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Implementation of ESD in Sweden seen in a Norm Perspective

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Introduction

Sustainable Development and Climate Change is still in the global focus but the UN World Summit – COP15 - in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December 2009 was nevertheless a failure. The implementation of education for sustainable development (ESD) is by several central international and national policy-documents pointed out as one of the most important challenges for compulsory school (see for example UNCED 1992, chap. 36). This challenge is also underlined by UN (December 2002) declaring the period 2005 – 2015 the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). Also in the Swedish syllabus it is stated that “Education should elucidate how the functions of society and our way of living and working can be adapted in order to create a sustainable development” (The objectives of education in Lpo94/Lpf94, decided upon in 1994). A significant characteristic of ESD is the strong emphasis on the moral and ethical aspects of environmental and developmental issues (see UNCED 1992, chap. 36, p. 2). This means that educators are expected to implement and organise educational practices where students are given an opportunity to make and discuss ethical judgements, and act in morally conscious ways regarding issues related to sustainable development. Ever since the concept of education for sustainable development was launched there has been an intense policy-debate about the ideological basis and the forms and content of this kind of education.

The environmental education research field that constitutes the source for a systematic and critical reflection on the implementation of ESD have expanded and advanced considerable, both internationally and in Sweden, during the recent decade (see Hart & Nolan 1999, Rickinson, 2001, Östman 2003, Wickenberg 2004 and Breiting & Wickenberg, 2010). Recently the value dimension of ESD has been addressed by Swedish researchers (see Öhman, 2008). Approaches for studying environmental moral learning processes and their content *in situ* have been developed by Öhman (2006a and b), and Öhman and Östman (2007). The other research field essential for this paper is found with *norm science*. Theories and methods for investigating norms and norm supportive structures at agent- organisation- and systematic levels have been developed within the research field of sociology of law (Hydén 2002, Wickenberg, 1999/2004/2010, Gillberg, 1999, Baier, 2003, Hallerström, 2006, Friberg, 2007, Svensson, 2008, Persson and Leo, 2010).

Aim and scope of this paper

This norm perspective approach have specifically been applied and developed in studies of *implementation of education or ESD* (see Wickenberg 1999, 2004, Hallerström 2006, Persson 2010, Leo 2010). These studies have contributed with important knowledge about the role of education as an arena for formation of sustainable norms. The new research project (mentioned below) is also *to focus leadership and professional norms* in the school (principals) and in the classroom (teachers) regarding ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) and especially the role and importance of *leadership in norm creation processes in education*.

When we are talking about norms (legal norms, ethical/moral norms, social norms, cultural norms, and technical norms) we are doing so with a definition in a more strict way. One problem with the term “norm” is that it is used in so many different ways, both scientifically and in everyday parlance. In response, we have proceeded based on a deeper line of reasoning concerning the ontology of norms and what norms are (Svensson 2008), and on the article *The Concept of Norms in Sociology of Law* (Hydén & Svensson 2008). The aim is to create a sociology-of-law-based definition of the concept of norms, a definition that can meet the needs of both the social and legal sciences. Svensson has conducted an ontological analysis of the concept of norms based on two other concepts: essence and accident. The reason for using the concept of essence is that it provides a basis for defining the concept of norms that enables one to identify norms. We have proceeded based on the following definition: Norms are *action instructions (imperatives)* that are *socially reproduced* and comprise *the individual’s understanding of external expectations regarding their own behaviour* (Svensson 2008 p. 45).

We are now in this new joint research project – with Uppsala University, Örebro University and Stockholm University – to start some in-depth case studies focusing *sustainable leadership*. The methods are qualitative interviews with key persons and analysis based on a norm perspective. The three targeted schools in the ongoing study have had education for sustainable development (ESD) for some time. That raises the question on what role leadership plays in how to get *sustainability* in Education for Sustainable Development in the schools. The objective in this new research project is also to identify and analyze structures or *leadership norms supporting education for sustainable development* (ESD) in schools and in classrooms.

The aim of this article is to present our present position in knowledge and understanding of the importance and complexity of the socio-cultural dimension of sustainable development regarding ESD. Often increased information, knowledge and experience in itself in the sustainability discourse and public debate is said to be the key to changes in action patterns. The same goes for education for sustainable development (ESD). We argue from a sociology of law perspective that changes of actions and action patterns are much more complex than adding more information in curricula, laws, policy and textbooks for these to end up in sustainable changes. One need to identify, analyse and understand norms which as such are constituted by three different dimensions or aspects: knowledge (cognition), driving forces (will and ethical values, emotions) and real possibilities (systemic conditions). These three dimensions we usually call the ‘norm model’ as an analytical tool in change processes.

Research on EE and ESD in Sweden

School is a socio-cultural institution with a long history and in Sweden it is also an officially sanctioned and vast area for influence and indoctrination. By definition, school is an organisation and institution created by society to deliberately influence children and youth in a certain direction. The Swedish public schools can also be seen as an expression of modern society’s idea of citizenship (Englund, 1986/1990; Östman, 1995; Boman, 2002, Öhman, 2006). School has become the greatest societal organisation in Sweden today (about 30% of the Swedish population today are studying or working within the public education sector). This institution is also very difficult to steer (Lundgren, 1977; Alexandersson, 1999; Lindesjö & Lundgren, 2002). Since 1990, it has been the mission of all Swedish schools to provide education and teaching on the environment (EE). This was clearly stated in the opening paragraphs of the amendment to the Education Act adopted by Parliament on December 10 of that year: “Everyone who serves in the schools has a mission to foster ... respect for our common environment” (SL 1 kap 2§). This means: everyone active within the school system has to address and relate to the new environmental theme in society. Soon after this

amendment was enacted, the Government appointed a new curriculum committee with a clear mission regarding the environment.¹ In June 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, also known as the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro, the Agenda 21 action plan on sustainable development was adopted. Education is in fact a substantial part of Agenda 21 – the word “education” alone or in combination occurs 486 times in this UN document. Parallel to these two events – the Swedish environmental education amendment and Agenda 21 – commitment to and engagement in the environment has been growing and declining at the local level and in the community ever since the mid 1960s. The text in the Education Act with its normative messages and signals takes on a concrete form in different curricula and syllabuses. This is also the case for the public preschool programme in Sweden. In those new curricula “sustainable development” also was introduced and added in the official and societal tasks or missions of school.² More detailed and elaborated views and analysis on those law and policy processes are presented in Wickenberg (1999 & 2004).³

What happens when these three influential processes (see Figure 1 below) converge at the local level in the schools? That is the main research question in the sociology of law research project Wickenberg conducted between 1993-1999. In this article, we will present some few of the main results. The research report (Wickenberg, 1999) and some following studies (Wickenberg, 2000, 2004 and 2006) – examines and focuses on the convergence of these three processes of influence in the school context mentioned. The research is based on a number of concrete qualitative case studies (using observations, individual interviews and document and policy analysis) in what is called “advanced practice.”

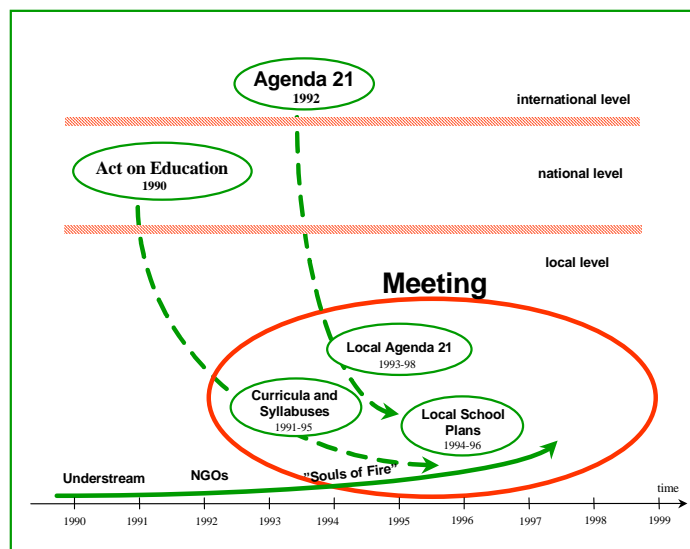


Figure 1. Distant and top-down indications of influence and control and their convergence on the local level with a bottom-up groundswell of environmental activities (Wickenberg, 1999).

¹ At the same time the General Assembly of the UN adopted The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) November 20, 1989. The Swedish Parliament ratified this convention June 29, 1990 and CRC came into force September 2, 1990. Article 29 in CRC is stating: "States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: ... the development of respect for natural environment" (29:1e). We could notice the similarities to and influences on the formulation of the environment amendment to the education act.

² Lpo94 (1994), p.7; Lpo94 (1998), p.8 and Lpf94 (1994), p. 26.

³ For pedagogic or didactic views on this educational area of EE and ESD in Sweden and in Denmark: see also Breiting & Wickenberg in EER (2010). For a broad overview and review of this research field in Sweden: see Östman (ed.), 2003.

Education, instruction, schools and universities belong to what, in a sociology of law context, can be described as different “forms of influence” or “forms of control”. The latter concept is often used in a top-down perspective; the concept of “regulation” is also sometimes used. A more comprehensive concept for this form of influence in education, school, etc., from a sociology of law point of view is referred to as “social forms of influence.” Other forms of influence are “market or economic” ones, and “political or administrative” ones, in which justice in the form of laws, ordinances, statutes and so on are included as a subset. A fourth form of influence is the “socio-technical infrasystem,” our infra-structural systems.

Since all citizens of Sweden – as in most other countries in the wealthier parts of the world – according to law have to spend seven to eight hours a day for nine to ten years of their lives in compulsory school (and preschool), there is reason for environmental research and research on sustainable development in social sciences to examine this far-reaching societal field of influence. If we also include the voluntary, extended time spent in upper-secondary schooling, the total comes to 13 years. In relation to the size of the area and its scope, there is surprisingly little such scientific research on EE and ESD carried out so far in Sweden. But during the new millenium started in a promising way with some research groups on EE and ESD growing in different places in Sweden. That is a result of common and united efforts in research and networking during the mid and end of the 1990:ies.⁴ Finishing this broad and basic introduction of Sweden we will get back to the main question in this article: What happens when these three influential processes mentioned above converge at the very local level in the schools and also are meeting the bottom-up understream(s)? What could be seen and learned?

Some ESD results in Sweden

The processes of norms and norm creation are important, as is the ‘norm model’ as an analytical tool for the understanding of the school’s change work with the new environmental and sustainable development themes.⁵ A ‘norm’ is in a simple meaning an “action directive” or “action direction” (see also above) and that is related to and vital in the understanding of the often used notion “action competence” (further reading on this educational notion – see Jensen & Schnack, 1997, Almers, 2009). Establishing new action patterns in everyday life in schools regarding sustainability is then in its turn stimulating and creating the new social norms that could be guiding for others to follow. An important result of this research study is, from this perspective, the understanding that it is knowledge, commitment, and inspiration from the actor’s lifeworld that has been allowed—contrary to earlier ideals—to influence the professional role or professional norms (in the system) of the school’s adult actors (cf Habermas, 1995). This mode of professional practice has been introduced by exceptionally dedicated individuals or key actors that have acted as forerunners and norm setters.

This development would not have been possible if the professional and bureaucratic-administrative actors had not adapted to this development by creating norm-supporting structures in the local environment of the schools. The norm support given by the headmasters (principals) is necessary and crucial to success in this respect of local implementation. Norm Supporting Structures are essential to identify, create and make use of in the very local level of implementation of new education policy in schools to support the local key actors like the “souls of fire”, the very dedicated persons from the bottom up groundswell. This in turn has

⁴ Since the spring of 2000, a national research network – “Education & Sustainable Development” – has been built up with financial support from the Swedish Research Council. The Network includes about 40 researchers (at the doctoral and post-doctoral levels) from 13 universities and colleges in the country. This resulted among others in IRES and RCE Skåne where the ESD research is continued and education is applied in practice.

⁵ This subchapter or part of the paper is based on research by Wickenberg, 1999/2004.

collected its nourishment and driving force from the distant action impulses connected to the policy development that has taken place at the national and international level.

The norm supporting structures are, as already mentioned, important building blocks as the school initiates a new theme among its adult actors. The norm supporting structures exist at different levels: in the individual schools, in the local council, and nationally. The norm supporting structures may be (Wickenberg, 1999/2004):

1. the dedicated key individuals within the school, so long as they are given adequate opportunity to act; interested colleagues and work mates;
2. the active support and participation of the headmaster and the school board (for further reading on this – compare Leo, 2010, below);
3. the infrastructure including the school buildings and its surroundings; other social arenas for communication, democratic participation (for interested students and teachers to exercise participation, influence, communication, and creativity such as students' ESD committees, etc.); anchoring, and collaboration, as well as for reflection, creative thinking, and the circulation of knowledge, values, competence, and experience (see also Persson, 2010, below);
4. external persons and other resources that may be mobilized to support the processes of influence; and self regulating instruments providing long term support for the processes such as *Grön Flagg* (Eco Schools), and the certification of *Sustainable Schools' Award*;
5. clear goals of ESD teaching; and a clear but basic definition of ESD.

Whether or not the initiation of sustainable development as a moral, cognitive, competence or experiential learning field in schools will take root in a broad sense and last for a longer time, still remains to be seen. It will require a development and restructuring of the knowledge of sustainable development in concrete applications in education where e.g. participation, real ownership and democracy play a vital role. Participation is also strongly connected to the implementation and application of the UN Child Rights Convention (CRC, decided upon by UN General Assembly in Nov 1989; especially article 12 and 13).⁶

Democracy, participation, norms and ESD

Participation – as one of the vital parts of the social dimension of ESD – has been a focus in two recent research projects in Sociology of Law at Lund University and ended up in two PhD-dissertations in 2010. The first research project, *Teachers and Democracy: Developing Democracy in Education from a Perspective of Sociology of Law* (Persson, 2010) was focusing the teachers' assignment regarding democracy from national steering documents like the Education Act and different syllabuses. The method was repeated in-depth interviews (both individual and in group) over four years with 25 teachers and law and policy document analysis. Persson concludes by stating that teachers act in a social structure that can be divided into two social circles. A primary or internal circle, where relations are personal and on everyday terms, consisting of children and students, colleagues and mostly also the headmaster. A secondary or external circle consisting of groups and structures with some distance, like state, law, politicians, authorities, their own professional training, media, public opinion and the like. The two circles represent an array of ideas, standpoints, legal rules et cetera that can be transformed into norms of action, meaning an imperative to the teacher. In relation to his or her educational acting, the teacher faces parallel action norms from the two circles. Professional acting is confronted with norms that can be either supportive or non supportive. Taking full account of the complexity in teaching most situations have to be

⁶ Compare the analysis and conclusions in Wickenberg, P. et al (eds. 2009): *Taking Child Rights Seriously. Reflections on five years of an International Training Programme*. Report of the CRC-programme, sponsored by Sida and run by Lund University, with some 200 participants from 26 developing countries

recognized as unique and analyzed as such. This puts a real demand on the professionalism of the teachers. Handling democratic issues professionally furthermore rests on moral and ethical standpoints. One of the main results in this study was that it showed three central intentions directing the teachers to: 1. Improve the capacity to see the child/student; 2. Become more critically aware of their own role; 3. Increase the awareness of democracy issues. The conclusion is that this forms three active *meta-norms* in education for democracy. These metanorms supports teachers in taking direction in complex and multilayered situations. The meta-norms can clearly be linked to the three dimensions of recognition. A practical consequence of this is that the concept of recognition presents both meaning and potentially powerful possibilities in developing methods of teaching for democracy.

The second research project on democracy, participation and sustainable leadership – also with clear implications on the social dimension of ESD – is: *Principals should and principals do: A Sociology of Law study on how to identify, analyse and understand professional norms* (Leo, 2010). Leo's purpose of the research is to study whether any special professional norms exist with regard to principals' leadership of the democratic mission which is presented to the schools. Leo at the same time developed new research methods to identify professional norms so that they can be discussed and, if necessary, further developed or altered. The aim was thus to *identify* norms in order to be able to later *analyse* and *understand* them. The basis for the research project is described in terms of the following fundamental research questions: How do principals interpret the democratic mission for schools?; How do principals translate this mission into concrete actions?; What professional norms for leadership are inherent in these concrete actions? Leo was following 14 principals with qualitative in-depth (individual and group) interviews and law and policy document analysis. The norm perspective is not intended to regulate all the work done by principals with professional norms. Nor is it concerned with identifying particular norms to improve their activities. For Leo it has to do with understanding schools and, in this case, the leadership provided by principals, with the help of a *norm perspective*. Social and professional norms are formed and changed in the contexts in which they exist, and the norm perspective offers one of a number of possible ways of understanding the actions and patterns of actions of which the principals' activities consist. One function that norms have is that of reducing complexity, and Leo is pointing to the need for research in this area. The position of principal is a complex one, as the identified norms also indicate. One conclusion is that more concrete norms are needed to reduce the level of complexity for principals. Leo view the identified professional norms as a form of *meta-norm*, that is, general norms that can protect existing ones. Meta-norms also enable the formation of sub-norms. Using the theories regarding norms presented in the thesis, we can deepen our knowledge of norms and identify, change or form more concrete *sub-norms* (Axelrod, 1986).

One of the norms identified and analysed in the thesis is that principals should have self-awareness. The principals speak here about the importance of *reflection* for greater self-awareness. This leads to a more concrete norm for the actions of principals: principals should reflect in order to acquire self-awareness. The author believes that reflecting on their own actions and the actions of others offers the principals a means of achieving the distance that greater self-awareness requires. The principals turn inwards, toward themselves, to gain insight into their own actions. This also has to do with a more outward process in which the principals think about something outside themselves, such as how other people have acted, or about the actual role of the principal. Reflection enables us to think about what is happening beneath the surface, and this leads to greater personal understanding. Applying a norm perspective will enable the principals to acquire the linguistic terms and concepts to allow them to reflect on their own actions and those of others. Reflection creates distance and an

opportunity to critically review the actions performed by the principals and the norms by which they are governed. Through reflection, the principals could become more highly aware of their own actions. They can then choose whether they will be governed by a social norm, a norm for teachers or a separate norm for principals, or if they wish to act in their own individual way.

Summing up

We are concluding this paper on the use and importance of norms and a norm perspective in elaborating the social dimension of ESD. We have found that norms, most often not visible, are active in steering and influencing many of our everyday actions. Norms are dependent on the social and cultural context and we know how to define and identify different norms – legal, professional and social norms. We know what norm supporting structures could be useful when implementing new norms and action patterns in schools and have evident knowledge of how and when professional norms for teachers and headmasters could be working. In our research we have noted, since long, that there is a need for scientific knowledge on how to establish changes of actions patterns regarding sustainable development and to be pro-active in climate change. Education – especially ESD – is by many influential global and national actors seen to be one of the most possible ways to open up for these changes in society – locally and globally. We argue, thus, among others from our research results presented above that a norm perspective on actions as well as active, real participation as part of the social dimension of sustainable development – as a desired and intended consequence in and for ESD – is fruitful to be able to get near these hopes for changes heading for sustainable development.

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