

SAGGIO

Environmental Education and Climate Change: Theoretical Approaches, the Albanian Context, and the Role of Youth in Building Pro-Environmental

ARTENIDA DURAKU

Ministry of Environment

Altin Abdiu – Judge, Court of Tirana

Abstract

Climate change is one of the most significant challenges of the twenty-first century, influencing environmental sustainability, socio-economic development, and the psychological well-being of younger generations. This article examines the sociological, psychological, and educational factors shaping environmental attitudes and behaviours among Albanian adolescents, combining theoretical analysis with qualitative research conducted in Shkodër. Drawing on international literature and theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Value-Belief-Norm Theory, Social Practice Theory, and Social Identity Theory, the study explores the influence of family, school, social interactions, and digital media on environmental identity. Findings indicate that many adolescents experience climate anxiety, uncertainty about the future, and limited trust in environmental institutions. The article advocates an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to climate education that encourages youth participation, sustainability practices, and emotional support.

Keywords: climate change, environment, education, young people, sustainability education

Introduction

Climate change has become one of the defining global challenges of contemporary society, affecting ecosystems, economies, public health, and social stability on an unprecedented scale. Rising temperatures, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, environmental degradation, and the increasing frequency of natural disasters are generating long-term consequences for societies worldwide. Nevertheless, the impacts of climate change are not distributed equally across populations. Children and young people remain among the most vulnerable groups, as they face both immediate environmental risks and future uncertainties associated with climate instability.

According to UNICEF, climate change constitutes a child rights crisis, affecting physical health, emotional development, educational opportunities, and social security. Similarly, the World Health Organization emphasizes that climate change is expected to increase infectious diseases, malnutrition, heat-related illnesses, and mental health challenges globally.

Within this context, environmental education plays a transformative role in developing awareness, critical thinking, civic responsibility, and sustainable behaviour. Climate education should extend beyond the transmission of scientific information and contribute to the development of active citizenship and environmental responsibility.

In Albania, the effects of climate change have become increasingly visible during the last decade. Floods, forest fires, urban pollution, rising temperatures, and environmental degradation have significantly affected citizens' quality of life. Young people in Albania are increasingly confronted with environmental uncertainty, which shapes their perceptions regarding security, stability, and future development opportunities.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore adolescents' perceptions, emotional experiences, and attitudes concerning climate change and environmental education within the Albanian context. A qualitative

approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of subjective experiences, emotional responses, and social perceptions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone.

The primary research instrument used in this study was the semi-structured interview. This method was selected because it allows flexibility for participants to express their experiences and opinions in detail while ensuring thematic consistency during data collection. Semi-structured interviews are particularly appropriate for examining complex emotional and social phenomena such as climate anxiety, environmental awareness, institutional trust, and civic responsibility.

The study applied purposive sampling, selecting participants according to their relevance to the research objectives. A total of ten adolescents participated in the research. Participants were selected from the city of Shkodër, Albania, a region particularly vulnerable to climate-related risks, especially recurrent flooding events. The selection of Shkodër was based on the city's direct exposure to environmental disasters and climate-related socio-economic challenges.

The interviews were conducted between January and April 2026 within the framework of environmental awareness and informational activities organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment regarding environmental protection and European integration processes under Chapter 27 of the European Union acquis.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted in a safe and non-disruptive environment in order to encourage open communication and honest reflection. Participants were asked questions related to:

- perceptions of climate change;
- emotional and psychological impacts of environmental crises;
- environmental education experiences;
- trust in public institutions;
- the role of family, school, and social media in shaping environmental awareness;
- and willingness to engage in pro-environmental behaviour and civic participation.

The interviews were documented through written notes and analysed using thematic analysis. The collected data were coded, categorized, and interpreted according to recurring themes and subthemes identified during the analytical process. This approach enabled the identification of common patterns related to climate anxiety, environmental responsibility, institutional trust, and youth engagement. Ethical considerations were carefully respected throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to the interviews, and confidentiality and anonymity were fully guaranteed.

Although the study provides valuable insights into youth perceptions regarding climate change in Albania, several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size and the focus on a single geographical area limit the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, qualitative research aims primarily at generating contextual and in-depth understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Theoretical Approaches on Pro-Environmental Behaviour

Intergenerational Value Transmission Theory argues that the family serves as the primary institution responsible for transmitting social norms, values, and behavioural patterns to younger generations. Through communication, observation, and everyday practices, parents influence children's attitudes toward environmental responsibility and sustainability. In Albania, where family structures continue to play a central role in socialization processes, this theory is particularly relevant in understanding the development of ecological values among youth.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour, developed by Icek Ajzen, explains that human behaviour is shaped by personal attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Within the Albanian context, this theory is especially useful for understanding the gap between environmental awareness and actual ecological behaviour. Many young people possess knowledge regarding environmental problems but often feel unable to contribute effectively due to institutional distrust, inadequate infrastructure, or limited opportunities for civic participation.

Social Comparison Theory, introduced by Leon Festinger, suggests that individuals construct attitudes and behaviours through comparison with others. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding the influence of social media, peer groups, and environmental activism among Albanian youth. Digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook increasingly function as spaces for environmental awareness, civic mobilization, and identity formation.

Value-Belief-Norm Theory argues that pro-environmental behaviour originates from a combination of personal values, ecological beliefs, and moral obligations. Individuals who perceive environmental protection as a moral responsibility are more likely to engage in ecological practices. In Albania, where social solidarity and collective identity remain influential cultural elements, this theory contributes significantly to understanding environmental responsibility among young people.

Social Practice Theory emphasizes that behaviour is not solely determined by individual choices but is also shaped by social structures, institutional conditions, and everyday routines. This approach is particularly important in Albania, where infrastructural limitations, inconsistent environmental policies, and limited recycling systems restrict opportunities for sustainable practices.

Impact of Climate Change on Children and Youth

Climate change increasingly affects the physical and psychological well-being of children and adolescents worldwide. Due to their developmental vulnerability, children are more exposed to environmental pollution, food insecurity, water scarcity, and climate-related disasters.

In psychological terms, climate change has contributed to the emergence of climate anxiety among young people. Climate anxiety includes feelings of fear, uncertainty, helplessness, and pessimism regarding the future of the planet and humanity. International studies demonstrate that many young people experience disappointment toward institutional responses to climate change and perceive governments as insufficiently active in addressing environmental crises.

The findings of this study indicate that Albanian adolescents experience similar emotional responses. Participants frequently associate environmental

disasters, particularly floods and earthquakes, with insecurity, stress, and uncertainty regarding their future. Several participants expressed concerns regarding the effectiveness of public institutions and environmental governance.

Furthermore, climate-related disasters negatively affect educational continuity and social well-being. In flood-affected areas such as Shkodër, school interruptions, economic hardship, and temporary displacement significantly affect young people's educational experiences and emotional stability.

Role of Family, School, and Society

Family remains one of the most influential socialization institutions in shaping young people's environmental attitudes and behaviours. Through communication, everyday practices, and behavioural modelling, parents contribute to the development of environmental awareness and ecological responsibility.

Schools play an essential role in developing scientific knowledge and civic competencies. However, environmental education in Albania often remains theoretical and insufficiently connected to practical experiences and local realities. Greater emphasis should be placed on experiential learning, environmental projects, community engagement, and interactive educational methods.

Social media and peer interaction increasingly influence environmental identity formation among adolescents. Digital platforms function not only as sources of information but also as spaces for civic activism, environmental campaigns, and social mobilization.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that climate change represents a multidimensional challenge affecting not only environmental sustainability but also the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of children and young people. In Albania, climate-related phenomena such as floods, environmental degradation, and extreme weather events increasingly shape young people's perceptions of insecurity and uncertainty regarding the future.

Environmental education emerges as a key mechanism for promoting awareness, civic responsibility, and pro-environmental behaviour among youth. The theoretical analysis suggests that environmental behaviour is influenced by a combination of individual, social, cultural, and institutional factors.

Within the Albanian context, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Intergenerational Value Transmission Theory, and Social Comparison Theory appear particularly relevant for understanding the development of environmental attitudes and ecological practices among young people.

The study highlights the necessity of strengthening climate education through:

- deeper integration of climate-related topics within the educational system;
- increased teacher training and institutional support;
- active involvement of families and local communities;
- support for youth activism and civic participation;
- and the development of public policies that empower young people to engage in environmental decision-making processes.

Only through an integrated and inclusive approach can Albania foster a sustainable environmental culture and prepare future generations to effectively address the challenges posed by climate change.

Bibliografia

- Ajzen I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior, in «Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes», vol. 50, n. 2, pp. 179-211;
- Festinger L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes, in «Human Relations», vol. 7, n. 2, pp. 117-140;
- Galway L.P., Field E., Jones-Casey K. et al. (2021). Climate change and mental health among youth: A systematic review, in «International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health», vol. 18, n. 11, art. 6052;
- Hickman C., Marks E., Pihkala P. et al. (2021). Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change:

A global survey, in «The Lancet Planetary Health», vol. 5, n. 12, pp. e863-e873;

Lawson D.F., Stevenson K.T., Peterson M.N., Carrier S.J., Strnad R.L. & Seekamp E. (2019). Children can foster climate change concern among their parents, in «Nature Climate Change», vol. 9, n. 6, pp. 458-462;

Ojala M. & Bengtsson H. (2019). Young people's coping strategies concerning climate change: Relations to perceived communication with parents and friends and pro-environmental behavior, in «Journal of Environmental Psychology», vol. 65, art. 101322;

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme (2022). *Youth and Climate Change Education in the Western Balkans*, New York: United Nations Development Programme;

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2022). *Learn for Our Planet: A Global Review of How Environmental Issues Are Integrated in Education*, Paris: UNESCO;

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund (2024). *The Climate Crisis Is a Child Rights Crisis*, New York: UNICEF;

World Vision Albania (2023). *Youth Perceptions on Climate Change in Albania*, Tirana: World Vision Albania.