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Integrating Environmental Education to Form Environmental Care Characters in Schools

Suarlin Suralin ✉

✉ *Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar, Sulawesi Selatan, 90224, Indonesia*

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*Corresponding author. Suarlin Suarlin
✉ suarlin@unm.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to integrate environmental education into school curricula to enhance environmental literacy, awareness, and sustainable behaviors among students and teachers.

Research Design and Methodology: The study employed a multi-phase methodology, including needs assessment, curriculum development, teacher training, student engagement activities, mentoring, and monitoring. The project was implemented through comprehensive workshops for teachers, hands-on experiential learning activities for students, and continuous mentoring and assessment.

Findings and Discussion: Results from pre- and post-intervention assessments indicated significant improvements in environmental knowledge and awareness among participants. Students displayed a deeper understanding of environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, and exhibited positive shifts in attitudes and behaviors towards environmental conservation. Teachers reported increased confidence and competence in integrating environmental topics into their teaching practices, facilitated by professional development sessions covering contemporary environmental issues and pedagogical strategies.

Implications: The study found that experiential learning activities, such as nature walks and school gardens, were particularly effective in fostering student engagement and retention of environmental knowledge. Additionally, the involvement of local environmental organizations and community members played a crucial role in reinforcing positive behavioral changes through social learning and community involvement. However, challenges such as limited resources and variability in teacher preparedness were identified, suggesting the need for ongoing support and resource allocation.

Introduction

Environmental education is a crucial component of contemporary education systems worldwide, fostering environmental literacy, awareness, and proactive behaviors among students. This branch of education encompasses teaching and learning about the natural environment, its challenges, and its human impact. The importance of environmental education has grown significantly in response to global environmental crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and unsustainable resource use. Education systems are pivotal in shaping future generations' attitudes and behaviors toward the environment. Focusing specifically on schools, integrating environmental education into

the curriculum is essential to instill environmental values from a young age. Schools are foundational institutions where children and adolescents spend a significant portion of their formative years. By embedding environmental education within school programs, we can nurture a generation that understands environmental issues and feels a deep-seated sense of responsibility towards sustainable practices. The initiative, "Integrating Environmental Education to Form Environmental Care Characters in Schools," is designed to address this need comprehensively.

The community's primary issue is the need for more environmental awareness and sustainable practices among students. This lack of awareness is manifested in various detrimental behaviors such as littering, wasting resources, and indifference towards environmental conservation efforts. Despite the increasing environmental degradation, many students still need to be connected to their actions' impact on the environment. This disconnection is often due to insufficient exposure to environmental education and a lack of practical engagement with environmental activities. Additionally, schools often need more resources, more training for teachers in environmental education, and a curriculum that prioritizes traditional academic subjects over environmental learning. These challenges create barriers to effectively integrating environmental education into the school system, perpetuating the cycle of environmental ignorance and inaction among students.

The potential solutions to these problems revolve around a multifaceted approach that includes curriculum development, teacher training, and student engagement activities. Firstly, developing an environmental education curriculum integrated into various subjects can ensure that environmental awareness is not treated as an isolated topic but as a core component of the education system. This curriculum should include theoretical knowledge about environmental issues and practical activities encouraging students to engage with their environment actively. Secondly, training programs for teachers are essential to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to deliver environmental education effectively. These programs can cover various aspects, such as contemporary environmental issues, teaching methodologies, and ways to incorporate environmental learning into existing subjects. Thirdly, organizing extracurricular activities such as environmental clubs, recycling programs, tree planting events, and clean-up drives can provide students with hands-on experience in environmental stewardship. These activities reinforce the knowledge gained in the classroom and foster a sense of community and shared responsibility toward the environment.

The primary objective of this community service project is to integrate environmental education into the school curriculum to cultivate environmentally conscious individuals. By doing so, the project aims to enhance environmental awareness and knowledge among students, foster positive attitudes and behaviors towards the environment, encourage active participation in environmental conservation activities, equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach environmental education effectively and promote sustainable practices within the school community. Through these objectives, the project seeks to create a ripple effect that extends beyond the school environment, influencing families and the broader community to adopt more sustainable lifestyles. The benefits of integrating environmental education into schools are multifaceted and far-reaching. Firstly, students will develop a deep understanding of environmental issues and the importance of sustainability. This understanding will translate into behaviors contributing to environmental conservation, such as reducing waste, conserving water and energy, and participating in community clean-up efforts. Secondly, the project will help build students' sense of responsibility and stewardship. As they engage in environmental activities, they will learn the value of taking care of their surroundings and their actions' impact on the planet. This sense of responsibility will likely extend into adulthood, influencing their future choices and actions. Thirdly, teachers will benefit from professional development opportunities that enhance their teaching skills and knowledge. Integrating environmental education into their teaching practices can make learning more engaging and relevant for students. This can also lead to improved educational outcomes as students see the real-world applications of their learning.

The school community will experience a positive shift towards sustainability. Schools can serve as model environments for sustainable practices, influencing students, staff, and families to adopt similar practices at home and in their daily lives. Creating a green school culture can also foster a sense of pride and collective achievement among students and staff. In the long term, integrating environmental education can contribute to developing environmentally literate citizens equipped to

tackle future environmental challenges. This literacy is crucial in building resilient communities that can adapt to and mitigate the impacts of environmental changes. The project "Integrating Environmental Education to Form Environmental Care Characters in Schools" is a vital initiative that addresses the pressing need for environmental awareness and action among young individuals. By embedding environmental education within the school curriculum, providing teacher training, and engaging students in practical activities, this project aims to create a generation of environmentally conscious and responsible citizens. The anticipated benefits extend beyond the school environment, contributing to the broader goal of sustainable development and environmental stewardship.

Literature Review

Environmental education is crucial in fostering environmental literacy and promoting sustainable behaviors. This literature review explores the body of research on integrating environmental education in schools, comprehensively analyzing definitions, theoretical foundations, and empirical studies. The review is structured into three main sections: theoretical frameworks and definitions, empirical studies on environmental education outcomes, and practical approaches and challenges in integrating environmental education into school curricula. This review offers a detailed understanding of how environmental education can shape environmentally conscious individuals and communities.

Theoretical Frameworks and Definitions

Environmental education is broadly defined as the process that allows individuals to explore environmental issues, engage in problem-solving, and take action to improve the environment (UNESCO, 1978). It aims to develop a population knowledgeable about the environment and its associated problems, aware of their solutions, and motivated to work towards their resolution. Environmental education is rooted in various theoretical frameworks that emphasize the interconnectedness of ecological, social, and economic systems. The Tbilisi Declaration, a foundational document in the field, outlines the goals of environmental education as creating awareness, knowledge, attitudes, skills, and participation among learners (UNESCO, 1978). One of the key theoretical frameworks in environmental education is constructivism, which posits that learners construct their understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflections on those experiences (Piaget, 1954). Constructivist approaches in environmental education emphasize hands-on, experiential learning where students engage directly with their environment. Another vital framework is social learning theory, which highlights the role of social interactions and community involvement in learning (Bandura, 1977). According to this theory, students learn by observing and imitating others, making community-based environmental projects an effective educational strategy. Empirical studies have supported the efficacy of these frameworks. For instance, Ballantyne and Packer (2009) found that experiential learning activities in environmental education significantly enhance students' understanding and retention of environmental concepts. Similarly, Chawla and Cushing (2007) reported that social learning processes, such as discussions and collaborative projects, positively influence students' environmental attitudes and behaviors. These theoretical foundations and empirical findings underline the importance of integrating interactive and community-focused elements into environmental education.

Empirical Studies on Environmental Education Outcomes

Numerous empirical studies have investigated environmental education outcomes, focusing on various dimensions such as knowledge acquisition, attitude change, behavioral intentions, and actual behavior. One of the most consistent findings in the literature is that environmental education enhances students' environmental knowledge. For example, a study by Volk and Cheak (2003) demonstrated that students who participated in an environmental education program significantly improved their understanding of ecological concepts and environmental issues. In addition to knowledge acquisition, environmental education has been shown to influence students' attitudes towards the environment. A meta-analysis by Zelezny (1999) concluded that environmental education programs generally lead to more positive environmental attitudes. This finding is supported by the work of Stevenson, Peterson, Bondell, Mertig, and Moore (2013), who found that students involved in

environmental education initiatives developed stronger pro-environmental attitudes compared to those who did not participate in such programs. Behavioral intentions and actual behaviors are also critical outcomes of environmental education. While changing behavior is more challenging than altering knowledge and attitudes, several studies have reported positive results. Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) proposed that environmental knowledge and attitudes, combined with situational factors and emotional engagement, can lead to pro-environmental behaviors. For instance, Hungerford and Volk (1990) identified vital variables such as knowledge of issues, skills in using environmental action strategies, and a sense of personal responsibility as predictors of environmentally responsible behavior. These findings suggest that comprehensive environmental education programs that address cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects can effectively promote sustainable behaviors among students.

Practical Approaches and Challenges in Integrating Environmental Education

Integrating environmental education into school curricula involves several practical approaches and faces various challenges. One effective approach is the infusion of environmental topics across different subjects, ensuring that environmental education is not confined to a single discipline but is an integral part of the overall educational experience (Heimlich & Ardoin, 2008). This interdisciplinary approach allows students to see the relevance of environmental issues in various contexts and encourages holistic thinking. Another approach is project-based learning (PBL), which involves students in real-world environmental projects. PBL has been shown to enhance critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and engagement (Thomas, 2000). For example, a study by Kwan and Miles (1998) found that students who participated in PBL activities related to environmental conservation demonstrated improved understanding and a greater sense of responsibility towards the environment.

Teacher training is another crucial aspect of successful integration. Research indicates that teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and skills significantly impact the effectiveness of environmental education (Goldman et al., 2014). Professional development programs that provide teachers with the necessary resources and training can enhance their ability to deliver effective environmental education. For instance, Ernst (2009) reported that teachers who received professional development in environmental education were more confident and competent in integrating environmental topics into their teaching. Despite these practical approaches, several challenges hinder the integration of environmental education into school curricula. One major challenge is the need for more time and resources. Many schools prioritize traditional academic subjects and standardized testing, leaving little room for environmental education (Stern et al., 2014). Additionally, insufficient funding and resources for materials, field trips, and extracurricular activities can limit the scope and quality of environmental education programs.

Another challenge is the variability in teachers' preparedness and willingness to teach environmental education. Some teachers may need more background knowledge or feel uncomfortable addressing environmental issues (Lane et al., 1995). Overcoming these challenges requires systemic changes, including policy support, curriculum reforms, and ongoing professional development for teachers. Furthermore, engaging students from diverse backgrounds and ensuring inclusivity in environmental education is an ongoing challenge. Research has shown that students from marginalized communities often have less access to environmental education opportunities (Gruenewald, 2003). Addressing this disparity involves developing culturally relevant curricula and providing equitable access to resources and experiences. In conclusion, integrating environmental education in schools is supported by a robust theoretical foundation and a growing body of empirical evidence demonstrating its positive outcomes. Theoretical frameworks like constructivism and social learning theory provide valuable insights into effective teaching and learning strategies. Empirical studies consistently show that environmental education enhances students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to the environment. Practical approaches such as interdisciplinary teaching, project-based learning, and teacher training have proven effective in delivering environmental education despite limited resources, time constraints, and varying levels of teacher preparedness. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from policymakers, educators, and communities to ensure that all students can develop into environmentally conscious and responsible citizens.

Research Design and Methodology

The method for the community service project "Integrating Environmental Education to Form Environmental Care Characters in Schools" involves several stages, including preparation and planning, training implementation, mentoring and monitoring, and conclusion and reflection. The preparation and planning stage entails conducting a needs assessment to understand the specific environmental education needs of the school community, identifying key stakeholders such as teachers, students, and local environmental organizations, and developing a detailed project plan. This plan includes a curriculum outline, resource allocation, and a timeline for activities. Effective communication with all stakeholders ensures their engagement and commitment to the project. The training implementation stage involves conducting comprehensive workshops for teachers to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to integrate environmental education into their teaching practices. These workshops cover various topics, including current environmental issues, pedagogical strategies, and interactive and experiential learning activities. Teachers are provided with educational materials and resources to facilitate their teaching. The training also includes practical sessions where teachers can develop lesson plans and participate in mock teaching sessions to apply what they have learned. In addition to teacher training, environmental education sessions are organized for students, incorporating hands-on activities such as nature walks, recycling projects, and school gardens to foster a connection with the environment and encourage active learning. Mentoring and monitoring are critical components of the project, ensuring ongoing support and assessment of progress. Mentoring involves regular follow-up meetings with teachers to provide guidance, address challenges, and share best practices. Experienced educators and environmental experts are available to offer personalized support and feedback. Monitoring involves collecting data through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations to evaluate the effectiveness of the training and the implementation of environmental education activities. This data helps to identify areas for improvement and to make necessary adjustments to the program. Students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors toward the environment are assessed to measure the project's impact. The project concludes with a reflection stage, which includes a comprehensive evaluation of the entire program. A final workshop is organized to unite all stakeholders to discuss the outcomes, share experiences, and celebrate achievements. Teachers and students present their projects and reflect on their learning journey, highlighting successes and challenges. This reflection helps to consolidate learning, reinforce the importance of environmental education, and inspire continued commitment to environmental stewardship. The findings and insights gained from the project are documented in a detailed report, which serves as a valuable resource for future initiatives and for sharing with the broader educational community. The community service project "Integrating Environmental Education to Form Environmental Care Characters in Schools" is a multi-stage process that begins with thorough preparation and planning, followed by the implementation of training for teachers and students, ongoing mentoring and monitoring, and concludes with a reflective evaluation. Each stage is designed to ensure the effective integration of environmental education into the school curriculum, fostering a generation of environmentally conscious individuals. The project emphasizes the importance of collaboration among all stakeholders, practical hands-on learning experiences, and continuous assessment and reflection to achieve its goals. Through this comprehensive approach, the project aims to create a lasting impact on the school community and contribute to the broader goal of environmental sustainability.

Findings and Discussion

Integrating environmental education into school curricula is crucial for fostering environmentally conscious individuals who can address modern environmental challenges. The project "Integrating Environmental Education to Form Environmental Care Characters in Schools" sought to enhance environmental awareness, knowledge, and behaviors among students and teachers through a structured program involving preparation, training, mentoring, monitoring, and reflection. This section presents and discusses the results of this project, focusing on the outcomes achieved, the effectiveness of the methods employed, and the implications for sustainable environmental education.

Enhanced Environmental Knowledge and Awareness

A central objective of the project was to elevate environmental knowledge and awareness among students and teachers. Pre- and post-intervention assessments highlighted significant improvements in participants' understanding of environmental issues, including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and sustainable practices. Initially, students needed more knowledge of these topics, often showcasing misconceptions or superficial understandings. However, post-intervention surveys and assessments revealed a marked improvement in their comprehension of environmental concepts. Interactive and experiential learning activities played a pivotal role in fostering this enhanced understanding. Activities such as nature walks, recycling projects, and school gardens allowed students to engage directly with their environment, providing hands-on experiences reinforcing theoretical knowledge. For instance, a school garden project enabled students to learn about plant biology, ecosystems, and sustainable agricultural practices while instilling a sense of responsibility and stewardship (Blumstein & Saylan, 2007). Teachers reported that these activities made learning more engaging and enjoyable for students and helped them retain information more effectively. The project's use of experiential learning aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, emphasizing the importance of concrete experiences in learning. Students can apply and reflect on their knowledge by directly interacting with their environment, leading to deeper understanding and retention (Kolb, 1984). This approach also aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, which underscores the role of social interactions and experiences in cognitive development.

Positive Attitude and Behavioral Changes

Another significant outcome of the project was the positive shift in students' attitudes toward the environment and their adoption of pro-environmental behaviors. Post-intervention surveys indicated that students developed more positive attitudes toward environmental conservation and a greater willingness to participate in sustainability initiatives. Teachers observed that students became more mindful of their environmental impact, showing increased enthusiasm for recycling, conserving water and energy, and participating in community clean-up events (Chawla, 2009). The project's emphasis on social learning and community involvement was crucial in these attitude and behavior changes. By involving students in collaborative projects and discussions, the program leveraged the influence of peer interactions and social norms to promote pro-environmental behaviors. For example, students who participated in group discussions about environmental issues were more likely to develop a sense of collective responsibility and motivation to take action (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, involving local environmental organizations and community members provided students with role models and mentors who exemplified sustainable practices. The observed behavior changes align with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which posits that attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence individuals' intentions and actions. The project effectively utilized this framework by enhancing students' positive attitudes, creating supportive social norms, and increasing their confidence in pro-environmental behaviors (Ajzen, 1991).

Teacher Empowerment and Curriculum Integration

The training workshops conducted for teachers were instrumental in building their capacity to deliver effective environmental education. Teachers reported feeling more confident and competent in integrating environmental topics into their teaching practices. The professional development sessions covered contemporary environmental issues, pedagogical strategies, and interactive and experiential learning activities. These sessions also provided teachers with educational materials and resources, which they found valuable for planning and implementing their lessons (Liefländer et al., 2013). Integrating environmental education across various subjects was a significant achievement of the project. By embedding environmental topics into disciplines such as science, geography, and social studies, the project ensured that environmental education became an integral part of the curriculum rather than an isolated subject. This interdisciplinary approach enriched students' learning experiences and helped them see the relevance of environmental issues in different contexts (Tilbury, 1995). Teachers noted that this approach encouraged critical thinking and a holistic understanding among students, as they could connect environmental concepts with broader social, economic, and

scientific themes. Integrating environmental education into the curriculum supports the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) notion, which advocates for a holistic approach to teaching and learning that integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions (UNESCO, 2014). This approach prepares students to understand and address complex sustainability challenges, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills essential for sustainable development.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Despite the positive outcomes, the project faced several challenges that must be addressed in future initiatives. One major challenge was the limited availability of resources, such as educational materials, funding for field trips, and access to environmental experts. Some schools needed help to allocate sufficient time and resources for environmental education due to competing academic priorities and budget constraints. Addressing these challenges requires increased support from educational authorities, policymakers, and community stakeholders to ensure schools have the necessary resources to implement comprehensive environmental education programs (Jickling & Wals, 2008). Another challenge was the variability in teachers' preparedness and willingness to teach environmental education. While the training workshops enhanced teachers' skills and knowledge, some teachers still felt hesitant or needed more confidence in addressing complex environmental issues. Ongoing professional development and support are essential to build teachers' expertise and confidence. Also, fostering a school culture that values and prioritizes environmental education can help mitigate these challenges by creating a supportive and motivating environment for teachers and students (Monroe et al., 2019).

Implications for Sustainable Environmental Education

The results of this project have significant implications for the broader field of environmental education and its role in promoting sustainability. Firstly, the success of interactive and experiential learning activities highlights the importance of engaging students directly with their environment. Future initiatives should prioritize hands-on experiences that allow students to explore and connect with their natural surroundings. These experiences enhance learning and foster a deeper emotional connection to the environment, which is crucial for motivating sustainable behaviors (Cheng & Monroe, 2012). Secondly, the positive attitude and behavior changes observed among students underscore the effectiveness of social learning and community involvement. Environmental education programs should leverage the power of social interactions and peer influence to promote pro-environmental norms and behaviors. Collaborative projects, group discussions, and community partnerships create a sense of collective responsibility and inspire students to take action. Additionally, involving local environmental organizations and experts can provide valuable mentorship and role models for students (Hungerford & Volk, 1990). Thirdly, empowering teachers and integrating environmental education across the curriculum is essential for sustainable education. Professional development programs that equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge are crucial for the success of environmental education initiatives. Moreover, embedding environmental topics into various subjects ensures that students receive a comprehensive and interdisciplinary education that prepares them to understand and address complex environmental challenges. Educational authorities and policymakers should support curriculum reforms prioritizing environmental education and provide schools with the resources to implement these changes effectively (Stevenson et al., 2013).

Future Research and Continuing Studies

To build on the findings of this project, future research should focus on long-term studies that track the impact of environmental education on students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors over time. Longitudinal studies can provide valuable insights into the lasting effects of environmental education and identify factors that contribute to sustained pro-environmental behaviors. Additionally, research should explore the impact of different teaching methods and curricula on student outcomes to identify best practices and effective strategies for environmental education (Rickinson et al., 2004). Furthermore, studies should investigate the role of cultural and socio-economic factors in shaping students' environmental knowledge and behaviors. Understanding how these factors influence

environmental education can help develop culturally relevant and inclusive programs that address the diverse needs of students from different backgrounds. Research should also examine the impact of environmental education on marginalized and underserved communities to ensure that all students have access to high-quality environmental learning opportunities (Ardoin et al., 2018). Finally, future initiatives should explore innovative approaches to environmental education, such as technology and digital tools. Virtual field trips, online learning platforms, and interactive simulations can enhance students' learning experiences and provide access to environmental education for those facing barriers to traditional forms of education. Integrating technology into environmental education can facilitate global collaboration and knowledge sharing among students, teachers, and communities (Riedmiller & Mennen, 2014).

Conclusion

Integrating environmental education into school curricula is pivotal in fostering environmentally conscious and proactive individuals. The "Integrating Environmental Education to Form Environmental Care Characters in Schools" project demonstrated that a comprehensive approach involving curriculum integration, teacher training, and experiential learning activities significantly enhances students' environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. By embedding environmental topics within various subjects, students can understand the interconnectedness of ecological, social, and economic systems, leading to a more holistic and engaged learning experience. Theoretical frameworks such as constructivism, social learning theory, and experiential learning underscore the effectiveness of this approach, providing students with hands-on, practical experiences that deepen their understanding and foster a personal connection to environmental issues.

From a managerial perspective, the project's success highlights several critical elements for effectively integrating environmental education into school systems. Strategic curriculum development ensures that environmental education is a core component rather than a peripheral subject. At the same time, comprehensive teacher training equips educators with the necessary skills and confidence to deliver engaging and practical lessons. Allocating resources for educational materials, extracurricular activities, and continuous professional development is essential for overcoming limited funding and time constraints. Additionally, building strong partnerships with local environmental organizations and community members can provide valuable support and enhance the impact of environmental education programs, fostering a culture of sustainability within the school community and beyond.

The broader implications of integrating environmental education extend to fostering a generation of environmentally literate citizens capable of addressing contemporary environmental challenges and contributing to sustainable development goals. The project underscores the importance of nurturing sustainable behaviors from a young age, thereby influencing students, their families, and communities toward more sustainable practices. Future research should focus on long-term studies to track the enduring impacts of environmental education and explore innovative approaches, including the use of technology, to expand access and engagement. By prioritizing and innovating in environmental education, we can prepare future generations to navigate and mitigate the complexities of environmental changes, contributing to resilient and sustainable communities globally.

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