



Jelena M. Stanišić¹
Institute for Educational Research, Belgrade

Original paper

Characteristics of Teaching Environmental Education in Primary Schools²

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Extended summary

School as one of the most important social institutions must keep pace with all changes in the society. It educates the generations which will play vital social roles in the future and will have to deal with various social issues and crises. In this context, the development of environmental awareness and acceptance of the concept of sustainable development for overcoming environmental crisis has been one of the key goals of many educational systems for many years. Environmental education plays a significant role in the realisation of this concept.

The recent changes of education policy and the curricula indicate that the importance of environmental education has been recognised in the Serbian educational system. Environmental content has been incorporated in the curricula, but it seems that teaching practice has to be changed as well. The research of the student achievement on the tests measuring the knowledge of environmental topics has been conducted throughout the country. The findings are indicative of the fact that Serbian students are not thoroughly familiar with the environmental protection. To incorporate environmental content in the curricula and expect that the students will automatically behave environmentally is obviously not enough. This is just a small step on the long and complex path of developing environmental awareness. Apart from the fact that environmental content is indeed present in the curricula, it is important how the appropriate environmental knowledge is conveyed and developed in teaching, and how environmentally desirable behaviour is encouraged. The poor knowledge of environmental issues is probably

1 jstanisic@ipi.ac.rs

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the consequence of an inadequate lesson preparation and teaching. Teachers must take into consideration the specificities of environmental topics when they prepare their lessons.

The aim of this paper is to determine the characteristics of the primary school lessons (didactic and methodological characteristics, encouraging critical and divergent thinking, correlation of teaching content, interaction between students and teachers, students' active participation) dealing with environmental content. Fifteen 8th grade classes were observed in three primary schools in Belgrade. The observation included biology, geography, physics and chemistry lessons. The results of the research show that teachers mostly applied traditional teaching methods, without taking into account the specificities of environmental topics. Frontal teaching, monologic teaching and textual materials were used in the classroom much more than group work, dialogic teaching, audio-visual and experimental teaching tools. Development and encouragement of critical and divergent thinking was also not present to a satisfactory degree in the observed lessons. Another problem identified during the class observations was the absence of interdisciplinary and integrative approaches, including the drawing of correlations among the subject matter of different school subjects. According to the observation findings, the students were not working in groups or pairs, nor were they encouraged to help one another in solving tasks, discuss issues, exchange views, analyse problems and draw conclusions.

In our opinion, the lessons covering environmental topics must include: interactive and interdisciplinary approaches, active learning methods, outdoor classes and activities, classes where students are encouraged to explore and analyse, discuss issues, exchange opinions and observe specific issues from multiple perspectives. These activities are aimed at developing students' environmental awareness, acquisition of the environment-related knowledge, and shaping students' attitudes and behavior.

Key words: environmental education, sustainable development, teacher, student, lesson, teaching methods, forms of teaching, critical and divergent thinking.

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