

**PAPERS**

## EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### **Abstract**

Education for sustainable development is a dynamic concept of development that will enable all individuals to acquire knowledge, values, and decision-making skills at different levels, and will contribute to a better quality of life without harming the planet in the future. The core of the education for sustainable development is an education that will allow the development of a widespread understanding of the interdependence and fragility of the system that planetary life rests on and an understanding of the base of natural resources that human satisfaction will depend on. The main problem of the research was to determine the attitudes of secondary and higher education teachers in regard to the concept of sustainable development, as well as the value orientation of the respondents when implementing the sustainable education system. A total of 200 respondents were included in the research (120 secondary school teachers and 80 higher education professors). The applied instruments in the research are the Scale for understanding the concept of sustainable development and the Scale for assessment of the values of sustainable education. The obtained results show that the respondents associate the concept of sustainable development with values, responsibility, ecology, way of life, progress, and future. At the same time, they have positive attitudes towards the concept of sustainable development, which plays an important role in the education of students. Teachers and professors stimulate the development and acquisition of new knowledge in their students, as well as responsibility towards themselves and others, and acquisition of self-confidence and personal identity as essential values for sustainable education. This will contribute to the development of persons who will satisfy their needs at the specific moment, that is, at present, without jeopardizing the possibilities of future generations when satisfying their needs.

**Keywords:** education, sustainable development, academic staff, students, knowledge

### **Introduction**

Recently, we have witnessed a large number of globalization processes related to teaching and education for sustainable development, which represent an educational imperative. Increasingly often, we perceive the need to preserve individual values, as well as to create mechanisms for their consolidation. That is why we say that education for sustainable development is basically an education about values, where the

central role belongs to the respect for others, including current and future generations; respect for difference and diversity; the environment; the source – the planet we live on (Shallcross et al., 2006). In parallel with the development of the feelings of justice, responsibility, research, and dialogue, education for sustainable development enables us improved behavior and practice that help us live a quality life without being deprived of basic needs. At the same time, education enables the acquisition of the required knowledge and skills aimed at a more straightforward resolution of the economic, social, and environmental problems of today (Öhman & Östman, 2019). There is no sustainable and quality economic development without a good education. It strongly affects economic development and thus becomes part of sustainable development. Therefore, it is considered that sustainable development is a way of life that should find a balance between economic development, a clean environment, social equality, and fairness for current and future generations (Bastianoni et al., 2019). The ultimate goal is the creation of a society where harmonious development will contribute to the permanent improvement of people's quality of life. That is why the concept of education for sustainable development is included in the formal, non-formal, and informal types of education. A new challenge is ahead of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: inclusion and creation of a sustainable society, as well as integration of the principles, values, and practice of sustainable development in all aspects of education and learning.

### **Vision and definition of education for sustainable development**

Education for sustainable development is a dynamic concept of development that will enable all individuals to acquire knowledge, values, and decision-making skills at different levels and that will contribute to a better quality of life without harming the planet in the future. (Sustainable Development Education Panel First Annual Report, 1998:30). Therefore, in accordance with the sustainable development goals, the education for sustainable development is based on three elements: the environment (protection of the ecosystem integrity, acceptance of the biosphere's capacity, biological diversity and quality of the environment); the economy (efficient use of natural resources, strategic sustainable development of the territory, use of resources and economic development); and the society (education in the field of human rights, healthcare, security, conflict resolution).

The education for sustainable development studies the following (Corney, 2006):

- respect, valuation, and preservation of the achievements of the past;
- life in a world where people will have enough food for a healthy and productive life;
- assessment and protection of the state of our planet;
- creating and enjoying a better, more secure, and just world;
- being a citizen who will care, who will exercise his/her rights and responsibilities at the local, national, and global level.

There cannot be long-term economic and social development on an exhausted planet. The core of the education for sustainable development is an education that will allow the development of a widespread understanding of the interdependence and fragility of the system that planetary life rests on and an understanding of the base of natural resources that human satisfaction will depend on (Hansjong & Werner, 2006). Therefore, the education for sustainable development has several priorities: improvement of primary education, redirection of the existing educational

programs at all levels in order to create sustainable development, development of public awareness and understanding of sustainability, so that knowledge, issues, skills, and values will be included in the education system in order to achieve sustainability (Ardoin et al., 2018; Varela-Losada et al., 2016). People need basic knowledge from natural, social, and human sciences in order to understand the principles of sustainable development, so that they can be implemented in everyday life. The education for sustainable development is focused on the main social, economic, and environmental issues that threaten the sustainability of the planet, but also on other issues such as war and militarism, government, discrimination and nationalism, migrants, human rights, and the media. In order to be successful, sustainable education should provide people with practical skills that will help them sustain their livelihoods and live sustainable lives once they complete their education (Sinakou et al., 2019; Hopkins, 2012). Therefore, during the educational process, attention is paid to acquiring the ability for successful communication (both written and oral); consideration of the systems (from a natural and humanistic perspective); consideration of time – predicting, thinking, and planning ahead; critical thinking about issues of values; separation of number, quality, quantity, and values; cooperation with other people; using the processes: knowledge, examination/research, action, reasoning, imagining, relating, valuing and choosing (Mogensen & Schnack, 2010).

The success of education for sustainable development depends on the combination of an entire range of factors, including the following: representation of sustainable development topics in the curricula, a new way of learning, employee obligations and responsibility, institutional development, partnerships, and finances (Borges et al., 2017). If education does not become sustainable education, there will be no transition towards sustainability.

### **The role of higher education in the evolution of sustainable development**

Knowledge, abilities, and independence are integral parts of human and economic development. Unlike other resources, knowledge spreads without limitation, thereby representing an unlimited source for economic and cultural development (Mahat et al., 2017). The key abilities and independence that education must develop in its pupils and students in order to develop the concept of sustainable development include the following: the ability for interdisciplinary work, cosmopolitan perception, understanding of different cultures and cooperation, planning and implementation of solidarity, self-motivation, and motivation of others, etc. (De Haan, 2006).

Education has a major role in the development of the concept of sustainable development. It conveys to the new generations the idea that all development-oriented activities should be based on the concept of sustainable development (Boeve-de Pauw & Van Petegem, 2018). This concept should be present in educational programs, materials, and other relevant activities in education in the country. The educational institutions in higher education, especially those in the public sector, play an important role in improving quality and preserving the environment, therefore they have an economic and social impact. Cortese (2003) indicates that higher education institutions have a profound moral responsibility to acquire higher awareness, knowledge, skills, and values that are required to create a sustainable future. In order to be able to fulfill this function and apply education for sustainable development, they need to: 1) implement a general reform of the university; 2) change the management of the university towards sustainability; 3) stimulate international cooperation between institutions and exchange of teachers, researchers, and students.

Higher education institutions contribute to the realization of the concept of sustainable development in different ways (Wals, 2014). In addition to the fact that sustainable development should be incorporated into existing and new programs, the need for the principles of sustainability to be represented in all types of management of institutions is imposed. There with, a clear message is sent to the community about the importance of the mentioned concept in higher education. In education at all levels, the opportunity for sustainable education should be gradually implemented, by encouraging integrative and interdisciplinary approaches, joint teaching, and study programs in schools and colleges (McKeown, 2007). The dominant elements in the curricula and programs should be elements related to environmental protection, socio-cultural elements of sustainable development, as well as elements from an economic aspect. At the same time, inside the university itself there should be a specific value system that depends on the socio-cultural aspect of the environment so that the students can be completely prepared for their economic future and independence, but also to solve the problems related to social justice, mutual relations, health and quality of life. In such a way, the values of knowledge, solidarity, identity, and responsibility will prevail, and they will be the foundation of the teaching-educational system.

To that end, teachers in primary and secondary, as well as in higher education, are expected to recognize and apply the common values of sustainable development and sustainable education (Zhan et al., 2019). The new curricula and school culture, i.e., university culture (freedom of expression, participation in decision-making, cooperation, shared responsibility, and sensitivity to other people's problems) are an important part of sustainable education. The bearers of these activities are teachers and academic staff and within their professional work, they need to know, apply and respect certain value frameworks that are part of the educational, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainable development (Desimone, 2009). Lifelong learning as one of the values of sustainable development represents a path for implementation towards realizing the concept of sustainable development.

## **Research methods**

### *Research problem*

The main problem of the research was to examine the attitudes of secondary and higher education teachers regarding the concept of sustainable development, as well as the value orientation of the respondents during the implementation of the sustainable education system.

#### *Goals*

1. To determine the attitudes of secondary and higher education teachers regarding the concept of sustainable development.
2. To determine the priority values in sustainable education for the respondents.

### *Research sample*

The research sample consists of 140 teachers from three secondary schools in Skopje and 60 professors from the University of Tetova. Thereby, 100 (50%) subjects were male and 100 (50%) were female. In terms of age, 22.7% of the respondents were between 21-35 years of age, 37.4% were between 36-45 years of age, and 39.9% were 46 years old and older. The average age of the respondents was 43.62 years, with a minimum value of 21 years and a maximum value of 65 years. In terms of work experience, 22.4% of the respondents had work experience of 0-9 years, 37%

had work experience of 10-19 years, 28% had work experience between 20-29 years, and 12.6% of the respondents had over 30 years of work experience. The average work experience of the respondents was 15.23 years with a minimum value of 1 year and a maximum value of 36 years. All included respondents in the research were randomly selected.

### *Instruments of the research*

The survey questionnaire consists of a preamble where the goals and the importance of the research are explained, as well as the time frame required for its completion. It consists of three parts: (1) General group of questions, (2) Sustainable development – conceptual determination and attitudes, (3) Value system of education for sustainable development.

The first part of the survey questionnaire refers to a group of general questions related to the respondents such as gender, age, years of work experience/years of service.

The second part of the survey questionnaire referred to determining the respondents' attitudes regarding the concept of sustainable development and for this purpose, we applied the Scale for understanding the concept of sustainable development (Roncovic & Rafajac, 2012) which consists of 11 items. The scale is of Likert type, where respondents expressed their agreement/disagreement on a scale from 1 to 5 (I completely disagree – I completely agree). The scale had good validity with Cronbach's alpha of 0.87.

The third part of the survey questionnaire consisted of a group of questions that referred to the assessment of individual values that are important for sustainable education. To this end, we applied the scale for assessment of the values of sustainable education (Mrnjaus, 2008), which consists of 49 items. The respondents had the opportunity to express their answers on a scale from 1 to 5 (never – always) and thus assess the importance of individual values of sustainable education in their daily work. The scale itself consists of four subscales: knowledge, responsibility, solidarity, and identity. The level of validity according to Cronbach's Alpha ranged from 0.75 to 0.86.

### *The procedure of data collection and analysis*

A total of 200 respondents were included in the research (120 secondary school teachers and 80 higher education professors). The respondents were familiar with the problem of the research before the distribution of the survey questionnaires, which increased their motivation to participate in it. It took them 10 to 15 minutes to complete the survey questionnaire and the questionnaire was anonymous. The data was collected in the period from June 30 to September 30, 2022. After the data collection and the detailed analysis of the survey questionnaires, they were processed by using the statistical program SPSS version 20.0.

## **Results**

At the beginning of the research, it was of interest to determine the knowledge that the respondents have regarding the concept of sustainable development. In doing so, we obtained different definitions of sustainable development, however, a typical element is that when defining the concept of sustainable development, the respondents associate it with values (New way of thinking about the agreed values of the democratic society/Certain values of the society that teaching and education rest on), responsibility (Social and responsible behavior/Responsible use of natural re-

sources), ecology (Use of natural resources while complying with environmental rules), way of life (Way of life to preserve the planet Earth), progress (Progress and development of the society in accordance with the laws of nature), and future (Sustainable development is our common future). This shows that the respondents have different experiences regarding their knowledge about sustainable development.

When it comes to the attitudes of the respondents regarding the concept of sustainable development, we found that the following statement had the highest arithmetic mean: *Sustainable development is the ability to use natural resources responsibly in order to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*, where the arithmetic mean of the respondents' answers was 4.43 with a standard deviation of 0.64, that is, most of the respondents completely agree with the statement indicated above (45.8%). Furthermore, regarding the following statement: *The implementation of the idea of sustainable development is possible only with a profound change of values and political concepts*, the arithmetic mean of the respondents' answers was 3.72 with a standard deviation of 0.73, and 23.5% of the respondents completely agree with it. The statement with the lowest value of the arithmetic mean was the following: *Sustainable development is a political system and an empty formula*, where the arithmetic mean of the respondents' answers was 2.22, with a standard deviation of 0.84. In addition, 56.4% of the respondents disagree with this statement, while only 1.2% completely agrees.

In order to assess the individual values that are important for sustainable education, we applied the Scale for assessment of the values of sustainable education, which consists of four subscales: knowledge, solidarity, identity, and responsibility. By analyzing the Knowledge subscale, we found that 66.02% of the respondents develop a positive attitude towards the acquisition of new knowledge among their pupils/students. Here the following statements had the highest value: *I develop a positive attitude towards learning and acquiring new knowledge in students* (M=4.63; SD=0.60) and *I enable students' independence in the research and construction of new knowledge* (M=4.12; SD=0.71), while the lowest value was observed in the statement: *I give the students a basis for acquiring the required knowledge for the advancement of the economic and social activities* (M=3.18; SD=0.98).

In the Responsibility subscale, the highest arithmetic mean was observed in the following statements: *I encourage students to take responsibility for themselves, their own lives and behavior* (M=4.67; SD=0.63), whereby 61.2% of the respondents agreed with this statement, and *I encourage quality mutual relations at school* (M=4.51; SD=0.74), while the lowest value was observed in the statement: *I develop awareness among students in the social environment* (M=3.24; SD=1.12). In the Solidarity subscale, the highest value of the arithmetic mean was observed in the statements: *I encourage students to have a positive attitude towards others* (M=4.74; SD=0.59), which dominated in 64.7% of the examined subjects, and *I encourage students to respect the dignity of others* (M=4.21; SD=0.70), while the statement *I encourage young people and children to do humanitarian work*, had the lowest value (M=3.67; SD=0.85). During the analysis of the Identity subscale, we observed the highest arithmetic mean in the statement: *I develop self-confidence and confidence in personal abilities in students* (M=4.78; SD=0.60), whereby 54.2% of the respondents agreed with this statement, while the lowest value was observed in the statement: *I direct students to communicate in a foreign language* (M=2.23; SD=0.89).

The statistical analysis of the data with the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test shows that there is a statistical difference in relation to the total score of knowledge of the concept of sustainable development among teachers and professors  $Z=-1.098$ ,  $\text{sig}=.004$ ,  $p<.01$ . The same applies with regard to the Knowledge subscale  $Z=-1.059$ ,  $\text{sig}=.003$ ,  $p<.01$ , while statistical significance between the subgroups is not present in regard to the Responsibility, Solidarity, and Identity subscales, i.e.,  $p >.01$  (Table1).

## Discussion

Education for sustainable development is a concept that emerged as a response to the challenges of modern society. It is one of the key mechanisms that should enable development that meets the needs of the present without jeopardizing the abilities of future generations to meet their needs. The new challenges of the modern world require new solutions, knowledge, skills, values, and methods as a response. This specific type of education is the answer to those challenges (Redman et al., 2018). It is based on the principles and values of sustainable development and requires an interdisciplinary application. It represents a basic tool that enables the change of the models of consumption and production, research and development of technology where-with the environment is improved. It also enables people to integrate environmental issues into activities, starting from an early age.

Of course, this requires adaptation of the educational curricula, so that the young generations understand the challenges we are facing, to develop the ability for critical opinion and problem-solving at the local and global level. When forming the attitudes, i.e., the value system, it is very important for the students to think not only about consumption at a global level but also to seek answers to the questions regarding the consumption habits in my settlement, family, school, and my personal consumption habits and how they affect the environment I live in? That is why an integrative, interdisciplinary teaching approach is the best way to work. The student is placed at the center of learning while considering the student's daily experience, which the teachers then utilize for the purpose of further learning, that is, the elements of that experience are being used in order to understand new concepts and build new knowledge (Olson et al., 2016). In this way, the instruction becomes more interesting, and students are motivated for better achievements and results, while teachers, through teamwork with their colleagues, get the opportunity to express their creativity, research their own practice and the practice of others, and determine the possibilities of connecting different subjects.

That is why we started the examination of the concept of sustainable development by defining sustainable development based on the knowledge that the respondents have so far. We obtained different definitions based on key terms such as value, responsibility, ecology, way of life, progress, and future. Regarding their views related to the concept of sustainable development, most of the respondents agree with the statement that *Sustainable development is the ability to use natural resources responsibly in order to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. When analyzing the Knowledge subscale, teachers and professors mostly value the statement *I develop a positive attitude towards learning and acquiring new knowledge in students*, while the dominant statement in the responsibility subscale is the statement: *I encourage students to take responsibility for themselves, their own life and behavior*. When analyzing the Solidarity subscale, we found that the respondents mostly agree with the statement *I encourage students to have a positive attitude towards others*, while on the Identity

subscale, most respondents agree with the statement *I develop self-confidence and confidence in personal abilities in students*. A characteristic element is that teachers and professors differed only in relation to the Knowledge subscale, while on the other subscales their opinions are at the same level. However, the obtained results show that the respondents give equal priority to the values of knowledge, solidarity, identity, and responsibility.

Teachers and professors understand and value the concept of sustainable development in relation to their personal philosophy and the socio-cultural conditions they live in, while in the course of their work they respect the personal values and the values of others. At the same time, they emphasize personal responsibility during the process of learning, research, guidance, and planning, thus bringing their students to a situation in which it is necessary to jointly think and discuss the problem they are studying, to cooperate, to take initiative, to solve and overcome obstacles, to behave responsibly towards others, their environment, towards themselves and their health.

This coincides with the opinions in a number of researches in the world that the leading principles of education for sustainable development include: lifelong learning, learning through action and participatory methods, cooperation and partnership, encouraging critical opinion, defining the problem, finding and applying solutions, inclusion to a large group of participants.

### **A Concluding Thought**

What does one of the respondents say about sustainable development for education?  
*“Each one of us should start from oneself, to question oneself what level of development he/she has reached, to try and to actively participate in all areas of sustainable development, because it is very difficult to develop something in a society where 1 out of 100 persons is active and the others just observe and comment. All of us as individuals in the society are very important for education for sustainable development, we just need to open our eyes well and try hard every day - each within our work domain, but also within the family.”*

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