

Challenges and Opportunities of Organizing Environmental Education Programs in Kosovo Schools

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Abstract

This study addresses forms of organizing, managing and promotion of environmental education in Kosovo schools and efforts to ensure safer and better environment in Kosovo. Environmental education in the Kosovo education system is linked between subjects and learning activities and as such is integrated at different levels of the curriculum area, subjects or learning modules.

As a new approach which started to be implemented in the last decade it involves a number of challenges and opportunities for building a sustainable system for organizing and implementation of the environmental education in order to raise the knowledge and awareness of youngster on environmental issues, environmental protection as well as skills, attitudes and values for sustainable development. In these regard, data for this study have been provided through the questionnaire with 630 teachers, who took part in the interview from six municipalities, school observation and focus group discussion.

The results of the study affirm the potential for further development and consolidation of environment education within the education system and at the school level and calls for structured approach from all education levels to address challenges and build a system which will address environmental issue and problems in a more organized way, develop and enhance the knowledge and awareness of young generation on environment as an important component for sustainable socio-economic development.

Key words: environment education, socio-economic development, environmental issues, sustainable development, environment management.

INTRODUCTION

Efforts to reform education system in Kosovo started right after the war in 1999 when the UN administration (UNMIK) was settled. Many international organizations arrived in Kosovo to support emergent, rehabilitation and transition period, and there were some major steps forward with regard to educational reforms. Priority was given to the stability of the education system, its integration within the country, and into the international context. Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MEST) has set out challenging and ambitious program for education reforms in Kosovo, namely the development of laws, strategies, curriculum framework, teacher's professional development and other reforms within the education system.

Among these many reforms in 2011 and the revised version in 2016, MEST brought the Pre-University Curriculum Framework¹, based on competencies, aiming to prepare student for life and work. According to the Curriculum Framework for Pre-University Education (2016, p.7) *'The transition from a subject-based curriculum to a competency-based curriculum aims at ensuring enhanced school autonomy and an increased level of accountability at the school level with a view to mobilizing the potential of Kosovar youth to compete successfully in the labour market within and outside the country'*.

Among the challenges that the Kosovar society faces and identified in the Curriculum framework was also the sustainable development and (2016, p. 11) *'the need to equip*

¹ For more see: Kosovo Curriculum Framework for Pre-University Education drafted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Prishtina, 2011, and the revised version in 2016.

students with knowledge, skills and attitudes to take care of the environment created by nature and man, to avoid the waste of resources and to eliminate irresponsible practices'. All this requires increasing the knowledge and awareness among the young generation on environmental learning, concepts and problems.

In order to make Kosovo Curriculum Framework applicable in Kosovo schools, MEST has also drafted the Core Curriculum² in 2012 and the revised version in 2016, as a basic document leading the teaching performance, leaning, methodology etc.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to analyse the challenges and opportunities of organizing and implementing the environmental education programs in Kosovo schools within the new Curriculum framework, as a subject embedded in specific subjects of the curriculum and addressed through topics or themes in the curriculum that are addressed in an interdisciplinary manner.

The paper studies the effects of reforms and transition, and the support offered to schools to implement new approaches on environment education, spread across different curriculum areas with the focus to develop student's key competencies and skills.

Environmental education in Kosovo

The Pre-University Curriculum Framework identifies six key competencies in accordance with the pre-university education goals: effective communicator, creative thinker, successful learner, productive contributor, healthy individual, and responsible citizen. In order to develop key competencies

² For more see: Core Curriculum for pre-primary grade and primary education in Kosovo, drafted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Prishtina, 2011, and the revised version in 2016.

curriculum areas were identified also, and the connection among curriculum areas, subjects and modules, all in function to develop student's key curriculum competencies. The environment education has been laid down into different curriculum area as in natural science, society and environment, health and welfare, life and work etc.

Therefore, the implementation of the new curriculum framework as a new approach among Kosovo schools required professional development of teachers and school management to make the process successful.

In order to support the education reforms and implementation of the new curriculum framework, the Basic Education Program (BEP), financed by the USAID and the MEST, started in Kosovo with a focus on primary education. The project was developed between 2010-2016 and BEP's motto was (2016, p.10) "*Developing students' 21st century skills with schools and communities*". BEP aimed to improve the capacity of Kosovo's schools to provide relevant skills for its students, improve the Government of Kosovo's institutional capacity in the education sector and improve the quality of primary education, including the education on environment (BEP, 2016). Environmental education in primary education by BEP program was organized in two ways: curriculum activities and extra-curriculum activities. The course on Environmental Related Learning (ERL) was developed including the Manual for teachers. The course was designed to offer new teaching strategies to teachers to implement ERL in schools as part of environmental education opportunities, centered on a critical thinking approach, and placing students in the center, given the opportunity to express their opinions, listen to other views, and compare and contrast information. The Manual aimed to provide teachers with an increased understanding of professional development skills to implement ERL in schools as part of environmental education.

As a part of making learning on environment more practical, BEP started also with the Green Club Program, as a continuation of the work of “Environmental and Energy clubs” established by project “Support to the Kosovo Energy and Environmental Club” a project supported by US Embassy. The aim of the Green Club Program was to *‘educate students about environment, provide hands-on, real-world learning opportunities that empower them to promote environment-friendly practices, and build partnerships with the local community to design and implement projects and programs that will result in a healthier environment and safer school’* (Meha & Demjaha, 2014). Through Green Club activities program aimed to develop student’s relevant skills, like entrepreneurial, creativity, team work, research etc, and empower them through active learning by consolidating student’s knowledge and learning.

All these programs were organized to support teachers and students to meet the requirements of the new curriculum, apply the new approaches and making learning on environment more practical.

Methodology and the process

Data for this study were collected through a number of instruments. A total of 630 teachers were included in the survey and the focus was the teacher’s professional development on environmental related learning, the challenges and obstacles for implementing environmental learning, green club establishment, recycling system etc. The survey was done in these municipalities: Prishtina, Gjakova, Mitrovica, Fushe Kosova, Shtime and Ferizaj. In addition, the work of the green club was monitored in selected schools. Following the analysis of the data, selected themes were used for the focus group discussion with teachers. The topics of discussion were focused on teacher’s professional development training attended, the resources in place to use during teaching, support from the

school management in organizing and development of environmental activities and projects, green club establishment and functioning etc.

The questionnaires conducted with teachers were analysed by extracting percentages from the teacher responses, whereas the qualitative data were analysed through the topics selected during discussion with teachers and analysis of other school material.

THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Understanding and implementation of environmental education within the Kosovo curriculum framework

Schools had difficulties in understanding and implementing the new Kosovo curriculum framework, and specifically the environmental education embedded in specific subjects of the curriculum, and environmental education addressed through topics or themes in the curriculum that are addressed in an inter-disciplinary manner. There were convergent and divergent teachers attitudes about environmental education, especially the way in which it was introduced in all curricula and in terms of the tendency to address values, ethics, attitudes and behaviours. Asked about the advantages of environmental education embedded in specific subjects of the curriculum, a teacher tells that *'teaching ERL across subjects gives students an understanding of environment in connection with science, art, technology, citizenship, language, etc. Students are stimulated to learn across all subjects, and develop literacy, numeracy and personnel learning and thinking skills'*.

Asked about how environmental education can be more effective, teachers focused on the training programs implemented by BEP. The three-day program was focused on three relevant themes: Curriculum Coherence, Compelling Teaching and Learning and School and Community Partnership, and the focus were meeting the MEST's new

curriculum and BEP relevant skills. After the course teachers were offered a list of materials and technology for adequate implementation of the activities, handouts, presentations, and guidelines needed for teachers and facilitators involved in implementation of the course. Teachers activities in the class with students has been monitored by school director and BEP facilitators and they were supported throughout the process. In addition, a Manual for teachers has been prepared and distributed to teachers to provide skills to implement ERL in schools as part of environmental education.

Teachers further mentioned the need for continues training, and not all teachers had the possibility to attend training and courses with the new approaches. Further, one of the group discussion member emphasized the need for adequate working material and books, as they stated that working condition influence the implementation of concrete activities with students. As example teachers tells how the implementation of environmental related learning activities and projects developed through BEP has helped them to implement activities where students played an active role in the life of their schools, neighbourhoods, communities and wider society as active and global citizens. Program provided continues support and it facilitated schools with resources and provided guidelines which made the process successful. However, with the end of project teachers has difficulties in providing the resources needed during the class work with students, as well as implementation of environmental activities and initiatives.

The question was on how to develop a structured approach on better organizing and implementing environmental education in Kosovo schools, and the teacher's answers was the need for concrete programs by offering continues relevant professional training for teachers, relevant teaching material for students, provision of human and financial resources, support from school management, support

from the local and national level, as well from the wider community in order to enhance leaning on environmental that will result in changing the day-to-day behaviour and practices of individuals, communities and the whole society. Such a transformation starts in schools by providing education on how to protect and improve environment in school and community, and better involvement of parents in order to ensure transformations of thinking about environment.

Implementation of environmental activities in schools

Implementation of environmental activities and projects in schools was seen very much related to the resources available, and broad participation of teachers, students, school staff and parents. 54% of teachers stated that it was very important to include all the above actors in environmental activities, whereas 46% consider that it is more important to establish a group of activists who will lead and manage environmental issues within the school by actively involving the school and the wider community.

With regard to the support schools receives from the central and local level on environmental education, particularly in the implementation of the activities, projects and initiatives, 68% of teachers declared that the lack of financial and human resources was one of the main obstacle and challenge for implementation of environment activities and initiatives. Many of these activities could not be covered by school budget, and even though there were concrete environmental initiatives by students and teachers, the lack of financial resources made them impossible to be implemented.

An interesting fact was that majority of teachers (71%) declared that parents were the biggest supported in all school initiatives. With regard to the level on involvement of volunteer, government's organization, agencies, and non-governmental organizations in school environmental activities and projects, around 63% assessed it as very poor, which shows

that initiatives from all sides were not satisfying. They need to be more proactive and find ways to cooperate in joint environmental projects and programs.

Establishment and functioning of environmental clubs

To make the leaning on environment more practical, the majority of the schools who took part in the study, had the Green Clubs as well, which were established by schools with the support of BEP. From the discussion with teachers we understood that the process of establishment of the green clubs in these schools went through structured processes. Initially, a group of teachers and students attended a workshop organized by BEP, where they got introduced with practices of the green club, how to establish in their schools, their functioning, development of the working plans etc. Then each teacher who attended the training with the support of school director, other teachers and students established in their school the green club, and with the support of BEP it developed the green club program for each year.

During the life of the BEP program, clubs received continuous support, they were provided with a set of material and guidelines to use like: Evaluation Tool, Manifesto, Campaign Handbook, Green Club Manual and other resources needed to implement school environmental activities and projects. All the resources have been used by students during the planning of activities, auditing of the school environment by recording and analysing the environmental situation within and outside the school, prioritizing activities, development of the action plan, regular monitoring of the activities and their assessment. There were numerous of activities organized by green clubs, however the majority of teachers (78%) focused on recycling system established with the support of BEP which provided bottle crusher and collection cages to enable schools to set-up a recycling system. The intention was to reduce the amount of waste going into landfill and reduce the waste plastic

found littering the countryside. By using this device, waste can be reduced and schools can recycle plastic bottles, and most importantly schools developed awareness on environmental issues and build good habits in students.

Teachers stated that mainly student were responsible about the whole process, and they only facilitated them. Each school has set up the recycling committee composed by students, and through everyday patrols they collected bottles from classrooms, crushed them and put into plastic bags. Students even brought plastic bottles from their homes, and parents also helped them. The funds they collected from the recycling company were used for development of environmental activities and projects, some schools bought recycling basked for classes, some bought trees for the yard, ecological light bulbs, and one teacher stated that with the money collected by recycling of the plastic bottles students helped one poor family.

However, since the end of the BEP project the work of this clubs has been diminished due to many challenges the teachers faces, (55%) declared the lack of management support, (63%) lack of teachers to be involved on environmental activities and projects, (56%) lack of support from municipal authorities, (64%) the lack of support from national authorities, and (58%) the lack of school culture to focus on environmental leaning, problems and issues.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Organization and implementation the environment education within the new curriculum framework, basically the learning on environment embedded in specific subjects of the curriculum, and environmental education addressed through topics or themes in the curriculum that are addressed in an inter-disciplinary manner, has made an important step in the education system. Implementation of the environmental education and learning across subjects gives students an

understanding of environment in connection with science, literature, art, citizenship, technology, and it helps to develop student's critical skills, environmental awareness, research, creativity and teamwork, presentation etc. It provides opportunity for both teachers and students to interact with community and increase cooperation between schools and community. However, all these new approaches to be successfully implemented, requires a continues support for teachers during planning and implementation, and creation of condition for implementation of environmental learning, activities and projects. Challenges are of different nature coming from the education system level, where there is no continues professional training for teachers, where the new teaching approaches for development of student's competences are presented and practiced by teachers. There is a lack of regular meeting, brochures, information, and grants to support schools for implementation of environmental activities and projects.

Another challenge of the Kosovo education system is the provision of financial sustainability for environmental education and activities, where the schools can have a wide range of resources and all teachers have access to them. The resources that are matched to the contents of the lesson, and support teaching and learning throughout the school, with a programme for the replacement and purchase of newer resources.

On the other hand, student should also be able have access and choose resources, with a wide range of quality resources including web-based materials related to all aspects of environmental related learning, global dimension, and resources that support inclusion and diversity. Both teachers and students should regularly review and assess the value of the resources they use, and also discuss what other resources would be helpful, and plan and develop resources together.

At the school level they face the lack of capacities for meeting the professional development needs on environmental learning, concepts and problems, with no school innovative vision, aims and objectives for environment. The school director and teachers have limited understanding of environment and there is a little planning on environmental education. The subject leaders have few skills and makes very little impact for changing school policies for improvement of environmental leaning and raising awareness on environment.

Each school should build a clear vision on environment, where the school director and teachers are proactive, have high expectations, support teaching on environment and involves students, parents and other stakeholders for school improvement. Schools have a clear environment policy statement, which is reflected in the school dedication and work on environment and in line with the school aims and objectives. There is a clear environmental learning planning with long and short-term objectives, with targets and commitment to develop environmental learning across curricula and school culture. And where the monitoring mechanism are in place with a regular review and assessment.

At the individual level, teachers should seek for obtaining and demonstrating competences in teaching of environment and contribute in changing the school culture. They should feel the need and be motivated to learn new skills and move from traditional leaning into new approaches where teachers and students work together and sees them as active participants. To reach such motivation, teachers need to be supported by all education institutions levels, creation of the mechanism to support teachers in their daily work and activities and together as school move ahead. Changes can be reached if there is willingness from all sides to move ahead, where the challenges are addressed regularly and new opportunities are created and used to improve environmental

education, improve the environment and enhance the quality of life for all Kosovo citizens.

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