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Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

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Abstract -This study aims at assessing the current status of how school leadership influences on the implementation of ideas of education for sustainable development (ESD) in actual educational practices of culturally diverse schools. In applying theories of culturally responsive school leadership and explaining principles of education for sustainable development from Mongolian perspectives, the study designed a set of criteria to assess how school leadership influences on the promotion of ideas of education for sustainable development in Mongolia. A sample of 50 culturally diverse schools comprising both eco and regular schools in Ulaanbaatar and rural districts of Mongolia were selected as key participants of the study to observe actual educational practices in the area of education for sustainable development. The school principals were assigned with the dual tasks of completion of pre-printed questionnaires to identify the major problems they face when mainstreaming ideas of education for sustainable development in different school contexts; and to determine what initiatives school leaders initiate to create school climate for promotion of education for sustainable development in culturally diverse schools.

Keywords - School leadership, Education for sustainable development, Culturally diverse school

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1. INTRODUCTION

The educational leadership, more specifically teacher and school leadership for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is gaining momentum in Mongolia. For the past few years, schools in Ulaanbaatar and different regions of the country started to offer extra-curricular activities in the areas of environmental education and local school leadership, so school leaders made attempts to transform their school facilities and environment in ways to make them ecologically more responsible. However, the “green development” in eco schools marked only the beginning of ESD.

More recently, the Ministry of Education and Science communicated its intent to move onto the next stage and lead the change to *mainstream* Education for Sustainable Development across whole school and support new ESD activities inside as well as outside of the school. Such a comprehensive approach implies not only greater attention to environmental education but in addition also means a commitment to knowledge, skills, and applications that relate to social-cultural and economic issues. In line with the global movement towards a sustainable development, the three pillars of ESD—environmental, socio-cultural, and economic — were likely to be rolled out in schools and communities of Mongolia over the past few years.

The Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Environment and Green Development worked hand in hand to accomplish this 21st century task. This article presents an exploratory study on *what role* culturally responsive school leadership plays in ESD implementation in actual educational practice and *how much* and *how* ESD is currently implemented and mainstreamed at classroom and school level.

This study aims at assessing the current status of how school leadership influences on the implementation of ideas of education for sustainable development in actual educational practices of culturally diverse schools.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Culturally responsive school leadership is to take the lead to make a momentous decision to effectively meet the students’ needs to possess important skills to learn culturally and socially different classroom [1][2], while using culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies [3][4]. In the classroom of students with diverse needs, teachers are obliged to manage it in more inclusive and culturally comprehensive ways [5]. In emphasizing the urgent need of reformation and transformation of all features of educational organizations such as planning policies, management, and budget allocation, school leaders must create the whole school culture and climate to fulfill the different needs of culturally diverse student while leading possible changes in teachers’ culturally responsive teaching [2]. Although pedagogy cannot solve all the problems faced with learners, the attempts to make major changes in teaching styles are needed to influence on the society and heal the inequities in social, political and economic lives of the country.

Education reform initiators have claimed that culturally responsive school leadership plays an important role in promoting a self-sustaining school environment in which highly qualified teachers are attracted, maintained and supported. Good school leaders make right decision to employ well-experienced teachers who are able to manage their teaching in more learner-friendly manner and to transform school facilities and environment in ways to make them ecologically more responsible [6] [7].

Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

The components of culturally responsive school leadership can be understood as school context, leadership style, and cultural fluency [8]. School context is the connection between all the stakeholders of the school such as from state to local leaders, from school leaders to school teachers, from teachers to students, parents and communities and so on [9]. Leadership style is adopted by school leaders in accordance with the common and special need of the receiving society. Cultural fluency is to respond to the students and parents from various backgrounds, ethnicities, socioeconomic status, and minorities in community [10] where the issues of sustainable development are addressed.

The ideas of education for sustainable development are to make any possible changes that need to be initiated by school leaders to redesign the socio-cultural environment of school context through progress, services, and accomplishment of ESD's vision [11]. School leaders, as change agents, must empower learners with the ESD perception, competence, rules of conduct, and ways of thinking of how make changes for their self-sustaining future [12]. Thus, the main focus in this article is on the assessment of the current situation of the relationship between school leadership and ESD development in culturally diverse schools.

2.1 Understanding ESD from Mongolian perspectives

The school management in Mongolia have been continuously transformed and progressed by the influence of globalization as well as individualization and accordingly arranged for the promotion of ESD. From Mongolian worldview [13], ESD can be understood as an interconnectedness of all the phenomena that form one world. Moreover, this means everybody has led any changes with one's leadership skills while creating his own sustainability literacy based on the life experiences and developing attitudes and outlooks towards any issues or phenomena in one world [14]. This, in turn, tells that any ESD-related actions initiated by school leaders can be integrated and implemented in educational practices of culturally diverse schools.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The main task of the study was to carry out an assessment of influence of school leadership in ESD implementation. The study was carried out over a period of ten months from August 2022 to June 2023. The objectives of the study are:

- (1) To identify the major problems they face when mainstreaming ideas of education for sustainable development in different school contexts; and
- (2) To determine what initiatives school leaders initiate to create school climate for promotion of education for sustainable development in culturally diverse schools.

A sample of 50 culturally diverse schools comprising both eco and regular schools in Ulaanbaatar and rural districts of Mongolia were selected as key participants of the study to observe actual educational practices in the area of education for sustainable development. To accomplish the proposed goal, the study raised two research questions:

- (1) What are the major problems school leaders face when mainstreaming ESD in different school contexts?
- (2) What do school leaders initiate to create school climate for ESD promotion in culturally diverse schools?

Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

3.1 Composition of the Research Team

The team consists of eight members - four ESD experts and four graduate students earning their degrees in educational studies. First, all the team members have been trained to build a common understanding of ESD and school leadership. The team is divided into two groups: one focused on the observation of school climate and the other on questionnaire from school leaders.

3.2 Methodological Overview

The distinctive methodological characteristics of the study are:

- (1) The use of statistical techniques to identify the major problems school leaders face when mainstreaming ESD in culturally diverse schools; and
- (2) The use of microscopic analysis to provide a detailed description of the school climate regarding ESD

3.3 The Study and Data

The main study is concerned with the assessment of the current status of the relationship between culturally responsive school leadership and ESD implementation. With the emphasis in this study is on the major problems and initiatives, it is intended to observe actual educational practices in 50 culturally diverse schools.

This study did not evaluate learning outcomes of students in terms of ESD and therefore, only focused on observations of actual educational practice in classrooms and schools.

3.4 Sample of Selected Schools

Team members were asked to visit schools and to observe actual educational practices in the area of ESD. For this purpose, 2 sub-teams were provided a combination of schools with prior ESD exposure (“treatment group”) and those without prior ESD exposure (“control group”). The two types of schools were not randomly selected and therefore, they do not represent the larger population of ESD and non-ESD schools in Mongolia.

A total of 50 schools were visited; of them 16 were in Ulaanbaatar and the rest were in 14 different provinces Gobi-Altai, Khovd, Sukhbaatar, Darkhan, Selenge, Bulgan, Orkhon, Tuv, Uvurkhangai, Arkhangai, Khentii, Dornogobi, Dundgobi, and Gobisumber. Figure 1 presents the distribution of schools in the sample.

Schools with ESD exposure in particular projects include: 11 SDC eco schools, two UNESCO eco schools, and one GIZ green school. Interestingly, seven additional schools self-identified as “eco schools” even though they were not officially included as a partner school in any of the environmental education projects.

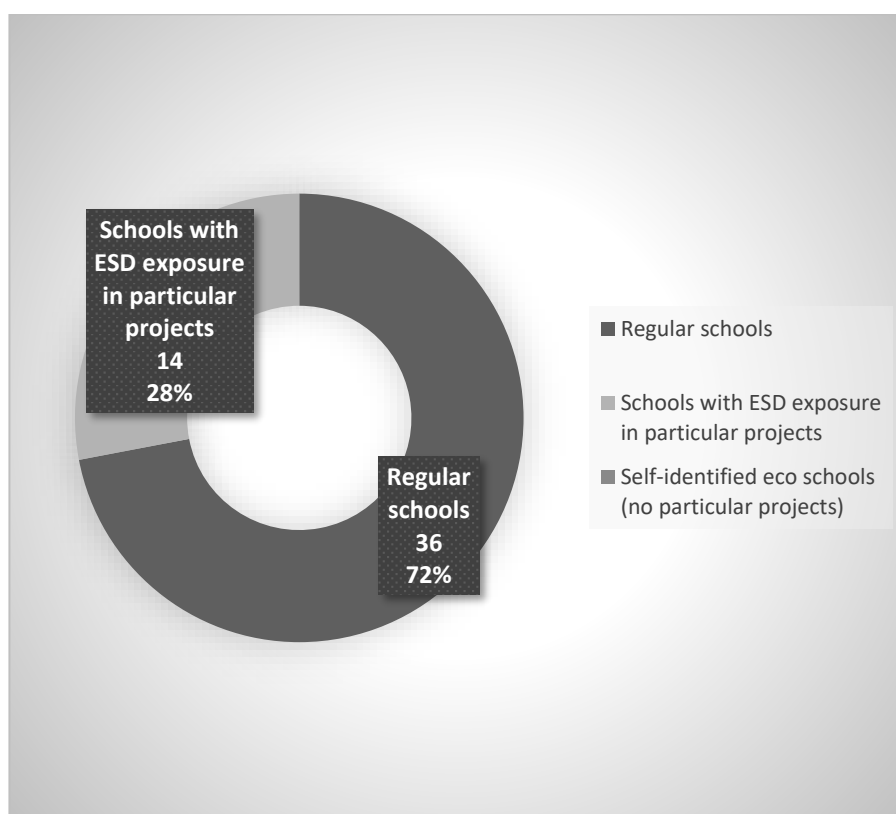


Figure 1: Sample of schools

Data Collection Instruments

The following instruments were developed to obtain standardized baseline data on the mainstreaming of ESD in culturally diverse school contexts:

- Microscopic analysis (observations, survey, interviews on actual practice):
 - i. Classroom observation instrument: 8 pages
 - ii. School climate observation: 1 page
 - iii. Guideline for expert team report: school visit – 5 pages

The instruments for the analysis of school climate observation comprise both items from international ESD standards and curricular frameworks as well as national items. Most of the international items in these research instruments are built upon the following well-known studies and frameworks of ESD:

- UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development Toolkit [15] †
- World Values Survey 7 (WVS 2017-2022) ‡

†McKeown, R., Hopkins, C. A., Rizi, R., & Chrystalbridge, M. (2002). *Education for sustainable development toolkit*. Energy, Environment and Resources Center, University of Tennessee.

‡Questionnaire for wave 7 (2017-2022) is available online: www.worldvaluessurvey.org

Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

Importantly, all elements or topics used in the checklist of classroom and school climate observations were adapted and appropriated to the Mongolian context. The list of international elements or topics was supplemented with Mongolian concepts that are related to the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of ESD.

The initial list of Mongolian elements or topics included the following:

- Socio-cultural dimension: conflict between nomadic and sedentary culture, party politics and parochialism, political deals and negotiations, cultural values and heritage, violence, cultural reform, cultural criticism, quality and access to service, system of religion and beliefs, social freedom, ethics and national standards, rights of future generations, social depression, information and media dictatorship
- Environmental dimension: rehabilitation, indigenous knowledge of nature, man, flora, and fauna, rural development
- Economic dimension: limited resources of Mother Earth, production and consumption, sustainability and development, excessive consumption

Based on a pilot-test, the Mongolian elements or topics were revised. Topics that were considered repetitive, ambiguous, or irrelevant during the pilot-test were eliminated from the study.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Problem identification

The pre-printed questionnaire was distributed and the respondents were allowed to tick three major problems they face while promoting ESD in their school contexts. As shown in Table 1, the major three problems were (1) school leaders' ESD knowledge, skills, application – 13 (26%); (2) school leaders' understanding ESD as a concept – 9 (18%); and (3) capacity-building of school leaders – 9 (18%).

Table 1: Major problems facing school leaders to implement ESD

<i>Problems n (%)</i>	
School leaders' ESD knowledge, skills, application	13 (26%)
School leaders' understanding ESD as a concept	9 (18%)
Capacity-building of school leaders	9 (18%)
Adaptation of ESD into Mongolian cultural beliefs	7 (14%)
Global ESD movement	5 (10%)
Global ESD literacy	4 (8%)
Misperception of leadership issues, unwillingness to accept ESD-related issues, and participate in ESD-related extra-curricular activities	2 (4%)
Lack of self-confidence	1 (2%)
Total:	50 (100%)

Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

4.2 Classroom and School Climate Observations

The study compared eco schools (N = 14) with regular schools (N = 29). The so-called self-reported eco schools (N=7) were excluded from this comparison in order to measure project effects. The two types of schools are remarkably similar with the exception of two areas:

- Eco schools are clearly “greener” in the sense of planting trees, school garden, etc. than regular schools
- Eco schools tend to also organize more intensively ESD related extra-curricular activities (e.g., eco clubs, initiatives of schools, local community, etc.) even though regular schools attach great value to these kind of extra-curricular activities

The main difference between eco schools and regular schools is their commitment to trees and plans and to afterschool eco clubs. Other than these two markers of eco schools, project schools did not display a greater sensitivity towards social, cultural or economic inequality nor did they differentiate themselves in terms of greater ESD mainstreaming into the official curriculum.

- Figure 2 presents comparison between regular schools and eco schools, and it includes four aspects of school organization. Clearly, eco schools are more likely than regular schools to be “green” in terms of their outside environment. Nevertheless, eco schools are not different than regular schools in terms of commitment to social issues, and ESD mainstreaming in the curriculum and in the extra-curriculum.

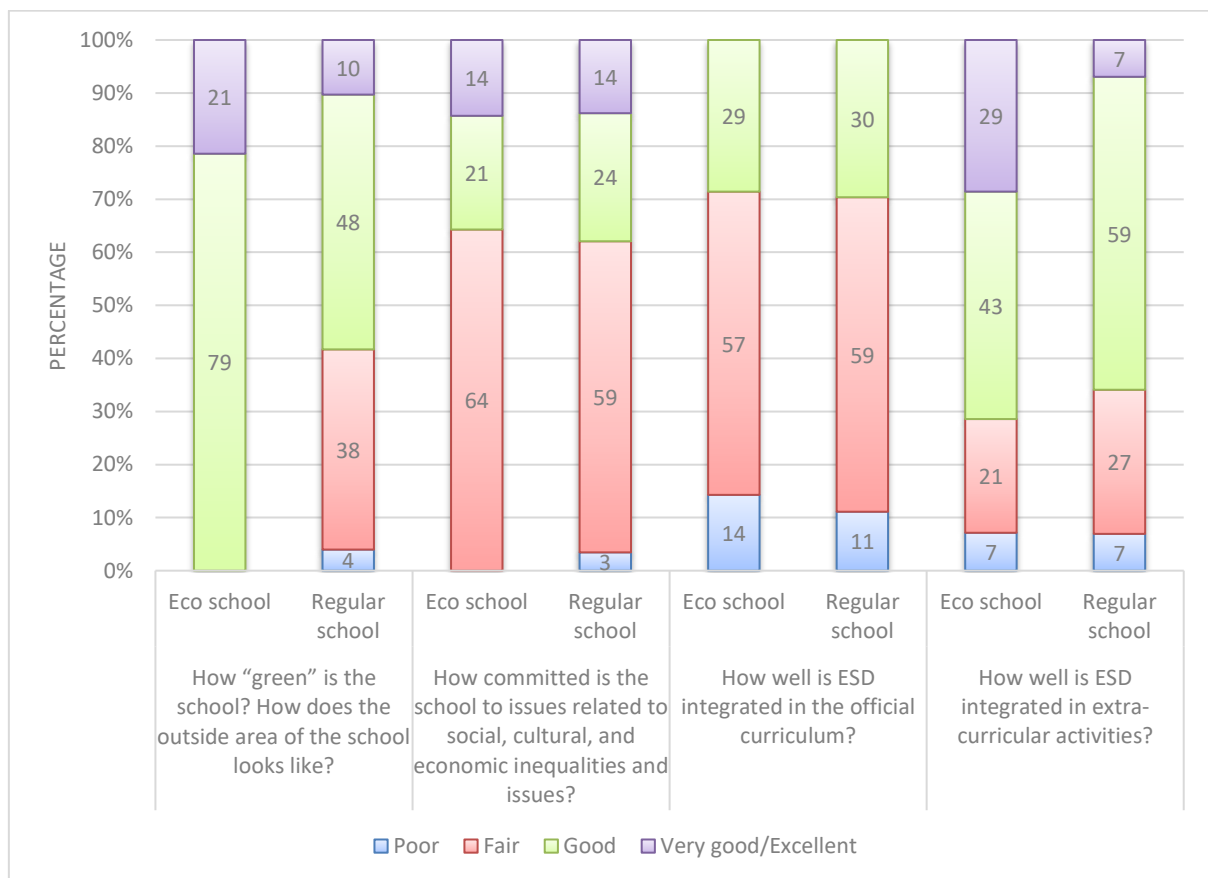


Figure 2: Supportive organizational climate for ESD, by school type

Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

- Figure 3 presents comparison between regular schools and eco schools, and it includes two types of resources. School leaders in eco schools are more likely to have access to ESD resources. However, eco schools are not different than regular schools in terms of community engagement.

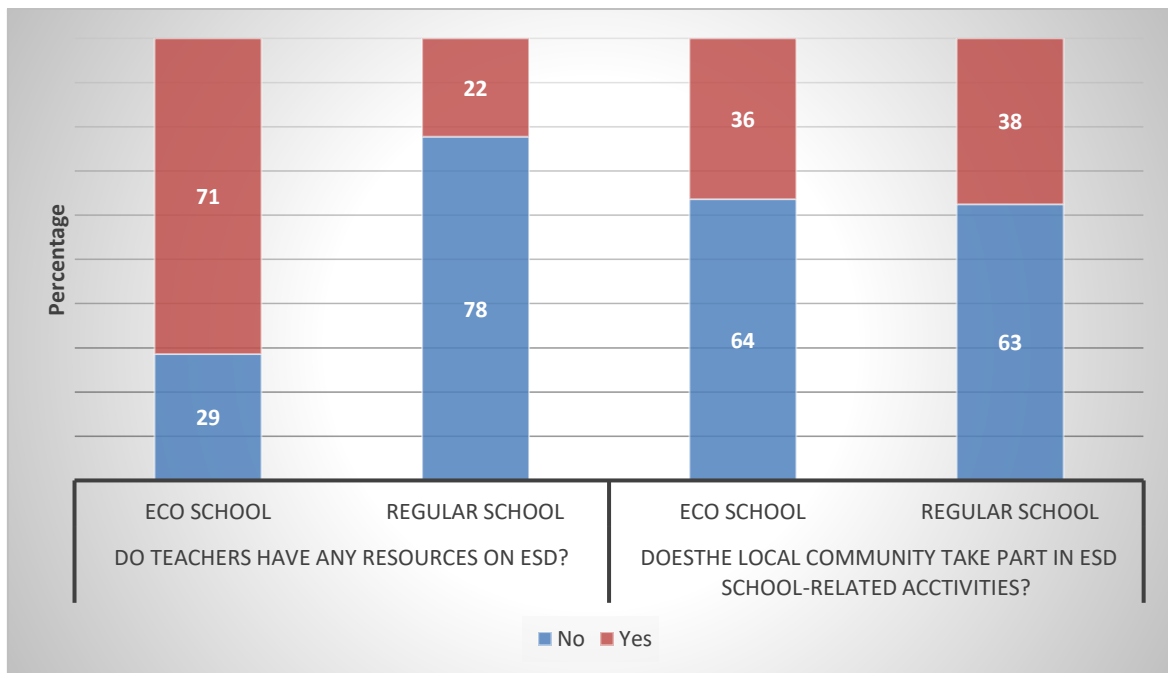


Figure 3: Availability of ESD resources, by school type

The school climate is good and healthy, but it does not support meaningful engagement with ESD.

- Overall, school climate seems to be positive and healthy. Almost half of the schools were evaluated, by the experts, as doing excellent or good in various dimensions. For example, more than four-fifths of schools (84 percent) were evaluated as doing excellent (29 percent) or good (55 percent) in terms of presenting posters and flyers that support gender equity.
- In Figure 4, school climate, however, seems not to support ESD in terms of modeling good pro-environmental behavior. For example, more than half of schools were evaluated as doing average or insufficient in terms of having separate bins for trash/waste and recycling (61 percent) and greening of school years (55 percent).

Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

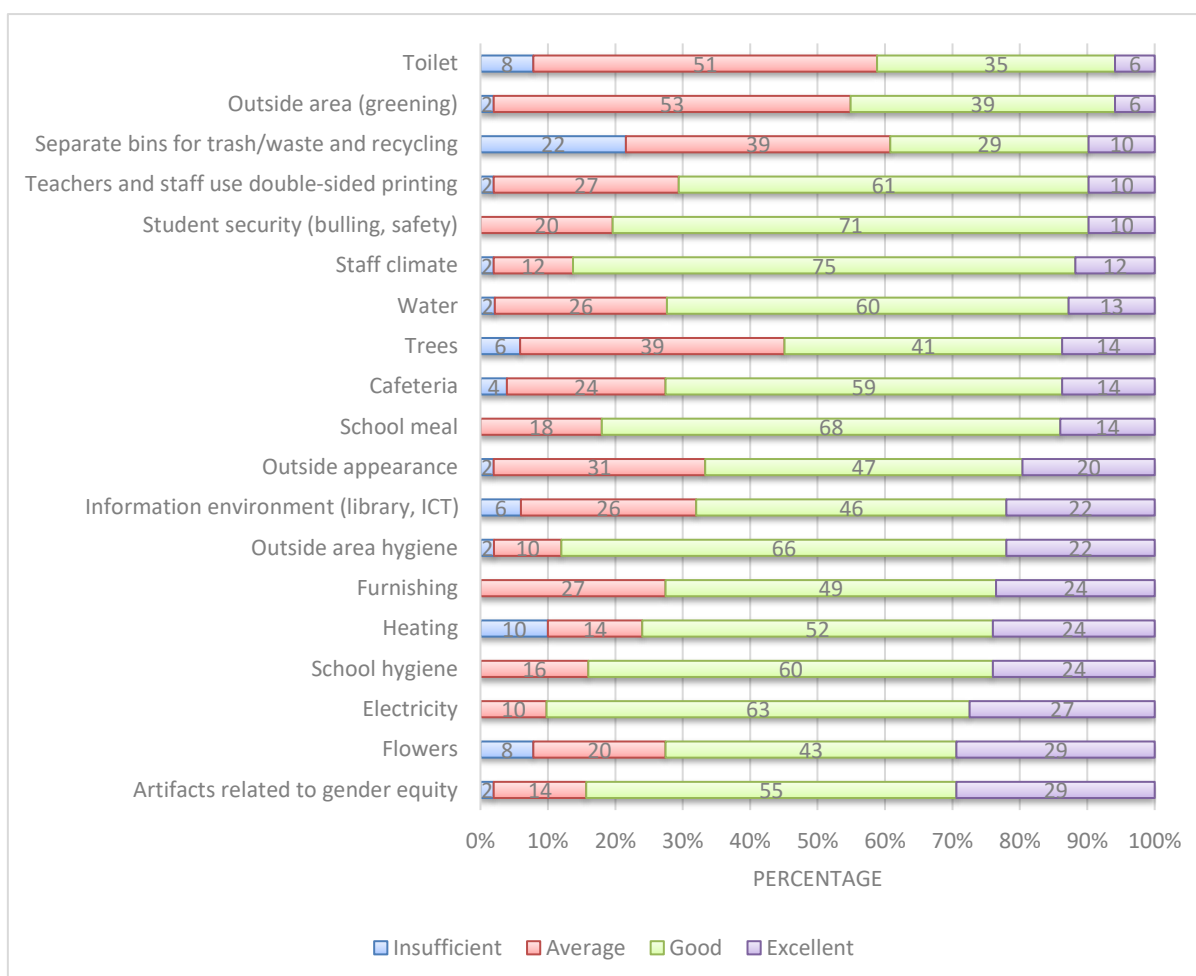


Figure 4. Dimensions of school climate

5. CONCLUSION

The study has reached to the following conclusions:

- The major problems for ESD engagement are (1) school leaders’ ESD knowledge, skills, application; (2) school leaders’ understanding ESD as a concept; and (3) capacity-building of school leaders in Mongolia.
- The school leaders need to attend in-service training to get a better understanding on how to use ESD concepts to strengthen specific competencies.
- There is a need to train and mentor school leaders in how to integrate ESD across subjects, in and out of the classroom, and in the local community.
- There is a need to share the broader context on sustainable development and instill a sense of global responsibility for sustainable development in all countries including Mongolia.

Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

Based on a microscopic analysis of observations at school and classroom level, the study finds that ESD is not sufficiently integrated and adequately implemented at classroom and school level. The findings indicate the followings:

Comparison of Eco and Regular Schools: The school leaders' commitment to trees and plans and afterschool eco clubs were different in both eco and regular schools. Other than these two markers of eco schools, regular schools did not display a greater sensitivity towards social, cultural or economic inequality, nor did they differentiate themselves in terms of greater ESD mainstreaming into the official curriculum.

School leaders' knowledge, skills, application. Currently, the focus is on school leaders' ESD knowledge. The scope of ESD needs to be expanded to include a focus on skills and applications. School leaders need to attend in-service training to get a better understanding on how to use ESD concepts to strengthen specific competencies (e.g. learning through action, inquiry-based learning, distinguishing between facts and opinions) and applications (e.g. ecological awareness, civic engagement, advocacy for sustainable development, engagement for social justice, sensitivity for equity and poverty).

Understanding ESD as a concept. Currently, ESD in schools is not taught as a concept that links environmental, socio-cultural, and economic aspects of environment. There is a need to teach ESD holistically as a concept with consequences for thinking, acting and living responsibly.

Capacity-building of school leaders. There is need to train and mentor school leaders in how to integrate ESD across subjects, in and out of the classroom, and in the local community.

Adaptation of ESD into Mongolian cultural beliefs. Concepts on the eco-system and sustainable development resonate with traditional Mongolian beliefs on man and nature. The link between international ESD concepts and cultural beliefs in Mongolia needs to be elaborated and conceptualized in order to teach ESD more effectively to students in Mongolia.

Global ESD movement and global ESD literacy. There is no awareness in schools of Mongolia about the broader debates and international agreements on sustainable development. There is a need to share the broader context on sustainable development and instill a sense of global responsibility for sustainable development in all countries including Mongolia.

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Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

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Culturally responsive school leadership and education for sustainable development

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