

Sustaining our Future Resources: A look at the Importance of Educating Children in Sustainability

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Introduction

Many different aspects of sustainability are being brought into perspective everyday, however one very important issue isn't getting the necessary attention that it deserves. The issue is the need to teach sustainability and healthy eating at a much younger age than it is currently being taught. Most people don't learn about sustainability until they are far into their college years and although it is never too late to learn about bettering ourselves and our future; it is of the essence to begin education as early as possible. While many people have children, plan on having children, or at least have some interaction with children; there are many people who do not have any involvement with them. However, it's a hard fact to argue with that children are the future ambassadors of our world. Because the whole world's future rides on future generations taking care of it, it brings into view the magnitude of importance in teaching our children sustainability.

Issue Statement

The basis of the issue is that people are not being educated on sustainability until they are well into adulthood and in many cases they are not being educated at all. To remedy this issue it deems important to begin educating people on

sustainability in early childhood. It is possible to begin sustainability education as early as children enter school, although it is up to the parents to introduce the importance of sustainability before a child goes to school. While major sustainability issues such as changing the way a whole country sustains their resources may be a little daunting for a young child to learn, it is possible to slowly introduce smaller, easier to understand issues. Thus allowing the children to learn many important solutions to sustainability issues over time. While other countries either an already developed sustainability curriculum or are beginning to develop one, there are very few places in the U.S. that have one in place. Consequently leading to few children learning the importance of sustainability.

Research testimony

A few researchers have begun to perform studies on the affects of teaching sustainability and healthy eating through out grade schools to demonstrate the importance of carrying this knowledge into adulthood. In one particular study discussed in the article, *"Food sustainability education as a route to healthier eating: evaluation of a multi-component school programme in English primary schools"* examines the introduction of curriculum involving healthy eating that eventually lead to lessons in sustainability. To initiate these subjects the school began giving cooking classes which allowed the children to chose which foods to use, thus giving them hands on knowledge of which foods are healthier over others to eat. This knowledge then lead into learning about food sustainability. The authors of this

article states that,

“Overall, the results show that the programme was associated with a range of school reforms. In most cases, training, facilities, participation and student exposure to sustainable food issues increased over the course of the evaluation period” (5, M. Jones, N. Dailami, E. Weitkamp, D. Salmon, R. Kimberlee, A. Morley, and J. Orme).

This study demonstrates the ability of children to both learn and comprehend the need for healthy eating and the capability to practice sustainability. They were also able to connect the two ideas together to impact their little society within the school, branching out into their home life. The authors further discuss the areas in which there were great results to be had.

“Working on a wide range of issues at the same time, programme-related outputs were evidenced in multiple settings- such as the classroom, the dining room and the after- school club. The focus on sustainability appears to have mobilized change among different agents – whether these are among student peer groups, catering teams or social networks. This reflects a health promotion approach in which there is a synergy of effort at multiple levels” (10).

This curriculum not only taught the children the need for healthy eating and sustainability, but to apply it to different areas of life. It gave them a healthier outlook on life and promoted unity among their peers.

Other studies have shown schools that are branching out of the kitchen and into the great out doors to teach the importance of sustainability. In doing so these educators are teaching the children how to solve problems on their own and to help the world around them. Sue Elliot discusses in her article “*Early Childhood education for Sustainability - Reflections from Downunder*” the benefits to this type of

education. Elliot states,

“Australia firmly linked this transformative agenda to early childhood EfS (Education for Sustainability) and advocated that children can be ‘problem seekers, problem solvers and action takers in their own environments’. EfS was no longer just in and about the environment but for the environment and it was more than simply adding another curriculum component or leafy green play experience. Holistic images of young children as active participants and decision-makers in their sociocultural systems with competencies to act for the environment became foundational. Meaningful play-based experiences facilitated by insightful practitioners invited transformative learning and a sense of empowerment” (Elliot).

This curriculum has affected all of the students that have passed through it, teaching them the importance of caring for and maintaining the world around them so that it will sustain not only them but also future generations. These changes allow children to learn how to not only solve the problems at hand but also to seek out other problems that need taken care of; giving them a sense of accomplishment and a greater love of learning.

When we learn what we love and love what we do we are able to develop a sense of accomplishment and pride in it. When we’re able to grow the foods that we love we are not only sustaining our lives, we are sustaining our very souls. While it is incredibly important to teach the value of nature and sustaining our food systems, it is also important to teach children how to eat healthily, how to judge what is healthy and what is not, and which foods offer the most sustainability. One such way is to teach children to delve into where their food actually comes from. In all of this we are able to take pride in what we grow and eat. Wendell Berry discusses this concept in his paper, “The Pleasures of Eating.”

“The pleasure of eating should be an extensive pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet. People who know the garden in which their vegetables have grown and know that the garden is healthy will remember the beauty of the growing plants, perhaps in the dewy first light of morning when gardens are at their best. Such a memory involves itself with the food and is one of the pleasures of eating. The knowledge of the good health of the garden relieves and frees and comforts the eater... A significant part of the pleasure of eating is one’s accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes. The pleasure of eating, then, may be the best available standard of our health” (234).

We have to love what we’re doing to be able to be successful at it. We not only need to love the food we eat and grow, we need to love where our food comes from, the Earth, so that we are motivated to sustain it. In doing so we will share that love with others including our children and other future generations.

Solution for Sustainability Issue

To solve the issue of the lack of sustainability training, we first must start out small. We must not throw the weight of the world on the children’s shoulders, but utilize their sense of wonderment and enjoyment for learning by slowly introducing ideas that further sustainability. By offering small but important steps, children are able to jump whole heartedly into the concept of creating a more sustainable world. Even the youngest of children can learn to be sustainably conscientious. One study done with a school in Australia; shows the impact of teaching kindergarten aged children the importance of creating a sustainability enriched school environment. Dr. Julie M. Davis discusses in her article “*What might education for sustainability look like in early childhood? A Case for participatory, whole-of-settings approaches*” the importance of such education and what happened in one such case study that

surveyed young children learning sustainability. Dr. Davis states,

“early childhood is a period when the foundations of thinking, being, knowing and acting are becoming ‘hard wired’ and relationships – with others and with the environment- are becoming established. It is also a time for providing significant groundings for adult activism around environmental issues. If children are to grow up in a world that maximizes their life opportunities, that recognizes their capacities as active citizens, and nurtures hope, peace, equity and sustainability... children need to be seen and heard in their communities around a wide range of social and environmental issues of concern to them. It also observes that responsible citizenship is not something suddenly given at eighteen years of age” (2-3).

Therefore, it is not only important to teach the necessity of sustainability but it is also crucial to teach children that they should be able to express their opinions, thoughts, and fears of the world around them.

In the same article, Dr. Davis discusses some of the procedures that had been conducted with the young children and how the children were able to flourish with the new sustainable curriculum, which they named *Sustainable Planet Project*, and establish their own class rules. The teachers implemented a few tasks to begin with but then the children took off with many ideas of their own. They observed actions that may have seemed small at first but when given a closer look were quite large. The children discovered that they were pouring out more water than they were consuming which lead to them creating a project for water conservation as a whole. These actions lead into even greater ideas of sustainability, which aided in changing the perspectives of everyone involved. Dr. Davis states that,

“Other results of the *Sustainable Planet Project* have been improvements to the children’s play spaces and to the ‘eco-friendliness’ of the outdoor environment. Not only are the grounds developing into a habitat for local flora and fauna, the changes have also provided multiple new opportunities for provoking the children’s (and

adults) curiosity about the natural environment, have enhanced learning about the natural processes, and have contributed to the development of environmental sensitivity and social responsibility - important qualities for sustainable living” (6, Davis).

This has not only taught these children the importance of sustainability but it has also given them a sense of responsibility and the confidence to be able to improve the world around them. Dr. Davis goes on to discuss that not only were these improvements happening within the school but the children were also taking the ideas home with them and implementing a sustainable future with their parents and siblings. Through these advancements the children were able to learn and grow in a fashion that hadn't been available to them before the project had been brought into play.

The curriculum for the *Sustainable Planet Project* that has been previously discussed was further examined by Dr. Julie M. Davis in her article “Educating for sustainability in the early years: Creating cultural change in a child care setting.” Dr. Davis previously had discussed how the children and educators at a school in Australia had implemented a new sustainability curriculum that changed the way their everyday routines were completed. In her new article Dr. Davis discusses further actions in which the children involved themselves in. Such as learning morality along with sustaining resources. One such case involved the children discovering a stolen shopping cart in their playground, which lead them to take action against the thieves by writing letters and creating posters. In the conclusion of her article Dr. Davis discusses that the process of implementing the sustainability curriculum and teaching the children how to better their world, has derived over

almost an entire decade. This sort of processes isn't one that changes people overnight, it takes small baby steps to make these kinds of changes. Dr. Davis states that,

“As this study has shown, creating change at Campus Kindergarten has been incremental, iterative and small scale - an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process, advancing slowly over almost a decade... Rather than change occurring through revolutionary processes where the old is quickly ushered out by radical reforms and replaced by new processes and structures, it emanates from the history of the organization and the people interacting in it; a combination of tradition and innovation underpinned by the quality of the people and relationships already in an organization. For these reasons, change is much more likely to be slow, small scale and imperfect, reflecting the complex, dynamic nature of the setting in which change is occurring. This signifies a process of slowly-emerging cultural change with success vacillating between stability and disorder, where uncertainty is seen as inevitable; and creativity, innovation and change are normal rather than aberrant” (10).

Through this article and case study we are able to see the benefits of teaching children at a very young age the process and importance of sustainability. Young children are not only able to understand many of the concepts of sustainability but are able to make good decisions on which problems need fixing. In doing so they are able to create and assist adults in creating a better world both for themselves but also for future generations.

Benefits

The benefits of teaching sustainability and healthy eating to young children are vast. Young children's minds are full of imagination and creativity; they are also completely enthusiastic to learn anything and everything they can get a hold of. When one begins teaching a young child healthy eating and sustainability they are

setting up that child for a healthy and beneficial lifestyles. Once introduced to the topic and idea of sustainability children are able to implement procedures within their schools, peer groups, and even at home. With this topic focus children are given a sense of responsibility, a stronger morality, and the benefit of being able to carry on a sustainable future.

Conclusion

While there are a number of campaigns to teach healthy eating habits, most people in the United States do not learn about sustainability until they are well into their college years, if they even learn about it at all. Many times people will have only heard of a sustainable future in passing and couldn't tell you what that would even mean. There are quite a few countries, mainly the UK and Australia; that have begun teaching the benefits of healthy eating and sustainability to children as young kindergarten. Through the research and case studies given we are able to see that young children are not only able to understand sustainability but are also able to implement procedures within their own little world. Teaching children sustainability as young as we are able to allows the children to learn many important solutions to sustainability issues over time. Studies show that the introduction of curriculum involving healthy eating may eventually lead to lessons in sustainability. To initiate these subjects one such school began giving cooking classes which allowed the children to chose which foods to use, thus giving them hands on knowledge of which foods are healthier over others to eat. This knowledge then leads into learning about food sustainability. In being given this

opportunity the students were also able to connect the two ideas of healthy eating and sustainability together to impact their little society within the school, branching out into their home life. This curriculum thus gave them a healthier outlook on life and promoted unity among their peers.

Other studies that have been done demonstrate curriculum that has branched out of the school buildings and into the great outdoors to teach the importance of sustainability. In doing so these educators are teaching the children how to solve problems on their own and to help the world around them. These lessons have affected all of the students that have passed through it, teaching them the importance of caring for and maintaining the world around them so that it will sustain not only them but also future generations. When we're able to grow the foods that we love we are not only sustaining our lives, we are sustaining our very souls. While it is incredibly important to teach the value of nature and growing food to sustain our food systems, it is also important to teach children how to eat healthily, how to judge what is healthy and what is not, and which foods offer the most sustainability. Young children are not only able to understand many of the concepts of sustainability but are able to make good decisions on which problems need fixing. In doing so they are able to create and assist adults in creating a better world both for themselves but also for future generations. In thus regards it deems to be stated that it would be exceedingly beneficial to implement a similar curriculum into United States school systems. Teaching healthy eating and sustainability for future generations.

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