

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION (EE) IN INSTITUTES OF HIGHER LEARNING (IHL)

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to emphasise the importance of teaching environmental education (EE) in schools and institutes of higher learning (IHL) curriculum. Although young Malaysian consumers are aware about the seriousness of environmental problems faced in the country, however, they differ in terms of willingness to change attitude and behaviour for the sake of slowing down pollution. Studies indicate that only female, Malay, aged 20 and below as the ones who are more serious about taking appropriate action to help out compared to the other groups (Abdul Wahid, Abustan & Karwi 2000; Abdul Wahid & Abustan 2001, 2002). This has serious implications in Malaysia's attempt as a country to achieve the Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992) objectives. As Malaysia consists of multi-racial people, and that these young Malaysians are the ones who are going to live long into the future and become role models for the other generations to follow, everybody should be made to play their part. Thus, educating them about the importance of saving the environment in terms of how they can do their part is seen as a "must do". The paper will proceed to discuss on the 'what' and 'how' issues of the subject implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the concern over environmental degradation such as pollution (e.g. green house effect, litter, flood), poverty (e.g. in India, Bangladesh), war (e.g. Iraq, Afghanistan),

A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

In today's education curriculum, focus has been on preparing students on how to best cope with globalization and technology as part of the new millennium's environment. Thus, students are taught on strategies of how they can be competitive and far minded, and to be materialistic – which sees the education system stressing the importance of science (e.g. engineering, robotics, genetic science, etc.) instead of social aspect/impact. As a result, students are not exposed to actual and real problems of pollutions, poverty, war, famines, etc. that are within their surroundings and atmosphere. The outcome of which we see the present education system producing people that lack emotions and feelings about real and actual problems of the needy.

Studies indicate that although younger consumers in Malaysia generally are aware of environmental issues, they however lack compassion about taking any proactive action to help reduce these issues due to their 'care free' and 'I don't care' attitudes (Abdul Wahid, Abustan and Karwi 2000; Abdul Wahid and Abustan 2001). For example, three different groups - the very much concerned, concerned and 'I don't care' groups were identified among young consumers in regards to environmental issues in Malaysia. Although many of them are aware about the seriousness of environmental problems faced in the country (e.g. water, air and noise pollution), however, they differ in terms of willingness to change attitude and behaviour for the sake of slowing down pollution. Only female, Malay aged 20 and below were found to be the ones who are more serious about helping out compared to the other groups. Even the way how they want to help out in terms of monetary or non-monetary differs.

Another study found a 'mixed' feedback from the Malaysian public in regards to recycling campaigns activated by the government (Md. Yusop, 2002). While the majority of the public perceived that it is unpopular (48.4%), many also think that it is popular (43.3%). Recycling campaign in Malaysia is perceived as to be still at the introductory or the growth stages. Again, it is the women who have the tendency to recycle more than men. Haron (2002) found that many Malaysian (Penang) consumers are not recyclers (more than 68%). After shopping, most will opt to dump the packages and plastic bags into dustbins rather than take initiative to separate items be recycled or re-used. Many perceived that all the rubbish they throw away are sent straight to landfill for dumping. Very few believed that the rubbish will be separated (i.e. to be sent to recycling centre for processing) by 'landfill scavengers' before sending the rest to the landfill.

These findings have serious implications in Malaysia's attempt to achieve the Agenda 21 objectives – at least for Chapters 25 (Children and youth in sustainable development) and 36 (Promoting education, public awareness and training). As Malaysia consists of multi-racial people (e.g. Malay, Chinese, Indians), and that these young Malaysians are the ones who are going to live long into the future and become role models for the other generations to follow, everybody should be made to play their part. They should be told and made to understand that the environment is not theirs, but it is to be shared amongst all generations. Thus, educating them about the importance of saving the environment in

be explored further with examples taken from the student's surroundings, e.g. Malaysia itself. Students can be given assignments that will force them to go out and examine the issues themselves (this can be done in groups) and for them to come back with practical solutions to the issues that they examined. They should be encouraged to start environmental clubs and/or projects for that matter, e.g. save the river; become watchdogs for water and air quality, organized seminars for the public to enhance EE issues, etc. All parties e.g. local authorities, industries, NGOs, etc. could be invited to help out to tighten the value of the contents. IHL in playing their part could also help in starting a fund or funds for such projects to take off.

To ensure that the moral and social obligations are enhanced in oneself, the importance of saving the environment must be emphasised in other taught courses as well, apart from the EE subject itself in IHL. For example, when one is teaching a marketing subject, the educator can help out by adding in a topic or two of the green marketing concept, the ethics of doing so, etc. This will help students to think and believe on the cause through 'repeating' technique that hopefully will change their attitude towards the better human being.

c) Communication - language

In delivering the contents of EE, educators must ensure that they deliver them in a simple language that even a layman could understand. It is a well-known fact that failure to communicate with the students at the level and language that they could understand will hinder educators from achieving the objectives of EE. As we know, there are many scientific terms used that even educators themselves sometimes could not fully understand. Thus, they must ensure that there is no mismatch between the resources of the language and the resources and materials needed to deal with the complexities of environmental issues examined in EE teaching.

d) Creativity

The main task for educators of EE is to provide more creative lessons and enrich the content to make the subject interesting and importantly perceived by the students. This will not be possible without the help of other parties as well. Only if educators take the initiative to use resources from the schools, IHLs, libraries, Internet, local authorities, industries, NGO's and society that students can 'connect' to whatever they are taught – leading up to the change of attitude process soon after.

For one, EE educators can take the initiative to start to set up an in-class or in-school library on the issue. Resources can range from simple to complicated materials such as newspapers, environmental issues books, journals, fact sheets, brochures, pamphlets, magazines, videos, and CDs. The library can be made "hands-on" as what has been done at Petrosains. A Web site or portal that can link students to all relevant persons or resources on environmental issues (this has been done by some) is also good.

As part of effective delivery, 'hands-on' teaching method could be done. For example, the International Hydrological Program (IHP) Malaysia and the Ministry of Education have taken the initiative to distribute the 'Water-Box Program' to selected schools in

Parents and extended family members can help by providing more EE resources at home e.g. CDs, videos, books, magazines, etc. They can even accompany the students to libraries, or take time to attend some seminars with the children, or even meeting up with teachers or lecturers to explore study habits that will reinforce their children's classroom learning and to help out in activities.

b) School/IHL

School principals can work together with district and state administrators and parent-teacher associations to plan for EE week, conferences, events, and exhibitions to promote EE learning. As a group, they can plan for larger inventories of EE materials for the school. Regional administrators can promote opportunities for collaboration and discussions among teachers involved in EE in various schools in their respective districts and states. They may also solicit the assistance of municipal and community leaders and business representatives to develop school libraries and support EE programs in schools. Similarly, students in IHL can take up these tasks themselves through faculties or students clubs, and using university funds or outside sponsors since they are more mature.

c) Industry/business sector

The business community must be encouraged to establish partnerships with schools and IHL and other related business to support activities and provide ample EE resources to the schools. For example, publishers can donate books and publish a greater variety of EE learning materials. EE learning materials should be reader-friendly, so that students can be literate in EE terms. IHL and some environment-related companies can organize occasional EE seminars for EE educators and students. Businesses can promote using the EE signs, symbols, etc. in their environmental and ad campaigns so that these symbols are familiar to the public. They can donate things like the recycle bins, trees that can be planted, to schools, and IHLs and the housing areas. We need to liberate the students and the public from their insulated 'carefree' and 'I don't care attitude' and surround them with ample instances of EE programs and campaigns to help them appreciate a more 'love the environment' kind of culture.

d) Local authorities

It is interesting to see that it is the same local authorities who say that they have laid down the law on the public to not implementing the law themselves. They have to consider the repercussions of such behaviour. Students and the public at large will learn to accept EE faster when ample banners, notices, and signboards on the ethics of living in a clean and safe environment are put up by the authorities. Simultaneously, they also provide the bins needed in proper places, taking care of cleanliness, taking immediate actions towards those needy people, etc. This can not only enhance themselves as local authorities that have done their job properly but it will help boosting the image of the country as well.

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