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“IS IT A DREAM OR REALITY?”: INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE ACTIVITY-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMMES IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlighted the challenges faced by students with disabilities in tertiary institutions in as much as their participation in environmental activities on and off campus. Population and lifestyle changes have led to more critical ecological problems. The role of education must be considered when debating environmental issues, such as the impacts of ecological changes and challenges. Tertiary education institutions play an integral role in minimizing environmental problems. Education institutions contribute and play a vital role in the nation's growth. Experiencing disability can significantly disrupt education attainment, including environmental education, and prospects of the young generation, thus leading to lifelong social and economic disadvantage. Environmental conservation is a collective responsibility for everyone to ensure that the environment is used sustainably. Therefore, the public, including people with disabilities, needs to be sensitized regarding the multiple dimensions of environmental development through participation in the activities-based program. Similarly, tertiary education institutions can provide environmental education through curricula and collaborative efforts with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in particular areas. The education acquired will help create awareness and understanding of the environmental issues among students with disabilities and the entire community. The primary objective of this paper is to highlight the extent to which students with disabilities are involved in activity-based environmental programs. Also, it examined the efforts taken by tertiary institutions in educating students with disabilities on activity-based ecological programs. A qualitative approach was employed to reflect the arguments on environmental issues for students with disabilities. Hence, the content abstraction method was used in this review paper to assemble data. More focus was on secondary data from reports, articles, journals, and books associated with the subject. The findings show that differently-abled students rarely participate in activities-based environmental programs in higher learning institutions.

Keywords: Environmental Awareness, Environmental Education, Differently-Abled Students/Students with Disabilities, Impact of Environmental Education and Environmental Conservation, Activity-Based Environmental Programs.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to critically reflect on the link between students with disabilities and environmental awareness by explicitly focusing on their participation in activities-based programs. It also traces the impacts of poor relations between man and the environment due to alarming societal environmental trends. Thus, this review paper reflects on the collective effects of environmental awareness and environmental issues on students with disabilities in Assam. As much as it reflects and highlights the hands-on environmental education for students with disabilities, this paper also offers insights into how ecological education promotes the expansion of the knowledge, understanding and attitude desirable for students with disabilities to care for the environment. To develop a world which guarantees environmental fortification and preservation, integrating the standards essential in sustainable development into all aspects and stages of education. Generally, education is a momentous tool to enable students with disabilities to be cognizant of the environment. Therefore, activities-based environmental education and students with disabilities are the focus of this study.

Background and the Current Status of Tertiary Institutions and Students with Disabilities in Emerging Economies

The world is transforming, while on the other hand, the obliteration of natural resources is going on at an alarming rate, resulting in untenable development. Human society now faces critical environmental snags such as climate alteration, the attenuation of natural resources, and pollution, among others. Ecological challenges are due to the constantly growing population and modification of lifestyles, consequently leading to environmental glitches.

Education is one of the significant ways of plummeting the problems. It is one of the powerful features of the country's advancement. Tertiary education is a higher level of education whereby students can use their knowledge to solve various life challenges, including environmental problems (Jadhar et al., 2014). Environmental conservation and protection are collective responsibilities. Therefore, people with incumbrances should actively participate in nature safeguarding. However, environmental protection can be successfully practised when students with disabilities are exposed to environmental issues through activities-based



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education programs, mainly to conserve nature and use it responsibly. Environmental education allows the participation and learning of all groups in the community regardless of their disabilities and diversities (UNESCO, 1997).

Additionally, it leads to well-versed citizenship and environmental literacy, ethical consciousness, and a more sustainable culture (UNESCO, 2018). Environmental education plays a vital role in solving environmental challenges. It exposes apprentices with disabilities to nature and the world outside the teaching space. However, depending on the nature and severity of the disability, some challenges might emerge for teachers and learners themselves.

Chapman and Pease (n.d) assert that people with disabilities require an exceptional educational environment with suitable techniques to enable participation in activities-based programs. The approach for imparting environmental education to learners with disabilities should likely be quietly different from other learners in regular classes. The case of Assam was used to assess the extent to which students with disabilities are aware of the environmental issues and participate in hands-on environmental activities programs which impact their subsists. The Ministry of Human Resource Development report shows that the enrolment of students with disabilities in higher learning institutions in North East India increased by 100 per cent between 2011-2012 and 2013-2014. Assam is one of the largest states in the North East and has a much higher number of people with disabilities than other states (Indian Census, 2011).

The report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Brazil in 1992 insists that the member states should promote community awareness and strengthen training related to environment and environmental education. During the 42nd Constitution Amendment in 1976, India incorporated environmental issues as a significant concern. The environment was given priority in National Policy Statements and Strategies, whereby in 1980, a Ministry of Environment and Forests was established. Previously environmental education was part of the school curriculum. However, in 2003, the Supreme Court of India endorsed that environmental education should be imparted in educational institutions as a compulsory subject (Sonowal, 2009).

In most cases, land degradation, pollution of air, water and soil, degradation of forests and the destruction of the landscape are significant environmental challenges facing India. Of interest is the new challenge of plastic waste and E-waste. The technological advancement of India and several Asian countries have put them at the forefront as much environmental deterioration is concerned. Environmental education empowers and engages the local communities, including students with disabilities, to participate in activities-based environmental programs. An all-inclusive approach with a rational and experiential plan would bring the projected outcome to the community.

Objectives

1. To examine the extent to which students with disabilities are involved in activity-based environmental programs in tertiary learning institutions.
2. To examine the efforts taken by tertiary institutions in educating students with disabilities on activity-based environmental programs.
3. To identify the challenges students with disabilities face during participation in activity-based environmental programs in natural settings.

Methods and Materials

A qualitative approach was used whereby secondary data were gathered from literature sources such as Reports of International Organizations and policies which focused on the educational rights of people with incapacities. Further, research papers, articles, and annual reports like UNESCO reports and Journal articles were used to search for data on the topic. The content analysis method was used for data collection. The researcher used keywords like environmental education, activities-based environmental program, students with disabilities and impacts of environmental education to search for data required for the study. An integrative literature review approach was used in coming up with this paper as the focus was not only on disability and environmental action but rather on articles focusing on the role of educational institutions.

Extensive evaluation of appropriate resources, including Journal articles, International Conference presentations, and other papers accessible in cyberspace on environmental education awareness among people with disabilities, were employed in collecting secondary data. The focus of this paper was on the factual and theoretical underpinnings of the reviewed articles. However, selection criteria were based on the relevance of articles to the subject matter regarding their contribution to environmental education for people with disabilities. The researcher imposed no date restrictions.



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Discussions and Findings

Students with impairments are one of the community's most ignored groups. However, they deserve equal access to high-quality education and actively participate in community movements (UNICEF, 2012). Activity-based environmental education is necessary to establish conditions that enable theoretical and practical instruction possible for differently-abled learners, which goes beyond nations and regions.

Globally, environmental sustainability is becoming an increasingly pressing concern. Higher education institutions play an essential role in promoting environmental sustainability. Universities can use their qualified staff and existing knowledge to address local and community-level environmental problems and concerns through research, outreach, and educational activities. Universities' courses address crucial information on environmental challenges. According to Jadhar et al. (2014), conservational education has been mandated for all undergraduate students in India.

Among the instructional tactics for fostering environmental consciousness are projects, a documentary depicting celebrations on an environmental day, exhibitions, seminars, conferences, and field trips. This concurs with the Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED) (2019) study, which describes how the number of environmental and sustainable development programmes at Arab institutions rose. Globally, research in higher education is an influential instrument for environmental development, particularly in the propagation of a healthy environment, the environmental sustainability of natural resources, and the protection of natural resources for the benefit of the entire community. Students have arguably been designated as the most ecologically concerned demographic. However, aside from classroom studies, little is known about the efforts made by higher education institutions to develop unique instruction methodologies to accommodate students with disabilities in activity-based environments. Education remains the primary instrument for transitioning to a more sustainable lifestyle that certifies harmony with the environment and balanced use of resources.

Students with Disabilities/Differently-abled Students

In as much as education remains the primary socialization instrument in the sustainable utilization of resources, the same social institution remains essential for the emancipation of less privileged and differently-abled members of the communities. As it may, disability is the functional restrictions which lead to an individual being unable to interact or make it difficult for a learner with a condition to perform certain activities and interact with the surrounding community. Disability hinders students' full participation on an equal basis with others, as stated by the Convention on The Rights of People with Disabilities (2006). Therefore, there is a need to reimagine, revisit, revitalize and re-engage the status of our educational institutions in developing nations. These often need more infrastructural prerequisites for enhancing sustainable environmental awareness for differently-abled and often marginalized students.

Indeed, education is an influential tool of community transformation and regularly initiates advancement in social structure. Considering the current environmental problems, it follows that environmental education needs to be Inclusive, implying that all students, including those with disabilities, should learn together in regular community educational locations with a suitable connection to care services. For environmental education to be practical and all-encompassing, the education system, educational structure, and practices must be flexible and more collaborative (National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), 2006). As such, students with disabilities are the most marginalized group in educational institutions. Thus, they are less likely to participate in and complete their education than their peers without disabilities.

Activity-based Environmental Education and its Essentials

Environment education is a long-life process that is based on practical fieldwork to be performed to respond to environmental problems occurring around the globe. Consequently, environmental education has become an essential part of the school curriculum worldwide (Karama, 2016). Environmental issues cover several groups of people, including students with disabilities. For sustainable development, environmental education is vital since it enables people to be conscious and exercise environmentally sustainable actions. Tertiary institutions are the level of education where students are changed socially and advanced. More emphasis should be on knowledge, sustainable growth and preservation. Environmental education should be practical and action-based fieldwork. Green campus is one of the immediate actions to promote sustainability and environmental conservation for everyone, including students with disabilities. Such opportunities develop students' awareness, values, attitudes and skills with the essence of reducing environmental impacts.

UNESCO (1978) view environmental education as a knowledge process that upsurges people's familiarity and consciousness with the environment and its encounters. Such education also establishes essential skills that assist in tackling environmental



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challenges such as changing climate, improving environmental motivations, and commitment to make knowledgeable choices and to be accountable (Borah, 2007). Environmental education involves the inclusion of environmental content in the educational system to enhance students' cognizance of environmental issues at all learning levels. Environmental education is essential in building responsible citizenship behaviour, which is integral to sustainable communities.

Activity-based environmental education allows people to explore environmental problems, find solutions to problems, and take proper actions to recover the situation. It is one of the significant ways to help reduce environmental problems caused by the poor relationship between man and the environment (Erhabor & Don, 2016). Environmental education aims to empower students to meet their needs, maintain a quality environment, acquire skills to alleviate environmental snags and participate in practising general knowledge and connected environmental glitches. There should be part of educational institutions' curricula. Youths who are environmentally vigilant and empowered can be potentially more excellent agents of transformation adaptation for the long-term conservation and stewardship of the environment. Therefore, environmental teaching which encourages such adaptation to transformation will allow learners with and without disabilities to have a more significant contribution to environmental issues within the community. Hence, educational institutions must enhance and develop environmental activities to build sustainable human capital for resilient communities.

Differently-abled students' access to and participation in hands-on environmental learning experiences are crucial because they contribute to a deeper appreciation of the interplay between the natural world and the consequences of human development (Shiderman, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to carry out activities-oriented programmes to empower and encourage creativity and interaction among youths (Berger, 2006). Dominguez and Schilling (2001) assert that having socially aware and engaged in conserving the environment requires education that shapes and changes human behaviour. Therefore, there is a need for the community to advocate inclusive practice and lessen the likelihood of marginalization for students.

Human developmental activities have brought about several problems in the environment. Many human activities have contributed to the current environmental predicament, including the massive cutting down of trees for various reasons, increased population, and increased pollution. Things like dwindling biodiversity, eroding soil, expanding deserts, ruined buildings from floods, and a generally unhealthful environment are all on the list (Erhabor & Don, 2016). According to Thompson and Hoffman (2003), Eco-friendly education encourages students to test their hypotheses and gain insights through experience. It requires active participation and inquiry on the part of the students. The environmental issues and impacts are learned within the milieu, which helps to advance real-world skills and the capability to evaluate the state of the environment. Students with special needs can benefit from environmental education because it raises their awareness of how their daily actions affect the environment.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have significantly contributed to public environmental education since 1970. Humans' actions have resulted in several negative consequences, including an ever-increasing human population and unsustainable ways of living, which contribute to the world's environmental crises. This consumes far more resources than can be replenished, and people's actions, such as excessive waste generation and polluting substances, harm the environment. Environmental education helps inform the public about the environmental issues due to human activity and natural causes. That is why it is crucial to look for potential solutions and, more importantly, to figure out how to safeguard the environment and make sensible, long-term use of nature (Garcia et al., 2017).

Of importance is the fact that environmental education based on fieldwork for students with disabilities in higher learning institutions needs to be prioritized. Going further step of using the special instructional strategy enables them to actively participate in every environmental movement conducted in the community. Adding to that, Shristi et al. (2020) shows that environmental education in higher learning institutions focuses more on the theoretical part rather than hands-on and mind-on activities (outdoor programmes). Several challenges may be behind this, like lack of teachers' training and the nature of the curriculum, which put more emphasis on the coverage of the syllabus. Thus, more efforts are being given to the theoretical side, leaving behind outdoor activities/programs where knowledge gained via theory will be applied and help comprehend the unpleasant outcome of the untenable habit of the surroundings.

This suggests that more lecture time is allocated to cover course material. However, the ability to interpret the curriculum contents and the teacher's initiative and creativity are crucial when planning outdoor activities like field trips. It is vital that today's young people, especially those with disabilities, learn to think logically and act on purpose in order to save resources and find solutions to environmental challenges they face in their everyday lives. However, there are environmental education clubs at several



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institutions; this does not necessarily mean that environmental education programmes involve physical activity. Since the university facilitates the formation of clubs, the program's character relies on the goodwill of its educators.

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Activities-based Environmental Programs

Environmental issues, specifically climatic change, have an immense impact on people with disabilities as they are often among the marginalized groups within society. Acquisition of environmental education will ensure awareness and understanding amongst students with disabilities and enable them to seek solutions for environmental challenges. UNESCO affirms that environmental education must be a fundamental curriculum by 2025 (UNESCO Report, 2021). Hands-on and minds-on experiences improve environmental education, whereby practical fieldwork is a curriculum enhancement over outdoor practices.

The Experiential Learning Theory

The experiential learning theory of David Allen Kolb is adopted to elucidate learning through practice. The theory stipulates that knowledge results from making meaning from direct experience and that learning are an amalgamation of involvement, perception, cognition and conduct. It offers field-based practices that link hypothesis and execution. Learning is a participatory process that permits students to interact with the physical environment. Adding to that, it focuses more on experience, the key motive in education, as information is created through transformative learning based on one's understanding of the matter (experience).

The Experiential Learning Theory has essential applications in the field of education. It is helpful in various fields, including in-field courses which are interactive and activity-based such as environmental education. Students have to link what is learned to real-world situations and realize the outcome of what is learned when it is subjected to practice. It is about transmitting theoretical knowledge into actionable results in knowledge attainment (Nelson & Staggers, 2018). Therefore, the Experiential Learning Theory has been adopted to analyze the execution of activity-based environmental education programs in higher learning institutions. However, research revealed that differently-abled students are engaged in outdoor/activity-based environmental programs in higher learning institutions in sporadic cases.

Higher learning institutions are expected to offer field-based programs concerning environmental protection and conservation. The purpose is to permit students with and without disabilities (differently-abled) to enthusiastically partake in practice apart from commonly faced in lecture class settings. Students are familiarized with several hypothetical environmental issues; however, applying the learned skills and techniques occurs when students are exposed to real-world settings. Experiential learning enables students to apply the fundamentals acquired skills in-class and use the techniques in the natural environment being studied. Thus, Kolb's theory is worth this paper as it helps to study the inclusion of students with disabilities in the activity-based environmental education performed by students at high learning levels.

The Inseparable Link between Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Environmental Action

Few studies specifically discuss the inclusion of differently-abled students in outdoor environmental programs, considering that every individual is predisposed to environmental challenges. Various Human Development Reports of 2007-08 do not discourse on the involvement of the individual with infirmities in acclimatizing to the altering environment (Wolbring, 2009). Individuals with disabilities need to comprehend their circumstances and be part of seeking a solution to the difficulties they face.

In many countries, NGOs have been working hand in hand with governmental agencies by establishing activities-oriented programs that expose youth to different aspects of environmental awareness, practices, and understanding. For instance, in Nepal, a local NGO, namely Environmental Companies for Conservation Awareness (ECCA), has been actively conducting outdoor environmental activities targeting differently-abled students/students with and without disabilities (National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), 2006). In Thailand, for example, research shows that graduate-level environmental education is a compulsory course for first-year students aiming to raise learners' awareness and understanding of environmental issues and challenges. UNESCO (1996) noted that almost all countries around the globe have initiated several environmental education and training programmes at the tertiary level of education. In different ways, many countries have responded to the challenges of the environment; however, the involvement of apprentices with incapacities in outdoor environmental activities at the tertiary level needs to be explicitly explained.

The Challenges of Incorporating "Disability" into "Environmental Curriculum."

Studies show that individuals with disabilities were formerly excluded from environmental education programmes, though awareness of disability has grown. In addition, implementing environmental education in schools in India, for example, has



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dramatically succeeded. However, few initiatives have been taken to ensure that students with disabilities participate in activities-based programmes regarding environmental issues. Aladag et al. (2016) postulate that students with disabilities are aware of environmental issues. However, the most practical problem confronting them is the difficulty of putting what they learned into practice. One solution to this challenge is creating awareness practice through awareness-raising hands-on environmental activities.

Trends show that including people with disabilities in various sects, such as higher learning institutions, is the biggest challenge. Though, several groups have been established in many countries all over the globe to fight for their rights (Frech, 1993). Literature shows that instructors face several challenges which avert the inclusion of students with infirmities in environmental education programmes. Challenges include the feelings of insufficiency on the part of environmental educators, lack of knowledge on environmental matters for the people employed in the arena of disability and access issues for those walking with crutches and wheelchairs. To improve and facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities into outdoor environmental education programmes, environmental educators should collaborate with people working in the field of disability. Furthermore, there should be networking between the groups working on environment and disability to promote awareness about the environment among students with disabilities.

Need for Environmental Education for Students with Disabilities

The solution to the problem of how to help the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society is found in environmental education. Education about the environment, especially of high quality, is essential in developing people's capacity to adapt to their changing surroundings and preserve their authenticity (Ekpo & Alyedun, 2019). Education about the environment can significantly affect how well it is maintained. Education can be transformative, but only if it is built on active, inclusive, and participatory learning and if teachers and students have access to resources that help them succeed. The best way to teach is to have students solve real-world problems and work on real-world projects.

Young people should engage in outdoor activities to develop their environmental consciousness, encourage positive attitudes toward the environment, and give their newly acquired knowledge a try. All children, especially those with special needs, deserve an education that helps them adapt to changing climate realities. In terms of being impacted by climate change, people with disabilities rank near the top of the list of most at risk. As a result, students should be capable of aiding themselves through initiatives and actions and participate in every facet of environmental challenges. According to the 2017 Earth Day Network Report, Environmental Education is crucial in helping individuals with disabilities learn about the environment and its relationship to humans and develop an appreciation for the natural world.

Field trips and other forms of activity-based environmental education are undervalued and rarely implemented at universities; this may be owing to a lack of specialized training for faculty. While the presence or formation of environmental education clubs at some universities is encouraging, there need to be sufficient conditions for developing such programmes, which typically take the form of on-campus activities. Due to administrative mandates regarding club formation, the programme's success is contingent on the faculty members' dedication.

Students who have received an environmental education are more likely to have a holistic understanding of the environment, its issues, and its solutions. Lead to involvement, and young people will step up to the plate as contributing members of society, inspiring people from all walks of life. Similarly, student field trips are enjoyable routines and chances for survey and discovery that help scholars develop fresh interpretations of nature on a personal level (El-Batri, et al., 2019). Everyone has the right to education (Article 26), no discrimination in education is welcomed, and educational possibilities are available equally (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

Challenges in the Execution of Activity-based Environmental Education for Students with Disabilities

Effective execution Activity-based environmental education faces many hurdles in higher learning institutions. The first and foremost barrier is the perceived lack of time and materials (financial). Outdoor environmental education and awareness programs need thorough preparation, which involves funds and time. Moreover, some edifying challenges incorporate the educators' reservations concerning their capability to conduct activity-based environmental education programs. Lack of teachers' training in the discipline may affect teachers' commitment and interest in providing instruction and designing and organizing outdoor environmental education programs for learners with and without disabilities.



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For the effective execution of environmental education, it is imperative to deal with teachers' attitudes towards students with disabilities and environmental education. Teachers' positive attitude towards learners and the subject matter is crucial as it enables complete instruction for the students in the class (Shristi et al., 2020). However, teachers and universities, in general, can organize and collaborate with an environmental education specialist to tackle some of the barriers mentioned earlier.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Education on environmental issues is essential for all professionals in the field. Education about environmental issues promotes greater comprehension of the issue at hand and the motivation to seek a remedy. Since students with disabilities are a marginalized population in society and schools, learning how to accommodate their unique challenges best is essential to provide them with meaningful environmental education opportunities. However, only a few outdoor-focused programmes were available to adolescents with impairments. Regardless of their differences, all community members have responsibilities for environmental conservation and dialogue. Because of this, it is proposed that students with disabilities in higher education settings benefit from individualized outdoor environmental education courses to raise their environmental consciousness and, in turn, help address community issues stemming from irresponsible environmental practices. A unique educational, environmental programme should be launched to increase people's awareness of environmental problems and their ability to cope with the environmental difficulties we face daily due to our dismal relationship with the natural world.

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