

Nourishing the Green Mind

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Climate education is critical for mitigating climate change, yet UNESCO data shows that the world's education still has a long way towards integrating it into the school curricula. We invited Shweta Bahri, Jiří Kulich and David Wilgenbus to examine the current status, efforts and challenges in teaching climate and sustainability to children.

Jiří Kulich, Director at SEVER – The Rýchoř Centre of Environmental Education and Ethics, provided the context of climate education in Czech Republic. Climate education is perceived as a cross-curricular issue which should penetrate different subjects at schools, and 70% of Czech citizens consider that the topic should be a part of the education. Surveys show that even young students often already have some knowledge on climate change, but their knowledge has many missing links such as concrete mitigation measures and they might not feel powerful enough to influence others on climate topics. Jiří pointed out that what is missing between environmental attitudes and pro-environmental behavior is “locus of control” - the sense that they can make a difference.

The specific challenges of climate education include: the problem seeming distant and slow, too complex and threatening, too polarizing, and the responsibility being too distri-

buted. Therefore it is important to show that climate change is happening close to us and will affect everyday lives in the Czech Republic. However, the topic should not be presented as a horror scenario but the information should be kept factual and well-founded. Jiří also made suggestions of what education policy should further take into account: 1) recognize climate education as a priority, 2) incorporate it as a cross-curricular issue into national curriculum, 3) support teachers in it, 4) assure quality educational programs and materials, and 5) coordinate public education of all citizens to engage in climate protection. The Czech governmental board on sustainable development published a guideline “Climate is Changing - And What About Us”, drawn out by a wide range of stakeholders, which is now available online.

David Wilgenbus, Executive Director at the Office for Climate Education (OCE), raised systemic and didactic challenges as to why there is too little integration of climate education into the curricula despite strong political commitment to promote it. Only 2% of the school curricula are considered to be providing climate change education on a moderate level. Most are very minimal; if it is not in the curricula, there is no access to resources or training. Most teachers prefer other sustainable development topics over climate

because it is the most complex, with multiple objectives and teaching approaches. Many teachers are not familiar with the multidisciplinary approach. One of the most important to note is the emotional challenge; teachers are hesitant to teach about climate change because they do not know how to deal with eco anxiety, and are afraid to scare their students. Recent surveys show that 80% of students expect a catastrophic future, and although teachers consider it necessary to teach the topic, only ⅓ feel able to do so.

Unlike 15 years ago, the majority of parents and teachers are fully on board with having climate education embedded in the school curriculum. Now it is a question of how to do it. OCE provides tools for teachers and also training for teachers and policymakers. It is very often the case that the policymakers tell the teachers what to do and that is why it is key to give teachers a chance to explain what they consider is important and what should be done. Many proposals are made from teachers at opportunities such as TeachersCOP.

Shweta Bahri, Co-founder and Sustainability & Education Policy Expert at Earth Warriors Global also shared statistics from the UK that 77% of children are more concerned about climate change more than anything else. After COP26, the UK government announced that schools now have to include climate education to their curricula but how that will be done is still unclear, no policies have been mapped out yet. There is also hopeful data

that if 16% students receive climate education, there is potential for 19 gigatons of carbon emissions to be reduced. Similar to the data shared by Jiří and David, 95% of the teachers want to teach climate education but only less than 40% feel confident to do so. Teachers are also overburdened, so Earth Warriors removes that burden by enabling them to simply deploy ready-to-use lesson plans. Shweta indicates that using a positive, solutions-focused approach without causing anxiety is key. Empowering children to take action and building a lifelong bond with nature is proving to be effective as the children - the age group 3 to 11 - embrace their identity as superhero-like Earth Warriors. Children nowadays are genuinely interested in learning about the planet and learning what they can do, shares Shweta, and that the students' parents often tell her that their children are changing the family's environmental behaviors.

The challenges confronted by educators and children share several commonalities in Europe - the sense of anxiety among the students on climate change, the necessity to provide tools and support for the educators and to equip the children with a positive outlook that they can indeed make a difference in tackling climate change. Children's climate literacy produces solid outcomes like reduction in CO2 emissions and positive influence directly to their families, and further efforts are expected to have climate education integrated into school curricula.



Relevant websites:

<https://sever.ekologickavychova.cz/sever-the-rychory-centre-of-environmental-education-and-ethics/>

<https://www.earthwarriorsglobal.com/>

<https://www.oce.global/en>

<https://www.eurosoc-digital.org/de/projekt/sustainable-educational-ecosystem-for-climate-protection>

<https://ucimoklimatu.cz/>