A little give and take

By divya choudary | Apr 22, 2015

Every school does its bit by getting children to plant a tree or make some compost. But apart from working as little breaks from their otherwise heavy learning schedule do these programmes achieve what they should? Here are some suggestions on how you can ensure measures for sustainability are taken in your school.

Just like with everything else in life, when you take something from the Earth you have to give something in return. Learning how to use the resources that we have efficiently is now not just a matter of empathy for the natural world, but an urgent necessity. It is because of this that it is essential that we embrace the concept of sustainability.

So, what is sustainability? Simply put, it is the ability to satisfy the basic needs – environmental, social, and economic – of the community in existence today while ensuring that the ability of the future generations to meet these needs is not compromised. It is about enjoying a better quality of life while caring for the environment and enabling those in the other parts of the world to enjoy the same.

In recent years, many schools and colleges have included environmental science in their curricula. And as has been emphasized in various forums, the study of the ecology and the environment, however, has to go beyond the classroom and into the playground of reality. It is in the schooling age that there is an opportunity to inculcate a sense of ownership and responsibility for the world we live in. The idea of sustainability must, therefore, be deeply integrated into school curricula and practices.

Education and awareness

While it is difficult for children to intuitively understand the dynamics of big issues like climate change or rising sea levels, environmental activists have translated these issues into everyday mantras that are easy to grasp and follow – the four Rs, for instance. It is essential to emphasize the importance of these: Reduce, Re-use, Recycle, and Re-think, while dealing with water, waste, air, energy, and bio-diversity.

Reduce

- Promote the saving of energy by emphasizing the importance of switching off electrical appliances when not needed or the use of alternatives (like halogen bulbs).
- Conserve water by making signs to remind others to do so or keep track of the quantity of water each student uses in a day.
- Encourage students to walk or cycle to school or to use public transport, reducing the number of cars on the road and the pollution that goes with them.

Re-use and Recycle

- Incorporate recycling in school activities using newspaper for art work and to cover books.
- Place bins within the school for paper and cardboard and plastic (re-used to make folders, bird houses), separate from the rest of the waste.
- Start a vermicompost and compost program to handle food waste.
- Use the compost to grow vegetables, if space allows, for the children to learn gardening and the benefits of organic farming.
- Collect rain water to water the plants.

Re-think

- Lead by example and use a jute or cloth bag instead of a plastic one.
- Promote healthy choices, replacing chips with fresh fruit and colas and fizzy drinks with healthier options like water, buttermilk, and juice. This will not only make one healthier, but avoiding packaged products will have a positive effect on the environment.
Hold discussions on topics like doing one’s bit to take care of animals, in addition to the more macro topics like alternative sources of energy and global warming.

- Ensure the inclusion and participation of everyone in the school and its surroundings.
- Screen videos like the ‘Story of stuff’ (http://www.storyofstuff.com/), which looks at production and consumption patterns.

You could perhaps ask the children to come up with additional ways of achieving sustainability that relate more closely to their surroundings and lives.

| wind-fan | For schools located in urban areas, buying office equipment from local firms, which are closing down, will help reuse the equipment and save money. Encouraging staff and students to take up car-pool arrangements could reduce the fuel used. Given the Indian climate, the use of solar panels or windmills will help reduce the carbon footprint, as can be seen from the practices of the Centre For Learning (CFL), Bangalore. Mr. Ashok Biradar, Administration Coordinator, says that the windmill and two solar panels installed take care of all the lighting, computer, and heating facilities of the centre, with only the kitchen and canteen being on the regular grid. While the cost of installation is high, the benefit of being ‘green’ is a good bargain, not to mention the low monthly electricity bills.

Visits to a landfill, gardening, volunteer drives to clean up the surroundings, field trips to observe the food web to get a greater understanding of the various forms of life, and similar initiatives would motivate children to take things further.

Vikramshila Education Resource Society, a non-profit NGO based in Kolkata works on the philosophy that the use of dialogue and participation ensures holistic learning. For instance, the topic ‘Water’ is dealt with in a manner where questions about its sources, supply, quality, usage, availability, and treatment of the waste water become part of the discussion. Drawing from daily life experiences, children get to share their views, brainstorm about ways to tackle the water crisis and discuss the importance of water in their lives.

Understanding the link between their current actions and the impact it would have on their future, students would come to accept sustainability as an integral part of their daily lives.

At the end of the day, the focus of schools should not just be on academic achievement but on inculcating a sense of environmental ownership and responsibility in the students. As to the Earth, the only planet known to harbour life, by leading healthy, environmentally friendly, and energy-efficient lives, we can give something back.

| earthian | Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rethink

earthian – A program by WIPRO intends to help with this. Their annual awards program has
been designed to propel critical thinking, reflection, and analysis by students, on issues such as climate change, cities, homes, policies, and technologies, to get a better understanding of sustainability. Students of schools and colleges have to make suggestions and come up with different approaches to counter environmental and ecological challenges.

The award money given to the selected institutions would enable the implementation of a ‘sustainable campus’ with facilities for water harvesting or utilizing solar power. It could also be used to create a lab for innovative projects and experiments. The students of these institutions would have the opportunity to interact with research organizations and specialists. Mr. Lingaraj Dinni, manager of the Sustainability Program Office says, “Teachers are an integral part of the program and the students, being active participants, could become the agents of change.” Read more about the awards at www.wipro.org/earthian.

The Gobar Times Green Schools Award, conducted every year by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in New Delhi, is given to schools that have implemented practices to efficiently manage natural resources. The students form teams and do a survey of the environmental practices of their own schools. Salwan Public School, New Delhi, is one of the schools that participated in the programme over the past few years and has consistently come in the top ten. The school has recharge wells and dual-system flushes to help conserve water. Collected tetra-pack cartons are recycled into books. Ms. Radhika Lalla, who is in charge of their eco-club says, “Although the students are involved, to make a greater impact more schools and the community should come together.” CSE also has an Environment Education Unit that conducts a two-day school training programme for teachers, students and others interested in bringing about changes in their school practices. Read more about the awards at www.cseindia.org.

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