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Links between Environmental Education in Formal Education and Environmental Volunteering Engagement

Volunteering is considered to be an important, beneficial, and crucial tool that brings value to one's life experience. Academic studies aiming to discover the motivations and benefits behind one's involvement in volunteering determine that : "In any case, it (volunteering) currently represents an important means of participating in civil society and has been suggested as an indicator of societal health, with research suggesting positive relationships between levels of voluntary activity, physical health and life satisfaction" (Whiteley, 2004).

This report focuses on Environmental Volunteering (EV), one of volunteering's many forms. In particular, this report focuses on the educational and activist aspects of EV, exploring what Environmental Education (EE) is and its benefits. This knowledge will then be used to research how EE improves and stimulates more participation in EV. This report will focus particularly on the importance of children's EE and how doing so correctly will define our planet's future.

According to the North American Association for Environmental Education, EE is *"a process which promotes the analysis and understanding of environmental issues and questions as the basis for effective education, problem-solving, policy-making, and management [...] In the broader context, environmental education's purpose is to assist in the development of a citizenry conscious of the scope and complexity of current and emerging environmental problems and supportive of solutions and policies which are ecologically sound"* (US EPA, 2022). EE is crucial to the efficiency and sustainability of EV: *"A second major type of environmental volunteering concerns community education on a given topic"* (Measham and Barnett, 2007). Indeed, the more aware and knowledgeable one becomes about an issue, the more likely one will behave according to that acquired knowledge. This is extremely important, especially when considering children's education and the valuable eco-conscious habits that need to be implemented not just for them, but for everyone: *"The importance of environmental education is that it sensitises us to the causes and effects of problems which, for too long, we have been only dimly aware. The environment is about children's future and many already know that we must encourage them to think positively about it [...] what needs to be done to reduce the damage we do to it, what opportunities there are for improving the quality of our surroundings - and to come up with practical solutions"* (Strong, 1998). Strong's analysis concludes that if environmental issues are taught in a simpler but more effective way, individuals are more likely to act in order to protect that environment. Theoretically speaking, if EE programmes and initiatives are carried out correctly and expandingly, we have the possibility to reach an outcome where we have raised the next generation to be autonomous environmental volunteers, because they would have been taught the right habits from early on, which would have been formed sustainably around this preventive knowledge. Encouraging a passion for improvements in daily habits promotes and raises curious and eco-friendly consumers, and this starts with our children's education: *"The Henley Centre (1994) research indicated a high level of interest in the environment amongst young people"* (Strong, 1998).

Therefore, as the future of our environment lies in the hands of the upcoming generations, the above literature encourages the formation of good eco-friendly habits from their youngest age. It is

especially crucial nowadays, with the pressing question of global warming and the destruction of natural resources, that the growing generation is taught how to become advocates for the environment: *“This change of perspective spawned calls for education that fosters citizen willingness and ability to participate in maintaining a clean and healthy environment-not just for humans, but for all life”* (Archie, Valley and McCrea, n.d.). Showing young people that there is a different possible way than what we have been taught, and than what our current system may encourage us to do: *“Therefore, the aim of environmental education is to make students capable of envisioning alternative ways of development and to be able to participate in acting according to these objectives”* (Jensen and Schnack, 2006). The reasons behind most environmental issues have stemmed from a lack of understanding, leading to over-consumerist habits and subsequent destruction: *“This catastrophe has been associated to inappropriate knowledge, ignorance and retributive attitudes towards environmental issues”* (Dr. Kimiti and Kipkoeh, 2013). Therefore, the aim of EE is to enable a more global vision of teaching environmental challenges, which in turn will assist governments in meeting their environmental objectives. EE is crucial not only to ensure a better future for our environment, further teaching social skills that promote a sense of community. There are so many different cultural, socio-economic, and political backgrounds within one neighbourhood, one region, one school, but EE, helps representing the values of EV by encouraging for more tolerance, understanding of one another and the environment we are part of by strengthening our civic engagement, which are all values part of volunteering: *“With its emphasis on communication, inquiry, and collaborative problem-solving skills, environmental education must help learners develop the capacity to understand and respect different perspectives, to communicate across cultures, and to understand difference as a potential asset”* (Archie, Valley and McCrea, n.d.).

Implementing and encouraging the values of EV and its EE aspect has been recognised by the Italian government. Recently, Italy officially implemented the study of climate change in their schools. Promoting EV as much as possible through specially-dedicated school programmes and courses, since: *“Climate change is an imperative topic amongst young people, and according to UNESCO, education is an essential element of the global response to climate change”*(TIRADO OROPEZA, 2019). Introducing such school programmes, can encourage and stimulate children by teaching them skills and knowledge that they can execute and that would serve them in their everyday lives: *“This is why the aim of environmental education must be to make present and future citizens capable of acting on a societal as well as a personal level”* (Jensen and Schnack, 2006).

EE feeds directly into EV. To promote more volunteering, including EE programmes in schools could encourage the collaboration between both schools and their local environmental groups and initiatives. This provides children with immersive experiences and stimulates a passion for environmental care by linking them directly with groups in charge. Such activities could range from picking up waste on the beach or in the streets, to teaching them how to become conscious buyers and consumers. These programmes must be made more interactive and immersive, to allow connections to be made with the civic-engagement and community-strengthening aspect of both EE and EV.

EE contributes to the activism of EV; One could say that education encourages action. If children learn about environmental issues and have their awareness raised from a young age, they could be more inclined to act on it and participate in active volunteering. According to a research targeting Hungarian high school and university students, the relationship between environmental knowledge and its predictable influence on improved environmental attitude may be variable: *“An increase in knowledge about environmental problems may raise peoples’ concern and awareness however, it does not necessarily result in behavioural changes.”* (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Bamberg and Möser, 2007). However, some studies say that more EE could create environmental-related anxiety in children. According to their research: *“Studies made in several Nordic countries in recent years indicate that this is an inadequate way of presenting the problem. It is not so much a question of creating anxiety during environmental education. The problem is more how to handle the anxiety and worry which students already feel.”* (Jensen and Schnack, 2006), that anxiety would prevent children from being encouraged to take action to participate in environmental-friendly behaviours and initiatives, resulting in an unwanted and counter-productive reaction. Despite this worry, it has been proven that when knowledge is shown to be applicable and interactive, the interest in the topic becomes long term and sustainable: *“attitude-focused teaching methods can be more successful in evoking behaviour changes in students than the use of purely knowledge-oriented tools”* (Zsóka, Marjainé, Széchy and Kocsis, 2012). Therefore, if EE is taught in schools, connecting it to the activism part of EV will encourage more contribution in children to become environmental volunteers, because it will provide students with a trustworthy environment within which they can learn, make mistakes, acquire confidence and see the positive results that they have created for themselves and those around them: *“Therefore, there is a need for a form of teaching from which pupils acquire the courage, commitment and desire to get involved in the social interests concerning these subjects (naturally based on understanding and insight). They have to learn to be active citizens in a democratic society”* (Jensen and Schnack, 2006). EE should be taught as a programme that encourages everyone to make behavioural changes: *“The main goal of environmental education should thus be to engage students with a complex toolset – containing cognitive, affective and conative elements – which fosters behavioural change”* (Zsóka, Marjainé, Széchy and Kocsis, 2012).

Volunteering is generally considered to be a great thing, but not everyone believes that it is effective, that they have the time for it or that they want to dedicate their money or energy to it. Therefore, a solution could be to promote all volunteering, but especially environmental volunteering, as something that is more accessible and as something that anyone can do from their own home. It can start with aspects that are commonly seen as outcomes of good environmental education, such as changing environmental-unfriendly consumer behaviours, and through making small, individual efforts to change bad habits and think about the importance and the health of local communities and surroundings instead of choosing the bad habit known as the “easy option”. Before we realise, we could all become autonomous and self-proclaimed environmental volunteers in our own way.

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