CRITERIA FOR AN EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Environmental awareness could also be called environment management, since it is necessary to organize, or rather manage any activities performed in order to protect the environment. A person who cares about their environment in their own household performs organizational tasks that are far more complex than people living in households who don’t care, or care less about their environment. Consider how much extra energy it takes to selectively collect plastic PET bottles, or to properly dispose of used batteries, compared to those who just dispose of these together with municipal waste, out of negligence or laziness. Many think that the activities of the average person don’t matter since there are so many of us on Earth that a single person’s efforts won’t change anything. Man, as a living being, is not capable of making decisions that would solve problems emerging in the next 20, 30 or 40 years; we usually start dealing with issues that we think will matter within the next 2–3 years: but we have admit that 2–3 years are not enough to solve global environmental protection and climate change problems. This way of thinking can easily lead to the decline of humanity in the future.

Keywords: environmental awareness, education, future, sustainability.

1. Introduction

Environmental awareness has been most prominent since the end of the 20th century, when the danger of an increasing ecological catastrophe caused by humans and the technologies developed by them has received greater attention. By 2020 the ecological footprint of humanity has taken a measurable shape, which is reflected mainly in the average temperature of warmer months. The past few months have already shown that the average temperature of our planet is increasing at a rapid rate compared to previous years.

Whether it’s about the atrocious scale of exploitation in the Brazilian forest, forest fires, or about the continuous air pollution (the perpetrators of which are the most developed and populated countries) we must realize that - taking into consideration the future of the planet and that of humanity - our present habits and workflows are unrealistic even from the point of view of a sustainable future. Looking back at our childhood, there were always warnings of how our industrialized and developing society impacts the ecological health of our planet, but back then, they all seemed like fearmongering to us - as they did to others, too. The main reason for this is that environmental awareness as a basic “trait” was not an integral part of public education in the ‘90s and even the 2000’s in our country or abroad, although in Europe efforts have already been made towards a common environmental policy since the 1970s. In 1972 the need for a common environmental protection policy was established. 1987 saw the creation of the Single European Act, with a new title, "environment", which served as the first legal basis for a common environmental policy. In present day Europe, the support of ever-growing and prominent “green parties” also shows that environmental awareness (and the demand for it), has undergone a significant growth in voters compared in recent years, even decades.
This tendency allows us to conclude that the number of people who are interested in shaping a sustainable and environmentally friendly future are on the increase in our society. In my opinion humanity, with its present technical knowledge, should be capable of realizing a future for generations to come, one that is more environmentally and energetically viable than it is today. In order to achieve this goal however, it will require that several basic things be improved and updated, for example in education, whether of adults or of the generations now growing up.

2. Environmentally conscious behaviour and education

Through multiple channels and phases, the environmentally conscious mindset itself can be transformed into a basic principle or value for children through education. Unfortunately, at present, climate and environmental protection is hardly if at all taught in primary and secondary schools. On this issue, Italy was world first in revolutionizing this education gap, with the subject ‘Climate Change’ being officially included in the school curriculum, and next year public education curricula will include education on climate change and sustainable development. Italian Minister of Education Lorenzo Fioramonti said that “next school year students will be obliged to deal with the effects of climate change for 33 hours.” The Minister stressed that his initiative was focused at familiarizing the next generation of students with the causes, risks and impacts of climate change [2]. It is important to develop a mindset at a young age that is not only purposeful and productive, but can create values in new and alternative ways through environmental awareness. Therefore, the other main channel, apart from public education is the family and within it, conscious education about environmental awareness. The tools for this can be “little things” such as separate waste collection or the (home) recycling of suitable items. Developing an ecological self-image that will allow the child to develop an idea of what ecological footprint their adult life or work will leave, does matter for the future. In this way the curriculum in later school education can have an important complementary role and meaning. The other challenge for contemporary environmental education is motivating people working with already established workflows to rethink in a “greener way”, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises. Even at my own workplace, I can observe the existence of the “old but working” principle, by which sometimes an almost unrealistic amount of office (paper-plastic) waste is created. Most of these could be replaced by either technology or other greener solutions, once the sustainability of the future becomes an issue on its own within the company, and not just the idea of profit. A solution to an already existing problem could be spreading so-called environmental and sustainability training which would allow employees to reshape their existing thinking and even come up with new (greener, cheaper) solutions, later incorpo-
rating them into their everyday lives. By the age of 14-16, young people are already very sensitive and emotionally susceptible to environmental problems. This is the age when they start see the world, to perceive and understand anomalous situations and are also very intellectually open [3]. It is important that environmental education prepares the child to recognize relationships and the often sadly conflicting goal systems within the context of environment-economy-society, and to make the most optimal and ethical choices in this limited area of decision (e.g. the relationship between growth and jobs versus pollution). Environmental education becomes complete (holistic) by expanding in to the field of mental health, and the educational opportunities in psychic balance and harmony. Environmental education is facing towards the future, preparing for the challenges of the future in the difficult circumstances of the present [4].

Objectives and tasks of environmental education (without aiming to be complete):
- dissemination of knowledge (nature, geography, wildlife, biology);
- shaping and development of skills (striving for harmony, problem-solving thinking, development of decision-making);
- consciousness-shaping (ecological view and a sense of beauty, holistic approach)
- transfer of values (with the most important principle that the Earth remains a magnificent place for the next generations, too).

3. Deficiencies in basic education

In Hungary, environmental education is a topic that is constantly engaging Hungarian educators, and the organization’s website - ofi.hu - is being constantly updated with the latest international and Hungarian research on the topic. This includes both new methods that can be used and their effectiveness. One of the major shortcomings of Hungarian environmental education is that prevention is not given enough emphasis in education. There is a rather conservative interpretation of the topic among Hungarian educators, which is limited to traditional methods such as selective waste collection or creative recycling. In addition, the term “environment” is often limited to the natural environment, while the urban environment is not even mentioned. One of the greatest flaws of the Hungarian education system is that teaching follows a pattern of 45 minute fragments and important relationships can be lost. Without a systematic approach it becomes difficult to teach other things as well, let alone to transfer the principles of environmental education. There are already a large number of eco- and green kindergartens and primary schools in Hungary, which provide environmentally conscious education, and a significant pedagogical toolkit and literature on environmental education has also been gathered. These include competences and the knowledge base of social psychologists, action educators and frontline educators. The Eco-School program is a good thing, but it also shows that environmental awareness is still an issue not all educational institutions wish to take ownership of. The other, more pressing problem is approach. Children are primarily facing problems that have long overgrown them - like global warming - that were also not caused by them in the first place, but by previous generations. It is more important to show what they can do for the environment. Several programs and vocational trainings offer solutions to these shortcomings, which are targeting the environmental knowledge of educators. Most of them are costly since they are organized by independent accredited associations. Some similar trainings are also available at state institutions. The so-called perceptual errors, to be formed during later development are something that is imputable to deficiencies in primary education, too, since the early stages of education largely influence learning mechanisms in secondary and higher education.

3.1. Perceptual errors concerning environmentally conscious behavior

The extent to which perceptual errors that justify the subjectivity of knowledge and decision are present and tangible in environmental activity and decision-making is interesting to observe:
- Stereotypes and categorizations – nuclear power plants and nuclear power energy is green, hybrid cars are environmentally friendly;
- Halo effect – a small car is of low consumption.
- Negative distortion – diesel powered cars are all very polluting;
- Projection – green organizations (e.g. Greenpeace) are violent;
- Selective perception – I’m not interested in whaling, it does not concern me, does not reach my consciousness;
- Causality and correlation – global warming has nothing to do with human activities, what’s more, there is no global warming;
- Causality – environmental protection is expensive and endangers the workplace.
4. Conclusions

There are economic development models that are capable of preserving natural resources for future generations. This, however, requires the use of renewable resources, a non-waste consumer behavior, and production that is material- and energy efficient. In these models, human beings utilize resources in such a way that they remain accessible to future generations [5].

The extent of human destruction is of such a level that within a few hundred years, our Earth will become uninhabitable. There will be tremendous heat and drought, and the air will be unbreathable. According to Hawking by 2600 our planet will become a fireball similar to Venus. This too, goes to show that it is not enough to entrust the environment to the environmentalists or the state: the citizens also need to understand the gravity of the situation and start living environmentally consciously, to not only secure the future of their children but also that of their grandchildren, too. As the population of the Earth keeps growing, we are exerting even greater pressure on the environment. If this type of pressure goes beyond the regenerative or regenerative processes of the environment, it will have serious consequences. For this reason, much more attention must be paid to protecting our environment now than at any time in the past.

“If you want to see the world change, be the change.” (Mahatma Gandhi)

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