

Environmental Education And Social Ethics

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ABSTRACT

The interdependence of man and the environment in its holistic form needs a better understanding. This is necessary for the protection and improvement of the environment and the survival of man. There is undoubtedly a balanced relationship between man and the environment, this has to be maintained. For a long time, man cherished the concept that he was the master of the environment. This has been the most erroneous and damaging concept developed in respect to man-environment relationship. Environmental education is a necessary tool for taking appropriate decisions concerning the solution and prevention of environmental problems which are considered disequilibrium caused by certain factors in the established relationship between man, animals, plants and others. For a very long time, man's activities on the environment have become more pronounced in different spheres, culminating in serious environmental problems. Man therefore needs to be educated for the understanding, solution and prevention of these problems. This paper examines the need for environmental education and social ethics for the survival of man and understanding and improvement of the environment.

Keywords: Environment, Ethics, Man environment, Education, Social ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Environment has been considered as the sum total of all the factors that affect organism. Environment is equally seen as the biosphere and its implications for mankind. The Ibilisi Conference of 1978 considered environment 'as the whole set of natural and social systems in which man and other organisms live and from which they draw their sustenance'. The relationship between man and the environment is a mutual one. This is why they are interrelated and interconnected. The natural environment consists the four interlocking systems of the atmosphere, the lithosphere, the hydrosphere and the biosphere. These four systems are in constant change but the pattern and the mode of such changes are affected incontrovertibly by human activities. As a matter of fact, environment has a holistic nature consisting of its physical, biological, social, cultural, economic, political dimensions which are interrelated and interconnected and invariably interdependent on each other.

The holistic nature of the environment has gradually developed through its within-ongoing-forces and changes since its inception. This holistic nature is dynamic which continually undergoes changes and develops towards a more stable holistic state. Environment includes water, air, and land, the interrelationship which exists among and between them and human beings, other living creatures, plants and micro-organisms.

All the components of man's environment play significant role in the corporate existence of man. The social environment of man which includes human groups, the material infrastructures built by man and the production relationship and institutional system that he has devised call for attention. The social environment however shows the way in which human societies have organised themselves and how they function in order to satisfy, first of all, needs relating to food, shelter, health education and work (UNESCO, 1977). Man needs to become aware, conscious and knowledgeable about their place in the environment. There is almost a balanced relationship between man and the environment and it has to be maintained especially through education. There is an urgent need therefore for man to understand the environment and its governing principles as well as his close relationship with and dependence upon it. In simple terms, man has to come to terms with the environment as the life support system specially through sustainable and sound development of its finite resources. Man is an integral part of the environment and there is a two-way relationship between them.

The relationship between man and his environment is symbiotic, involving both resources, i.e. opportunities and constraints. Man and environment shape each other to reach a dynamic and stable man-environment relationship. Ayeni (2004) asserts that attempt by man to balance the imbalance radiating the environment vis-à-vis man environment relationship and interaction necessitate the need and the urge for man to understand the environment in its holistic nature.

Man and Environment

Man cannot be considered in isolation from his environment. The sustainability of the environment depends closely on man and the way society is organised and its values and objectives. Changes on the relationship between man and his environment depend to a large degree on changes in the organisation and aims of the society. Man, since inception had seen himself as the controller of the environment. Even with the

development of religious concepts, several religions, particularly Christianity, views the created order as existing for human exploits. For example in Genesis 1:26, it is said that man was set over nature and had authority to do much as he liked. In the same Christian book, Genesis 1:28, Adam and Eve were told to be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth. The mere fact that God has made man the controller of the environment gives man the power to use and misuse the environment. There are lots of actions of man on the environment that can lead to global cataclysm such as man-made nuclear arsenals, man-made radioactive wastes, biotechnological misuse, hazardous chemicals on agriculture and industry, pollution of different types and degrees. To avoid all these, there is the need for environmental education.

Education and Environment

Before we start our discussion on the need for environmental education, it is expedient to briefly explore what education in environmental education stands for. The concept of education guiding mainstream schools today and as related to this topic is that education is the delivery of knowledge, skills and information from teachers to students. This conception of education contributes to harming students and teachers by driving policy makers to insist on accounting for units of information that students demonstrate knowledge of on tests. The perceived need for mass scale standardised outcomes leads to a kind of instructional bookkeeping that drives administrators to control teachers' behaviour, which in turn is directed to controlling students' behaviour in ways that increases symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other forms of diminished psychological well-being.

Students' outcomes as measured by tests bear little relationship to true education and so the instructional bookkeeping scheme is a failure even before the harm it causes is taken into consideration. To give a proper definition to education is more complicated by the fact that there is not a clear consensus about what is important about being and becoming educated. For many people, the importance of education has in future job prospects, for others its quality of citizenship and yet others just want literacy, critical thinking and creativity. As a matter of fact, Don Being believes that an educated person is expected to be someone who perceives accurately, thinks clearly and acts effectively on self-selected goals.

Education also always necessarily embodies assumptions about the person. In some philosophies, the person is seen mostly as defined by the social roles for which they must be prepared, e.g. husband, labourer, artisan, etc. The overall development of that person, the realisation of potentials the person has to become more of a human being is seen as a goal of education in these philosophies. This aspect of education is also clearly value-based. The values education promotes are generally ones on which society feels consensus. They are not contentious. When values are contentious, when there is disagreement about them, educators would put themselves in the midst of controversy if they tried to promote values on either side of the controversy. This is generally the case with many social issues. On these issues, many educators feel that teachers should give unbiased information, respect students, regardless of their views, be careful not to teach materials at a level students cannot comprehend but to leave students with despair, fear, guilt or other coercive emotions. This is consistent with the social values that should prevail in democracies.

One exception to not using propaganda such as above is when students is at danger of not acting in his or her own best interest. For example, smoking, unprotected sex and drunken driving are all things young people are tempted to engage in, but which society agrees are against not only society's interest, but more importantly, are against the young persons own self interest. In such matters, propaganda may be justified. Brandbury (1991) considered environment as the arena where values like honesty, decent living, friendliness are taught. As a matter of fact, teachers can be utterly value—neutral but students bring environmental values along, and end up exposing each other to these as they play together, do project together and perform several activities together.

Education as a matter of fact is vital to environmental solutions. It is generally believed that education helps change basic beliefs and values so that temporary fixes like laws, penalties and so on become necessary. Education undoubtedly deals with value issues, with expanding acceptance of norms about what is right and wrong. The relationship between man and his environment in the recent times needs much to be desired especially when it comes to man's hostility and brutality to the environment as a result of man's technological advancement. It is not to say that environment must not be developed, but for man's survival and mutual relationship with the environment, there is the need for environmental education at all levels of our educational programmes to make recipients understand the role environment has to play in the socio-economic and political survival of men.

Environmental Education and Social Ethics

Environmental education refers to organised efforts to teach about how natural environment function and, particularly, how human beings can manage their behaviour and ecosystems in order to live sustainably. It is the educational process through which is imparted to its target group in schools, homes, factories, farms, etc, the environmental sensitivity, awareness, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, skills, commitments and civic actions needed for understanding protection and improvement of the environment and the prevention of solutions of its allied problems. This term however implies education within the school system from primary to post-secondary. It is broadly used to include all efforts to educate the public and other audience, through print materials, websites, media companies, etc.

Environmental education is learning process that increases people's knowledge and awareness about the environment and associated challenges, develops the necessary skills and expertise to address the challenges and fosters attitudes, motivations and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action.

Smyths (2006) believes that the mission of environmental education is to foster environmental literacy among all citizens who should make sound judgment and decisions and have ethical responsibilities about the environment and its related issues. Environmental education serves as a common denomination in educational renewal at all levels of education, by enhancing interdisciplinary among the different subjects and by relating education to the real life of its target groups. Environmental education advocates problem-solving approach as a skill which could help and guide its target groups in the solution of current and future environmental problems.

It is expedient to note that environmental education can be traced back as early as the 18th century when Jean Jacques Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi and others stressed the importance of education that focuses on environment. As a matter of fact, environmental education gained international recognition when the UN Conference on Human Environment held at Stockholm, Sweden in 1972, declared that environmental education must be used as a tool to address global environmental problems.

Santra (2012) opined that the important role of environmental education is in the preservation and improvement of the world's environment as well as in the sound and balanced development of the world's communities. Also, environmental education aims at preserving and improving the global environment and sought to provide the framework and guidelines for man's operations and activities in the environment. Through this type of education, citizens are provided with an in-depth understanding of the environment. Environmental education is not restricted to in-class lesson plans. There are numerous ways pupils can learn about the environment in which they live from experiential lessons in school compound and field trips to national parks, to after-school organisations and school wide sustainability projects. The environment undoubtedly is a topic which is readily and easily accessible.

Man lives, interacts, romances and depends on the environment, so his knowledge about the environment right from birth to death is highly imperative. Environmental education therefore should aim at training individuals to thrive in a sustainable society. Society in this regard requires conformity to certain basic values that are essential to the conduct of social life. These however include values like respect of persons, honesty, general cooperativeness, inhibition of violence, respect of property, obedience to law, patriotism and many others. Education always does play a role in socialising young people into these values. Education as a matter of fact is not value-neutral.

Following from the above, one can now see that environmental educators should engage in education that is appropriate and helpful to the community and her mutual relationship to the environment. Environmental educators are to provide accurate, balanced and effective instruction on environmental conditions, issues or actions. They should encourage learners to explore different views, and form their own judgments. To educate in a way that encourage the ability to form good judgments on key issues is a central value in societies. Environmental education therefore builds capacity for democratic participation that enhances societal progress in all ramifications.

The knowledge about the environment, especially its holistic nature and the laws that govern the ongoing process in the environment is undoubtedly a priority needed for a better understanding, protection and improvement of the environment. This knowledge needs be provided through formal and non-formal environmental education to decision makers, politicians, students, teachers and the general public. Every human being should be aware, conscious and knowledgeable about his or her role in the environment. There is almost a balanced relationship between the human being and the environment and it has to be maintained. Environmental education, undisputably, is a necessary tool for making appropriate decisions concerning the solution and prevention of environmental problems which are considered a disequilibrium caused by certain factors in the established relationship between human being, animals, plants and others. This however raises certain issues on environment and social ethics.

Environment and Social Ethics Juxtaposed

'To think is easy. To act is difficult. To act as one thinks is the most difficult of all.' Ethics lie at the heart of all human endeavour from one foundation of human civilisation and to the day-to-day decisions we all make in the course of our lives. The great aim of education is not knowledge per se but action. Exercising our ethical abilities as related to environmental issues is part of being human. It is an ability that should be built into our lives such that it becomes simply normal behaviour. Ethics should not be an exotic activity performed by heroes, saints and experts that reside elsewhere. It is a matter for everyone. It is the stuff of everyday activity.

In spite of growing interest, ethics circle, the perimeter of mainstream education. Ethic undoubtedly is a tricky word that can take many meanings, for example, 'ethic is a process of inquiry and critical thinking.' It is not about preaching 'indoctrinating' or inducting learners into rules of behaviour or codes of conduct. Ethic is seen as something that has to do with upright living and making moral decisions based on the goal of being noble in everyday activities. Ethic is an open-ended process with the potential to expose new challenges and generate new possibilities. It is a process of making choices that enable better ways of seeing and doing things. Ethical positions are however open for discussion, re-examination and revision. Ethical practice often encounters ambivalence and ambiguity. It involved finding ways to allow people to deliberate on ethical questions.

This process requires respect and tolerance, to hear and consider different perspectives. When we are tolerant and respectful, we find ways to share common language and create space to discuss alternatives. This process, however, is mediated according to Wathen (1988) by an 'ethic of timeliness'; an ethic of timeliness is an imperative to take action before reaching the point of no return, before outcomes become irreversible. This often requires a combination of pragmatic decision making, credibility and a commitment to exploring all available alternatives within time boundaries. Environmental ethics place responsibility on the shoulders of everyone, including the scientific and intellectual communities, and especially educators to work closely with decision makers, the public and each other so that all are aware of the multiple dimensions of issues and associated risks that are peculiar to the environment and the survival of man.

Aver (2010) asserts that the conflict between individual and social-environmental interests will only become more acute. If this continues, at some points, perhaps there will be a consensus that environmentally harmful behaviour is strongly proscribed. Then there may be a call for aggressive environmental education. But by that time, we may have lost critical environmental services, or at least irreplaceable environmental amenities that make life worthwhile.

To develop the relationship between environment and social ethics, environmental education are to be incorporated into formal and non-formal education programmes, this will undoubtedly enhance knowledge and skills to understand and solve environmental issues that are inimical to human survival. Equally important is the fact that this will help people to acquire the attitudes and motivations leading to decisions and civic actions for the protection and improvement of the environment and its quality. The hostility between man and the environment becomes incongruous especially when one considers how the two are interrelated for their survival. It is expedient therefore that individuals and social groups should acquire a set of values and feelings of concern for the environment and the motivation for actively participating in environmental improvement and protection.

Conclusion

Environmental education at this period of climate change and other environmental hazards becomes imperative especially when one considers the significant amounts of air pollution and waste, and the public's concern for their health and the health of their natural environment. It is therefore expedient to advocate that environmental education be incorporated into the curriculum of the primary school, secondary school, tertiary institutions and other formal institutions in Nigeria. To make this function, teachers must be adequately trained at both the NCE and B.Ed. degree programmes and also through pre-service and in-service programmes in environmental education. As a matter of fact, the environment should be seen as a living laboratory in the teaching/learning process at all levels of education.

This approach has its unique place in education of learning by doing is opted for as teaching method and strategy. In fact, the fundamental task in the teaching of environmental education is to inculcate sound environmental attitudes and ethical responsibilities conducive to sound civic actions. It is therefore suggested that the task before environmental education in the 21st century is to recognise the complexities involved in the environment and assist in the overall process by striving to implement programmes of education that inform the students and the general public about the complexities of the environment in which they are growing up and live in, and also empowers them to address environment and develop issues in their own lives and provide them with opportunities to be inspired by the joys, wonders and mysteries of the natural world and human achievements.

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