



UMEÅ UNIVERSITY

GERUM no. 2026:3

Umeå Studies in the educational sciences no. 91

‘You can just go out into the woods’

How geography teachers interpret and teach sustainable development

Hampus Hallingfors

Academic dissertation

Which, with the due permission of the Vice-Chancellor of Umeå University for the examination for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is presented for public defence in Hörsal UB.A.230 - Lindellhallen 3, Samhällsvetarhuset on Friday, 5 June, 2026 at 10:15.

The thesis will be defended in English.

Faculty opponent:

Docent Sally Windsor, Institutionen för didaktik och pedagogisk profession, Göteborgs universitet, Sverige

Organisation

Umeå University
Department of Geography

Document type

Doctoral thesis

Date of publication

12 May 2026

Author

Hampus Hallingfors

Title

'You can just go out into the woods': How geography teachers interpret and teach sustainable development

Abstract

The societal debate on sustainable development is present in our everyday lives, emphasizing the need for a transition to avoid irreversible environmental and social consequences. Educational systems can be seen as a vehicle for this adaptation, providing pupils with tools to critically analyse sustainability methods. In Sweden, this responsibility is shared across multiple subjects, Geography being one.

By studying documents and interviewing Geography teachers this thesis sets out to investigate how education for sustainable development (ESD) is conceptualised, manifested, and geographically anchored within the school subject of Geography in Swedish lower- and upper-secondary education.

The research is structured around three interconnected themes. First, the subject, employs boundary-work theory to analyse a curriculum revision debate where sustainable development was proposed as an independent subject. The findings reveal how the relationship between the discipline of geography and the concept of sustainable development was negotiated. Geography's holistic nature makes it inherently suited for ESD, the subject faces challenges related to ambiguous objectives and a low disciplinary status. The second theme, place, utilises spatial and frame factor theories to explore how teachers use the local settings as a pedagogical resource. The analysis demonstrates that a relational conceptualisation of place is essential for making abstract sustainability challenges relatable. It is argued that 'place' functions as a frame factor, conditioning teaching practices and providing an arena for pupils to develop action competence. The final theme, the teachers, focuses on teacher agency and the practical navigation of classroom realities. Teachers act as agents of change, balancing curriculum requirements against societal pressures such as 'alternative facts' and increasing climate anxiety among students.

The thesis concludes that Geography contributes to ESD through its integrative perspective and its ability to bridge global issues with local lived experiences. However, several institutional challenges are identified. Both the subject's marginalisation within the Swedish school system and the highlighted need for enhanced subject-specific support and professional development from national educational authorities can constrain Geographys' potential.

Keywords: Geography education; sustainable development; education for sustainable development; Sweden; boundary-work; place; teacher-agency

Language

English

ISBN

978-91-6850-037-9 (print)
978-91-6850-038-6 (pdf)

ISSN

1402-5205
2004-8890
(print),
2004-8661

Number of pages

132 + 3 papers