

Schools' work on education for sustainable development

Summary

In September 2015, the UN's member states accepted Agenda 2030 with 17 global goals and 169 associated targets for long-term sustainable financial, social and environmental development. Agenda 2030 aims to eradicate poverty and hunger, implement the human rights for everyone, achieve equality and empowerment for women and girls and ensuring a lasting protection for the planet and its natural resources. Sweden along with its other member states has committed itself to working towards achieving the 17 global goals and 169 associated targets for sustainable development. Agenda 2030 emphasises that the global goals are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the financial, the social and the environmental.

Education is regarded as a crucial factor in the implementation of Agenda 2030 and associated target 4.7 states that all students will be given the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. Teachers and students are therefore regarded as important actors for the implementation of Agenda 2030. Education for sustainable development is a term that is often used in connection with associated target 4.7. Through education for sustainable development, students will be given the action competence needed to take on sustainability issues. It is not enough to have knowledge about areas that concern sustainable development, the students must also be given an opportunity to develop their skills and willingness to contribute to a sustainable development.

However, knowledge about how education for sustainable development as a whole is applied in Swedish schools is limited. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate has therefore chosen to review how schools work with education for sustainable development. The results are compiled in this report and it is forward-looking. The intention is, among other things, to generate more knowledge about the situation.

What the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has reviewed

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate has reviewed the quality that schools work with in order for sustainable development to have an imprint on the education as a whole. In its review, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has assessed to what extent students are allowed to participate and influence issues that concern sustainable development. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate has also assessed to what extent the principals govern and organises the school so that education for sustainable development has an imprint on the education as a whole.

The review was carried out during the spring of 2022 in 30 primary schools grades 7-9. The selection is based on a variation of school units where the aim has been a distribution of schools based on geographical location, type of organiser and type of municipality.

The most important observations

In 27 out of 30 of the reviewed schools, the Swedish School Inspectorate has assessed that the work on sustainable development can be further developed.

Greater knowledge about education for sustainable development in teachers may increase student involvement.

According to research, the teaching methods used are important factors when it comes to encouraging students to develop action competence. The teaching needs to provide the students with the tools needed to, now and in the future, make independent and reflected choices in various sustainability issues. It is about providing students with participation and influence on the teaching and to emphasise the fact that there are different perspectives on sustainability issues and almost never any ready-made or "correct" answers. Such teaching is facilitated by teachers having good knowledge about education for sustainable development. Teachers in the schools that have been reviewed believe that they generally have good knowledge about sustainable development and Agenda 2030, which is a great starting point for making the students aware of how different environmental, social and economical conditions affect different sustainability issues. However, at the same time the results of the review also indicate that many teachers have a more limited understanding of education for sustainable development and feel that their task is to change the behaviour and values of students in terms

of sustainable development, rather than train the students to approach sustainability issues in an independent and reflective manner. A greater knowledge about education for sustainable development in teachers can therefore be an important part of getting more students to view themselves as actors for sustainable development.

Few schools manage to reach a high quality in their work on education for sustainable development.

The research emphasises that the content as well as the form of teaching are important factors in education for sustainable development. In order for sustainable development to have an imprint on a school there needs to be conscious work at the schools that combines both the content and the form of the education. Conscious work of this nature is often lacking at the reviewed schools, even though it is common for schools to work with several components in education for sustainable development.

The principals at the reviewed schools can in many cases further develop their work on creating a common understanding at the school when it comes to education for sustainable development and of how the school can work on it. The review also shows that the majority of principals are not aware of what knowledge the teachers at the school have in terms of education for sustainable development, and at the same time the teachers describe various dilemmas in their teaching that are linked to education for sustainable development, which indicates that they may need more knowledge or support. These two areas are significant to schools that want to ensure that education for sustainable development has an imprint on the education as a whole, since it creates conditions for a conscious, goal-oriented and cohesive work on education for sustainable development, which may contribute to action competence among students.

A more pronounced governance may promote the work on education for sustainable development.

The Swedish National Agency for Education has established that there is support for education for sustainable development in regulatory documents for Swedish schools and supporting material has been created in order to promote such work. The review shows that schools work with different components in education for sustainable development, which is supported by the regulatory documents. However, there is a lack of comprehensive work that governs and binds together the different components so that education for sustainable development can be considered an overriding factor in the education as a whole.

According to research (see the introduction), it is of key importance in education for sustainable development that there is an holistic perspective that ties together the content and form of the education. In light of the observations in the review, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate finds that there may be reason to consider whether it is desirable that the governance of education for sustainable development becomes more pronounced, or if it possible to promote such work in schools in other ways. If so, education for sustainable development needs to be considered together with other comprehensive and transverse elements that the schools should work with according to the curriculum.