STATUS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION
IN THE EASTERN AFRICA REGION:
OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES
AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Relevance of Environmental Health Education by R.K. Kerich

Abstract
Environmental Health Education offered in learning institutions is intended to serve a dual purpose. First, it is to generate and impart new knowledge on how to respond to environmental health problems and secondly, it is intended to promote good health through enhancement of appropriate use of natural and human resources. Thirdly, it is to effectively accomplish these objectives, Environmental Health Education in the formal Education system must offer relevant content. This paper discusses the “relevance” of Environmental Health Education in learning institutions. Like other types of Education, Environmental Health Education entails passage of new knowledge, acquisition of new skills, and development of desirable attitudes and values. Hence, it is important that as the learners acquire new knowledge and skills and as they develop their attitudes and values, relevant content on health and environment is offered. Here relevance refers to the type of content dealt with that would enhance the attainment of the intended goals.

Introduction
Environmental Health Education offered in Learning institutions is intended to serve a dual purpose, first to generate and impart new knowledge on how to respond to Environmental Health problems and second to promote good health through enhancement of appropriate use of natural and human resources. Here health is defined as: “... a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease” (Donald A.R. and Walter, H.G, 1973:p.5).

To effectively accomplish the objectives of such programmes, Environmental Health education in the formal Education system must offer relevant content. This paper discusses relevance of Environmental Health education in learning institutions, its quality and emerging challenges. Like other types of education, Environmental Health education entails passage of new knowledge, acquisition of new practical skills, and development of desirable attitudes and values. Hence it is important that as learners acquire new knowledge and skills, and as they develop their values and attitudes, relevant and high quality content on health and environment is offered.

Relevance of Environmental Health Education Content
Relevance, as used in this paper refers to the type of content dealt that would enhance the attainment of intents or goals. It must be realized that selected Environmental Health Education content must be relevant to the learners as well as instructors, researchers, professionals, and community members if the programme is to be sustained. To exhaustively evaluate the content of Environmental Health education, it is necessary to consider factors affecting its relevance, which include: Environment, changing technologies, and socio-cultural factors.

Environment as a factor in content relevance
The environment is simply defined as surrounding, is important in selecting Environmental Health education content and in planning for such a programme. This is due to two characteristics of the environment namely: Dynamism, and Diversity.
Dynamism of the environment

Environment changes both in time and space. Hence temperatures change with altitude and latitude while diurnal temperatures vary according to the time of the day. Variation in environmental factors makes it difficult to select an optimally relevant content. Therefore what is relevant now may in a moment later be rendered obsolete. This calls for regular review of the content selected.

Diversity of the environment

The environment is a composite entity made up of wide ranging factors. These may conveniently be placed under physical, chemical, biological and human categories. Considering this diversity of factors, it is usually difficult to select content to cater for all aspects needed. A drawn up programme drawn up is usually used in environments of varying characteristics yet it is expected to be of universal use. In Kenya, for example a programme offered in Arid and Semi Arid Lands (ASAL) is expected to be used in an area experiencing high rainfall throughout the year. In a case like this, choice of content must carefully be made.

Changing Technologies

Because of continuing research, technologies have had to change from time to time. There has been for example, a marked improvement in the area of information technology which in turn has highly affected modes of information passage. New technologies have pre-empted the selection of certain content into Environmental Health education curricula yet with constantly changing technologies it is never known whether a satisfactorily relevant content has been selected.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Attitudes, values and beliefs of people vary from one person to the other. Values and attitudes of learners may affect, in the long run, the nature of content adopted just as those of the instructors would. Perception of professionals, members of a community, researchers and instructors on what subject matter is important is significant during the selection of content into a programme. Hence content of Environmental Health Education would very much be influenced by their perception of priority health issues.

Interaction of factors

Use of a single factor to explain the irrelevance of content in a programme is insufficient. Relevance of content should be seen as a function of environmental, technological, and socio-cultural factors. The optimal combination of the factors yields the most relevant content. Fig 1 below illustrates how various factors interact to yield relevant content.
Quality of Environmental Health Education content

Quality of content of a programme include both relevance and its ability to pass over desired knowledge and practical skills to the learners. It involves its precision in passage of information and skills. Because of the need to consider a variety of variables during content selection Environmental Health education has fallen below expectation particularly with respect to precision, recency, practicability and relevance of information to the contemporary society.

Enhancement of Environmental Health Education content quality

The quality of Environmental Health education can be enhanced through proper content selection. Content infused into a programme will remain durable if adequate involvement of all stakeholders is made. A curriculum developer after conceiving an idea must consult with experts, professionals, and community members before the needed content is written. These would modify or improve the selected content. When written, further refinement is made through pilot-testing by using identified learners. Content that will have gone through the process will be considered to be of higher quality than that otherwise obtained. Even where the procedure cited is followed, regular review of programmes is needed in order to improve the content in line with the prevailing changes. Representation of content selection procedure is shown in Fig. 2 below.

Selection of Environmental Health education content through use of a conventional process described above would in no doubt improve its quality. Application of knowledge on indigenous system of Education, however, will also improve the quality of chosen content. This is particularly so where values and attitudes of a community are being considered when selecting the content. A typical Indigenous African Education for example, emphasized the following virtues: practical experience, social experience, spiritual experience and physical experience and yet was useful in passage of knowledge, skills, and values to the society. These virtues could be useful when deciding on the nature of content to adopt.
Having discussed relevance and quality of Environmental Health Education content, it is important now to consider emerging challenges. Studies done indicate that Environmental Health education is currently needed if health-related problems are to be resolved. Several emerging challenges, however, are recognized and need to be attended to. These include: improvement of research procedures in response to contemporary issues such as HIV/AIDS, sensitization and awareness campaigns among communities; harmonization of diverse cultural attitudes and values selecting the content; acquisition and development of relevant teaching materials; retraining of personnel handling Environmental Health education and identification and use of appropriate modes of information dissemination.

Arguments on the emerging challenges
Considering the challenges mentioned above, it becomes clear that the Ministry of Education in Kenya has a heavy task ahead. In my view, the Ministry of Education should closely liaise with Ministry of Health to identify the most pressing health issues. As already mentioned, the most pressing health issues currently experienced include the HIV/AIDS pandemic and lack of public health awareness. On identification of these issues the Ministry should develop a relevant Environmental Health Curriculum with the issues deliberately infused into its content. In view of the shortage of trained personnel handling environmental health content, the Ministry should, in addition, develop a training programme for both pre-service and in-service teachers. In both cases mentioned above, thorough appraisal of the existing curriculum is urgently needed. When reviewing curricula, it would be very important to make horizontal comparison of Environmental Health Content with those of similar disciplines particularly that of Public Health, and to consider the Acts governing their implementation within contemporary society. This would reduce duplication where it occurs.
Implementation of the proposed curricular, challenges and the way forward

Successful implementation of the proposed curricular will largely depend on the relevance of its content, its design and the targeted learners. This may be enhanced through proper choice of teaching materials and medium of instruction. It is recommended that teaching materials be prepared alongside the curriculum and that mode of information dissemination be appropriately chosen ahead of time. Already inservice training has been recommended if adequate handling of the content is to be attained. While implementing the curriculum, several challenges are likely to be encountered notable of which will be choice of appropriate content to cater for individual differences and likely resistance from the affected community of the new curriculum innovations. Where these occur, it calls for commitment on the part of the implementers. To succeed, sufficient sensitization campaigns among the communities are necessary and should be organized by the government. Appropriate campaign programmes should be developed on the issues at stake and disseminated to the people through carefully selected media e.g. through TV, radio and newspapers.

Above all, success will be realized if research is regularly undertaken to evaluate people’s perception on the nature of the curriculum content and to identify the most optimal way of implementing it.

Conclusion

The need to offer Environmental Health education is urgent. However, relevance of its content must regularly be appraised particularly because of the diversity and dynamism of the environment, changing technologies, and varying socio-cultural values. The quality and relevance of the selected content are affected by these interacting factors. Proper selection of content following conventionally known procedures and adequate consultation during programme development would serve as a useful mitigating measure for the adverse effects on the quality and relevance of Environmental Health education content.

References


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