

Sustainability, subjectivity, and ethics

This chapter zooms in on the focus group discussions which show that sustainability education requires a *subject*; a situated, embodied position from which some sort of assessments of more or less sustainable practices, futures and acts can be done. However, the conventional request for teachers and teacher educators to remain somewhat *objective* in their teaching demands quite the contrary; a disembodied teacher, free from social and political attachments. It is this tension that interest me here. Thus, this chapter zooms in on how the teacher educators grappled with *subjectivity and objectivity* in relation to ethical questions of teaching. What is at focus here is therefore boundaries challenged in relation to the ethics of teaching and the teacher role. In accordance with the overall aim of the dissertation, I am primarily interested in sustainability and subjectivity and I will here discuss subjectivity in relation to ethics.

The necessary vanishing of the individualized human subject

It has been pointed out in various contexts that we are living in an era in which the conventional individualized human subject should be

considered dead. Foucault, Nietzsche, and other so called anti-humanists have pointed out the many problems of attaching notions of agency and will to autonomous human subject, without considering the various ways in which subjectivity is tied to flows of power, animals, technology and discourses. Thus, it has been known for quite some time in philosophy that the liberal, human subject is unfit as the primary target and mean for intervention in contemporary politics and policy, precisely because no human subject can come to be in our society without being in, and having, relations to various other subject and objects. (REF SHOVE?) Bringing this line of thinking to the current ecological crisis, the artificial, atomic notion of the liberal subject might be fighting its last battle as the nodal point for political interventions, especially since the ecological crisis is emphasizing clearer than ever that no being can exist without affecting other beings. The hegemonic, neoliberal, political discourses seem still to construct the self-made entrepreneurial man at the center of change, although one certainly could argue that the self-made entrepreneurial man appear not to be so self made at this point in time. He (sic!) is instead rather entangled and intertwined with forces, substances and beings that constantly transcend boundaries for what it means to be human. Important here is that the death of the individualized human subject has consequences for the intersection between ethics and sustainability education, precisely because it demands a relational thinking of ethics in which a solid human subject no longer can be at the center of our

(human) attention.

The focus group participants opened up the boundaries of human subjectivity through recognitions of that any individual choice always will have consequences for others:

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| <p>Olof: Jo därför tänker jag också, någon kan ju argumentera att för det har med min frihet att göra, jag bestämmer över mitt liv och det blir också problematiken här alltså (1:32:39) jag tänker på mänskliga fri och rättigheter som någonting gott va men om man säger ditt exempel här, ja men jag får väl bestämma själv hur jag ska göra, alltså där finns en motsättning där också mellan.. ja</p> <p>Oscar: Jo men det är naturligtvis viktigt men alltså det viktiga är väl att alla medborgare alltså gör övervägda val.</p> <p>Olof: Men hur kommer man dit?</p> <p>Oscar: Ja men det är väl det som är.. ((skratt))</p> <p>Flera: ((skrattar))</p> | <p>Olof: Well, I thought about that someone can argue for that this has to do with my freedom, I decide over my own life, and that becomes the problem here. I'm thinking about human freedom and rights as something good, but if you take your example here; yes, I get to decide for myself what to do, there is a tension there too between.. yes</p> <p>Oscar: Yes, but of course it's important, but the important thing is, I assume, that all citizens make balanced choices</p> <p>Olof: But how do you get there?</p> <p>Oscar: Yes, that's the thing.. ((laughs))</p> <p>Many: ((laughs))</p> |
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The conversation above reveals the boundaries of the seemingly individualized human subject, or to put it differently; the lack of boundaries in the way someone's action never can be done in a vacuum which does not affect the lives of others. As Olof points out above, the notion of deciding over one's own life is problematic because it is attached to a logic of freedom and rights within a neoliberal domain that refuses to see and acknowledge that the individual choices both are restricted by, and affects, others. In this example, Oscar responds to

Olof by saying that the most important thing for citizens is to make balanced, well-thought-out choices, but when Olof asks the question of how to get there, it is met by laughter from the other participants. What this interaction point to in terms of subjectivity is what I would define as part of the realization of the vanished individualized human subject. Throughout the focus group conversations, it seems rather clear that subjectivity in relation to sustainability and teaching is both restricted by and conditioned through the recognition of that any subject or subjectivity never can exist/be/become without being in relation to others. In this way, the teacher educators are opening up a reconsideration of the boundaries of subjectivity in our contemporary time of ecological challenges and crisis.

A similar conversation was carried out in another focus group, as I was asking the participants what their students need from their education.

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| <p>Hanna: Vad behöver dom från utbildningen?</p> <p>Sebastian: För dom behöver kunskap så att säga, om det, att förstå hur en..</p> <p>Sofia: Vad..</p> <p>Sebastian: Hur ens, hur en individ handlingar påverkar andra individer.</p> <p>Sofia: Mm.</p> <p>Sebastian: Alltså andra individers levnadsvillkor, socialt, ekonomiskt.</p> <p>Sofia: Mm</p> <p>Sebastian: Men alltså få in det hur du handlar påverkar andra personers livsvillkor</p> <p>Sofia: Mm</p> <p>Sebastian: Och livsmöjligheter.</p> <p>Sofia: Mm</p> <p>Sebastian: Men även andra personers</p> | <p>Hanna: What do they need from their education?</p> <p>Sebastian: They need knowledge so to speak, in order to understand..</p> <p>Sofia: What..</p> <p>Sebastian: How one, how an individual's action affects other individuals</p> <p>Sofia: Uhm</p> <p>Sebastian: Consequently other individuals life conditions, socially and economically</p> <p>Sofia: Uhm</p> <p>Sebastian: But consequently to get it; how you act affect other people's life conditions</p> <p>Sofia: Uhm</p> <p>Sebastian: And life possibilities</p> |
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| livsmöjligheter påverkar dina liksom | Sofia: Uhm Sebastian: But also how other people's life possibilities affect you |
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In this quote, Sebastian and Sofia are agreeing on the importance of knowledge as a process of becoming conscious about how individual actions, life conditions and possibilities in life always are in relation to actions, life conditions and possibilities of others. This acknowledgement does work in opposition to the solid, autonomous subject who chooses its life and its actions. Without being in relation to others, there is no such thing as subject and subjectivity. Consequently, the boundaries of individualized human autonomous subject are put under question as a non-functional model for teaching sustainability-issues. As I see it, it becomes difficult for the teacher educators to hold on on to an idea of the subject as autonomous in relation to the interconnection with various others. This challenge of boundaries are however complicated in relation to the hegemonized idea of the objective teacher.

The impossibility of teaching objectively

Now that I have shown the discourse of the vanished individualized human subject as present in the focus group conversation about sustainability, I will look closer into the focus group conversations that were grappling with the ideal of he teacher educator (and teacher) as

objective. Clearly, the death of the liberal subject leads to the conclusion that there never can be a position from which any teacher and researching subject can claim objectivity. This is simply because the objective position presupposes detachment from a historically and locally specific context, which ignores subjectivity as a relational position/process situated in a specific context (**HARAWAY**). I will go further into the relation between subjectivity and ethics by taking a closer look at how the participants grappled with the impossible ideal of being objective as a teacher educator:

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| <p>Gert: Jag har ju egentligen svårt att tänka mig att man kan vara objektiv</p> <p>Goran: Det är klart man inte kan</p> <p>Gert: Det är, det är liksom någon sådan här idealbild, att man ska försöka vara så objektiv som möjligt</p> <p>Goran: Ja men är det, är det en idealbild egentligen? Är det bra att, att vara objektiv?</p> <p>Gert: Nej..</p> <p>Gunnar: Jag kan hålla med dig men när man ändå är inne i klassrummet här då känner jag ändå att jag kan liksom inte stå där så pass.., eftersom det här är så pass ideologiska grejer så kan jag ju inte göra lektionen till någon slags</p> <p>Goran: Politisk pid..</p> <p>Gunnar: Propaganda</p> <p>Goran: Nej ((skrattar))</p> <p>Gunnar: Propagandalektion för mina åsikter /.../</p> <p>Gunnar: Men jag säger ju inte vad jag tycker, men de märker det ändå</p> <p>Gisela: Precis ((skrattar))</p> <p>Goran: ((Skrattar))</p> | <p>Gert: I actually find it hard to believe that one can be objective</p> <p>Goran: Of course you can't</p> <p>Gert: That is some kind of ideal picture, that one shall try to be as objective as possible</p> <p>Goran: Yes, but is it actually an ideal picture? Is it good to be objective?</p> <p>Gert: No..</p> <p>Gunnar: I can agree with you, but when I'm in the classroom here I still feel that I cannot stand there... because this is such ideological stuff so I can't make the class into some kind of</p> <p>Goran: Political..</p> <p>Gunnar: Propaganda</p> <p>Goran: No ((laughs))</p> <p>Gunnar: Propaganda class for my opinions /.../</p> <p>Gunnar: But I don't tell them what I think, they notice it anyway</p> <p>Gisela: Exactly ((laughs))</p> <p>Goran: ((laughs))</p> |
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In the focus group conversation between Gert, Goran, Gisela and Gunnar, they all resist and challenge the ideal of being objective as a

teacher, educator simply because they seem to agree on that it is impossible. However, the opposite of objectivity seems in this example to be connected to ideology and propaganda – things that are assumed to not belong in a classroom of any kind. Although, of course, education is inherently ideological and political, as being one of the central institution in any modern or postmodern society. The ideal of being non-ideological and unpolitical as a teacher therefore remains; it is unacceptable to claim anything else from the teacher position. The problem here is that objectivity is perceived as free of ideology, with help from a “gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988, 581). This ideal is not as stable as one could think thought, since Gunnar ends this excerpt by pointing out that regardless of what he is saying out loud in class, his students can still tell what he is thinking. This is a situation which seems to be recognized by Gisela and Gert by their laughter. No teacher seem to live up to the ideal of objectivity. Although objectivity is recognized as an impossibility, it still remains a more or less desirable ideal for the teacher educators.

The impossibility of objectivity was further discussed by another group of focus group participants as they elaborate on the future as a highly political and normative phenomenon:

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| Lars: Men också vad man själv funderar, om man liksom, om man, lärande för hållbar utveckling då ska man ju göra | Lars: But also what one self wonders, education for sustainable development, then you have to do something for the |
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| <p>någoting för framtiden och då blir det väldigt normativt, och det, alla vill ha en hållbar utveckling men det är liksom vissa saker som är de goda och man konstruerar vissa goda studenter eller elever eller människor</p> <p>Lillemor: Ja hur undervisningen ska se ut.</p> <p>Lars: Ja hur undervisningen ska se ut och vad är det för typ av ideal som är viktiga och vad är det, vems framtid är det vi pratar om och så.</p> <p>Lisbeth: Ja det är ju intressant med tanke på att vi också tycker att lärande för hållbar utveckling handlar om någon slags kritisk..</p> <p>Lars: Ja, ja</p> <p>Lisbeth: Kritisk, att det är en viktig ingrediens och samtidigt så blir det väldigt lätt föreskrivande</p> <p>Lars: Ja</p> | <p>future and it becomes really normative, everybody wants a sustainable development but it's like there are some things that are good and one constructs certain good students or pupils or humans</p> <p>Lillemor: Yes, what teaching should look like</p> <p>Lars: Yes, what teaching should look like and what kind of ideals that are important and whose future we are talking about and so</p> <p>Lisbeth: Yes that's also interesting when thinking about that we think that education for sustainable development is about something critical..</p> <p>Lars: Yes, yes</p> <p>Lisbeth: Critique is a crucial ingredients and at the same time it is easily becoming prescriptive</p> <p>Lars: Yes</p> |
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As can be seen in this excerpt, “doing something for the future” seems highly problematic to Lars, Lillemor and Lisbeth, because talking about the future is impossible without being normative in some way. Since sustainability-issues are discursively tied together with ideas of the future, it becomes impossible for the teacher educators to manage sustainability in education without being – contrary to the ideal of objectivity – subjective. In this way, I would like to claim that sustainability demands a subject – an embodied, historically and locally situated teacher; someone who does something and takes a worlding stance in issues regarding the future. My point here is that every time the future is spoken of, a stance has already somewhat been taken. How, when and where one talks about the future has worlding effects, it creates certain possibilities and makes others harder (HARAWAY). Now, I think education about the future, which lies in

the definition of sustainability education, challenges the very idea of education, especially the idea of education in those educational fields which have tried harder than others to hold on to objectivity as the teaching ideal (science education for instance?). The opposite of normativity, which in Lars' account above is connected to "doing something for the future" gives a glimpse of the ideal he holds in the conversation about neutral knowledge which can be passed on [förmedlat] to the students independently of the contextual relation between teacher and student. However, sustainability cannot be handled within the realm of such narratives about subjectivity; as something a teacher can step away from in his/her role inside the classroom. As I have shown above, the objective teacher ideal coexists with the realization of the vanished individualized human subject. I will discuss this as the management of mutually necessary/impossible subjectivities.

Necessary/impossible subjectivities

Between the vanished individualized human subject and the requirement for a subject lies the mutually necessary and impossible subjectivities that sustainability education demands. At heart of the tension lies the paradox of that we *cannot be* individuals in relation to sustainability-issues, and yet we *are* individuals according to dominant neoliberal educational discourses in which the rational individual will be able to chose in the direction of a better future. Individuality must

therefore be separated from subjectivity, because subjectivity cannot be found within the clear boundaries of a single individualized human body. This is also the reason why the idealized objectivity does not work; objectivity denies subjectivity as a necessary relational political process in sustainability education. The tension I try to call attention to here has clear parallels to the teacher role: a teacher is not supposed to be subjectively embodied in order to teach – yet every teacher is. In short, sustainability education demands an embodied teacher subject that does not feel comfortable being there. Partly, perhaps, because the role of the subject is uncertain in relation to issues that transgress boundaries and dichotomies that education traditionally has parted from (nature/culture, student/teacher, subject/object) to which the individualized human is seen as the solution. I would like to claim that this uncomfortable situation open up the teaching subjects for negotiation, because we are at a time when their boundaries are tangible and highly unstable. The role of the teacher in relation to sustainability can be said to be somewhat “impossible,” and unless the impossibility is seen as the very condition of the teacher profession the teacher has yet to find hir role. Deborah P. Britzman has argued for the teacher profession as impossible, because it is a profession always in an *uncertain* process of becoming with others. She claims that the teacher “chooses both uncertainty and responsibility” (Britzman 2010, 36), hence the painful and inherently difficult duty of teaching others. This impossibility is further displayed in the following exchange in one of

the focus groups:

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| <p>Lars: Nej men det blir ju, det blir ju lätt så att det är vissa, vissa ideal som är de dem man föreskriver.. /.../ Lillemor: Det normativa Lisa: Normativa Lillemor: Ja Lisbeth: Ja, men också att det är ju såhär att man ska äta kravodlad mat, man ska äta.. man ska sortera sina sopor, jag tycker det är mycket intressantare att ta upp är det verkligen bra med kravodlat? Är ekologisk jordbruk, är det, är vi helt överens om att det är bra i alla delar, alltså jag tycker, sen kan jag fatta ett personligt beslut om att jag vill göra dittan eller dattan. Men jag tycker utbildning handlar ju om att ge dem förutsättningar och fatta egna beslut.. Lillemor: Ja Lisbeth: Och sätta sig in.. Lars: Ja</p> | <p>Lars: No but it becomes easily certain ideals which are those one prescribes.. /.../ Lillemor: The normative Lisa: The normative Lillemor: Yes Lisbeth: Yes, but also that one should eat organic foods, one should eat... one should recycle one's garbage, I think it's much more interesting to bring up; is it actually good with organic foods? Is organic farming, are we agreeing completely on that that's a good idea at all times? Consequently I think, I can make my own decision about doing this or that, but I think education is about giving them the prerequisite to make their own decisions.. Lillemor: Yes Lisbeth: And acquaint oneself into.. Lars: Yes</p> |
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In the exchange above, the focus group participants seem to agree on that education is about the process of becoming a subject, in the sense of creating opportunities for the students to make decision of their own. The teacher educator is not aloud to express or have an opinion in the classroom, while teaching others to have their own opinions on a variety of sustainability-related issues. The act of teaching others to become subjects/subjective, while the teacher educators themselves try to avoid subjectivity, runs the risk of creating a nihilist environment in which everything is up for question. The problem with a nihilist point of departure is that “anything goes”, as if the choices of style of eating and farming are choices one can make in separation from ethical

considerations which involve and affect others' lives. Lisbeth's claim that the purpose of education is for each and everyone to make their own decisions rests upon the very same idea in which the process of making decisions rests on a rational, individual, human being. The notion of the individual – free to make his own choices – is that very liberal idea in which my life and choices are disconnected from others.

To teach the teacher students to become subjects in relation to sustainability-issues, raised further concerns about the role of being a teacher educator:

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| <p>Sandra: Vi brukar också diskutera det här med måste man leva hållbart för att kunna undervisa om hållbar utveckling. Sebastian: Mm. Sandra: Det är ju en, det är ju rätt svårt. Sebastian: Ja. Sandra: Eftersom vi lever i det samhällssystemet vi gör.. Sebastian: Mm. Sandra: Och faktiskt sätter sprätt på ganska mycket resurser.. Sebastian: Mm. Sandra: Och tar för oss på andras bekostnad. Sebastian: Mm. Sandra: Och ska man va krass och hårdra så skulle ju ingen av oss kunna. Sofia: Nä. Sebastian: Mm. Sandra: Undervisa om hållbar utveckling. Men många som studenterna tror ju liksom att, "jamen det måste man ju göra, det måste verkligen göra det liksom", och då är vi diskvalificerade hela gänget. /.../ Solveig: Ja, det säger jag till mina studenter att ni har den här kursen nu. Sen kan ni ju slappna av. Jag är ju i den varenda termin ((Skratt))</p> | <p>Sandra: We usually discuss this that do one have to live sustainably in order to teach about sustainable development Sebastian: Uhm Sandra: And that's a, that's pretty difficult Sebastian: Yes Sandra: Since we're living in the society that we're living in.. Sebastian: Uhm Sandra: And actually use a lot of recourses Sebastian: Uhm Sandra: And live at the expense of others Sebastian: Uhm Sandra: Strictly speaking, none of us could be able to do it Sofia: No Sebastian: Uhm Sandra: Teach about sustainable development. But many students believe that "well one has do it, one really has to do it", and that would disqualify all of us. /.../ Solveig: Yes, I tell my student that you take this course now. Then you can relax. I'm in it every semester ((laughs))</p> |
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In the exchange above, the teacher educators are trying to figure out how this necessary/impossible demand on subjectivity could be carried out in relation to teaching sustainability-issues. Just like the previous quotes above, the participants are here grappling with how each and everyone's living condition are conditioned by society. All ways of living are in fact affected by larger societal systems in which it is impossible to carry out subjectivity in isolation from others. As Sandra claims that her and her colleagues are living in a society in which they get to live at the expense of others it becomes clear that simply by being in this world, Sandra is taking some kind of stance. The Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas asks “Do I have the right to be?” (REF LEVINAS) and I think that is a question that points to some of the things that are at stake here: simply by being, one is involved in more or less ethical relations which, at there most extreme, are about who gets to live and die in this world (HARAWAY, LEVINAS). Such a recognition leads to what Sandra points out above: “strictly speaking, non of us could /.../ teach about sustainable development.” In this way, subjectivity (to act in ethical ways) becomes important in order to even qualify as a teacher educator. Clearly, Solveig acknowledges towards the end of the quote above that the subjectivity that sustainability education demands prevents her from “relaxing” (act unethically) in relation to acting sustainable. What it means to be a teacher educator is thus tightly connected to how one embodies the subjectivity and responsibility that sustainability education seems to demand.

As pointed out above, the focus group participants seemed for the most part well aware of the impossibility of teaching with the individualized human subject as model for subjectivity in sustainability education.

Situated ethics

Questions of educational politics, interventions and practices are always already ethical questions, because they are connected to inclusions and exclusions of bodies, forces and discourses. Sustainability education highlights that every action, and every being are in relation to others and therefore part of more or less ethical relations. I would like to clarify that I am not talking about predefined ethics here, but rather ethics as situated and embodied (**NODDINGS; LEVINAS; HARAWAY**). Levinas has pointed out the painful and political condition of being (**REF**). Sustainability education, in the conversation of the focus group participants, complicate the teacher position. On the one hand sustainability education requires an embodied subject, on the other hand the teacher educators are struggling with the ideal of objective teaching. Since subjectivity no longer can rest upon the individualized human subject as the nexus for change, sustainability education requires subjectivity which connects its very being to the ethical relation with others. This requirement, seen in the light of the current ecological crisis, forces the teachers to face their embodiment in an otherwise disembodied discourse of education.

I suggest that the focus on the future (as discursively tied together with sustainability) makes it particularly hard for the teacher educators to manage teaching without recognizing one's own embodied and political subjectivity. I argue that this tension challenges the boundaries of ethics of teaching. The challenge opens up the very question of the teaching profession between the impossible and the necessary.