



AL-QUDWAH

ISSN(P): 2959-2062 / ISSN(E): 2959-2054

<https://al-qudwah.com>



Teacher Educators' Views on the Moral Dimension of Education for Sustainable Development: Exploring Their Conceptions and Practices

ABSTRACT

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has emerged as a transformative approach to addressing global challenges, incorporating environmental, social, economic, and moral dimensions into education systems. This study examines teacher educators' perceptions of the moral dimension of ESD within Pakistan, highlighting its significance in shaping ethical awareness and sustainability practices among future educators. Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 387 teacher educators through a validated questionnaire, while qualitative insights were derived from 35 semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that while many educators acknowledge the moral dimension, its integration into teaching practices remains inconsistent. Themes such as moral responsibility, ethical frameworks, cultural norms, and critical thinking emerged as pivotal to understanding educators' conceptions. The study underscores the importance of professional development and curricular reforms to enhance educators' capacity to embed moral values in sustainability education. By foregrounding the moral aspects of ESD, this research contributes to the discourse on equipping future generations with the ethical foundation needed to address sustainability challenges effectively.

Keywords: Teacher Educators, Moral Dimension, Education for Sustainable Development, ESD Conceptions, ESD Practices

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Date of Submission: 11-12-2024

Acceptance: 04-01-2025

Publishing: 19-01-2025

Web: <https://al-qudwah.com/>

OJS: [https://al-qudwah.com/](https://al-qudwah.com/index.php/aqrj/user/register)

[index.php/aqrj/user/register](https://al-qudwah.com/index.php/aqrj/user/register)

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Introduction

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has become a crucial strategy for shaping future societies by embedding economic, social, environmental, and moral dimensions into educational systems. Khadim, Qureshi, & Khan (2022) addressed the global challenges identified in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), teacher educators play a key role in fostering sustainability awareness among future teachers. They are not only providers of knowledge but also role models who promote the values and ethical practices essential for sustainable development (Rafiq, Iqbal & Afzal, 2024).

In Pakistan, where issues like environmental degradation, economic inequality, and social injustice are pressing concerns, the integration of ESD into teacher education has taken on increasing significance (Khadim, Jamil, & Yaqub, 2024). While the environmental and social aspects of ESD have received considerable attention, the moral dimension often remains overlooked. This moral dimension includes the ethical responsibilities of individuals and societies, emphasizing integrity, responsible behavior, and respect for future generations as central to achieving sustainable development.

This study explores the perspectives of teacher educators in Pakistan on the moral dimension of ESD. Using a mixed-methods approach, it investigates how teacher educators perceive their role in teaching moral values within the framework of sustainable development and examines the extent to which these values are incorporated into their teaching practices. The research underscores the importance of teacher educators' awareness of the moral aspects of ESD and highlights the challenges and opportunities they face in embedding these values into educational practices (Rafiq et al., 2024).

By focusing on the moral dimension of ESD, this study contributes to the broader conversation on the transformative potential of teacher education in advancing sustainable development in Pakistan. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to ESD that integrates ethical and moral principles, ensuring that future educators are equipped not only with knowledge but also with a sense of moral responsibility to inspire their students toward building a sustainable future.

Literature Review

The moral dimension is pivotal in ensuring that sustainable development is not merely a technical or procedural endeavor but a value-driven approach. Rolston (2012) highlights that moral reasoning in sustainability involves recognizing the intrinsic value of the environment, advocating for its preservation not just for human utility but as an ethical duty. This aligns with Norton's (2005) concept of "sustainability ethics," where long-term societal welfare is placed above short-term individual gains. Naess (1989) introduced the concept of "deep ecology," which emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. This ecological worldview aligns with the moral dimension of sustainable development, advocating for a shift in values that prioritize ecological balance over exploitation (Rafiq, Kamran & Afzal, 2024).

Fien and Tilbury (2002) further elaborated that sustainable development requires a transformative change in societal values and behaviors, stressing that moral education is key to fostering this transition. Khadim, Qureshi, Khan (2021) argued that education systems must

go beyond imparting knowledge to developing ethical reasoning and a sense of global responsibility (Khadim, Qureshi, & Khan, 2021).

Role of the Moral Dimension in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Sterling (2010) emphasized that ESD must nurture "sustainability consciousness," which involves ethical awareness, critical reflection, and a sense of responsibility. He argued that without integrating moral education, ESD risks becoming a superficial exercise in environmental awareness rather than a transformative force for societal change. Tilbury (2011) supported this by advocating for participatory and experiential learning approaches in ESD, which can help students internalize moral values through engagement with real-world sustainability challenges. Vare and Scott (2007) differentiated between "ESD 1" (focusing on knowledge and skills) and "ESD 2" (emphasizing critical thinking and moral reasoning). They argued that ESD must balance these approaches to equip learners with both practical capabilities and ethical principles.

Conceptions of Teacher Educators Regarding the Moral Dimension

Bourn (2014) explored the role of global citizenship education in fostering the moral dimension of sustainability. His research highlighted that teacher educators who adopt a global perspective are more likely to address ethical issues such as inequality, justice, and human rights in their teaching. Khalid et al. (2019) conducted a study on teacher perceptions of ESD in Pakistan, finding that while many educators acknowledged the importance of ethical values, few incorporated them systematically into their curricula. They recommended ongoing professional development to bridge this gap. Arjen Wals (2015) stressed the importance of reflective practices for teacher educators, arguing that self-awareness of their own values and biases is essential for effectively integrating the moral dimension into their teaching.

Moral Dimension and its Connection with Other SD Dimensions

The integration of the moral dimension with other aspects of sustainable development is crucial for holistic outcomes. Robinson (2004) argued that sustainability is inherently a moral concept, as it involves trade-offs and decisions about who benefits and who bears the costs. Leal Filho et al. (2021) highlighted that social and economic injustices are often the root causes of environmental degradation. Addressing these injustices requires an ethical framework that promotes equity, inclusivity, and fairness. Chapman and Gough (2020) emphasized the role of moral leadership in sustainability initiatives, noting that leaders who prioritize ethical principles can inspire systemic changes that align with sustainable development goals.

Emerging Perspectives

Orr (1992) argued that the current ecological crisis is as much a moral and cultural failure as a technical one, necessitating a reorientation of educational priorities toward values-based learning. Meadows et al. (2004) in their seminal work *Limits to Growth* underscored the ethical implications of overconsumption and environmental exploitation, advocating for a moral responsibility to adopt sustainable lifestyles. UNESCO (2019) called for integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into ESD, recognizing their ethical frameworks as valuable

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contributions to sustainability. Indigenous perspectives often emphasize harmony with nature and collective well-being, which align closely with the moral dimension.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to explore teacher educators' conceptions of the moral dimension of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and understand how they perceive its integration into teaching practices. This research aims to assess the role of teacher educators in fostering moral values that align with the principles of sustainability, ethics, and social responsibility.

Research Questions

- How do teacher educators conceptualize the moral dimension of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)?
- How do teacher educators perceive the importance of the moral dimension of ESD in shaping future generations' attitudes toward sustainability?

Methodology

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design under the pragmatism paradigm to explore teacher educators' perspectives on the moral dimension of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). By simultaneously collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Quantitative data was gathered using an adapted questionnaire from 387 teacher educators across eight public sector universities, while qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 35 purposively selected educators. The questionnaire's validity and reliability were confirmed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview data, identifying key themes and offering deeper insights into the educators' views on the moral dimension of ESD.

Analysis and Findings

Teacher Educators' Conceptions about the Moral Dimension of Sustainable Development

A thematic analysis of the data provided by teacher educators can uncover key patterns and central themes regarding their conceptions of the moral dimension of Sustainable Development (SD). The following is a thematic breakdown, accompanied by a summary of the main findings.



Theme 1: Sense of Responsibility

The concept of responsibility repeatedly emerged as central to the moral dimension of SD. Many participants referred to the idea that sustainability entails ethical duties to act in accordance with society’s norms and values. They stressed the importance of instilling a sense of responsibility in pre-service teachers, particularly regarding moral behavior.

Participant (P7) framed moral responsibility as a social obligation where everyone must adhere to the ethical standards of honesty, respect, freedom, and cultural values.

Participant (P8) described moral attitude as the mechanism through which individuals determine right from wrong based on societal norms. The participant highlighted the role of teacher educators in teaching moral responsibility and noted that addressing right and wrong in education could solve many societal issues.

Participant (P9) elaborated on individual responsibility, aligning the moral dimension with societal norms and values, emphasizing how moral responsibility can address SD problems when financial and institutional resources are limited.



Theme 2: Ethical Framework and Moral Values

Many participants linked the moral dimension to an ethical framework, drawing connections between moral values and the broader goals of sustainable development. This theme highlights the belief that ethics—particularly honesty, respect, and fairness—are crucial for SD.

Participant (P10) highlighted moral duty as the foundation for creating an ethical society, advocating for actions grounded in honesty, respect, and helping others. This participant emphasized the universality of these moral values, connecting them to religious teachings in Islam.

Participant (P15) emphasized that every individual stand moral responsibility, linking this responsibility to a spiritual mindset. According to this participant, a strong sense of moral duty promotes welfare and service to humanity, suggesting that moral values form the core of sustainability practices.

Participant (P17) extended this by linking moral responsibility to resource conservation and poverty reduction, indicating a connection between moral ethics and social and economic development.

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Theme 3: Moral Behavior and Cultural Norms

Several participants addressed the link between moral behavior and cultural norms, reflecting on how societal values shape conceptions of right and wrong. They believe that moral teaching should integrate cultural and societal dimensions to foster ethical behavior.

Participant (P19) suggested that the moral or ethical dimension covers all previously established dimensions (environmental, social, and economic) by offering guiding ethical principles. They highlighted how environmental, economic, and social ethics guide behavior in sustainability practices.

Participant (P22) underscored the importance of instilling a sense of responsibility from a young age, explaining that moral education starts at home and is reinforced through religion and society. This participant emphasized that success in sustainable development hinges on ethical upbringing and practices.

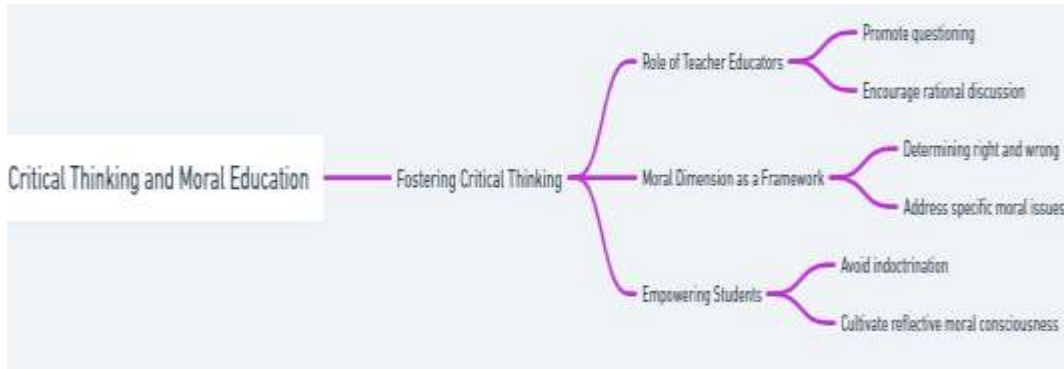


Theme 4: Critical Thinking and Moral Education

Another theme that emerged involved the need for teacher educators to foster critical thinking and questioning among pre-service teachers, promoting a deeper understanding of the moral dimensions of SD.

Participant (P23) described the moral dimension as a framework for determining right and wrong behavior. The participant emphasized the importance of critical thinking and rational discussion about specific moral issues as a means to strengthen ethical understanding in teacher education.

Participant (P24) considered the moral dimension a relatively new concept and warned against indoctrination. They advocated for empowering students to think critically and ask questions about moral issues, underscoring the role of teacher educators in cultivating a reflective moral consciousness in their students.



Key Findings

The findings clearly indicate that teacher educators view moral responsibility as central to the moral dimension of SD. Many participants emphasized the need for individuals and future teachers to recognize their ethical duties to society, encouraging values like honesty, respect, and cultural sensitivity. Teacher educators in Pakistan generally believe that the moral dimension of SD is tied to broader ethical values like truth, fairness, and justice. Without a moral foundation, they suggest, societal progress toward sustainable development is limited.

There is a consensus that teacher educators should encourage critical thinking in pre-service teachers to help them engage more deeply with the moral and ethical dimensions of sustainability. Educators are seen as role models who must teach students not just about sustainability but also how to critically analyze moral issues surrounding it. Teacher educators also connected moral responsibility with societal and cultural norms, suggesting that ethical behavior is contextually shaped by the values of the society in which one lives.

Most participants recognized the importance of the moral dimension, some described it as a relatively new concept, not yet fully integrated into their teaching practices. This points to a gap in the curriculum and the need for professional development to enhance educators' understanding and integration of moral values in sustainability education.



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The quantitative findings stated that only 63% teacher educators know about moral dimension of the ESD. The know about rights, good and bad deeds, respect, honesty etc. The findings also highlighted that moral dimension they learn from their childhood.

Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the critical role of the moral dimension in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), particularly among teacher educators. A central theme emerging from the data is that while many teacher educators are not explicitly aware of the moral dimension, they inherently integrate ethical values such as respect, honesty, and fairness into their teaching practices. This suggests that the moral dimension operates at both conscious and unconscious levels within their pedagogical approaches. This aligns with the work of Khadim (2024), who highlighted the implicit integration of moral values in ESD practices.

A significant finding is the correlation between teacher educators' experience with ESD and their understanding of its moral aspects. Those with extensive exposure to ESD through coursework, research, or teaching displayed a more nuanced and holistic grasp of the moral dimension. Conversely, less experienced educators often relied on traditional teaching methods, lacking a deeper understanding of how moral principles intersect with sustainability. These findings support the argument that professional development and experience are critical in enhancing educators' capacity to address the moral aspects of ESD comprehensively (Rafiq, Kamran & Afzal, 2024).

The concept of moral responsibility emerged as a recurring theme, with educators emphasizing that sustainability education must extend beyond environmental and social issues to foster ethical responsibility among pre-service teachers (Khadim, Jamil, & Rafiq, 2023). This finding resonates with Busoi's (2014) assertion that ethical perspectives are indispensable for achieving sustainable development goals. The integration of moral responsibility within ESD equips educators to instill a sense of accountability and ethical reasoning in their students, promoting a culture of responsible citizenship.

Despite the inherent integration of moral values, many educators expressed concerns that current teacher education curricula inadequately address ESD, particularly its moral dimensions. This critique aligns with the work of Viennet and Pont (2017), who advocated for curriculum updates that explicitly incorporate ESD across its moral, social, and environmental dimensions. Khadim, M. (2024) recommended inclusion of formal training and professional development opportunities for Teacher educators focused on the moral aspects of ESD. Such training could enable educators to transition from intuitive integration to more deliberate and comprehensive instruction (Rafiq, Kamran & Afzal, 2023).

The study's findings diverge from those of Lima et al. (2023), who reported a predominant focus on environmental aspects of sustainable development, with limited attention to economic and social dimensions. In contrast, the current study highlights that educators recognize all four dimensions—moral, social, economic, and environmental—as integral to sustainable development. Similarly, these findings contradict Martins et al. (2019), who argued that teacher educators often view economic and social dimensions as unrelated to sustainability. This contrast underscores the evolving understanding among educators regarding the interconnectedness of sustainability dimensions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study's findings have significant implications for policy and practice in teacher education. First, they highlight the need for educational reforms that explicitly incorporate the moral dimension into teacher preparation programs. As suggested by Sang (2019), such reforms should emphasize critical thinking, problem-solving, and ethical responsibility to enable pre-service teachers to engage with ESD holistically. Additionally, professional development programs should focus on building educators' capacity to integrate moral values explicitly and intentionally into their teaching practices.

Conclusion

Overall, the study reveals a growing recognition among teacher educators of the moral dimension's centrality to ESD. While much of their integration of ethical values is intuitive, there is a clear need for formal support and curricular reforms to ensure that educators can address sustainability issues comprehensively. By fostering a deeper understanding of moral responsibility, teacher educators can better prepare future generations to navigate the complex ethical challenges of sustainable development.

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