

## School Principal As An Environmentally Sustainable Leader

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### *Abstract*

*It is not enough to solve ecological problems only with the agreements put into effect by the states. It is also essential that the citizens adopt the said agreement articles. At this point, the necessity of providing education to individuals of all ages comes into play. For this reason, this study examined the environmental sustainability self-awareness of school principals. Phenomenology, one of the qualitative research designs, was used in the research; The study group consisted of 35 school principals determined by the "criterion sampling" method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, among the school principals working in different public schools in Istanbul. It was determined to be doing a master's degree as a criterion. The data were evaluated by content analysis. After the interviews, created themes according to the questions in the interview form. The codes were created within the framework of the answers to the questions by the school administrators. The code and theme list were finalized and made ready for defining and interpreting the findings. As a result of data analysis, five main themes were reached. These are Environmental Sustainability, Ecological Leader, Ecological Events, Being a Sustainable School, and Attitudes Towards Sustainability. The majority of the participating school principals stated that it is crucial for the schools they manage to have a plan and strategy in terms of environmental sustainability.*

**Keywords:** *Environmentally sustainable leader, School principals, Ecological, Qualitative research*

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## INTRODUCTION

The need for education and training institutions is increasing daily to raise awareness about ecological events and systematically raise environmental awareness. It is not enough to solve ecological problems only through agreements by states. It is also vital that the citizens adopt the articles of the deal. At this point, the necessity of providing education to individuals of all ages comes into play. Schools are where guiding others about environmental awareness and sustainability issues will take place. Schools are a whole with their leaders, teachers and students, their environment, and parents. Although many factors affect the development of this whole, it is among the duties of the school principal to coordinate these factors. For this reason, the environmental sustainability self-awareness of school principals was examined in this study.

The basic meaning of sustainability is to continue and to exist. This concept, which includes dynamic implications, is also defined through different disciplines (Özgen, 2019). The most accepted definition is expressed in the 1987 Brundtland Report as “meeting the needs of the present without touching the resources that can meet the needs of future generations” (United Nations, 2020). Osorio (2005) classified sustainability as normative and positive. While positive sustainability examines sustainable development's economic and ecological foundations and its consequences, normative sustainability is concerned with institutional definitions of sustainable development. Sustainability has three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002). Research focuses on environmental sustainability.

Environmental sustainability can define as protecting the things that are important for the environment (Sutton, 2004: 11), creating sensitive actions to ecosystems and biodiversity (Morelli, 2011), and needing sustainable production and consumption (Goodland, 1995). Goodland and Daly (1996) mention four degrees of environmental sustainability: weak, medium, strong, and extremely strong. Weak environmental sustainability holds that all or most of the world's natural capital can be converted into artificial capital or artifacts. Medium environmental sustainability believes that to ensure the sustainability of the total capital stock. It is necessary to look at its composition, whether natural, artificial, or human. Environmental solid sustainability means protecting different capital stocks separately, and natural and artificial capital are complementary rather than substitutes. Extreme environmental sustainability means that nothing should be consumed, non-renewable resources should not be used in any way, and a portion of renewable resources should be proportionate to growth.

The only way for a sustainable life is to educate future generations about a sustainable life in their environment (Qablan, 2005). Thanks to education, students' participation in solving environmental problems will increase. Education provides opportunities to improve the quality of life for the future without harming the world, participating in the decisions about what to do individually and collectively on a local and global scale (Summer, 2005). The essential stages of the relationship between sustainability and education are in the table below.

**Table 1.** *The important stages of the relationship between sustainability and education*

Stages	Name of the event	Date
<b>First Stage</b>	Tbilisi Declaration	1977
<b>Second Stage</b>	Agenda 21	1992
<b>Third Stage</b>	10-year goals of the United Nations Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014)	2002
<b>Fourth Stage</b>	UN European Economic Council (UNECE) Education Strategy for Sustainable Development	2005
<b>Fifth Stage</b>	UNESCO Global Program of Action (2015-2019)	2013

These projects emphasize the importance of school administrators, teachers, and students in spreading and strengthening sustainability. Harris (2008) and Jackson (2007) also claim that organizational change towards sustainability in schools should occur with the participation of all members, including school principals, teachers, and students. The one who will coordinate this participation is a leader with sustainability awareness. Akin et al. (2013) determined the views of influential leaders on social, economic, and environmental problems and identified ten qualities for sustainable development in leaders. These; are learning, strengthening, adapting, developing, holding together, reflecting, maintaining, humility, honesty, and practicality.

Harris (2008) defines a sustainability-conscious leader as a leader who nurtures and supports sustainable development. In this case, we can define a school principal who is aware of environmental sustainability as a leader who is sensitive to environmental problems, observes the ecological balance, and helps and supports the realization of relevant actions in the school. In a broad sense, we know that environmentally-friendly policies will benefit future generations. On the other hand, in the short term, a more ecologically appropriate educational environment, including experiential education programs in the open air, may provide extra benefits for children's development. For this reason, it is important to include activities related to environmental sustainability in the action plans of schools. In this context, the research focuses on school principals' views on how environmental sustainability awareness they see themselves as leaders and how much action their schools take in this regard. The research is expected to increase the self-awareness of the school administrators participating in the study about what has been done and should be done about environmental sustainability.

## Method

### Research Design

Phenomenology, one of the qualitative research designs, was used. The phenomenology design focuses on phenomena that we do not have detailed knowledge of but are aware of (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In this study, the phenomenology model was used to reveal the thoughts of school principals about environmental sustainability.

## Study Group

The study group of the research consists of 35 school principals who determined by the "criterion sampling" method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, from school principals working in different public schools in Istanbul. The criterion sampling method is the examination of situations that meet a set of predetermined criteria or that can be created by the researcher or that a pre-prepared criterion list can be used (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In this study, the criterion was created by the researcher. In this context, the study group comprises school principals working in public schools and doing postgraduate education. Doing a master's degree was determined as a criterion because although there is no obligation, it desired to reach the views of school principals on sustainability, who thought to be open to self-development and learning new things. The demographic information of the participants is in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Demographic information of the participants*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Seniority</b>	<b>School Level</b>	<b>Gender</b>
SP1	16	Pre-school	Man
SP2	5	High school	Woman
SP3	13	Primary school	Man
SP4	9	Primary school	Man
SP5	15	High school	Man
SP6	3	Primary school	Man
SP7	14	Primary school	Man
SP8	17	Pre-school	Man
SP9	6	High school	Woman
SP10	10	Primary school	Man
SP11	10	Primary school	Man
SP12	9	High school	Man
SP13	9	Primary school	Man
SP14	20 years and above	High school	Man
SP15	10	Primary school	Man
SP16	5	High school	Woman
SP17	12	High school	Man
SP18	15	Primary school	Man
SP20	20	Pre-school	Man
SP21	6	Primary school	Man
SP22	5	High school	Woman

SP23	7	Primary school	Woman
SP24	20	Guidance research center	Man
SP25	25	Primary school	Woman
SP26	19	High school	Man
SP27	21	Primary school	Man
SP28	19	Secondary school	Man
SP29	19	High school	Man
SP30	22	Primary school	Man
SP31	12	High school	Man
SP32	10	Secondary school	Man
SP33	12	Secondary school	Man
SP34	21	Secondary school	Woman
SP35	25	Primary school	Man

## Data Collection

A semi-structured interview form was created for the interviews by scanning the relevant studies and taking expert opinions. It was conducted online due to the Covid 19 pandemic, voluntarily, with school principals determined by criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods. Participants expressed more than one opinion on some questions.

## Analysis of Data

The data evaluated by content analysis. In content analysis, it is organized and interpreted under certain concepts and themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). After the interviews completed, themes created according to the questions in the interview form. Then codes created within the framework of the answers given to the questions by the school administrators. The code and theme list were finalized and made ready for the process of defining and interpreting the findings—the data classified in such a way that they are compatible with each other. After completing the first draft, reviewed the analysis, and the repetitive or incompatible themes were reclassified. With quotations that point to a specific subject or point, the majority expresses this; Interpretation was made using available literature information. School managers were coded from 1 to 35 and gave an "SP" code to indicate they were managers.

## Validity and Reliability

Since building this study on a qualitative research design, the researcher conducted the validity and reliability study accordingly to the qualitative method. For the credibility dimension of the research, the researcher created an atmosphere of trust and made them more sincere in their answers by chatting with the participants before the interview. By approaching the data obtained

during the interview with a critical point of view, the ability of these data to respond to the research questions was questioned, and it confirmed that sufficient answers were obtained by returning to the previous questions when necessary. The data source group was diversified to ensure the validity of the data collected in the study (Gray et al., 2007). For this purpose, determining the study group in the research achieved diversity by reaching school principals working in different regions. Besides, the content analysis was repeated at another time and provided time variation (Cohen et al., 2005, p. 113).

## Results

As a result of data analysis, six main themes were reached. These are environmental sustainability, ecological leadership, ecological events, being a sustainable school, and attitudes towards sustainability. Related themes, sub-themes, and findings' interpretations are included in this section.

### **The school management has a development plan for the environment and sustainability.**

Does the school administration have a development plan for the environment and sustainability? The results of the question are shown in Table 3 together.

**Table 3.** *Availability of a development plan for the environment and sustainability*

Statements	Frequency (f)
Yes, there is a plan	11
No, there is not a plan	24

It is seen that the majority of schools do not have a development plan for the environment and sustainability.

### **The Importance of School Management Having A School Strategy That Focuses on Environmental and Sustainability Issues**

As a school administrator, how important do you find it to have a school strategy that focuses on environmental and sustainability issues? The results of the question are shown in Table 4 together.

**Table 4.** *The importance of school management having a school strategy that focuses on sustainability issues*

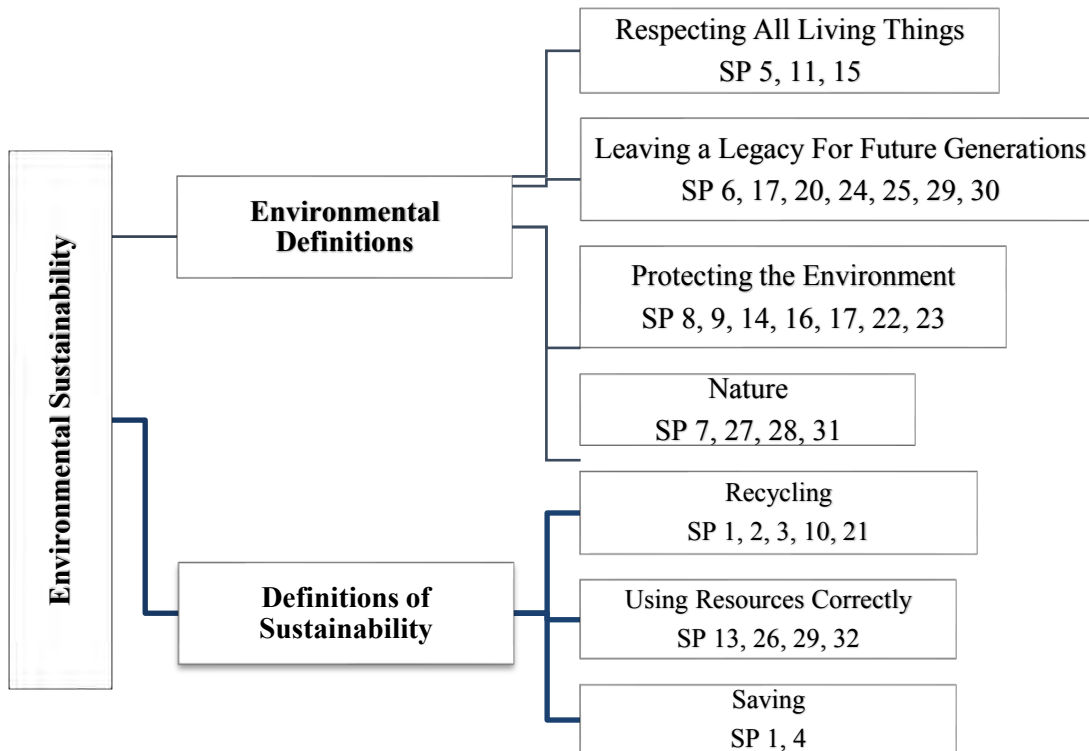
Statements	Frequency (f)
It is important	26
It is not important	9

It is seen that the majority of school administrations stated that it is vital to have a school strategy that focuses on environmental and sustainability issues.

## Environmental Sustainability

“What does the concept of environmental sustainability mean to you?” question has been asked. Environmental definitions and definitions of sustainability are sub-themes. The codes are recycling, saving, respecting all living things, leaving a legacy for future generations, protecting the environment and nature, and using resources correctly. Data on the environmental sustainability themes are in Table 5.

**Table 5. Environmental Sustainability**



Some of the school principals' views on the environmental sustainability theme are given below:

SP10: “The ability of the life cycle to repeat itself in the natural environment and to ensure its continuity for the future ecological environment.”

SP20: “To be sensitive to the environment and to leave the environment better for future generations.”

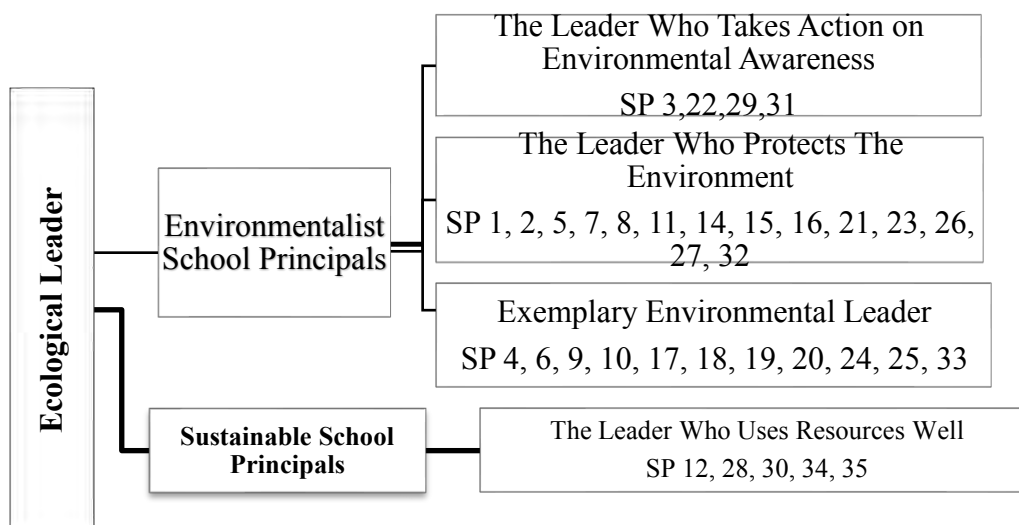
SP16: “It evokes the idea of protecting our environment by being suitable for living species free from negative effects on human life.”

SP29: “To use natural resources correctly and to transfer resources to the next generations.”

## Ecological Leader

Participants were asked, "What does an Ecological Leader mean to you?" Environmentalist school principals and sustainable school principals are the sub-themes. The codes listed the leader who takes actions related to the environmental awareness at school, the leader who protects the environment, the exemplary environmental leader, and the leader who uses resources well. Data on the ecological leadership theme are in Table 6.

**Table 6.** *Ecological Leader*



Some of the school principals' views on the Ecological Leadership theme are below:

SP18: “To be a role model in the design and implementation of infrastructures related to the environment and nature and to lead by determining the direction for its development and protection.”

SP21: “Humans always work to earn more, to lead a more luxurious and comfortable life in this world. Still, they forget that neither winning nor other ambitions will have any meaning in a place where the environment has been destroyed, and our world has become uninhabitable. In this context, the leader should be ecological and show sensitivity to the environment.”

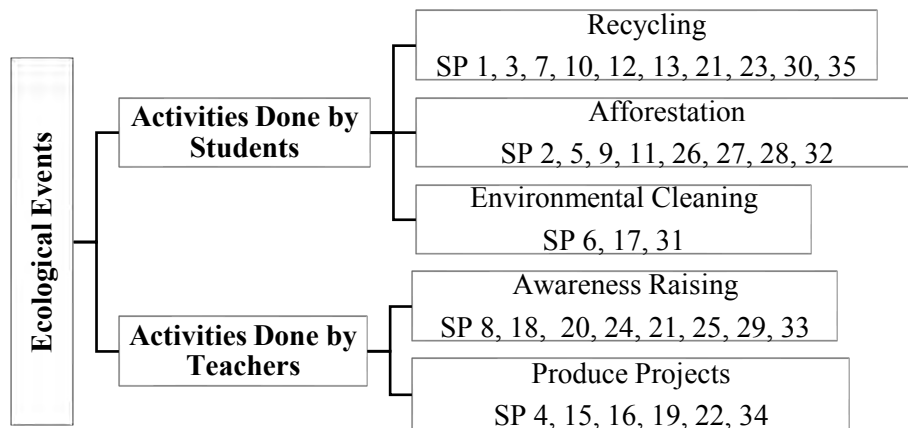


SP29: “The person who plans a sustainable future takes sustainability as a basis, from the materials he uses to the educational curricula they create, and considers them when making decisions.”

## Ecological Events

“Are there activities related to environmental awareness in your school? Can you list the actions? The main theme determined as ecological activities. The sub-themes are Activities Done by Students and by Teachers. Recycling, Afforestation, Environmental Cleaning, Awareness Raising, and Produce Projects are codes. Data on the ecological activities theme in Table 7.

**Table 7.** *Ecological Events*



Some of the school principals' views on the theme of environmental activities are given below:

SP23: “Yes. We have waste bins in all our corridors. (Plastic, glass, paper, waste battery, electronic waste, and waste oil), we regularly deliver our waste paper to our municipality. We organized a campaign to give one pencil as a gift to our student who brought ten waste batteries before the pandemic. There is no trash can in our classrooms. All wastes are in the waste bin”.

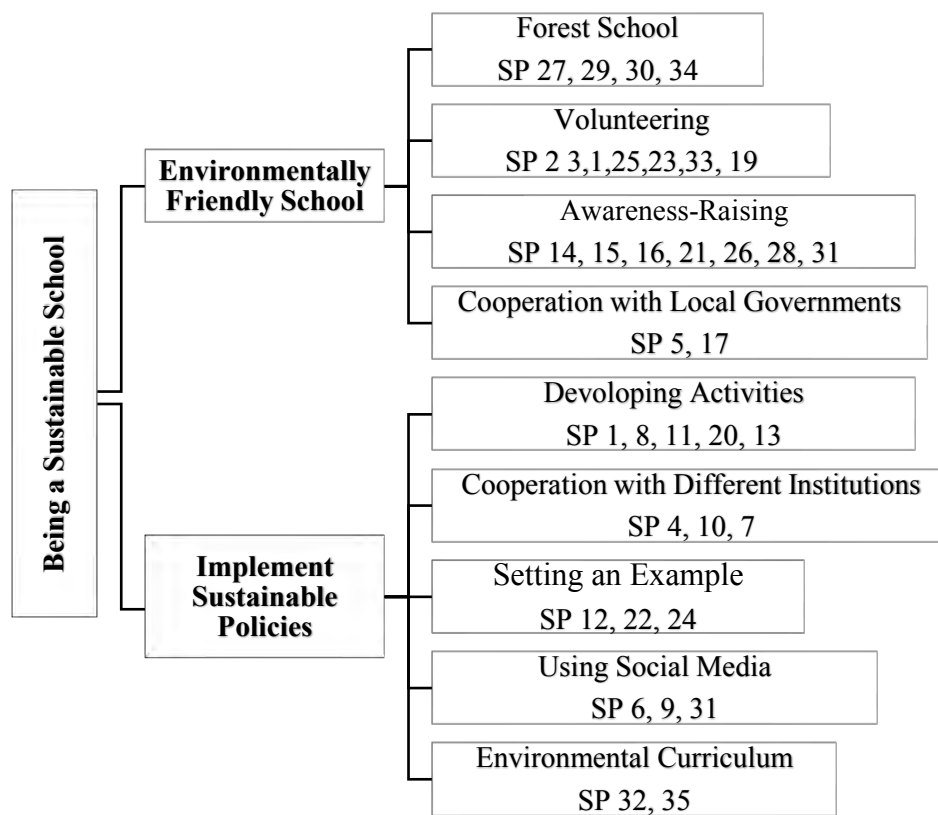
SP14: “Yes, in progress. Some of the work done is below. 1. The event named "The Names of the Trees" aimed to promote, care and protect the tree species in our school garden. 2. Birdhouses were built in different parts of our school. 3. A memorial forest created in the name of our school”.

SP25: “Before the Pandemic, we visited the recycling facility in our district, and we plan to do this with our 4th graders every year. We make compost in our schoolyard. Our environmental studies continue”.

## Being a Sustainable School

“What do you think should be done to be an environmentally friendly school?”. The main theme was as being a sustainable school. The sub-themes were being an environmentally friendly school and implementing sustainable policies. The codes of the eco-friendly school sub-theme were forest school, volunteering, awareness-raising, and cooperation with local governments. The codes of the sub-theme of sustainable policies are developing activities, cooperation with different institutions, setting an example, using social media, and environmental curriculum.

**Table 8.** *Being a Sustainable School*



Some of the school principals' views on the theme of being a sustainable school are below:

SP7: “The school should be established in a large area, produce its electricity, use solar energy, and make landscaping—projects with the least plastic use and recycling sensitivity.”

SP10: “Public-private Non-Governmental Organization These studies should be given priority in schools with activities such as foundation associations.”

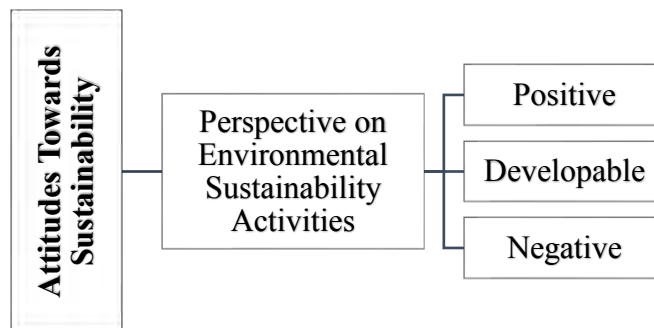
SP20: “Informative seminars should be organized and raise awareness on the subject with prepared posters. Activities can be scheduled to enable students to be active in environmental protection.”

SP26: “I believe this subject should be taught as a lesson starting from the small classes. It is not something that can pass over with a seminar or two. Environmentally friendly equipment should be encouraged with tax incentives, environmentally harmful tools should be removed from life as soon as possible, and measures should be taken to minimize the damage they cause. Life should be cared for and cared about, not gained. Otherwise, everyone should be aware that there will be no future where you can spend your earnings. Ideal habitats should be established, and all facilities should be provided for everyone to have this kind of life.”

## Attitudes Towards Sustainability

“How do you evaluate the general attitudes and behaviors of key components such as school administrators, teachers, students, and parents about environmental sustainability studies?” question has been asked. Under the main theme of Attitudes Towards Sustainability, there is a sub-theme of perspective on environmental sustainability studies. The codes listed as positive, developable, and negative.

**Table 9.** *Attitudes towards sustainability*



Some of the views of school principals on the theme of attitudes towards sustainability are below:

SP23: “The school administration's attitude determines the school's general attitude. We started environmental awareness studies at our school three years ago. We see that even the students who have just started our school are separating the wastes and throwing them into the appropriate waste bin.”

SP22: “Although there has been a development in our society in this direction in recent years, certainly, we are still not at the desired level.”

SP26: “I think it is insufficient and not severe enough. I believe the local and central administrations do not give the necessary importance to the situation. Unfortunately, the steps that need to be taken are not taken on time.”

## Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

This research it is aimed to reveal in-depth the views of school principals on environmental sustainability, which is very important in the global sense, and, as an extension, the implementation of environmental sustainability policies and actions in schools.

The majority of the participating school principals stated that it is crucial for the schools they manage to have a plan and strategy in terms of environmental sustainability. However, most do not have a development plan in their schools. According to school principals, environmental sustainability evokes issues such as recycling, saving, respecting the habitat of all living things, leaving a legacy for future generations, protecting the environment, and using nature and resources correctly—the emphasis placed on saving and using environmental factors well.

They define an ecological leader as a leader who takes environmental actions at school, protects the environment, sets an example in protecting the environment, and uses resources well. Burns, Vaught, and Bauman (2015) also emphasized that the ability to work collaboratively and sustainability education is essential for promoting sustainable leaders. Ulrich and Smallwood (2013) defined a sustainable leader as someone who cares about the organization's resources. Metcalf and Benn (2013) view sustainable leaders as having extraordinary talent. These leaders are described as visionary, problem-solver, adapting groups to organizational change, and individuals with emotional intelligence. Pelinescu and Rădulescu (2011) mentioned a need for a new leadership style, which they call eco-leader.

School principals have mentioned that actions such as being a forest school, volunteering, raising awareness, cooperating with local governments, developing activities, collaborating with different institutions, setting an example, using social media, and implementing an environmental curriculum will be adequate for a sustainable school. Also, Assad (2013) suggested that the curriculum given in schools should be reorganized within the scope of sustainable leadership characteristics of students' knowledge, skills, interests, and attitudes. In addition, school principals mainly stated that their perspective on environmental sustainability is positive for teachers and students, while parents have a more improvable attitude. McCann and Sweet (2013) said that employees feel their leaders encourage ethical and sustainable behaviors.

Environmental sustainability in schools is rarely mentioned in studies in Turkey. For this reason, it is of great importance that this research presents the leadership and attitudes of school principals with a master's degree concerned about self-development with an in-depth description. On the other hand, this research cannot focus only on the ecological leadership paradigm that school principals can no longer ignore and should come to an essential point among leadership styles. Therefore, future research may focus on strategies to improve school principals' ecological leadership characteristics. Similarly, what can be done with student-teacher-parent stakeholders for a school to have an environmentalist perspective may be an issue that needs to be investigated.

Environmental sustainability reminds us that nature's resources are not unlimited and infinite. When what we receive from nature exceeds what we give, the balance will be disrupted. Today, although human beings seem to have achieved the dominance of nature, this is an illusion. Our world, which is heated by greenhouse gases due to human-made constructions on unsuitable lands, floods, erosion and earthquakes, energy consumed to meet the needs of the increasing population, and increasing trade, receives the answer to this illusion with burning forests. The world's countries should act immediately on environmental protocols such as the Paris Agreement. The activation of these protocols necessitates a change in the understanding of leadership. This change can follow a trend from top to bottom or vice versa. A school principal can make a difference with the environmentalist policies he creates and can take action with the awareness that we will leave the world to our children and students.

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