

The Role of Environmental Education in Transition from Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism¹

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Abstract

Today, global environmental problems are seriously perceived in everyfields of daily life so people extremely need to gain awareness on this issue. Although bans and laws are effective enough in combating environmental problems, the desired results can not be reached without changing people's environmental perspectives. Anthropocentric view has brought together many of the major environmental disasters and has led to the destruction and exploitation of nature for the sake of more profit. However, people can not cope with environmental problems those they caused. Disappearing ecosystems, disrupted natural balance, desertification and endangered species threaten future generations. Without changing environmental perspective of the community, producing permanent solutions to environmental problems is difficult. Environmental education will be able to guide the activities to be performed to prevent environmental problems. Environmentally-conscious generations by environmental education could play an active role in solving environmental problems in the future. These generations will not be the cause of these problems but part of the solution. In this theoretical study, the role of environmental education in transition from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism will be dicussed.

Keywords: Environmental Problems, Environmental Education, Community, Future

1. Introduction

There are many important effects of anthropocentric views in current size of environmental problems. Destroyed natural resources and polluted nature for the sake of more profit is the main cause of the current global disaster. With continuous human intervention against nature with the help of developing technology and science threatens future generations. Despite all the legal measures and penalties, unfortunately the desired outcomes can not be achieved in the prevention of environmental problems. To achieve permanent solutions for the prevention of these problems, primarily it is necessary to modify people's views against environment. Effective solutions for the future will only be given such a measure. At this point environmental education is of great importance. People's point of views can be changed only through education. Generations given environmentally conscious through environmental education could play a key role in the prevention of environmental problems. They will be able to see the real causes of environmental problems and will be able to internalize the importance of ecocentrism for the sustainability of life.

2. The Relationship Between Environmental Problems and Anthropocentrism

All living things are dependent on the environment they live. Environment is the totality of all the factors that impact on the life of an organism or organisms (Çepel, 1996: 41). Environment is the physical, biological, social, economic and cultural atmosphere in which people and other creatures interact with each other (Republic of Turkey Environmental Law). Environment is all kinds of biotic and abiotic factors (social, cultural, historical, climatic, physical) affecting a living organism or organisms during their lives (Yücel and Morgil 1998: 84). The concept of environment describes mutual relationships of people, people interactions with other organisms, air, water, soil, underground resources and mutual relations with the climate and the interaction within the framework of this relationship (Keleş, Hamamcı ve Çoban, 2009: 52). As it can be seen from the definitions and explanations, environmental concept represents a very big significance for all living things.

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Despite being part of the environment like other living things, human unfortunately gives great damage on the environment for the sake of more profit. Humans' insatiable desire for wealth lies On the basis of the environmental problems that threaten the future of all living things.

Anthropocentrism is based on two fundamental assumptions. These assumptions are (Önder, 2003: 148):

- Man and his values are the source of all values,
- Using nature to satisfy the human desire is legitimate.

According to anthropocentrism, human must dominate nature by overcoming the obstacles with the help of technology. Therefore, nature is transformed into a useful format for human. Unlimited confidence in science and technology is necessary. Humans are the central or most significant species on the planet. All the beings in nature and the other species are the vehicles or the resources to be used for the purpose of serving the interest of humans. Nature has only instrumental value (Keleş, Hamamcı ve Çoban, 2009: 74- 75). Thus environmental problems are occurred. In fact, environmental problems are occurred from exploiting environmental values for more profit and keeping the individual interests superior to the common interest of society (Geray, 1997: 323-324). However, humans are part of nature, although they try to be dominant. Therefore humans must use their environmental values in the most appropriate format. Right of use doesn't give the authority to destroy (Keleş, Hamamcı ve Çoban, 2009:229).

Nature has come to the point of exhaustion as a result of pressures by human. Human needs nature to survive but nature doesn't need human. Nature can survive without human. Natural resources can govern themselves and each are renewed in each specific systems. This feature ensures the stability and continuity of each system. Pressures can only come from outside the system (Aruoba, 1997: 175). Relying on their knowledge and technical progress humans try to dominate nature since the beginning. Humans have long-lived unaware of their harm to nature. When the pressure of technological developments on nature in the 20th century reach dangerous levels, humans have only recently become aware of the problems that reached to a level threatening the future of humanity. Today maintaining harmony with nature is a necessity not a requirement. Humans are able to notice that survival without air, water and soil is impossible (Keleş ve Hamamcı, 1993: 13-14). Humans should behave consciously against unavoidable environmental disasters. Instead of anthropocentrism, the adoption of ecocentrism by the society is of great importance for safer and healthier tomorrows.

3. The Concept of Ecocentrism

With the concept of ecosystem, living and nonliving nature began to be seen as a single entity and a system. An ecosystem can be described simply as the collection of all living and non-living components in a particular area. Accordingly, a sea, a lake or an island can be considered as ecosystem. For example, the Mediterranean, or the Euphrates River along with its basin is an ecosystem in itself. Ecosphere is one of the largest ecosystem units. The Earth is an ecosystem. Formed with all the seas, lands, inland waters, living-nonliving organisms world is also called the biosphere which means living sphere. The concept of ecosystem has brought holistic approach to ecology. Today, for the solution of environmental problems, holistic approach is not an option, it has become a necessity (Özerkmen, 2002: 180). The holistic approach requires ecocentrism rather than anthropocentrism for society.

Only human being has intrinsic value for anthropocentrism. Creatures other than human are considered as tools that can be used to address human needs. However, ecocentrism is based on the intrinsic value approach and in this approach creatures other than human beings have intrinsic value and ecocentrism is completely opposed to the instrumentalization of nature (Şakacı, 2013). Human is not above or outside the nature, he is a part of it for ecocentrism. Human is a species and his species features do not make him more valuable or more important than the other species. Ecocentrism requires respect for all beings in nature. Technology is seen as the source of environmental problems in ecocentrism (Keleş, Hamamcı ve Çoban, 2009: 74). This view takes humans, living and nonliving organisms as a whole in the system approach and other creatures independent from benefits to human are considered valuable because of their existence (Ergün ve Çobanoğlu, 2012: 91). For sustainability of life on earth and safer tomorrows humans should respect such integrity. Environmental education will be able to guide to the works to be done in this way.

4. Environmental Education and Its Effect on Ecocentrism

Education is one of the most important tools that can change human behavior in the desired direction. Especially when it comes to increasing environmental awareness, the desired results can be taken by education. Extensive conscious and awareness should be targeted for every people ranging from children to adults with environmental education. When the informative programs which will be rapidly applied with the aid of communication devices are firstly provided for children, it can be possible to get favorable outcomes after a few generations. And with the adults' education, when the natural awareness is extended, the perspectives for the problems will be under control and appropriate policies can be generated. Our future assurance and the persistence of human being can only be provided with such precautions and conscious (Alpagut, 1997: 118-119).

For acquiring environmentally conscious environmental education activities are of great importance. Environmental education can be defined as a lifelong interdisciplinary approach that is conscious about the environment and environmental concerns, contributive about the available environmental problems and it has the purpose of developing a world population which has the preventive knowledge, skill, manner, incentive, personal and social mission and responsibilities against the new formations (Deniş ve Genç, 2010: 9). Environmental education is educational efforts to raise awareness of individuals about the environment they live in (Gülay ve Önder, 2011: 47). The basis of environmental education is for protection of nature and natural resources and it not only informs people but also affects their behaviors. The primary aim of environmental education can be stated as forming favorable and permanent behavioral change and making individuals active participator in the solution of problems (Şimşekli, 2004: 84).

Environmental education includes some practices those develop individuals on taking suitable decisions and demonstrating positive behaviors about the issues related to environmental quality (Hart, 2007: 690). The necessity of environmental education can be said to be acknowledged almost all over the world. In every field of life and in every grade from preschool to university, environmental education gains importance. Primarily, the environmental sensibility that is available in society is expected to be increased with the environmental education (Gülay & Önder, 2011, p. 47). One of the main objectives of environmental education is to look through ecological point of view to the nature (Karakaya ve Çobanoğlu, 2012: 29). Environmental education aimed at producing a citizenry that is knowledgeable concerning to bio-physical environment and its associated problems, aware of how to help solve these problems, and motivated to work toward their solution. Major objectives of environmental education are to promote the people to develop and/or acquire (Erdoğan, 2009: 29-30):

- A clear understanding that man is an inseparable part of a system, consisting of man, culture, the biophysical environment, and that man has the ability to alter the interrelationship of this system,
- A broad understanding of the biophysical environment, both natural and man-made, and its role in contemporary society,
- A fundamental understanding of the biophysical environmental problems confronting man, how these problems can be solved, and their responsibilities of citizens and government to work toward their solution,
- Attitudes of concern for quality of the biophysical environment which will motivate citizens to participate in biophysical environmental problem-solving (Erdoğan, 2009: 29-30).

According to Belgrade Charter which was published after a workshop organized under the patronage of UNESCO in Belgrade, the objectives of environmental education are (Mason, 2008: 34):

- **Awareness:** to help individuals and social groups acquire an awareness of and sensitivity to the total environment and its allied problems.
- **Knowledge:** to help individuals and social groups acquire basic understanding of the total environment, its associated problems and humanity's critically responsible presence and role in it.
- **Attitude:** to help individuals and social groups acquire social values, strong feelings of concern for the environment and the motivation for actively participating in its protection and improvement.
- **Skills:** to help individuals and social groups acquire the skills for solving environmental problems.
- **Evaluation ability:** to help individuals and social groups evaluate environmental measures and education programmes in terms of ecological, political, economic, social, esthetic and educational factors.
- **Participation:** to help individuals and social groups develop a sense of responsibility and urgency regarding environmental problems to ensure appropriate action to solve those problems (Mason, 2008: 34).

The environmental education as a part of lifelong education must be prior to every stage of active participation of individuals and the participation process of individuals both as an educator and a participant with reference to the point that every individual has the right of environmental education and instruction as indicated in the constitution. Environmental education can be applied in manufactories, fields, work places and on the job with this aim. New manners and behaviors about the environment can be gained in the scope of that act. An appropriate environment can be provided for educating society about those issues at the education focused centers such as social education and development centers, public councils, village councils, city councils and the environmental residences. In the scope of environmental education, trips for learning natural environment and history, videos, films, walks, climbing, writings, paintings and photography competitions can be arranged. Museums, libraries, national parks and ruins can be used for this aim. In this context, it can be clearly said that environmental educators should have different features from teachers in the class. Primarily, environmental educators, who should have the sensibility for the environment, must have an interdisciplinary environmental education and this has a dramatic importance for making connection between various professional fields and environmental problems. Teachers are expected to be leader in the revealing the environmental problems, in the process of solution with them, and in the activation of required attempts and actions (Geray, 1997: 333-337).

When considering the definitions and goals of environmental education, its role in converting anthropocentrism to ecocentrism can be understood easily. A community given environmental awareness through environmental education can clearly see the main causes of environmental problems and can internalize an idea of a harmonious coexistence with the environment is of great importance for the future of all living beings.

5. Conclusion

Ecosystems are the planet's life support systems for the human species and all other forms of life. Human biology has a fundamental need for food, water, clean air, shelter and relative climatic constancy. Other health benefits include those derived from having a full complement of species, intact watersheds, climate regulation and genetic diversity. Stresses on freshwater sources, food-producing systems and climate regulation could cause major adverse health impacts (WHO, 2005).

Today's environmental problems arose from the lifestyles of human being. As a result of these, public health has been endangered and ecological balance has been lost slowly. This threat has initiated a movement in educational system in order to consider environmental education. Therefore, environmental education has been recently strongly emphasized and has been taken into consideration when planning school curriculum by the developed and developing countries. Further, environmental education has been recently attracted much attention by most people such as children, teachers and parents, and by governments and organizations (Erdoğan, 2009: 9).

As a result of pollution and destruction of nature in line with human interests, environmental problems have reached an unmanageable size and complexity. Today it is necessary that people should accept as a must of nature conservation and development for their own future. Otherwise future generations will have no chance to live in a safe environment. In this context, anthropocentrism should be left as soon as possible and human should admit the intrinsic value of nature. Humans can integrate with nature by internalizing ecocentrism and can actively participate in the solution of environmental problems. In this way, they will not be the source of problems but parts of the solution. Environmental education should be generalized within the scope of formal and non-formal education in all educational institutions, private and public sectors. This raising awareness movement will be able to shed light on a safer and healthier tomorrows. Generations can integrate with ecocentrism only with environmental education. Supporting these efforts by local governments, universities, non governmental organizations and service sectors will strengthen the impact of environmental education in the community.

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