

Student Perspectives on Sustainability Education: Exploring Awareness, Preparedness and Action in Abu Dhabi Schools

Author: Dr. Denise Buttigieg Fiteni

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has emerged as a central pillar in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), positioning education systems as key drivers in preparing future generations to respond to complex global challenges. While policy frameworks and curriculum reforms increasingly emphasise sustainability, a critical question remains: are students meaningfully equipped with the knowledge, skills, and agency required for sustainable living, or does educational provision remain limited to surface-level awareness? This study addresses this gap by foregrounding student voice as a critical lens for examining the effectiveness of sustainability education in Abu Dhabi schools, aligning with the global imperative to bridge cultures and co-create knowledge through locally grounded educational practices.

Situated within the United Arab Emirates' broader educational reform agenda and sustainability commitments, this research explores how secondary school students perceive the integration of sustainability and the SDGs across their learning experiences. The study is underpinned by the premise that students are not merely recipients of curriculum but active agents whose perspectives can provide valuable insights into the alignment between intended, implemented, and experienced curricula. In doing so, the research contributes to a growing body of literature that calls for more participatory, inclusive, and contextually responsive approaches to curriculum development and pedagogical leadership in sustainability education.

Adopting a mixed-methods research design, data were collected from approximately 160 secondary students across selected schools in Abu Dhabi. A structured questionnaire was utilised, combining Likert-scale items with open-ended questions to capture both measurable trends and deeper qualitative insights. The instrument explored three key dimensions: students' conceptual understanding of sustainability and the SDGs; their experiences of how sustainability is integrated across different subject areas; and their perceived readiness and confidence to apply sustainable practices in their everyday lives. This approach enabled the study to generate a comprehensive picture of student experiences, balancing breadth of data with depth of interpretation.

Preliminary findings indicate that while a majority of students demonstrate a general awareness of sustainability concepts and global environmental challenges, this awareness is often fragmented and lacks depth. Students frequently associate sustainability with isolated topics such as recycling, climate change, or healthy eating, rather than understanding it as an interconnected, systems-based concept encompassing environmental, social, and economic dimensions. This suggests that while sustainability is present within the curriculum, it is not consistently scaffolded or developed progressively across year groups.

In terms of curriculum experience, students report that sustainability is addressed unevenly across subjects, with more explicit connections evident in science, geography, and health-related disciplines, including food and nutrition education. However, cross-curricular integration remains limited, and students rarely experience sustained or coherent learning sequences that allow them to build competencies over time. Many participants described

their exposure to sustainability as consisting of one-off lessons, themed days, or extracurricular initiatives, rather than embedded, continuous learning. This finding highlights a disconnect between policy aspirations for whole-school sustainability approaches and the realities of classroom practice.

Importantly, the study reveals a gap between awareness and action. While students express concern about global issues such as climate change and resource depletion, fewer report feeling confident in their ability to take meaningful action or influence change within their communities. Opportunities for experiential learning, such as project-based activities, community engagement, or student-led initiatives, appear inconsistent and often depend on individual teachers or school-level priorities. This reinforces the need for pedagogical approaches that move beyond knowledge transmission towards the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and civic agency.

Students also emphasise the importance of culturally relevant and context-specific learning experiences. Responses suggest that sustainability education is more meaningful when linked to local issues, such as food waste, water conservation, and energy use within the UAE context. This aligns with the broader WERA theme of bridging global visions with local innovations, underscoring the importance of contextualising global frameworks, such as the SDGs, within students' lived realities. In this sense, student perspectives serve as a vital bridge between international policy discourse and classroom practice.

The findings of this study have significant implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and educational leadership. They point to the need for more coherent, progressive, and cross-curricular approaches to sustainability education, intentionally designed to build competencies over time. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of empowering teachers through professional development and leadership support to implement transformative pedagogies that foster student agency and participation.

By foregrounding student voice, this paper contributes to the co-creation of knowledge in sustainability education, offering empirically grounded insights that can inform both local practice in Abu Dhabi and broader international discussions. It argues that bridging the gap between awareness and action requires not only curriculum reform but also a shift towards more participatory, contextually grounded, and practice-oriented models of learning. In doing so, the study advances the conversation on how education systems can more effectively prepare learners to contribute to sustainable futures.

Keywords: Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Student Voice, Sustainability Education, Curriculum Integration, Abu Dhabi Schools