



The Ineffectiveness of Classroom-Based Environmental Education in Shaping Environmental Awareness and Behaviour in India

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ABSTRACT

Environmental education (EE) aims to cultivate environmental consciousness and encourage environmental behaviour among students. In India, even after its inclusion in the formal curricula, there is increasing evidence that classroom-based EE does not effectively cultivate lasting environmental awareness or behaviours in the students. This article studies the shortcomings of classroom-based EE in developing effective environmental consciousness and environmental behaviour among the students in India. It underscores the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical environmental behaviour, pointing out how EE taught in classroom often focuses on memorization rather than experiential learning and personal initiatives to tackle environmental problems. The article identifies issues such as lack of practical application of what is being taught in the classroom, and the need for a more interactive and personalized approach. It suggests that changing the way EE is taught in educational institutions – through active learning, hands-on experiences, and encouraging personal responsibility – can bridge this gap and cultivate true environmental awareness in students.

Keywords: Environmental Education, Experiential learning, Environmental Behaviour, Educational Reform.

Tens of centuries ago, human beings were simple, humble, respectful, grateful, and satisfied beings, perfectly in tune with nature. But as time passed and men grew more and more intelligent, they cared less and less for the environment. In the race to become masters and establish supremacy over the planet, we humans have caused nothing less than distress to our mother. However, the fact that we are all an inextricable part of the environment is slowly setting in. We have come to realize that anything we deliberately or unconsciously do will not only impact the environment but will equally disrupt our lives. Hence, we, who thought ourselves to be the masters of the planet, have been humbled by our mother nature to become servants and clean up our own mess. Alarming news related to pollution, global warming, loss of diversity etc. ring every day, every hour, warning us about the rapid environmental destruction, necessitating immediate actions and behavioural changes both on global

and personal levels. To address these issues, one of the attempts undertaken by many countries of the world, including India, is the inclusion of Environmental Education in the curriculum. UNESCO recognises that Environmental Education is necessary to bring a shift in the environmental attitudes and behaviours of people, especially young minds. Therefore, UNESCO aims to integrate Environmental Education into the curriculum of all countries worldwide by 2025. However, what is concerning is whether Environmental Education – a concept that is deep and vast – when clustered and limited to 'teaching,' 'studying,' 'memorizing,' and then writing points in exams (as is probably the case in many schools and colleges in India), truly enables students to form a personal connection and bond with the environment, fostering environmental attitudes and intentions while encouraging responsible actions, remains questionable.

India is one of the few countries that has made environmental education a compulsory subject at all levels of education. In response to a PIL submitted by M.C. Mehta in 1991, the Supreme Court declared that awareness of the environment should be taught as a compulsory subject. As a result, EVS is included in the curriculum of almost all the schools, colleges, and universities of India. But the problem is that these educational institutions have understood the declaration of the Supreme Court in a very straightforward manner and are doing only what is being told. They are hell-bent on 'teaching awareness' to students rather than 'creating awareness.' Go to any educational institution in any part of India and ask the students who have studied Environmental Education what the 3Rs of sustainability are. Eight out of ten students will definitely scream, "Reuse, Reduce, Recycle!"

It is not just an assumption I am making. In the self-answering questionnaire that I distributed to 73 students, 69 students answered the question correctly (though the order varies). Ninety-five percent knew that the process of converting waste materials into new products is recycling. Now, the question is, how many students, apart from knowing the right answer, actually implement the 3R principles in their day-to-day life? After analysing the collected data, the results were as expected. Only 22.2 percent of the students always reuse and repair items instead of discarding them (the actual numbers could be even lower, as it is a self-answering questionnaire, and we cannot know whether the answers are honest). Sixty percent of students answered that they 'sometimes' reuse and repair items. Where does this 'sometimes' stand, is the question now. Did they answer 'sometimes' to avoid answering 'never'? Are they saying that they practice sustainability when they are in the mood or when it is convenient? Is it totally ignored or forgotten when it becomes inconvenient? Shouldn't sustainability be a continuous, deliberate process for students who confidently answer that the 3Rs are one of the best methods to save Mother Earth? We humans have impaired Mother Earth to such an extent that even if we start taking necessary actions right now, it will take a very long time to cure her completely. Hence, practicing sustainability 'sometimes' in today's scenario may not be a great option. What is more disheartening is that students who have studied EE chose 'never' or 'sometimes' in their responses. This happens because of the stress on mere memorization of points rather than creating awareness in students to actually implement what they are being taught.

Another drawback in the Environmental Education taught in schools is its failure to make the pupil understand the importance of personal and small initiatives that can contribute to solving large-scale problems. The solutions prescribed in the syllabus and taught to the students are rather too general or global. Not only the solutions but also the causes of these large-scale problems are often too generalized. For instance, deforestation is quoted to be one of the major sources of environmental degradation, and the causes of deforestation are often portrayed as 'urbanization', 'development of infrastructure', 'commercial activities', and the 'expansion of agricultural land'. Undoubtedly, these are some of the major causes of deforestation. However, do any of these causes create awareness in students about how they are personally and equally accountable for the felling of trees? Definitely not, because the majority of the students are not directly associated with these problems. Along with these major causes, there are a few everyday practices that seem trivial but actually act as a slow poison to Mother

Earth. One such example is the vast increase in the use of tissue paper, both soft and hard tissue. Twenty-seven thousand trees are cut every day around the world for the production of tissue paper alone. Not only that, gallons of water and huge amounts of energy are also used in the production of tissue paper. Tissue culture, which was not so prevalent in India 10 to 12 years ago, has become all-pervasive in the country today. To the question "When you visit a restaurant, do you use tissue paper after washing your hands?", 54 out of 73, i.e., 73.97% of the students answered in the affirmative, which is very concerning. Tissues are designed and usually used as a replacement for water in various cleaning processes. This is commonly practiced by many Westerners. But the funny part is that, in India, after having their meal in a restaurant, people first wash their hands in the wash basin and then use the tissue to dry the water from their hands. What a mindless wastage of resources!

This is what happens when the causes are too generalized, and students are not made aware of how they are closely accountable for the atrocities against the environment. The same goes for the solutions given in the textbooks or the syllabus to various environmental problems. They are too generalized and focus on the 'what' and 'why' instead of the 'how.' Little acts of sustainability that can create a huge impact are given no space in the curriculum. Along with stating 'afforestation,' 'using renewable resources', and 'creating awareness among the public' as solutions to combat global warming, if simple solutions like 'deleting emails every day' were also included in the subject and students were assigned to do it every day, perhaps then the compulsory Environmental Education in India could also become effective. Making the students understand and practice such little initiatives not only helps in developing a sense of accountability but also may act as a reminder, leading students to form their own initiatives and resolutions. Because a student cannot probably plant a tree every day but can definitely delete emails every hour!

The treatment of Environmental Education, just like any other main core subject, is another problem that is hindering it from reaching its objective. In the name of teaching awareness to the students, they are just made to memorize a few definitions, some acts related to the environment passed by the government, types of pollution, their causes and effects, solutions, etc. Written exams are conducted, and how well the student produces these memorized concepts on the exam sheet determines the score of the student. Little importance is given to experiential learning, which is majorly required for students to show environmental behaviour. Memorizing facts related to the environment may improve the subject knowledge of the students but fails to create a connection between the students and the environment, which is crucial to avoid the student from becoming apathetic to nature. This is clearly understood from the analysis of the data collected through the survey.

The questions in the self-answering questionnaires distributed to students were of two types: the first type assessed how well the students could answer syllabus-based or factual questions about the environment. The second type assessed the environmental behaviour of the student. It is observed that most of the factual questions were answered correctly in the questionnaire. But the answers to the questions based on behavioural practices were not as satisfactory. This gap between environmental knowledge and environmental behaviour is due to giving more importance to memorization of facts and the lack of experiential learning. In some educational institutions, especially in colleges, Environmental Studies is passed off as an extra subject that is easy to score, which is agreed upon by 68 out of 72 students in the questionnaire. Even the internal credits are given based on some written assignments, PPT presentations, or seminars. These help only in memorizing facts rather than encouraging the students to take actions. An effective behavioural change can happen only when students are made aware through experiences. Students can be encouraged to take action by treating Environmental Studies as a special subject, bringing about changes in the system of giving internal and external credits. For example, students can be trained to make compost or bio enzymes, and then internal credits could be given based on the samples of compost or bio enzymes that students have prepared at home. This is just one example, and it is in the hands of the institutions, especially the

teachers, to adopt such creative experiential learning techniques that can establish a close connection between the students and the environment. Ultimately this may lead the students to take their own initiatives to protect the environment because, facts may get erased from the minds very soon, but experiences do not.

An individual becomes truly aware and conscious not by mindlessly acquiring vast knowledge, but by deeply understanding the small things. Today's students are going to work in various fields like administration, politics, education, business, industries, etc., in the future. Definitely, at some point, they will face a certain situation where their decision can either be detrimental to the environment or become a step toward protecting it. Mere knowledge about the types of pollution or definitions of a few ecological terms won't help in such times. Rather, the kind of awareness they are given during their young age will determine the nature of their decisions. Hence, not just education but the right education and its implementation can prevent young minds from turning into dragons of inaction. Here, I conclude with a hope that all students, along with the 73 participants who correctly answered June 5 as World Environment Day, develop and sustain awareness, conscience, passion, empathy, and love for the environment every day.

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