

MULTICULTURAL VOICES IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: RELEVANCE AND IMPORTANCE

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Abstract

Anthropogenic activities have immensely impacted the state of our environment and have contributed to its use, miss-use and over-use. Hence, it is of utmost importance that environmental education is imparted and awareness generated in civil society so as to curb over-exploitation of natural resources and limit environment degradation. In this context, Multicultural Environmental Education, both formal and informal, plays a significant role in not only disseminating environmental awareness but in the understanding of the concept of environment, its use and management, from a multicultural perspective. Multicultural Environmental Education is being projected as an extremely apt reform that not only highlights the significance of generating consciousness and communicating environmental education but also as a platform where local communities can be heard and their traditional knowledge incorporated in endeavours of environment conservation and protection.

Keywords:

Multicultural Environmental Education;
Indigenous knowledge;
Cultural heterogeneity;
Educators.

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Introduction

Anthropogenic activities have immensely impacted the state of our environment and have contributed to its use, miss-use and over-use which have not only led to international outrage and cry but have also captured centre stage in most debates and deliberations today. Hence, it is of utmost importance that environmental education is imparted and awareness generated in civil society so as to curb over-exploitation of natural resources and limit environment degradation. In this context, Multicultural Environmental Education, both formal and informal, plays a significant role in not only disseminating environmental awareness but in the understanding of the concept of environment, its use and management, from a multicultural perspective. Its central theme being reconnecting people to their natural environment, representation of voices from all sections of society with regards to environmental knowledge and recognizing cultural heterogeneity. It is essential to do so given the differences in socio-cultural backgrounds and the impact of global forces on local communities coupled with technological innovations of local communities themselves, which have brought about drastic changes to their social-cultural worldview. This allows for the reinterpretation of the concept of environment and the incorporation of the notion of inclusiveness which would bring about active participation of people in management endeavours, and a more conscientious and holistic effort in the conservation of the environment. Multicultural Environmental Education is being projected as an extremely apt reform that not only highlights the significance of generating consciousness and communicating environmental education but also as a platform where local communities can be heard and their traditional knowledge incorporated in endeavours of environment conservation and protection.

"With globalization, people are frequently called to work together for solutions to environmental problems much beyond our local realities. Thus, cross-cultural communication gains a special significance in the comprehension of environmental degradation and the identification of environmental solutions...As environmental education originated from nature and conservation studies, it was originally conceived as science education regarding the environment. With the influence of the ecological movement, the social and political dimensions of environmental problems were identified as necessary in environmental education" (Marouli, 2002: 26).

Multicultural Environmental Education

"Multicultural Environmental Education (MEE) highlights the importance of reaching out to culturally diverse populations and of understanding, respecting, and utilizing their perspectives in environmental education...Multicultural Environmental Education is a term which was introduced in North America in the early 1990s...it seems that Multicultural Environmental Education originated from the theoretical tradition of the environmental justice movement, and it has borrowed from multicultural education (Marouli, 2002: 28). MEE "is thereby conceptualized as taking a holistic, interdisciplinary approach aimed at problem solving and addressing community issues and needs, emphasizing environmental rights for all, and utilizing indigenous environmental knowledge and perspectives" (quoted in Blanchet-Cohen and Reilly 2013: 13).

It refers to increased access of culturally diverse—not only the dominant—groups to environmental education and increased representation of their worldviews in it. In this context, access refers to several aspects of environmental education programs. Multicultural environmental education has to go beyond past attempts which interpreted “multicultural” to mean the inclusion of a few children from different racial and ethnic groups and marginal changes in the curricula, while for the most part continuing the dominant discourse and continuing to represent primarily the viewpoints of a limited sector of the population. Often times, "the worldviews of marginalized people have not been represented in environmental education as the environmental justice movement has shown" (Marouli, 2002: 27). “For education to be multicultural, it has to include a wide variety of students and perspectives in all phases of planning, development, teaching and learning” (quoted in Marouli, 2002: 28-29). "In a sense, multicultural environmental education is a broad and diverse valley into which flow ideas and influences from four great mountain ranges: environmental education, multicultural education, critical pedagogy and environmental justice. The meeting of these ideas and influences is creating an environmental education for a culturally diverse and interdependent planet - a multicultural environmental education" (Running-Grass, 1996: 1). Some key principles on MEE outlined by Blanchet-Cohen and Reilly (2013: 19) are:

- It is an educational process that helps individuals become aware of, understand, accept, and celebrate other cultures and their environmental traditions;

- It affirms the central idea that all cultures have a relationship with the natural world which they and all others can draw upon for understanding and inspiration; and
- It asserts that, beyond the development of environmental literacy, community empowerment and restoration are necessary steps and key goals and that a “non-advocacy” approach is impossible.

Using a multicultural framework in environmental education is a way of acknowledging that students have different learning styles; that all students do not share the same beliefs or experiences; and that to understand any environmental issue, whether local or global, we need to understand the cultural factors that have created it (Marouli, 2002: 28).

“Multicultural environmental education is not merely environmental education with multicultural populations or "audiences" nor is it "urban environmental education with multicultural populations." It is rather a very new kind of environmental education, where content is influenced by and taught from multiple cultural perspectives. It is conscious of its own cultural perspectives and of the function that it has in the world and in the lives of diverse students and communities. As the nation's schoolrooms and communities become more diverse and value their diversity, environmental education must evolve as it encounters new cultural realities in specific community contexts” (Running-Grass, 1996: 1). “It likewise challenges us to reformulate what we think environmental education is and can be. It is in communities struggling for environmental justice that new and innovative forms of multicultural environmental education are developing and making a positive difference for environmental quality” (*Ibid*).

The ultimate goal of environmental education should be to draw on the experiences, perceptions, cultural backgrounds, and interests of students to create a nurturing learning environment. One of the first steps in any attempt to teach environmental education should be to identify and work with what is familiar to the students, to stimulate curiosity and provide a foundation on which they can explore less familiar or more complicated issues, themes and settings. Any attempt to teach environmental education without incorporating the students' experiences will fail to be interesting or relevant to many of them. Learning occurs when students make connections between what is taught in the classroom and what happens in their daily lives outside of school.

A multicultural approach to environmental education can bridge the gap between classroom and out-of-school learning. Students learn a great deal from their immediate environments; consequently, an educational program that forces them to disconnect themselves from that environment will fail. Environmental education should be taught by starting with the students' experiences, interests and the cultural and environmental references they have around them, then later investigating other types of environments and experiences. Environmental education has been consistently defined in a way that stresses responsible environmental behavior as a major goal. Such behavior has been defined as individual or group behavior which is aimed at understanding environmental issues and seeking solutions to environmental problems'. A multicultural, action-oriented environmental education approach that encourages students and teachers to participate more fully in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of educational activities aimed at resolving environmental issues identified by the learners is indeed the need of the hour. What is considered to be an "environmental issue" is dependent on the perceptions and experiences of the learner as well as on the context in which education occurs. Given that the educational activities are aimed at resolving environmental issues, students and teachers actively seek to improve the local biophysical and/or social environment while engaged in an interdisciplinary learning process (Taylor, 1996: 3).

Conclusion

“It is the expansion of the ecological message, inclusion of students' perceptions and experiences, and inclusion of the social, economic and political dimensions of the education in a multicultural setting that helps students to learn” (Taylor, 1996: 3). “Multicultural environment is considered in different ways: as a cultural phenomenon and mechanism of transfer of social experience, as the scope of pedagogical values, as a part of pedagogical culture of the lecturer and as a new informational environment” (Yusupova, 2015: 561). Educators and researchers have much to learn from the rich body of traditional knowledge and experience which defines communities. These are the product of individual and collective learning over a period of time, handed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. “To enhance student multicultural environmental learning, teachers must transcend their own limiting and potentially biased beliefs and attitudes” (Blanchet-Cohen and Reilly 2013: 19). As teachers and educators our method of teaching should not only be participatory in nature but engaging students to view

the environment through their culture's eyes while involving them in the teaching and learning process and "building teacher capacity to co-create curriculum to accomplish the inclusion of family and community in curriculum development" (*Ibid*: 20). In order to do so teachers should be "creative with, and responsive to, the social and environmental diversity in their particular locale...and position themselves as collaborative action researchers...reaching beyond their classrooms is a way of implementing the central idea that every culture has a relationship with the natural world, which we can all draw upon for understanding and inspiration " (*Ibid*) while celebrating their students' multicultural differences, honouring diversity and recognizing the immense contribution that cultures have made in the process of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development over the years.

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