

Quality education as a predictor of education for sustainability¹

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse, from a theoretical point of view, the aspects that define the education for sustainability in the context of global development policies. In this context, the phrase “sustainable education” has been described in the context of the relationship between indicators that measure the quality in education and the long-term solutions offered by the education providers to specific problems related to some fundamental areas of sustainability: social, environmental and economic. The current study aims to give arguments for an explanatory paradigm that has been taken into account which is the following: education for sustainability is a predictor of quality education.

Keywords:

Sustainability, education, quality, sustainable education, school success

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Introduction

The 2012 meeting of UN member states at the Rio de Janeiro, Brazil Conference, known as the *United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development* (Rio + 20), facilitated the launch of a call for UN member states that within three years they should identify and describe the main challenges of humanity on sustainable development and sustainability. Following these complex research approaches of the society, there have been identified the strategic directions of global development. Also, within the framework of this meeting, the concept of “sustainable development objectives” was outlined. Following this approach, on the 5th of September 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, known under the name of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) has been launched. This summit brought together a number of 193 member states of the United Nations, including Romania. The strategic directions for sustainable development outlined within the 2030 Agenda through Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 in number. They replaced the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), contained in the Millennium Declaration (adopted by the United Nations in 2000). Within the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030) the goal of “quality education” (O4) is to be identified, a goal which demands taking actions to facilitate “*guaranteeing a quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all*”. In this context, the issues connected to the dimension of the quality of education lead us to the following rhetorical level: “What does quality education mean?”, “What does to achieve quality education imply?”, “How can we promote quality education?” and “Why do we need quality education?” The general perspective on approaching the issue of “quality in education”, includes aspects related to: addressing the conditions for implementation and carrying on of the educational process by promoting knowledge, school efficiency and school success, monitoring school education through analysing the results obtained by students in assessments (national tests, national exams) and resources and structures involved in carrying on the educational process.

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Quality education - between desideratum and action approaches

There are numerous definitions given to quality education, most of which referring to “*the characteristics of a study program and its provider through which the expectations of the beneficiaries are met as well as the quality standards*” (art. 3, Law no. 86/2006). The operationalization of the “quality education” concept integrates criteria and reference standards, performance indicators and results. Quality assurance in education is conditioned by the capacities of the institutions providing education to support the educational process (institutional, administrative and management structures) and by all the resources necessary to effectively support the education of results obtained in a well-established time interval (human, material and time-based resources). The mobilization of resources in education is the subject of some specific actions, designed to facilitate curricular implementation, forming and development of cognitive and functional-action skills concerning the trainees, scientific research, financial expenditures, initial and stage objective assessments. To these facts mentioned before, aspects related to the fulfilment and observance of the quality management criteria in education (specific strategies and procedures for quality assurance) are added.

The analysis of indicators that measure quality in education correlates with a series of challenges of nowadays education, namely relating education to scientific knowledge, forming and development of key competencies for sustainability (OESC, 2017), issues related to school success rate, as well as the analysis of the necessary resources for the carrying on of a quality instructive-educational process.

The quality paradigm in education also integrates explanations that highlight the importance of active participation of all social systems bearing a fundamental role in education: from school as an organization providing education to organizations having educational purposes, to active/functional partnerships between family and school, family-school-community and school-society. Guaranteeing a quality education integrates the need to respect the principles regarding

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professionalisation and suitability of professional conduct, emancipation, innovation and promotion of meritocracy.

The strategic goals (as described in the documents adopted and in the ones related to the “Quality Education” objective - Agenda 2030) aim at giving access to educational services for everyone, forming and developing the cognitive and functional-action skills of all trainees necessary for a successful integration and social functioning, non-discrimination and equal opportunities, their school and social inclusion, training and development of vocational skills needed for integration into the labour market, literacy and basic arithmetic, acquisition of knowledge and competencies needed to promote sustainable development in all categories of trainees.

According to some researchers in the field of education (Cristea, 2015, pp. 54-56), the reference sphere of education for sustainability aims at “the superior, sustainable quality of the education system and the educational process”. Sustainability education arouses the interest of specialists in the field of education both in terms of curricular construction perspectives and also in terms of curricular implementation approaches. In this context, the following question arises: in the context of education for sustainable development is a curricular reconstruction (still) needed?

Therefore, we appreciate the fact that the comprehensive approach to the concept of “quality education” refers to quality indicators, tools for measuring quality in education, good educational practices, learning outcomes (formed skills), school and social inclusion rates, functional illiteracy rates, PISA results, access to educational services, school performance level, professional and social insertion rates and to the level of literacy in a society.

The concept of “sustainability” has got many defining projections. An article published in 2017 (Moore, et al., 2017) mentions that the authors conducted a review of the specialised literature that appeared around the concept of “sustainability”. They found out that there are many definitions which do not support the operationalization of the concept. We bring forward some examples (apud Moore, et al., 2017): „Sustainability of organizational innovations can be thought of as the

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point at which new ways of working become the norm and the underlying systems and ways of working become transformed in support ”(Greenhalgh T, 2004),“ The simplest definition of sustainability is the ‘capability of being maintained at a certain rate or level’ ”(Gruen R, et al., 2008); “We use the term sustainment to denote the continued use of an innovation in practice” (Aarons G. et al., 2011). The theoretical analysis of the concept of “sustainability” must be performed in conjunction with another term, “durability”. According to UNESCO's thesis, education is the key tool for achieving the goals of durable development, the engine of sustainable development and the key to a better world.

Summarizing the information enclosed in the specialised literature, we could define sustainable education as being the result of some continuous actions of design and implementation of an educational process, adapted to the challenges of the future, for all sectors of social life.

Reviewing the specialised literature

Many researchers have been concerned with explaining the concepts of “quality education” and “sustainability”. Both of them are found described in different stances of several studies, reports, research, macrosocial analysis (at the level of the educational system) and microsocial (at the level of school organizations), educational policies and specific legislation in the field of quality in education. The reviewing of the specialised literature was focused, as a unit of analysis, on the scientific articles published and indexed by Clarivate Analytics between 2000-2022 (April 1), which integrated the following keywords: “quality in education” and “education for sustainability”.

The aim of the research is to obtain generalizations of the indicators that characterize the two concepts, described by the scientific research. The objectives of this research are the following:

analysis of scientific publications addressing the issue of quality education and education for sustainable development (O1) and creating an inventory of terms that describe quality education and education for sustainability (O2).

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In compliance with the stated objectives, the following explanatory level was considered: there is a concern in the field of designing and measuring quality indicators in education, which can influence education both at the level of the education system and at the level of implementation of the education process (I. 1.1); the factors that influence the quality of education are described, on one hand, in the context of the implementation of social and educational policies (measures, programs, institutions, institutional and social actions meant to produce positive effects in terms of increasing the level of education), and on the other hand the existence of performance standards at the level of educational institutions (I.2.1); certain categories of factors may influence the quality of education under certain conditions specific to the policy mix (social and educational) (I.2.3). The research focuses on the following key concepts: quality in education, quality indicators and sustainability in education. The unit of analysis is represented by the scientific publications indexed in the Web of Science database. The registration unit is the scientific article/scientific publication. The research is of a mixed type: quantitative and quantitative.

In order to map the proposed topics, scientific publications were identified from the Web of Science database by refining the articles according to certain indicators such as: keywords, year of publication and fields of study. The research method used was the bibliometric one. Within the years of 2000-2022, a number of 141,264 scientific publications referring to the topic “quality education” can be identified on the Web of Science platform. Out of these, 24.4% of publications are integrated in the category “research on quality in education”.

We define an indicator for measuring quality, “*an instrument for assessing the state of functioning of education systems, either as a whole or on certain components or levels*” (Jigău, et al., 2014, p. 12). We find quality evaluation indicators in education described in the context of strategic objectives on educational policies and corresponding to some strategic goals, such as: increasing access to education, participation and increasing the rate of promotion of compulsory education, integration and professional and social inclusion of trainees, professionalization of the educational system and

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development of the network of specialists in the field of education and implementation of an educational process focused on training and development of skills for the future.

Within the context of *quantitative indicators of quality measurement*, the following were identified (on multidimensional criteria, on all types of education and according to European regulations) at the level of the following units of analysis: resources of the educational system (human, material and financial), inclusion and school participation (school enrolment rate, dropout rate, repetition rate, pass rate, student enrolment rate at different levels of schooling, with reference to the number of school-age population and corresponding to the level of schooling, the number of qualified teachers per educational unit, the ratio of unqualified teachers, the average number of students in a class), the efficiency and efficacy of the educational process (ratio of school results obtained by students in national exams, PISA tests or summative assessments, repetition rate, dropout), average length of school attendance, gender parity indices, ratio of pupils/students with special educational needs attending a form of education and efficiency coefficients. We appreciate that, in the context of the quality assessment process in education, a number of limits that may influence the measurement process can be identified, for instance: measurement techniques and instruments are considered, in many cases, as an actual end (*per se*); the inadequacy of the indicators to the strategic objectives of the educational policies and increased importance is given to quantitative measurements, to the detriment of qualitative assessments.

Qualitative indicators for measuring quality in education are found connected to the aspects that refer to measuring the level of autonomy and responsibility of students in relation to their own learning, to the development of cognitive and functional-actional skills necessary for successful social integration, to the development of learning skills throughout life, to the rate of participation of trainees in social development, to the development of civic sense and increased involvement in programs that target the prospects for durable development. Education for the future thus becomes a measure of quality in education, by reference to indicators of durable development

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for the future (social, economic, cultural indicators). There are a number of approaches of today's school, which encourage the development of such a perspective. We submit to discussion the concept of "Green Schools", identified in a project implemented by WWF-Romania, together with partners of the Greeninitiative Association and the British Council, which emphasizes the need for a paradigm of experiential learning, in the context of the need for education for durable development. The project proposes an innovative educational formula for the generations of change: eco-education through experiential learning, both in and out of the classroom, as well as the involvement of students in solving environmental issues. Also in this project, the education for sustainable development integrates an eco-education platform, called "Green schools: environmental education at the national level" in the educational process. The project is supported by the "Together with Lidl for a Better Future" program.

We assume that, in the conditions of quality education, education for sustainability is described in the context of the new curricular paradigms, of the new practices of curricular implementation, which we consider as precursors of quality education for sustainability. Social responsibility and civic responsibility become an integral part of education for sustainability. Education and the cultivation of values at the individual level are also the prerequisites for prosocial behaviours necessary for the future (individual and community responsibility in relation to nature). The curricular approach, in the context of education for sustainability, can integrate in the training strategy didactic approaches taken from the models of experiential pedagogy and it can also integrate methods based on problem solving, collaborative learning and alternative evaluation.

Conclusions

Sustainability education is a measure of quality in education. This emerges from the urgent need to prepare today's generations for the challenges of the future. The quality of educational services is an evaluative concept, a result related to the conditions of the instructive-

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educational process, to the needs, values and aspirations of the society for the future. The quality of education is described both in the context of the objective conditions in which the educational process takes place, and in relation to the way in which each trainee adequately integrates the competencies formed in certain situations or personal and professional contexts.

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