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Can children make parents adopt more sustainable lifestyles? What is the role of New Education Policy?

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We have only one home, planet Earth. Preserving the balance that renders our home liveable is imperative for our continued existence. Over the last century or so, the unrelenting drive towards economic and industrial development has led to the erosion of earth's resources and threatened the delicate ecological and meteorological equilibrium. Slowing down this impending march towards self-destruction has become critical today.

Can our schools and the New Education Policy (NEP) somehow help us out of this predicament? What is the role teachers and their students can play in educating the households, communities and societies about the climate crisis? Even better, can't they teach us how to avert it? After all, teachers must know all the answers and it is the lives of children that are at stake because of

our mindless consumption. Let us first get a sense of how critical the current situation is.

Mean global temperature has increased by more than 1oC since 1980 and in recent years, polar ice sheets are melting at an alarming rate, causing the sea levels to rise by 4 inches since 1993. In the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26, 2021) in Glasgow, nearly 200 countries pledged to limit the average increase in global temperature to below 2o C above pre-industrial levels, while making all efforts to limit the increase to below 1.5o C (agreed at COP21, 2015, in Paris). Researchers have estimated that, in the last century, freshwater usage has increased by over six times; and the gap between demand and supply of freshwater will touch 40% by 2030.

To achieve the global temperature goals, the average per capita global carbon footprint needs to drop to below 2 tons per year by 2050. Electricity and heat production contributes to more than 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Household electricity consumption accounts for nearly 25% of global electricity use (IEA, 2019); while the figure stands at 10% for freshwater consumption (UNESCO WWAP, 2019).

According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), if even 1 in 8 people globally make environment-friendly choices in their daily lives, there can be approximately 20% reduction in global carbon emissions. Many actions that directly affect resource consumption in households are a result of routine everyday activities and are habitual in nature. Repetitive activities such as wasting water while brushing teeth, taking bath, washing dishes, or keeping the lights, fans, A/Cs and other electrical appliances switched on

even when they are not needed, keeping the vehicle engine running while waiting in front of traffic lights etc., are largely habit driven and any behaviour change that is persistent will require interventions that can change these largely automatic responses.

One important constraint to achieving widespread behaviour change is scaling up the interventions to nationwide or even citywide levels; targeting individual households at the macro level is a major logistical challenge. That's where our schools and the NEP can come to rescue, by facilitating an unusual but scalable intervention that targets secondary schools to make the younger generation the messenger and architect of our behavioural change proposition. A well-designed curriculum on sustainability, incorporating both knowledge and information aspects as well as practical and experiential aspects of environment-friendly behaviours could go a long way in achieving long term goals. The schools can play an important role in educating and bringing about climate friendly behavioural changes in the younger generation and their families. The key will be to encourage students to not only adopt conservation behaviours themselves but also be the torchbearer to ensure that their family members also practise the same and make mindful resource consumptions a habit in their daily lives. Human psychology says that the people are most influenced by those who are emotionally close to them. Most people are emotionally closest to their children. Hence, parents are more likely to listen to their children if they are advocating good behavioural practices at their homes, than to any other source.

Active participation in adopting and spreading positive conservation behaviour aligns well with the experiential learning goal of the NEP. Practising classroom lessons at home and advocating the same within the family are the best forms of experiential learning a child can have. Having children participate in sustaining their own futures in this way is only possible if this program is given teeth in the form of formal inclusion in the curricula, dedicated teachers and mentors, and an elevation to the same status as existing graded subjects such as the languages, humanities, and the sciences.

Also, such courses must be structured in a constructivist fashion, wherein children gain their understanding about climate change and how their individual behaviours can help or abate climate change through observation of daily routines and active participation in household/outdoor activities. The content should directly relate to students' prior experiences from daily happenings at home and surroundings, by carefully posing emerging climate problems that are directly affecting the households and local communities. The focus should be on controlling the rise of those problems through mindful actions in daily lives. There comes the practical aspect of environmental education. Alongside promoting household practices and outdoor experiences, schools must focus on other important characteristics such as group discussions and group activities around environmental issues, specifically applicable to that geography. The concept of 'experiential education' has to be broken into many subcomponents such as daily observations, idea generation, active participation, hands-on experience, investigation and discovery, and other such experiential learning techniques.

A few pilot studies on experiential environmental education can be designed and tested in selected cities and the learnings can be incorporated into the final curriculum before a wider roll out. To scale it up state-wide and country-wide, middle school teachers need to be trained to make this as part of regular school curriculum. Another alternative is to develop an online curriculum for the teacher training and share this with schools across the country, along with a few case studies from the piloted regions as examples.

Making sustainability part of the formal performance evaluation in schools will ensure that it is taken seriously by the parents alongside the children. It is high time we take climate change seriously and make it part of our school education, so that the future generations whose lives are at stake, get the necessary awareness and the right education to abate and when necessary, adapt to the changing climate.