

Environmental Ethics Education : A Necessity to initiate Environment Oriented Action

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Abstract

The environmental crises, that has emerged as a global challenge and that demands the mitigation of the problems through local action at the individual level, necessitates the review of the environmental education with respect to its goal as well as its pedagogical approaches. There is increasing advocacy for the environmental ethics to be placed as the focus of environmental education and an emphasis on the ethical aspects of the environmental issues as the starting point of teaching about the environment and for the environment. The need of the hour is to move beyond emphasis on mere sensitization towards environmental issues to developing practical capacities among the individuals to analyze the ethical aspects of the environmental issues and take decisions for actions. Thus the present paper attempts to provide a rationale for inclusion of environmental ethics as an important aspect of environmental education both at the curricular level as well as from pedagogical point of view. Further, the significance of ethical discussions to initiate environment oriented responsible behavior on part of the individual is also discussed.

Key- words: Ethics, Environmental Education, Human Behavior

Environmental issues have posed global challenges that have raised skepticism regarding the sustainability of nature to nurture human civilization. Environmental issues are basically societal issues and they have to be dealt with as such. Dealing with social issues further constitutes a characteristic feature of an informed democratic citizenry. A member of any democratic society is expected to be well informed and competent to actively participate in the social issues and has the self efficacy to take decision regarding the course of actions to be taken in the specific social context. Thus environmental education is visualized as an endeavor that facilitates the development of a set of knowledge, attitudes, values and skills that enable and ennoble an individual into democratic citizenship wherein they can efficiently and effectively deal with the socially embedded environmental issues.

Nations across the world have realized the immediacy of attending the environmental issues and the exigency of action at the local level. The realization further dawned that education has a significant role in bringing about the radical change required at the behavioral level to meet out the problems arising out of the environmental crises. The Stockholm United Nations Conference on Human Environment in June, 1972 recommended for a cooperative effort in International Environment Education (NCERT, 1981). Consequently, a framework as a guide for environmental education came into existence because of the meeting convened in October 1974 by UNESCO in cooperation with UNEP and other international bodies. Finally, the Tbilisi declaration of 1977 provided the basic criteria for determining the goals of environmental education (NCERT, 1981).

Although the consequent ardent effort and persistent endeavor have led to an increased level of awareness and sensitization towards the environmental problems, the same has failed to bring about any radical change among the individuals at the behavioral level. Consequently there exists an all pervasive mood of environmental inaction that is detrimental to any effort towards the amelioration of the fast deteriorating environment.

The “cascading effect” of the human-environment interaction (i.e. the long time duration between the individual’s interaction with nature and its effect) is one prominent factor that has further contributed towards the prevailing environmental action at the grass-root level. There is realization of yet another important factor that has led to the failure of the environmental education to mitigate with the environmental inaction. This factor has a direct relationship with the subjective norms that individuals adhere to, and that has a guiding influence on their behavior (Azen and Fishben, 1980). The simple informative nature of the experiences related to the environmental values have contributed less towards the development of critical minds that can examine their subjective norms in the context of the environmental problem and take decision regarding the course of actions to be adopted. Thus the environmental values have been accepted superficially without any concern or commitment to those values.

There exists, therefore, a need of extending the goals of environmental education beyond the awareness level. The felt need further led to the advocacy for admitting the development of the basic competencies among the individuals to overcome environmental inaction and initiate environmentally oriented action (EOA) as the ultimate goal of environmental education. To meet the emerging challenges of sustainable development, the educational system and particularly the school education system has to take a lead role in increasing the environmental awareness, attitudes and values. At the same time the educational system is expected to be self efficacious in developing the capacities among the individuals to evaluate their own behaviors vis a vis the environment. The environmental ethics education provides a plausible way to develop such capacities. Since environmental ethics deals with the pattern of behavior that one should follow while interacting with the environment, the effective route to achieve the goal of Environment Oriented Action is through the inclusion of ethics education as a significant aspect of any environmental education program.

Rationale for Inclusion of Environmental Ethics

Ethics belongs to the realm of values. Environmental ethics includes “principles and values that a man as an individual and as a member of the society should follow so as to conserve, preserve and manage the environment” (Saxena, 2003, p.138). Thus, ethics has a direct relationship with human behavior mediated through the value system developed by an individual. However whereas environmental values deal with such questions as what is environmentally good? and what is bad?, environmental ethics relates to, doing what is good and not doing what is bad. For many authors, the decisions regarding good and bad is rather prescriptive in nature.

The prescriptive nature of environmental ethics poses no problem as such. However, the actual point of deliberation is the way in which such prescriptions are translated in the classroom. There always exists the possibility that a person may conceptually come to grasp a given set of values and at the same time there is no internalization of those value systems by the individual. Thus, we have to see that there is a sort of commitment towards a value system and hence their code of conduct vis a vis the environment. From all perspectives, the immediate need to clarify and integrate the environmentally conducive value system as well as to develop a code of ethics to interact with the environment is undeniable. Therefore, the need of the hour is not only to make an individual develop a commitment towards doing what is right but

also doing what is detrimental from the perspective of the environment. Further, there is a need to help individuals develop the right ethical code guiding and directing their actions towards the environment. Briefly then there is need to move from mere sensitization and a concern towards the environmental issues towards developing the social responsibility of following the moral obligations while acting towards the environment.

Environmental ethics deals with the ethical relationship between human and the environment of which he is a part. Thus, environmental ethics aims to explicate how one should behave or what rules and moral obligations one should have while interacting with his environment. These moral obligations reflect the set of standards for making decisions, choice and actions. Environmental education therefore has the necessary obligation of developing among the individual those set of standards that will act as the frame of reference for the individual to act and evaluate his action.

Early incorporation of Environment Ethics Education

A comprehensive environmental education course aims at developing the required environmental knowledge, forming the desired environmental attitudes, fostering the appropriate environmental values and above all the nurturing of “well accepted norms of behaviors for the conduct of individuals, societies, communities, nations and world all around.” (Singh 2003, p. 63). Given that environmental ethics reflects the standards for action, there seems logic in understanding the determinants of behavior. Furthermore, it should include experiences wherein the individuals get the opportunity to discuss their own norms and the normative beliefs and thereby harmonize their own beliefs’ with the normative beliefs. The theory of planned behavior by Ajzen and Fishben emphasizes that knowledge, attitude and individuals’ moral stands and the social and moral values interact together to determine the behavior of an individual (Kaiser, et. al., 1999) (Refer to Fig below).

The theory of planned behavior explicitly points towards the interplay of subjective norms and the normative beliefs as a prominent determiner of behavior. The theory claims that the normative beliefs i.e. the social values are the source for the development of individual’s own core value system. However, there are all possibilities of individuals differing with these values and developing their own belief system that in turn provide them subjective norms for behavior. The match between the social norms and individual’s norms represent the strength of the social norms and values. Thus the greater the match between these two factors the more is the chance of generating behavior in accordance to the standards.

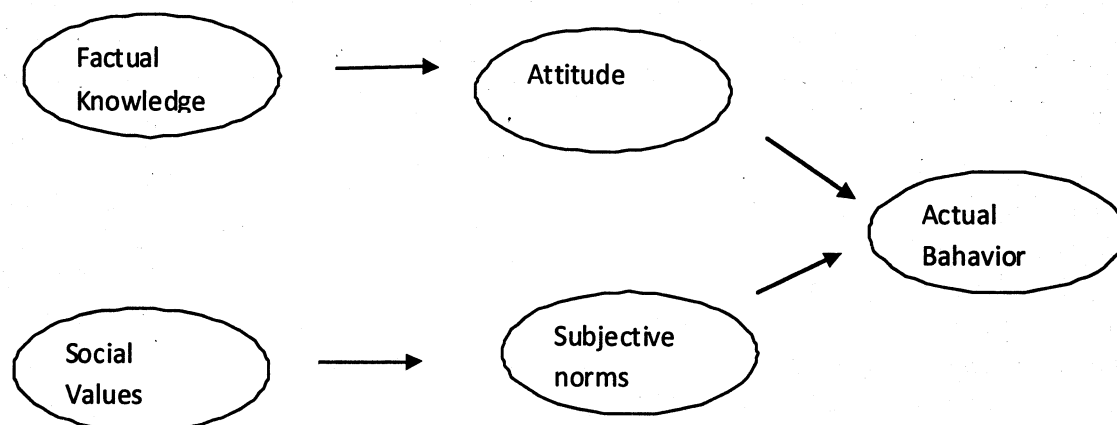


Figure 1: Theory of planned behavior given by Azjen and Fishbein (1980) as quoted by Kaiser et.al., 1999.

The foregoing discussion further necessitates the need of rethinking the pedagogical approaches for environmental education with a focus on environmental ethics. The most basic requirement is the development of awareness regarding the factual knowledge related to environment and environmental problems. However the factual knowledge and the underlying scientific bases of the variegated environmental problems are to be exploited as the medium for the development of the higher level competencies viz. the analysis of the subjective norms and the prescriptive norms, evaluating them in the context of the specific environmental problem and finally taking a decision regarding the course of action to be adopted. Thus there is need to deliberate over a pedagogical approach that can facilitate values integration through a rational dialogue vis a vis the environmental problems, the code of behavior desired and the conflicting behavior shown by individuals.

Suggested Pedagogical Approach

The focus of environmental education is to initiate environmental action and to make every individual contributory towards such action. However an individual can effectively and wisely contribute towards EOA provided that they have the desired competency to evaluate the mismatch between the subjective norms and the prescriptive environmental ethics. Subsequently there is need to bring about a curricular shift in the environmental education with emphasis on such environmental issues that pose the opportunity for the individuals to examine the related norms.

The suggestion therefore is to make the discussion related to the subjective norms and the related prescriptive ethical norms as the focus of teaching in the framework of environmental education. The pedagogical approach should follow a bottom-up approach wherein a local environmental issue is to be selected as the starting point. Within the context of the local environmental issue selected, the teaching-learning experiences are suggested to emphasize on the harmonization of subjective norms and values of the individual with the wider values and moral norms desired in the context selected. Accordingly the learning opportunities should be supportive of promoting a discussion related to the normative beliefs (i.e. beliefs that are prescribed and that are expected to guide action in the desired way) vis- a-vis their own subjective norms (i.e. beliefs related to the environmental issue in question, that are an outcome of the individuals different concerns and the interaction of those concerns within a socio-cultural milieu).

The discussion and analysis of the personal and the prescribed norms are thus suggested to guide the overall teaching strategies and learning experiences. The advocacy for such an approach is expected to foster the desired competency among the individuals to look at the environmental problem with a much wider perspective wherein the students are guided towards the prescribed norms through their involvement. The students' involvement at the higher mental level includes clarifying their value system as well as getting an opportunity to evaluate and take decisions regarding the ensuing actions in real life situations. The prescribed code of conduct, thus learned, is expected to ensure the development of competencies required of a well-informed citizen capable of taking decisions regarding their course of action in the context of variegated environmental problems. The approach is further expected to foster the students' belongingness with the norms they arrive at and thus the probability of the learned norms getting translated into action is expected to be high.

Conclusion

The man- nature relationship has arrived at the verge of collapse and if serious steps are not taken immediately, the future remains indecisive and uncertain. The grim situation demands immediate action, on part of everyone, –individually or in-group. Consequently, the schools have to take a lead role in developing right type of future society wherein each member is socially as well as environmentally responsible and are

competent for Environment Oriented Action. This further demands incorporation of the values and ethics in the overall framework of environmental education at the school level. The endorsement of prescriptive nature of environmental ethics and the significance of the subjective norms of individuals in deciding the course of their actions necessitates the shift in the pedagogical approach towards environmental education.

Further, development of appropriate content and pedagogical knowledge related to environmental ethics is desirable for the teachers to enable them in implementing the strategy and designing the curricular experiences to attain the stipulated goals of environmental education. Thus, in other words the teachers need to develop appropriate 'pedagogical content knowledge' with respect to teaching of environmental ethics and enhancing the competencies of individuals for Environment Oriented Action. There is need of appropriate and timely efforts at the level of pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes.

Finally, the inclusion of environmental ethics within the framework of the environmental education at school level is still in its nascent stage and needs innovative curricular approaches and their evaluation. The result can be achieved through further deliberations and substantiation of the various dimensions of Environment Oriented Action, the role of environmental education in initiating Environment Oriented Action and the pedagogical approaches relevant for Environment Oriented Action. The approach suggested in this paper is brief and introductory in nature and it needs further treatment and refinement. The simple picture presented through this paper with respect to environmental ethics education might seem to be an overly simplified plan of action. Nevertheless, it does provide a concrete direction to improve our efforts for attaining the environmentally desirable behavior among the individuals through our school education programmes. Thus the theses of this paper are a-priori and it needs further improvements and empirical support. However, it provides an initial step towards a more progressive and promising line of action to make environmental education at school level more effective and outcome oriented.

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