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Early childhood education and learning is a boon for sustainable development

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Abstract

This study highlights the importance of early childhood education and learning in the achievement of sustainable development. Early childhood education is considered the foundation of individual development. It is an important period for young children where it sets the foundation for lifelong learning. It targets the holistic development of child. The early stage of an individual's life, the mental development on its peak and is highly influenced by the environment. Therefore, it is very important to embed education for sustainable development into the curriculum of early childhood as it not only ensures the young mind equipped with all the knowledge of the surroundings but also comprehend the methods and techniques used for the benefit of the whole world. This incorporates cultural traditions into language subjects like Hindi, English, Punjabi, etc; Environmental changes like climate change into core subjects (maths, science and humanities) and involves modification in the teaching-learning process to a more all-encompassing approach. The students are able to relate what they learn in the classroom to their real life situations, and will place themselves in a better position to take the lead in changing behaviour and adopting sustainable lifestyle to make this beautiful planet safe, healthier and more livable place for us as well as for our future generations. Sky rocketing industrialization has led to the depletion of our earth resources which takes us to the plundering of the future of forthcoming generations. Thus, to preserve our culture, environment and social environment; education serves as a beacon of light. It is like the first ray of sunlight which enlightens the darkness of mind and opens the bars of narrowness which broadens our vision towards the creation of the world livable for everyone. Therefore, education for sustainable development (ESD) in early childhood can illuminate our minds to achieve sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainable development, early childhood education, school curriculum, activity based learning, project based learning

Introduction

If you are thinking a year ahead, plant a seed.
If you are thinking a decade ahead plant a tree.
If you are thinking a century ahead, educate the people.

Education is as old as the beginning of human existence. It is a process which influences individual capabilities, social-environment development, ethical surroundings and above all cultural adaptability and guidelines for the application of knowledge which is beneficial for our society. The importance of education can be interpreted from the reply to the question asked to Aristotle. The question was 'How much better educated men were than those who were uneducated'. Aristotle gave a very beautiful answer by saying 'As much as the living are from the dead'. Thus, it is a process to shape the quality of life of individual and through them the quality of society and the world is important.

Early childhood education (ECE) is a branch of education system that relates to the formal or non-formal teaching of children from birth up to the age of eight. Traditionally, this is up to the equivalent of third grade. ECE is described as an important period in child development.

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It is in early childhood that children form connection and relationships with parents teachers and the community. In this period their attention is naturally drawn to their environment and this gives them a perspective of life and how system works. It is considered that the home is the first school for a child and the early childhood education sets the foundation for the child's lifelong learning. It is the responsibility of teachers or the education system to make sustainable education as a part of everyday practices rather than a topic or theme to be consider for a short time. There is a need to include Sustainable Development Education within the curriculum. Sustainability education enables teachers and young children to promote a sense of responsibility, show respect for the natural environment, be active participants and bring about enquiry and social change.

The act of Improving by expanding, enlarging or refining positive changes or addition of physical, economic, environmental, social and democratic component is called development. It is true that development is necessary to meet human needs and improve the quality of life but it must happen without depleting the earth resources to meet the current and future needs. Therefore, the need of an hour is recognised by the word leaders; emphasize Gandhian way of life; which helps to eradicate the luxurious life. This life cultivates the minds of our young generation to use less resources and make the world a safer, healthier and more liable place for us and future generations. To sensitize these problems, education serve as a big force; force that not only contributes to National development, but also to sustainable development. It promotes development of knowledge and skills required to achieve sustainable development (SD).

Sustainable development

In the 21st century sustainability refers to the coexistence of the capacity of biosphere and human civilization. The Rio declaration on environment and development (1992) laid down 27 principles of sustainability. One principle states that "In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constituted integral part of the development process, and cannot be considered in isolation from it. Living standards in different parts of the world is essential to achieve sustainable development and meet the needs of majority of people".

The concept of SD emanated as a response to a growing concern for human impact on the environment. The world commission on environment and development (1987) popularised this concept as 'development that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'. This definition acknowledges that development is necessary to meet human needs and improve the quality of life; it must happen without depleting the capacity of the earth's resources to meet the current and future needs. The development activities that do not degrade the environment and can be carried on for a long period of time is called sustainable development. The basic principle of SD is living within the boundaries of consumption of natural resources. SD is the plan of action for people, planet and prosperity.

It may be noted that UN conference on environmental development (popularly known as Earth summit) also debated in 1992 and confirm to resolve the technique to promote the three pillars of SD namely economy society and environment, as interdependent and mutually reinforcing

concepts. To achieve SD, these sectors are to come together. The economic, social or societal and environmental factors are interdependent to each other. For example, a healthy prosper society relies on a healthy environment to provide food and resources drinking water and clean air for it citizens. Thus, to explore the interaction among economy, society and environment; the role of education is very important.

Early childhood education for sustainable development in school curriculum

Venkatarama (2009) suggested that more emphasis should laid on school education so as to bring the behaviour and attitude changes among the invisibles toward the sustainability.

ESD not only means to integrate sustainability topics into curricula but also sustainability -related intended learning outcomes.

"Curricula need to ensure that all children and young people learn not just foundation skills but also transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem solving advocacy and conflict resolution, to help them become responsible global citizens "(UNESCO 2014)

Various countries are the best examples of integrating ESD in curriculum.

- Mauritius -National Curriculum framework
This policy was introduced in 2008 with an objective of making Mauritius a world model of sustainable development by 2020.
- Togo-Quality education for a sustainable future
In Togo, educational policy is generated in national culture and including new ESD oriented curriculum.
- Finland and German also followed concept of inclusion of topics, content, learning objectives, learning experiences and concrete examples in their curricula to achieve ESDS.

The knowledge on sustainable development can be imparted in various subjects like:

- First language subjects (Hindi, English, Punjabi, etc.)-
The wealth of our literature, folk, traditions etc. can be used to highlight people's relationship with our culture.
- Mathematics:- Mathematical concepts can be taught in relation to social, economic and political environment.
- Social sciences:- Since policy decisions are made within the context of social institutions and human values at various levels, various subjects such as geography, history, political science, psychology etc. can contribute greatly to the study of how alternative plans and actions can affect our sustainable future. Also, environment awareness can be included to open the child's horizon towards the importance of nature for all living beings.
- Sciences -The presence of various resources present on the earth and it's relation to our life can be imparted.

Promoting Sustainability in Early Childhood Education

Sustainability in early childhood suggests a way of thinking and responsibility towards environment. It covers many different aspects from gardening to recycling. When we teach about sustainability in schools, students will not only learn about the world around them but also they build a more sustainable society and a more sustainable world. All things were taken for granted when most of us were growing

up, but we may be endangered now if we don't take action now! So it is very important for us to make sure that are future generation will be aware of the concept of sustainability.

Sustainability is all about resource use and consumption.

- While teaching about sustainability it is very important for teachers to make sure that student will learn about making better choices to reduce waste and preserve resources for future generations.
- Teachers can make different strategies to ensure that students able to understand the concept of sustainability which will help them to use planet's natural resources responsibly
- It is not amount to make students understand the concept of recycling but it is about enjoying that their choices do not negatively impact people or animals living on this earth.
- Learning about the climate invokes a sense of responsibility, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary (beyond the scope of studies) action.
- It involves unique modes of non-conventional teaching.
- Teaches the student to use all resources wisely and minimize wastage when stuck in challenging situations.
- By following the practical, lead-by-example method, teachers can promote a better learning environment. That can go beyond the scope of green schools.
- Polishes up the students' problem-solving and decision-making skills.

Focus on activity based and project based learning

Both learnings are the part of pedagogical approaches to teaching learning process. Here the children are active learners rather than passive recipients of information. If children are provided the opportunity to explore on their own and provided with an optimum learning environment the learning becomes more joyful and long lasting. Biazaka, Marleya and Levinb (2010) science activity base learning has been seen to have encourage the learners to interact with us rounding and environment. Focusing on sustainability solutions, cultivation of an imaginative experimentalism is required. The difficulties involved in transitioning to a more sustainable world can only be worked out in the process of formulating practical alternatives to the problems at hand. For example:

- **Tree plantation drive:** Organise tree plantation drive to motivate students to understand the importance of ecosystem for sustainability.
- **Field Trips:** Composition of field tripss bring students together in ways that go beyond traditional classroom experiences. It helps them to feel closer to the environment as well.
- **Campus as Sustainability Classroom:** Teachers should encourage students to think of campus as a place for sustainability. It is only possible it teachers assign various projects to students that allows them to develop solutions to problems related to sustainability. They identify in their own dormitories and dining halls. Allow students to connect with the existing campus resources and organizations.
- **Classroom as Sustainable Laboratory:** There is an importance of teaching sustainability in large part. Teachers can encourage students to see not only the campus, but also the city and country as a

sustainability classroom. Through various projects and practices teachers can broaden the perspective of their students towards the environment and Sustainability.

- Saving Electricity: encourage the students to switch off appliances and lights when not in use,
- Empower women and girls around you and promote equality,
- Motivate the students to use public transports or cycles,
- Organise workshops, seminars, debates, celebration of festivals etc.

Therefore, education at school level is a key to nation's capacity to develop and achieve sustainability targets. This education can improve agriculture productivity, enhance the status of women, reduce population growth rates, increase environmental protection and generally raise the living standards.

Conclusion

Sustainable development allows us to live in harmony with the planet. Being the responsible inhabitants of the earth we have the moral responsibility to ensure that future generations will also be able to fulfil all their needs and they can live on a planet with rich environments and healthy ecosystem and their society is peaceful, fair and thriving. Thus, education will serve as a beacon of light to nurture the minds of the children with inclusion of positive thoughts, values and traditions which help in channelizing their energies in a right direction, one day we will be able to achieve the goals of sustainable development.

A lot of efforts have already be made by government as well as non-government organisations but still some sustained efforts need to be made(involving youth, religious organisations, senior citizen associations) to campaign together for the reduction of emission of Greenhouse Gases, population control and better sanitation programmes, etc. Innovations and new projects, ESD and related education sectors need to be popularised and encouraged by involving youth, senior citizens Association etc. In this way the ESD would really contribute to the country's prosperity and happiness of the people. It would also ensure the social and economic well being of the people.

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