrutinize my own teacher educator experience of participating in a local practice of preparation for WSD.

The use of two concepts from a curriculum theory, that is, intended and enacted curriculum, helps me analyse the experience of reading

² All quotations are my translation.

³ The traditions of folk education (*Folkbildning*) have a rich cultural tradition in Sweden as a formative bottom-up driving force for social change.

myself as a teacher educator for WSD in the local practice of my institution (Goodlad, 1979). The theory therefore creates a necessary distance that is needed to analyse collective learning processes I am part of and which I invite other teacher educators to collaborate on (LaBoskey, 2004). Sharing stories of short staff mobility programmes in teacher education may help transgress the cultural and autobiographical limitations to widen the horizons (LaBoskey, 2004). As a teacher educator, I approach WSD as a mainly collective learning process with several parties engaged, for instance colleagues, students, and cooperation partners. The learning process engages and conflates a development of new ways of knowing and identities, rather than a production of pre-fixed learning objectives (Wyszynska Johansson, 2018). Reading the documents that I am expected to “implement” in my practice, for example, local visions or mission statements, policies, goals, and strategies to achieve the goals specified, all together gives access to the curriculum as intended. The intentions are expressed and materialized in competence building initiatives, that is, in-service course on Sustainable Development, explained later. The course can therefore appear to give a glimpse into the curriculum as enacted in the university that I work in. My interpretation of documents that are published on the university’s homepage and a subsequent analysis of the course contents I aspire to pass is influenced by insights gained from the short staff mobility programme. The aim is to enrich the teacher educator’s understanding of pedagogical frames that WSD can implement into in their teaching practice. Sharing the experiences of these pedagogical frames can also contribute to a critical discussion of perceptions that we may take for granted in teacher educator practice. First, teacher education in Sweden is briefly sketched, illustrated by an example. What follows is a presentation of my reading of documents accessed via the university’s homepage. After that, interpretations of the materials from the Sustainable Development course are discussed. Placing the two dimensions, that is, intended, and enacted curriculum side by side, allows me to comment on what pedagogical frame WSD can be put into. By making the current pedagogical frame for WSD explicit,

I invite teacher educators to discuss how teacher education can be further improved.

Teacher Education in Sweden

To become a teacher or a preschool teacher in Sweden, certification⁴ based on a teacher degree is generally required. Teacher education programmes vary regarding their requirements, however Bachelor of Education or Master of Education⁵ prepare and qualify for teaching at all levels, from pre-school to upper-secondary and adult education. All programmes include a common and mandatory core in educational sciences of 60 credit points and 30 credit points in work-integrated learning combined with practicum. To alleviate the shortage of teachers in Sweden, a shorter teacher programme of 60 credit points targeting teachers with foreign diploma has been introduced. University West graduates students with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in (1) Pre-school Education, (2) Primary Education – Extended School, and the Degree of Master of Arts in (1) Primary Education – Pre-school Class and School Years 1–3, (2) Primary Education – School Years 4–6, (3) Secondary Education, (4) Upper Secondary Education. The choice of school subjects that University West offers consists of English, Swedish, Swedish as a second language, and Social studies/Civics⁶ (Högskolan Väst, n.d.b).

According to the qualitative targets for the teacher diploma in the ordinance on higher education, teachers must show competence in handling sustainable development in pedagogical work in a holistic and integrative way:

⁴ Certification is issued by the Swedish National Agency for Education.

⁵ The exception is Vocational Teacher Programme consisting of 90 credit points.

⁶ Thanks to cooperation with other universities, a wide selection of subject and subject block combinations is possible. Swedish teachers in general teach at least two subjects.

– to show competence in pedagogical work regarding judgements based on relevant scientific, societal, and ethical aspects with a particular focus on the human rights, especially children’s rights according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as sustainable development. (SFS, 1993:100)

A clear implication seems, therefore, that issues of sustainable development cannot be dealt with in isolation from wider existential issues, for example, human and children’s rights according to the targets for the teacher diploma above.

University West provides all the teaching staff with access to the Sustainable Development course which means that the contents must be presented in general terms for the teaching staff across the university to adapt to suit their specific needs. However, of interest here is to problematize the contents, in terms of issues and approaches, or possibly a standardized common ground that teacher educators are provided with to stimulate their further pedagogical work with student teachers. In this way, the mandatory course can possibly serve as a common “launching pad” for teacher educators to enable them to participate in a local discourse on WSD, regardless of the teacher programme. Through the course, the teacher educators in my institution are provided with opportunities for developing a shared understanding of what WSD may mean and a common vocabulary.

The Intended Curriculum for WSD

The need for all teaching staff to achieve a basic competence for teaching *on* and *for* sustainable development and to do that *in* sustainable ways is foregrounded on the University West homepage (Högskolan Väst, n.d.e). Through the commitment to developing work-integrated learning, as, for example, a transdisciplinary knowledge field,⁷ the integration

⁷ Work integrated learning as a profile has defined education, research, and collaboration since the establishment of University West in 1990.

of goals related to work-integrated learning and sustainable development are advocated. Explicitly the integration of sustainable development with work-integrated learning is named as a quality indicator in the university's quality assurance systems for research and education. Thus, such integration is articulated as an overarching strategy to be applied:

- To integrate sustainable development as a quality aspect in the university's quality assurance systems for research and education,
- To assign sustainable development as a quality assurance aspect in work-integrated certification of programmes. (Högskolan Väst, n.d.a)

Accordingly, the university's goal is to build on students' engagement in climate issues and by means of work-integrated learning provide opportunities for them to act:

The university shall make the most of students' engagement in climate change issues and by means of work-integrated learning provide opportunities to contribute to the university's and other organisations' sustainable development work. (Högskolan Väst, n.d.d)

My interpretation is therefore that work-integrated learning is specifically singled out as a specific method, or perhaps a set of methods/tools to contribute to both the university's and other organizations' WSD. With sustainable development being the goal, the key word for its achievement is work-integrated learning as a method.

With the UN Agenda 2030 as a departure point, the university's overarching goal is "to enable all staff and students to contribute" to solving the challenges inherent in WSD. Being and identifying oneself to be an active contributor to solve challenges tied to sustainable development in, for example, professional work and in the society, is profoundly ambitious. Such a goal indicates a high degree of dilemma ridden complexity. The key strategy for WSD is to create opportunities for students, teacher educators, and parties in interdisciplinary settings to discuss,

analyse, and, if possible, solve sustainable development challenges. That is possibly why the need to “train students to understand the complexity in sustainable development challenges from *various theoretical perspectives and in an interdisciplinary way* [emphasis added], aided by *intercultural encounters* [emphasis added] and work-integrated learning.” One way to achieve that is to provide education to build a competence firmly grounded in a “scientific approach”:

- To offer high quality education that develops students’ competence to contribute to sustainable development, grounded in scientific approach. (Högskolan Väst, n.d.e)

As the climate transition is a specific area singled out, the need for students to develop “knowledge and competence needed for climate transition” is acknowledged. The focus is on knowledge *on* and knowledge *for* solving challenges such as climate transition – therefore, it is knowledge in action, grounded in the three dimensions, that is, environmental, social, and economic, which is sought for and emphasized:

- The university’s education develops students’ competence to contribute to sustainable development, grounded in scientific approach and with Agenda 2030 as well as the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainable development. (Högskolan Väst, n.d.e)

Explicitly, the aim is to create “a sustainable development culture” with “the global goals for sustainable future” being “a natural vantage point” (Högskolan Väst, n.d.c). In sum, a culture that is called for implies a unified set of beliefs and norms, a shared repertoire of what is taken for granted. The notion of scientific approach is also singled out as an important factor for the creation of such organizational culture, a culture of care. Broad capacities for action “to solve the ecological, social and economic societal challenges the world is facing,” expressed here as a “natural” part of an organisational culture supported by “scientific approach” rely on and require a dialogue between several scientific

disciplines. The focus on straightforward finding and applying solutions which is generally advocated risks putting other and softer issues, such as awareness and responsibility, on the margins. Calls for straightforward solving action without groundwork on sensitizing for the complexities and dilemmas may impoverish WSD. Possibly this is why “concrete, specific” knowledge and skills related to the climate transition also rely on ability to “*describe, analyse and understand complex contexts* [emphasis added] and *together with others* [emphasis added] find solutions *in the situation one is in* [emphasis added].” However, the climate transition is acknowledged as an “area especially suitable for interdisciplinary cooperation [...] dealt with from various perspectives, e.g., *technology, behaviour and organization* [emphasis added]” (Högskolan Väst, n.d.e). In this way, the cooperation between disciplines can be seen as already outlined, with technology and social science taking the lead.

The Enacted Curriculum

The Sustainable Development course (henceforth, the course) explicitly supports the vision laid out in the local policy documents. The course is said to be firmly grounded in the three dimensions of sustainable development, that is, environmental, social and economic, which are “to be integrated” (Högskolan Väst, n.d.f). The on-line course aims at enabling the “staff to be active participant in WSD together with colleagues and students.” The design of the course is asynchronous with four modules that include short video films supplemented by visual presentations and questions to be discussed in discussion forums. The course is offered via the university’s digital learning management platform and assessed in a final (synchronous) seminar. The modules introduce a conceptual framework, address the issue of “for whom and for what” sustainable development can be, regulations and a didactic implementation (Högskolan Väst, n.d.f).

The concept of the Anthropocene is referred to, with mankind singled out as the largest and most influential transformational power. The last 10,000 years of stability, “good weather,” are said to be gone irrevocably, having played a role for the growth of mankind and civilization. This is exemplified by the status of plastic, which is ubiquitous. Plastic appears nowadays to be transformed into geological material because mankind (“we”) transferred and stored so much coal in it that plastic equals other coal-rich sources such as natural gas or oil.

In this matter-of-fact way to carry out the message, it is acknowledged that it is difficult to disconnect human development from making ecological impact. The content appears as well balanced, with both conflicts and synergistic effects: “The way to sustainability is characterized by conflicts and synergy effects between various interests and needs.” The way to deal with this dialectic proposed is to adopt “a systemic and holistic perspective.” To illustrate this perspective, an example between tensions (1) within, as well as, (2) between the three sustainability dimensions in focus are shown. The example is about a proposal to open a mine by the lake with a capacity to provide Europe with precious metals for conductors. On the one hand, the conductors decrease the impact on the climate, on the other the risk of poisoning the water rises, exemplifying the former case. In the latter, a conflict between the ecological dimension, enhanced by the prospective mine may produce negative social effects, forcing inhabitants to move from their farms they lived in for generations. So, the conflicts are acknowledged in a scientific way, providing facts and figures, as well as causes and effects. However, for the sake of contrast, positive synergy effects are also mentioned, exemplified by food industry as food “influences both the environment and our health.” The division between the environment as something existing independently of humans and the same humans’ health is maintained, even though tied together. Aligned with the logic of this division, the production of vegetables has both low impact on the environment at the same time as it is beneficiary to human health, which contrasts with the production of red meat. In the face of the facts and figures “it is easy to do right.”

Such cheerful slogan perhaps glosses over the conflictual nature of WSD. Doing the right thing in a developed country entails commitment to sacrificing one's own convenience. Barely on one occasion, the issue of choice, either "of sacrifices" or the "carriers" of such sacrifices is brought forth. The issue of making sacrifice is however firmly framed as a political rather than an existential issue. The conflictual nature of WSD is, however, acknowledged, but the ways to problematize this are tied to a multiplicity of actors and goals. Short video films shift local settings, from town square symbolizing the potential for contradictory interpretations of WSD to hydroelectric power plant. WSD is acknowledged as an empty signifier, open to multiple interpretations and not as something that is universally good. The main message is the need to adopt a critical attitude to WSD, mentioning for instance innovation fetishism or North-South problematics. In the didactic part of the course, teacher educators are encouraged to use various methods such as simulations and play to make students reflect on their actions, contribution, and responsibility.

Conclusion

The course design appears well-aligned with the intended curriculum. Accordingly, the course contents revolve around the interplay and interdependence between and within the three dimensions, that is, environmental, social, and economic. The course appears as rich in insights from natural and social sciences, anchoring WSD firmly in these disciplines. The humanities and their capacity to contribute to problematize WSD are left aside and to my knowledge they are not specifically drawn on (cf. Ochwat, 2020). This is worrisome because the culture of care that is advocated in the curriculum may be difficult to achieve without employing the insights from the humanities. We, as teacher educators, are provided an inroad into WSD based on a scientific model of hard science, facts and figures, causes and effects. The rationale of the course is

to generate solutions to the current crisis, somewhat bypassing its existential nature. The scope for meaning-making processes to understand the situation “one is in” (above) seems therefore restricted.

The experience of coming back home from a short staff mobility programme has guided my reading of the course materials in novel directions. Enriched by this personal experience, my focus switched to identifying those parts that specifically bring forth inherently conflictual nature of WSD, including aspects of solidarity and making individual and collective sacrifices rather than the content more directed at “solving” problems. My interest is in how learning process can be arranged beyond a set of pre-fixed objectives for me as a teacher educator, my teacher educator colleagues in Sweden and elsewhere, and for the teacher students in our care (Wyszynska Johansson, 2018). We need to educate prospective teachers to help their pupils handle the situation we are all “in,” adopting an attitude of care, shared responsibility and hope (Ojala, 2012). Our student teachers need to connect with the needs of children and the young not only via hard science but also by being personally touched by humanistic approaches. I contend that the course content only marginally addresses the need to step back and acknowledge the developed world’s privileged position. Whenever the issues of awareness of the conflictual nature and ethical struggles surface in the course content, they are downplayed or glossed over as generally problematic.

The design of the course mirrors a linear logic of natural science, presenting hard facts about climate changes and proposing solutions. The pedagogical framing of such an inroad into WSD mirrors a primacy of natural science, setting the agenda for WSD for teacher educators. Natural science defines what the problem is and proposes solutions that appear perhaps as easy to follow. In this way WSD is framed as a problem to be solved by some sort of innovation. The focus is on actions to solve the climate change problem. This approach, once set, appears only to be complemented by social science whose function is to problematize the inherently conflictual nature of WSD from the perspectives of actors, their motivation, and theories of human action, such as the Rational Choice theory. The contribution of pedagogy is reduced to didactic

classroom implementation, for instance, how to present educational content in terms of so-called wicked problems. My conclusion is that the humanities, that is, language and literature studies are not utilized to contribute to equipping the teacher educators with competence to educate prospective teachers. The areas that studies of language, culture and literature can contribute to, such as human and intercultural encounters (see above) and multiple understandings of the situation “one is in,” can be further utilized in WSD. I propose, therefore, that explicitly drawing on the humanities can acknowledge the inherently political nature of WSD that creates social implications which vary both globally and locally. This is an invitation for teacher educators to join a dialogue on pedagogical frames for work with sustainable development.

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Jej zainteresowania naukowe dotyczą następującej problematyki: nauka poprzez prace, edukacja nauczyciela, szkolnictwo zawodowe jako droga kształcenia umiejętności i tożsamości zawodowej, badania w działaniu, dydaktyka ogólna i szczegółowa.

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