

Environmental Literacy

A study conducted for the California Department of Education by the American Institute for Research sought to explore the connection between environmental education and school performance. The study focused on 255 sixth grade students at four schools who attended three outdoor education programs. It explored how participation in these programs affected students' personal and

social skills, their appreciation of the environment, and their understanding of science.

Three rounds of surveys were administered to students, parents, and teachers as well as a control group of students who did not participate in environmental education.

According to the findings, student assessments showed significant improvement in conflict resolution

for students who attended the program. Coincidentally, the parents of these students surveyed did not indicate any significant difference in social-emotional behaviour. Teacher surveys tended to support the students' views.

In terms of environmental stewardship, student assessments of those attending the programs showed significant

improvement in environmental behaviours. Again, surveys of their parents did not reveal any recognition of change in environmental attitudes.

With regard to improved understanding of science, children who attended the outdoor school significantly raised their science scores as a result of participation in the program.

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Of the students participating in the program, 58 per cent were in the English learner category, and in the four participating schools, 80 to 100 per cent of the children attending qualify for the free lunch program.

Environmental education in schools is supported by over 95 per cent of Americans, according to a study undertaken by the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation. The same Foundation reports, however, that American adults are “by and large both uninformed and misinformed” on environmental information and issues.

“80 per cent of Americans are heavily influenced by incorrect or outdated environmental myths”

A 10 year study of environmental literacy in the US produced by the organization last year offers a dismal view of learning levels among American adults, related to the environment. It notes that “the average American adult, regardless of age, income, or level of education mostly fails to grasp essential aspects of environmental science – or even basic concepts such as run off pollution and fuel use.” It adds that almost 80 per cent of Americans are heavily influenced by incorrect or outdated environmental myths and that just 12 per cent of Americans can pass a basic quiz on awareness of energy topics.

The study also observes that “there is little difference in environmental knowledge levels between the average American and those who sit on governing bodies, town councils, and corporate boardrooms.” In spite of this ten-year tracking of environmental knowledge, a Gallup poll this year revealed that over 60 per cent of Americans consider themselves

to be environmentalists. No similar studies of environmental literacy have been undertaken in Canada.

Other findings include that for most adults, “the media is the only steady source of environmental information.”

The organization sees this as a critical problem in terms of environmental literacy noting “the key problem with the media is one of depth rather than accuracy.” They add, “The media is well positioned to provide widespread but superficial information on environmental subjects; it is poorly positioned to offer in-depth education.”

The study considers the tendency of polling companies to ask people whether they are aware of an issue. They describe simple awareness as “a simple familiarity with an environmental subject with little real understanding of its deeper causes and implications.” It becomes questionable whether public opinion surveys based on such low levels of awareness should be the basis of public policy.

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One sobering conclusion in the study is that environmental literacy takes time and cannot be “placed in an educational microwave.” Their research concludes that very few people have sufficient environmental knowledge and skills to be considered environmentally literate. Although they conclude that there are no hard numbers on the subject, the Foundation estimates that only “one to two per cent of adults in America” could be said to be environmentally literate.