

Environmental Education and Future Generation

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Abstract

As members of the community, we all need to be more environmentally and socially active to ensure that our communities are safe, sustainable and live in worthwhile places. By providing our youth with access to information and skills' training in environmental protection, we are securing the future generation. We must widen their access to information and develop their skills. Education and other formal and non-formal trainings help to develop the necessary skills and provide them the necessary foundation to make strong decision. We must therefore, increase the capacity of our youth to transform their vision to realities and so that their future is secured. This paper raises some questions about the future for young children. It explores the links between early childhood education and environmental education and proposes some ways to strengthen these.

Key words - Environmental Education, Future Generation.

Introduction

Nowadays, environmental education is sometimes integrated into school curricula as an interdisciplinary goal of formal education. It is also a part of informal education, and a part of daily life during leisure time activities, as well as a substitute for or extension to the formal education sector. Environmental education is about experiencing, sharing, creativity, pleasure and sensitivity. Environmental educational activities can be informing the population, discovery activities (guided visits, games, outings), but can also consists of the active participation of the public in (workshops, volunteering, excursions, role playing, field trips or holidays). The public sector, as well as NGOs, provide material, education and guidelines on environmental education. Education for sustainable development became more and more important at the beginning of the 21st century. It can be viewed as a broadening and strengthening of environmental education. It takes into account not only the education about ecology and how to protect naturally functioning environments, but also the social, democratic, cultural and economic wellbeing of humans in these environments. It aims at enabling people to enforce and support sustainable development in their regions and globally. One of the greatest tasks for society then is to equip youth with the attitudes, values, knowledge and skills necessary to rethink and change current patterns of action and to secure healthy, just and sustainable futures for all (Davis and Cooke, 1996). This paper raises some questions about the future for young children. It explores the links between early childhood education and environmental education and proposes some ways to strengthen these. *Now* is the time for the early childhood educators to catch with community concerns about environmental issues and to take a leadership role in an area in which we have the potential 'to make a difference'.

A Few Big Questions about the Future

What is life going to be for our children, and their children, in the coming 50 years? Can our children expect to have healthy and vigorous lives when already we have natural systems that are unable to regenerate as we impinge on their boundaries, extract their riches and pour in pollutants? What can our children expect when we have reduced the capacity of the biosphere to cleanse itself, so that clean water in many parts of the world is either impossible to attain? We certainly need massive inputs of energy and resources to ensure its quality. What can our children expect when, in many nations, the loss of forests and the impacts on human health of industrial development are major public health issues? What can our children expect when violence is not only on the television screen, in the computer and video games, but also in the schools and on the streets of the towns and cities in which we live? Will it be possible for our children to lead satisfying lives, when the world's supply of natural and human resources is being increasingly captured for the purposes of frivolous consumerism? Where children are regarded as 'economic units', 'bombarded with multi-million-dollar ad campaigns to make them desperate to eat this hamburger, wear those shoes, eat that ice-cream, drink that particular drink, buy certain toys' (Adams, 1996:2). We live in a society where our wants have become our needs! Can our children expect to have fulfilling and fruitful lives, free from hunger and violence, when even now, the world's population is growing by around 90 million people each year and there is increasing demand for wealth, and higher levels of consumption, in all our economies?

In summary, on a global scale, we already have rapid population growth with fewer resources and decreased capacity of the natural and social systems on which we depend to support this, combined with rising expectations for greater material comfort.

A Key Role of Environmental Education

What does this mean for those of us who live with, work with and care about the lives of the very young? What on earth can we do to deal with the major global social and environmental issues confronting us? What can we do when relationships with each other and our relationship with the Earth are undergoing rapid transformation? We can communicate via the Internet across the world, but we can't keep families talking across the dinner table; we can enjoy a television show about insects in tropical rainforests, but we don't appreciate the wildlife in our own backyards and we blast any spiders that dare to come in with a spray of toxic chemicals. We provide children with new, exciting activities – Computer Gym at 2 to 12 years, so they won't fall behind their peers - but we don't have time for quiet walks and quiet talks with our children. The children we care for and engage with in our classrooms and homes need adults - teachers, parents and others - to become much more concerned with and involved in personal and community decisions about current actions and future prospects. Environmental education, with its major goals of ecological sustainability and social justice *within* and *between* generations, is of paramount importance. 'To be 'environmentally educated teacher' (UNESCO-WP) is crucial in transforming attitudes, values and actions that lead towards sustainable social and environmental relationships.'

What Is Environmental Education and Why Is It Important?

A variety of terms is being used by the environmental education community to describe its work. These include (for example): wilderness or conservation education, outdoor education,

ecological education, environmental education, place-based education, sustainability education, education for sustainable development, etc.

- “Environmental education” is a process that provides learners with awareness and knowledge about the environment (typically including the relationship of humans to the natural world), and fosters the development of the skills, attitudes and motivations to enable learners to make informed decisions and take responsible actions that incorporate environmental considerations.
- The ultimate goal or outcome of environmental education is the creation of environmentally literate citizens.
- This is important because solving today's challenging local and global environmental issues and moving society towards sustainability cannot rest only with “experts” but will require the support and active participation of an informed public in their various roles as consumers, voters, employers, and business and community leaders.
- Environmental education focused on children and youth is a particularly important strategy because it's an opportunity to intervene at a key developmental stage of life and because children can be an important influence on the environmental behaviour of their parents.

Approaches to Environmental Education

The process of environmental education can occur through formal, non-formal, and informal approaches or settings. Formal environmental education is linked with the formal education system and generally takes place in a school context. Non-formal environmental education is organized educational activity outside the formal school system, and includes environmental education activities or programs provided by community organizations, youth groups, museums, zoos, and nature/interpretive centres etc. Informal environmental education is the provision of information without an organized institutional structure and typically includes learning about the environment through the media, personal reading, everyday experience and interactions with others.

Education *about* the environment encourages learners to understand how natural systems work, to appreciate their complexity and to understand how these and human systems interact. Education *for* the environment adds a more overtly political dimension that is concerned with social critique and social action for change. It is this form of environmental education that is seen as having the potential to deliver ‘the values transformation necessary to promote sustainable and socially just lifestyle choices. Yet, in spite of there being little intersection between early childhood education and environmental education, these two field are indeed ‘natural’ allies. They share similar philosophical orientations and endorse similar educational practices. Central to early childhood has been a focus on equitable, democratic and inclusive ways for people to interact - the building and actions that lead towards sustainable social and environmental relationships.’ of trusting relationships with one another that affirm, nurture, support and focus on negotiation rather than domination. In other words, there is already a strong commitment to building quality relationships between people, a necessary tenant for sustainable social justice. There has also been an historical valuing of the outdoors for children’s play and learning. In other words a solid platform already exists within early childhood education for developing the major goals of environmental education - social justice and ecological responsibility for *the future* as well as for the present.

What is needed?

We need a sound environmental education and workplace change to act as exemplars of good practice to inspire others. We need many more resources that are developed specifically for the early childhood field. We need a research base for early childhood environmental education to support teachers as they embark on curriculum change. **As** professionals, we need to encourage our education institutions and professional associations to advocate for environmental education **as** a necessary part of both the pre-service and ongoing professional development of early childhood teachers. We need to work in, support and extend teacher networking in this area. As parents, teachers and teacher educators we need to advocate *now* for the rights of children to have enriching contact with living things, where a love of nature is fostered and where children *can* truly learn to become caretakers and nurturers of the earth. We need to reinforce the values of cooperation and shared responsibility and to encourage children to become not just problem-solvers but also problem-seekers and solutions-creators.

As members of the community, we all need to be more environmentally and socially active to ensure that our communities are safe, sustainable and worthwhile places in which to live. The challenges are great, but with an environmental education perspective in early childhood and early childhood practices informing environmental education, I believe we can create positive change for better futures. This comes from a committed belief that: *The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found but made. And the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination.* (Commission for the Future, Australia)

Further, the youth can be effective communicator of information and technologies, mobilize of resources, networkers to strengthen institutional linkages, trainers and effective prime movers in environmental information and education campaigns. We believe that the youth are agents of transformation. We recognize that there is a need to provide our youth greater responsibility to determine and create their own future. The goal to increase environmental awareness among our youth through education (formal or informal) must be achieved, for the youth represents a new vision. They will determine our future, they will shape our destiny. All sectors of society agree that we must foster values, behavior and attitudes required to attain a truly sustainable future. Education is the process required to attain that the youth, our agent. By developing the capabilities of individuals, specifically our youth, to work towards a sustainable future we are essentially creating a strong society. By providing our youth with access to information and skills training in environmental protection, we are securing the future generation. As major stakeholders, we are poised to lose more if should not act now and allow our youth the opportunity to present their perspective on governance and protection of our environment.

It is our mission to deliver these services to our youth. We must widen their access to information and develop their skills. Education and other formal and non-formal trainings help to develop the necessary skills and provide the foundation for strong decision making. We must increase the capacity of our youth to transform their vision to realities and our future secured.

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