Mapping Current Sustainable Development Discourse in Sweden and the EU

Tomas Torbjörnson

Department of Education, Uppsala University, Sweden

The outcome of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is affected by factors such as the teachers’ level of engagement, their commitment to alternative environmental educational traditions (Sandell, Öhman et al. 2005), and how they manage to bridge the gap between the school and the surrounding society (Jensen 1994). Other factors are to what extent the pupils have achieved competence in democratic and environmental action from social practices outside the school (Almers 2009) or what kind of sociocultural surroundings they belong to (Skogen 1999). Other important parts of the explanation are how sustainable development is represented in the curriculum and how the curriculum is transferred to the teaching. Environmental and sustainable development discourses are also changing (Laessöe 2010), and since the school and the community are not isolated entities, it appears obvious that discursive changes can affect ESD. Insights into present discourses and discursive changes may therefore be important skills for anyone with the ambition to develop ESD into a creative, problem-solving process that also includes the most controversial local and global dilemmas.

The aim of the study, which is briefly presented in this paper, is to identify and characterize sustainable development discourses in authoritative texts that are important for the perception of ESD. Texts in this category include transcriptions of parliamentary debates and political speeches from both the national and the European level in which aspects of ESD are discussed.

Different discourses represent different ways to express meanings about the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development as well as about learning and education. The dominating sustainable development discourse in northern Europe during the 1990s is referred to as “ecological modernization”, which can be summarized as a market-driven economy moving towards sound environmental practices. A hallmark of this discourse is a quest for consensus rhetoric which is in contrast to the old Scandinavian tradition of dissensus-based public debate (Laessöe 2010). Consensus requires a degree of shared interests, which raises some questions. Is the sweeping change in the economy, welfare systems and environment that shaped the world during the past decades still compatible with consensus rhetoric and shared interests? Are we still living in the age of ecological modernization or did the meaning of sustainable development change when the times changed?

With regard to critical discourse theory, meanings stand in a dialectical relationship to the social practices where they are mediated. “Mediation is the production, movement and transformation of meanings within and between social contexts, across space and time” (Graham 2002, p. 234). The initial work in my study is devoted to identifying to what extent the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development are represented and through what aspects they become visible in the texts. These questions open up to uncover implicit meanings regarding time and place, social actors and processes, which are tasks that will follow. These analyses will be woven together in the Swedish discourse in a European and a global context and they will also contribute to an understanding of current and upcoming challenges in ESD-education on both a national and an international level.
Methodology
The initial empirical data consist of transcriptions of two interpellation debates which took place in the Swedish parliament (Riksdagen 2007; Riksdagen 2008) concerning state support for the organization and development of ESD in primary schools. Two opposition politicians (Peter Hultqvist [PH] and Mats Pertoft [MP]) contested the government's ambitions to meet the objectives in the adopted policy documents and to maintain the previously established ESD-networks. The Minister of Education, Jan Björklund (JB), answered both questions. The program NVivo 9 was used to code the texts according to nodes containing meanings related to the environmental, economic and social dimensions of SD. The ecological parent node included the aspects nature, environment and climate. The economic node included the aspects growth, global(ization) and competition. The social node included the aspects equality, solidarity and justice. Different sources of intertextuality were also coded to different nodes at individual, national, European and global levels. Collocations to key words within the nodes were finally examined to identify subtle meaning connections. The work in progress will be continued with further texts from the Swedish government and parliament and also texts from the European Parliament and the European Commission.

Conclusion
Most of the debate focused on organizational issues but it also became clear which dimensions and aspects of sustainable development the debaters highlighted. One striking result so far is the absence of the economic and social dimensions. Both JB and MP strongly linked ESD to education about environmental problems, and especially climate change, from a unilaterally scientific perspective. In the first debate JB mentioned “science” eight times in different contexts: "Within the school the issue of sustainable development, to the extent that we talk about environmental and climate issues, is mainly managed within the science subjects” […] “The natural sciences have to be upgraded, and obviously the issues of environment and climate are central […] We will […] introduce national tests in science subjects” (Riksdagen 2007). In the other debate JB also exaggerated the importance of science. PH replied by emphasising that “it's [ESD] not just a matter of the science subjects. It requires a holistic view of society and its development” (Riksdagen 2008). The continued analysis will look for aspects other than scientific aspects of knowledge in the texts. Are there, for example, any references to ethical, aesthetic and philosophical aspects of knowledge regarding sustainable development in the material?

References


Jensen, B. B. (1994). Action, action competence and change in the field of environmental and


