Sustainable Development in Romania in Pre-School and Primary Education

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Abstract

The paper presents the results obtained in a study to the teachers’ perception related to the current context of the pre-school and primary education for sustainable development in Romania. In order to identify the teachers’ opinions on the education for sustainable development in the current Romanian educational system and to evaluate the teachers’ needs, there have been used two methods: (a) semi structured interviews and (b) questionnaires.

Keywords: Pre-school and primary education, sustainable development, lifelong learning key competences;

1. Introduction

The research results presented in this paper were obtained in the frame of a two years Comenius project, Sustaining Development in Early School Education - SUSTAIN. SUSTAIN is a Comenius project that aims to improve the quality of education and training on the theme of sustainable development. In line with EC recommendations, the goal of the Sustain project is to provide teachers with methodological support so they may conceive training courses that transmit, to students, knowledge and capabilities that allow them to make informed choices, respectful of both society and the environment. The activities and products of the project aim to provide solutions for supporting the development of key competences for lifelong learning relevant to the social and environmental aspects of sustainable development at an early school age. One of the primary objectives of the project is to create and share good practices in teaching which will involve work on supporting the key competences of young learners in classroom applications among the participators in the partner countries. The SUSTAIN project gather partners from four countries: Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Italy.

2. Education for Sustainable Development

The most frequently quoted definition of “sustainable development” (SD) was proposed by Lester Brown, founder of Worldwatch Institute (WCED, 1987). This definition was used in the report "Our Common Future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development, known as Brundtland report. The Brundtland Report
defined sustainable as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

The development can be sustainable only if there is equilibrium between different factors which defines the quality of life, in general. Thus, the concept of sustainable development circumscribes three dimensions: economic, social and environmental.

At the summit of ministers of education and environment, held in Vilnius, Lithuania, at 17th to 18th of March 2005, it was adopted the UNECE(United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The document states that “education, in addition to being a human right, is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and an essential tool for good governance, informed decision-making and the promotion of democracy. [...] Education for sustainable development develops and strengthens the capacity of individuals, groups, communities, organizations and countries to make judgements and choices in favour of sustainable development.” (UNECE, 2005)

The aim of this Strategy is to encourage UNECE member States to develop and incorporate ESD into their formal education systems, in all relevant subjects, and in non-formal and informal education.

In the UNECE Strategy for ESD there are presented the key themes of SD which includes, among other: poverty alleviation, citizenship, peace, ethics, responsibility in local and global contexts, democracy and governance, justice, security, human rights, health, gender equity, cultural diversity, rural and urban development, economy, production and consumption patterns, corporate responsibility, environmental protection, natural resource management and biological and landscape diversity.

Education for sustainable development (ESD) overcomes the frame of the aspects of human dependency to the quality of the environment and of access to the natural resources of our days. ESD faces with essential aspects of preparing children to be involved in sustainable development through participation, self efficacy, knowledge about equality, social justice (Breiting, Mayer, & Morgensen, 2005).

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning calls on Member States to ensure that each citizen has the key competences to adapt flexibility to a changing world in which everything is highly interconnected. The key competences for lifelong learning are as follows: (1) communication in the mother tongue, (2) communication in foreign languages, (3) mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, (4) digital competence, (5) learning to learn, (6) social and civic competences, (7) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and (8) cultural expression and expression. These eight key competences are mutually supportive and underpinned by skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, initiative taking and decision making, all of which are essential for achieving the objectives of sustainable development (Council of the European Union, 2010).

Romania has a National Sustainable Development Strategy, Romania 2013-2020-2030, which states that the radical improvement and diversification of the opportunities offered by the Romanian educational and training system are priority objectives of strategic importance and basic preconditions for an effective implementation of the principles of sustainable development on medium and long term. According to art. 68, paragraph (1) of the National Law of Education, the national curriculum for primary and lower secondary school education focuses on 8 key areas of competences which determine the training students’ profile. These eight key areas of competences are, in fact, the eight EU key competences for lifelong learning. In the recent years, it is obvious that, in the schools in Romania, there were made real steps to create a context, a school environment favourable for developing a behaviour characteristic to active citizens, educated in the idea of the complex dimension of sustainable development which includes the interdependence between society, economy, politics and the environment.
3. Method and results

3.1. Method

In order to evaluate the current Romanian educational context and the teachers’ needs related to the education for sustainable development, there have been made two particular actions:

1. a theoretical analysis on the Romanian actual curricular specifications and related materials;
2. a practical research on the main aspects, gathered according to teachers’ perception related to this topic.

In the practical research made to identify the teachers’ opinions on the education for sustainable development in the current Romanian educational system, and in order to evaluate the teachers’ needs, there have been used two methods:

1. semi structured interviews. The structured interviews consisted in asking questions, collecting the answers and discussions about education for sustainable development with groups of pre-school and primary teachers;
2. questionnaire (on paper or in electronic format). The questionnaire included the same questions used during the interviews.

The participation was anonymous.

3.1.1. Respondents’ profile

To the interviews there have been participated 63 pre-primary teachers and 40 primary teachers. There have been collected 94 questionnaires on paper and 14 questionnaires in electronic format. Thus, 211 teachers have been participated to the study, 159 pre-primary teachers and 52 primary teachers.

All respondents belonging to the feminine gender is not surprising, given that 99.7% of primary school teachers in Romania and 75.1% of the primary and lower secondary education teachers are female†.

67% of the study participants teach in rural areas and 33% in urban areas. 5% of the respondents have ages under 25, 10% between 25 and 29, 44% between 30 and 39, 10% between 40 and 49 and 31% between 50 and 59 (Figure 1). The great majority of the respondents, 74%, has a length of service in education over 10 years (49% have the length of service in education over 15 years and 25% between 11 and 15). The rest, 26% have experience in education as follows: 14% have experience in education between 6 and 10 years, 6% between 3 and 5, 5% between 1 and 2 and 1% has less than one year experience in education (Figure 2).

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† https://www.fundatiadinupatriciu.ro/ro/media_room/stiri/451
3.2. Results

In order to evaluate the current Romanian context of the pre-primary and primary education for sustainable development, the respondents have been asked to answer to the following questions/requests: (1) How often your organization is embedding SD (sustainable development) concepts or approaches into the educational program? (2) Please give examples (3) To what extent do you think the following key competences should be developed in the pre/primary school age to allow pupils to be more successful in their later school performance and more prepared for the world of work? (4) What topics and in which subjects could be integrated to the lessons in pre/primary schools to support the SD education? How SD can be used to develop students’ key competences? (5) What kind of training and or methodical support does a teacher need to be more active and successful in developing pupils’ key competences and in teaching SD?

To the first question, How often your organization is embedding SD (sustainable development) concepts or approaches into the educational program?, 36%, 38%, respectively 19% had answered Very often, Often and, respectively Sometimes. Only 7% considered that in the schools they work there are implemented Rarely or Never sustainable development concepts or approaches.

As examples of implementation of sustainable development concepts or approaches in the school they work, the respondents indicated numerous projects, partnerships, local, regional, national and international collaborations, contests and lessons topics included in the compulsory and optional subjects. These examples may be structured in the following categories:

1. health education – the national program More informed, healthier, educational partnerships with medicals, lessons, etc.
2. ecological education - national projects and programs: Schools for a Green Future, LeAF, Let’s do it Romania, Herbs, Eco school; practical activities in nature, lessons, etc.
3. traffic education – the project Little pedestrian, meetings with traffic agents, lessons, etc.
4. physical education – the national program Kalokagathia
5. prevention and fire fighting education - meeting with Inspectorate for Emergency Situations representatives, evacuation exercises in case of disasters, educational movies, fire simulations, lessons, etc.
6. civic education - actions of donation of gifts, cloths, toys for poor and institutionalized children, forming positive attitudes in relations between colleagues, lessons
7. education for democracy - projects: Spring day, I and the world I live in; lessons, etc.
8. other - projects Every child in preschool/school, No TV week, etc.; collaborations with church (Let’s be good Christians), family, medicals, library, other preschools, hall, etc.

These examples offered by the teachers as examples of implementation of concepts and approaches related to sustainable development in pre-primary and primary education prove a good understanding of the large meaning of term of sustainable development. It can be noted that the examples are not limited to environmental issues.

The following question, the respondents had to answer to what extent they think the LLP key competences should be developed in the pre/primary school age to allow pupils to be more successful in their later school. The answers show that most of the teachers considers as being important or very important the development of all the eight key competences in pre-primary and primary education. However, they devoted considerable importance to the development of: communication in the mother tongue competences (78% responded To a very great extent, and 19% To a great extent), social and civic competences (78% responded To a very great extent, and 21% To a great extent) and learning to learn competences (74% responded To a very great extent, and 22% To a great extent). The communication in foreign languages competences and the mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology where considered by the respondents, as being less important.

As topics and subjects which could be integrated to the lessons in pre/primary schools to support the SD education, the teachers indicated subjects such as: road traffic, civic and moral education, religious education, ecological education, education for health, education for democracy, education for personal security, etc.

According to the respondent teachers the sustain development can be used to develop key competences to the children at pre-primary and primary level through activities such as:
• Cultural activities: Traditions and customs specific to the Romanian people, culture and national and international cultural values
• Experience exchanges between children from different social environments or from different locations (cities, countries)
• Lessons: Computer - my friend, Friends of colours, Internet – advantages and disadvantages
• Introducing foreign languages as compulsory subjects, not as optional
• Language and communication activities, group networking, person to person relationships
• Tracking and involving children in activities in different contexts: visits, excursions, theatre, botanical garden, zoo, etc.
• Use of oral language in different contexts of networking, dialogical speech
• Addressing subjects less known to children
• Extensions to mandatory activities
• Role play, educational games
• Activities in collaboration with specialized institutions (doctor, policeman, fireman): medical offices, Police, Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, Environmental Protection Agency
• Collective activities of environment protection with parents, etc.

To the fifth question, What kind of training and or methodical support does a teacher need to be more active and successful in developing pupils’ key competences and in teaching SD?, the respondent teachers responses may be groups in three categories:

• Training courses, symposiums, informal meetings, active participation to methodical committees, round tables, experiences exchange, self-study, practical workshops on:
  o The meaning of the notions which defined the sustaining development
  o Actual communication ways between the teacher and the child in order to transmit, develop the required competences for sustainable development
  o The use of ICT in education
  o Activities/models to apply active-participative methods, etc.
• Equipments:
  o Educational materials in accordance with the curriculum topics, educational videos, etc.
  o Computer, Internet connection, printer, beamer, libraries, etc.
  o textbooks, methodological guides for preparing lessons plans, books, etc.
• Support from school staff, manager, children’ parents, partnerships, etc.

4. Conclusion

Besides other important findings, the research showed that although the Romanian curriculum for pre-school and primary education (according to the Romanian Educational Law) emphasizes on themes for sustainable development and also key competences development, many teachers are not aware of that.

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