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Measuring teachers' understandings of sustainability: Analysing content and self-awareness

Research shows that many people have a limited understanding of the concept of sustainability. Given the deterioration of Earth's biosphere and predictions of a possible planetary collapse, people need to have more than a limited understanding of sustainability. They need a reasonable level of understanding in order to make decisions, both in their employment and their personal lives that will stop and even reverse this deterioration. UNESCO regards teachers as key agents who can bring about such change in people's behaviours. However, it is crucial that teachers have an understanding of sustainability in order to incorporate it in their classroom programmes.

This research explored 77 student teachers' understanding of sustainability. Their self-awareness of their understandings was also investigated. These data were gathered using a questionnaire and analysed using two tools developed for this research that were able to measure both teachers' understandings and their level of self-awareness. It was found that most of these student teachers had simplistic understandings of sustainability, and similarly to overseas findings, their understandings were environmentally focused. Their low level of understanding was also reflected in the way that over half of this group did not have an accurate self-awareness of their understanding. Such findings suggest a need for pre-service and in-service programmes to develop their understandings so that effective sustainability education programmes can be implemented.