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An Insight into Attitudes towards Environmental Issues amongst Young Learners

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Abstract

The interface between humans and the environment is increasingly becoming crucial for the survival of the planet. Environmental degradation has been continuously flagged by scientists, activists and academicians. However, the pace at which this decline is occurring, combined with the instances of environmental calamities, such as, extreme weather events and climate change, is a cause for urgent concern. The foundation of our interaction with the environment and the attitudes that we develop towards it begin in the early years. In this context, the paper tries to gain an insight into the attitudes that young learners have towards environmental issues and the role that environmental education plays in the process. The exploration emphasizes the importance of practically engaging learners with the realities of the environment if we seek to create a populace that is sensitive and understands the nuances of sustainable development.

Key Words: Environmental education; young learners; attitudes; environmental issues.

Significance of Environmental Education at the School Level

Environmental education, as the name suggests, is education about the environment. However, it is not simply content matter related to the discipline; rather it signifies a way of life wherein lifestyle choices are guided by an ethos of concern for and protection of the environment. It fosters an understanding of our organic connection with nature and encourages us to look at contemporary environmental issues from the perspective of critical

thinking and problem solving. Along with the awareness of environmental issues, attitudes and skills to address these issues are also important contributors to the scenario. This helps us move towards the goal of sustainable development for all through informed decision making. UNESCO also acknowledges the power of environmental education in our endeavour to preserve our planet for future generations.

Historically, the culture of India has an intimate connect with its surrounding environment, both at an individual and community level. Our ancient traditions and folk-lore promote a concern for nature and a deep sense of belongingness for the plants and animals around us. As we move towards urbanization and modernization, this equation is becoming progressively complex. The world at large recognized the importance of bringing environmental issues to the forefront, at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972. It advocated the need to recognize that environmental problems extend across national boundaries and hence have to be tackled collectively. It also highlighted the importance of environmental education in this regard. The Stockholm Declaration and Action Plan for the Human Environment initiated a discussion about development and the degradation of resources between the global south and north.

The Stockholm Conference led to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme, which was a major participant in spearheading the first inter-governmental conference at Tbilisi, Georgia in 1977. The Tbilisi Declaration is considered a landmark document which delineated the imperatives of environmental education in addressing the environmental challenges faced by the world.

“Environmental education is a learning process that increases people’s knowledge and awareness about the environment and associated challenges, develops the necessary skills and expertise to address the challenges and fosters attitudes, motivations and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action.”

Tbilisi Declaration

The declaration put forth certain guiding principles, which mandate that environmental education should be a lifelong process with an interdisciplinary focus. Environmental issues should be examined from different points of view with an emphasis on activities and real life experience.

These pioneering events set the ball rolling for other environmental conferences , such as, the Earth Summit at Rio (1992); World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg (2002).

With this historical background in mind, let us look at the current scenario. In contemporary times, the importance of protecting the environment in the face of alarming instances of environmental degradation has become increasingly inescapable. As a case in point, the State of India's Environment Report (2023), which is brought out annually by the Centre for Science and Environment, can be considered. It states that our country has seen 271 days of extreme weather events in the time period of January to October, 2022 which has resulted in the loss of 2900 human lives. Air pollution is reducing our lives by approximately four years and eleven months. The state of water health is also worrisome, with thirty thousand water bodies showing signs of rampant encroachment.

Such statistics are a grim reminder of the gravity of the situation and once again highlight the urgent necessity of ensuring that our young learners have a strong foundation in matters related to the environment so that there is a culture of sensitivity towards the environment and a proclivity for taking informed decisions regarding environmental concerns from an early age.

The curriculum of the Indian education system incorporates environmental education starting from the primary level and going up to higher education. Environmental education features as Environmental Studies (EVS) in the primary school curriculum and includes concepts from science as well as social science. It has an interdisciplinary approach which incorporates the bio-physical and socio-cultural aspects of the environment. The aim is to create a familiarity with the core environmental processes which inform the daily lives of young learners. It visualizes a transaction based on providing experiences from the immediate environment which motivate learners to participate in protecting the environment. Art and craft activities, games and experiments centered on observational as well as analytical process skills help students to understand relationships between the social and natural environment. The area of exploration expands from the home and school to larger issues of the country and globe.

As the learner moves to the middle school, environmental issues are embedded in the science curriculum as integrated science, with themes woven into the subject areas. Geography, Political Science and History also talk about the environment at relevant junctures. The secondary level continues to deal with issues such as the ecosystem, how our activities affect the environment and waste management. Senior secondary school has a disciplinary orientation and the subject of Biology and Geography in particular focus on such areas.

Policy Guidelines

We now look at some of the salient features of the recent policies which serve to guide the path of environmental education in school.

National Curricular Framework, 2005

The National Curricular Framework (2005), formulated by the National Council of Educational Research and Training advocates that the school curriculum should develop an awareness of environmental concerns among the students. In the discussion on 'Habitat and Learning', it opines that environmental issues must be embedded in the teaching of different subjects across curricular levels. It emphasizes the scientific, as well as, social scientific nature of the domain. Science is basically a search for patterns and order in nature. Scientific theories and laws help build a meaningful framework which helps us to systematize the immense complexity of the natural and physical world. It gives importance to children's ideas and alternative conceptions and a constructivist pedagogy based approach to inculcate sensitivity towards developing a scientific understanding of the environment. The concept of environmental validity places environmental issues in the context of science, technology and society and enables learners to make informed decisions.

Along with a scientific component, environmental education has an equally strong social science aspect. The NCF exhorts educationists to see the organic connections individuals have with the social, cultural, political, historical and economic milieu. Learners need to develop a discovery oriented approach towards these areas.

National Education Policy, 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisages environmental education as an integral part of Indian school curricula. Conservation of the environment in the face of current day challenges and a focus on the priorities of sustainable development need to inform our curricular choices throughout the trajectory of school education. Environmental issues, such as, conservation of resources and respect for the environment have been fore grounded, with a recognition of traditional Indian knowledge systems, as well as, the aspirations of a modern Indian society.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach to delve into the classroom. Two categories of schools were chosen in order to understand the government and private settings. Twenty students were selected randomly from each school. Class 4 was taken into consideration, since the focus of the study was on the primary level. Interviews were conducted with the students around areas such as, conservation of natural resources, lifestyle choices; their awareness about flora and fauna and the challenges facing our environment today. Along with the above, observation of EVS classrooms was also undertaken. These observations were non-participant in nature and gauged the ethos of the classroom and the nature of pedagogical processes. Researcher observations preceded the interviews. These were accompanied by informal interactions with the learners in order to establish rapport and enable the participants to achieve a comfort level with the researcher. This allowed the participants to undertake the interview process with greater willingness and articulate their views freely. The data obtained from the above was analyzed with the help of frequency response categories. The insights emerging from the study are discussed in the next section along with their educational implication

Analysis and Discussion

The classroom observations revolved around the pedagogy used, teacher-learner interaction, resource material, nature of discussion about environmental concepts and learner participation in school related environmental issues. An analysis of the above revealed that teaching learning was largely teacher-centric and textbook based. Minimal use of resources other than the chalkboard and textbook were used. The format of classroom discussions was question-answer type, with the teacher asking most of the questions. Learner questions were rare and usually remained unanswered. The source of questions was the text, although there was some evidence of real-life correlation of theoretical concepts, through examples. In both types of schools, EVS was quite often integrated with other subjects through cross-referencing. Learner participation in eco-friendly practices, such as, switching off the classroom lights before leaving, general cleanliness, hand hygiene and preventing wastage of water was observed in five percent of the students.

The themes emerging from the interview based interactions are discussed below. They highlight the awareness levels and attitudes that learner's reported regarding environmental issues. The findings are also correlated with pedagogical concerns and implications for the education system.

Natural Resources

The interaction focused on the practical aspects of the natural resources as learners encounter them in their daily lives, such as, water, electricity and air. Nearly all the learners expressed awareness about the declining quality of air and the harmful effects it has on the respiratory system. When asked about electricity shortage, eighty percent of students from the government school narrated a frequent encounter with power cuts and an interruption of their studies and homework as a result of this. Seventy percent of private school students had access to inverters and generators, hence did not report any hindrance at a personal level. Both categories of students were aware of the need to save electricity by virtue of it being a limited resource. When asked about their contribution towards conservation of electricity, their responses were limited to switching off fans and lights. This was not corroborated by researcher's school observations. Eighty percent of learners were able to give the reasons for water scarcity and suggested solutions like, reusing waste water for cleaning floors and watering the plants.

Lifestyle Choices

The choices individuals make in the course of living their day-to-day lives is a telling comment on the importance of the environment in their psyche. Most of the learners fully supported the decision to ban plastic bags but ninety percent of them admitted to using plastic bags for shopping. Only five percent used cloth or jute bags while buying groceries. Car pools were also endorsed in principle but rarely used. Awareness about CNG cars was present in seventy percent of the learners as an alternative to petrol cars. Anti-cracker campaigns evoked the maximum response, with all the students desisting from burning crackers on Diwali festival.

Awareness about Flora and Fauna

Living in urban surroundings, meant a largely 'concrete jungle' environment for most of the children. Their interaction with flora and fauna, particularly the latter, was restricted to a few domestic animals and potted plants. Only fifteen percent across both categories mentioned a visit to a nearby park or green space as a part of their weekly activities. The most popular leisure activities were internet games and you tube videos. The remaining time was devoted to tuitions and homework. Much of their knowledge base related to plants and animals was derived from online sources rather than practical experience.

The above discussion displays that there is a visible disconnect between learners' awareness about the challenges facing the environment at a theoretical level and their ability to think of and practice alternatives their lives.

Corroborating these findings are the classroom observations which show a largely textbook centered instructional strategy across school settings. Unless learners are taught in a manner which stimulates critical thinking through investigations tailored towards solving real-life problems, they will not be able to connect theoretical concepts with the environmental issues facing our society.

The vision of environmental education as is evident from the policy documents envisages an exploration based pedagogy where learners can participate in environmentally relevant projects, take field trips and learn how to critically analyze various aspects of a situation and solve real-life problems related to the environment. The practical realities of the classroom do not support this vision and restrict EVS to a paraphrasing of the definitions of theoretical concepts. This is visible in learners' factual articulation of the characteristics of an issue, while at the same time being oblivious of its real world applications. The vision of teaching EVS remains unfulfilled if the ideas learnt in the classroom are not translated into environmentally sensitive action.

In conclusion, there is evidence of positive inclination in the attitudes of young learners towards environmental issues. They are aware of challenges being faced by the environment. However, this needs to be strengthened through hands on, minds on pedagogical processes wherein, learners and teachers go beyond the confines of the textbook and explore the environment collaboratively.

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