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The Role of the Family in Ecological Education

When we consider the question of ecological education, which is also known as environmental education, we could return to antiquity in our research. This process is easy to understand because looking for the beginning of every European idea we have to follow the same path. The origins of our civilization are strongly rooted in ancient Greece. However, we have to remember that the very beginning of modern environmental education, which aims to find the balance between economic and social development and create valuable attitudes toward the protection of the environment, dates back to the second part of the twentieth century. In 1970, the international conference organized by the International Union for Conservation and Natural Resources (IUCN – previously the International Union for Conservation of Nature) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stated that ecological education is a long process involving development of abilities and behaviours necessary to understand and accept the relationship between man and the environment. This long process of education must also result in fostering abilities to take conscious decisions in order to improve the quality of the environment (Palmer, 2003: 7). Today, when we try to present the aims of ecological education, more emphasis is placed on sharing the knowledge of new technologies, as well as economic and social changes. The teacher of ecological education must be familiar with the problems of poverty and overpopulation. It is clear that education that strives to create the attitudes of appreciation and protection of the environment has to be at the center of every educational program, and should be incorporated into biology, economics, psychology and sociology. In Poland, and I think that in many other European countries, although it is not easy to generalize, the question of ecology in educational systems has found its place following the discussion of the problem at the international level. At this point, we should not forget about the role that the

UN special agency, UNESCO, and the United Nations Environmental Program have played in developing ecological education⁷.

First of all, in our investigation we are going to look through the official documents of the United Nations. Next, we will focus on the problem raised in the title of this article. It is not possible to deny that the family still creates the best place for a basic level of education, especially ecological education. The modern family can help in the process of learning about the environment; however, in the case of the dysfunctional family the process of education is distorted or even inhibited. In a positive way, no system can replace the family at the beginning of the child's life (Dąbrowska, 2004: 147). I would like to come back to the definition of ecological education given by the IUCN and UNESCO. Special emphasis has been placed upon shaping the ecological attitudes and values. Only one circle is privileged to manage the task given by this definition. Obviously, I am speaking of the family. The decisions taken by parents in the face of contemporary problems connected with ecological education are the source of proper and improper attitudes of the child in the future.

Every teacher is obliged to appreciate the family's freedom in educating and choosing the principal values. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says: "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (Art. 26, nr 3)⁸. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights develops the rights of parents. It says that the states, parties to the covenant, should respect parent's freedom and right to choose for their children other types of schools conforming to their values than those established by public authorities (Art. 13, nr 3)⁹. In this perspective, we must ask if we have the right or if we should emphasize the role played by the family in ecological education. The answer is easy: The protection of the environment is one of the most important responsibilities of the human being. We need to decide whether or not this principle is the categorical imperative of modern family. If the answer to this question is yes, then, ecological education determines the future of next generations.

The first significant international conference that dealt with the issue of the environment was organized in Stockholm on 5–14 June 1972. At the end of the meeting, over 100 delegates and heads of states issued a special declaration. In the document we read: "Education in environmental matters, for the younger

⁷ See: *Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education organized by UNESCO in co-operation with UNEP Tbilisi (USSR) 14–26 October 1977*, http://www.gdrc.org/uem/ee/EE-Tbilisi_1977.pdf.

⁸ http://www.un.org/events/humanrights/2007/hrphotos/declaration%20_eng.pdf.

⁹ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/ceschr.pdf>

generation as well as adults, giving due consideration to the underprivileged, is essential in order to broaden the basis for an enlightened opinion and responsible conduct by individuals, enterprises and communities in protecting and improving the environment in its full human dimension” (Osmańczyk, Mango 2003: 2201). This official declaration was not the only document published in the capital of Sweden. There are also two other important papers: recommendations to improve the official declaration and the text of establishment of International Environment Day. As regards ecological education, we must emphasize recommendations no. 95 and no. 96. In the first one, we read that the conference committee asked the General Secretary of the UN to support projects aimed at continual cooperation among various programs, such as social, educational, and cultural, at the international level. In recommendation no. 96, it has been implied that UNESCO, and the other international agencies concerned, should, after consultation and agreement, “take the necessary steps to establish an international program on environmental education, interdisciplinary approach, in school and out of school, encompassing all levels of education and directed towards the general public, in particular the ordinary citizen living in rural and urban areas, youth and adult alike, with a view to educating him as to the simple steps he might take, within his means, to manage and control his environment”. Taking into account the long perspective of ecological education, we would like to emphasize that World Environment Day was established during this conference. It has been celebrated every year on 5 June, the day on which the Stockholm meeting started.

In Poland, not only World Environment Day but also Earth Day has been celebrated since 1990. On 29 April 2012, whole families will participate in final celebrations of Earth Day in Warsaw. People responsible for the organization of World Environment Day and Earth Day are obliged to balance the “familiar atmosphere” with the special occasion to provide some serious information on the problem of environmental protection. The main aim of the celebration is to inspire awareness and appreciation for the Earth’s natural environment.

Analyzing the Stockholm declaration, we find that the document deals generally with ecological education of young and older generations. After all, it does not refer to elementary, secondary, or university level students. Ten years after the Stockholm Conference, the World Commission on Environment and Development was established by the General Assembly of the UN on 19 December 1983. The special report, *Our Common Future*, being the result of four years of the commission’s hard work was published in 1987. It is known as the Gro Harlem Brundtland Report – named after the former prime minister of Norway and the Norwegian Minister for Environmental Affairs from 1974 to 1979. She was responsible for the work of the commission and the preparation of the document. This document presents the definition of sustainable development,

which has been found to be the most frequently cited definition of this concept to date. According to the report, sustainable development means the development that “meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The report says that ecological education must present knowledge referring to the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities. Ecological education must be integrated with different branches of the sciences, which are included in school programs at all levels of education, and is also directed toward school teachers.

The greatest event in the modern history of the ecological movement was the Earth Summit which took place in Rio de Janeiro, from 3 to 14 July, 1992. Concrete preparations started eighteen years after the Stockholm meeting. The matter of ecological education during the preparation period was emphasized in the United Nations resolution from 1989, 22 of December. The official document stated that one of the important aims of the new conference would be “to promote environmental education, especially of the younger generation, as well as other measures to increase awareness of the value of the environment”. The Earth Summit resulted in the following documents: *The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, *Agenda 21*, and *Forest Principles*. We can also mention two important legally binding agreements that were opened for signature: *The Framework Convention on Climate Change* and *The Convention on Biological Diversity*. The question of ecological education appears in some of them. For example in the last one we read that the contracting parties shall “promote and encourage understanding of the importance of, and the measures required for, the conservation of biological diversity, as well as its propagation through media, and the inclusion of these topics in educational programs; and cooperate, as appropriate, with other States and international organizations in developing educational and public awareness programs, with respect to conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity” (Art. 13, point a and b)¹⁰.

The most essential for ecological education is obviously *Agenda 21*, which is an action plan of the United Nations related to sustainable development. There are four sections in the document: “Social and Economic Dimensions”, “Conservation and Management of Resources for Development”, “Strengthening the Role of Major Groups” and “Means of Implementation”. It is not very difficult to guess that the question of education is presented in the fourth section, to be defined in chapter 36. Addressed in the text of *Agenda 21*, ecological education must be presented in all systems of education, both formal and informal. The students who participate in it are to be sensitized to the environmental problems. The aim of ecological education is to shape the ethical and valuable attitudes, which are essential to

¹⁰*The Convention on Biological Diversity*, <http://www.cbd.int/convention/text/>.

sustainable development. *Agenda 21* does not concentrate only on the individual but on the society as well. The whole group must take conscious decisions. Perhaps the most valuable recommendation is the necessity of incorporating ecological questions into all programs of study and all levels of teaching, including the university level¹¹. We can imagine that ecological problems are presented during geography lessons but it is not easy to see them in mathematics lessons.

A simple conclusion can be drawn from this short overview of the official documents that deal with ecological education. None of the presented texts touches on the place of the family in environmental education. I think it would be helpful in our further discussion to mention the meaning of the term “education”. Using this term we think not only about the process of learning at school. Education is a long process, the aim of which is to change or create the attitudes and values of people, especially of children and the young generation. First of all, these are the values which are accepted and professed by the whole society. Certainly, the system of public and private schools is helpful in this process. The people who participate in the process of education, both students and teachers, should be ready to resolve problems and conflicts through patient conversations, peaceful discussions and long dialogues that result in the acceptance of a new system of values (Nalaskowski, 2003: 905–906). In this perspective, ecological education is the process of learning, creating and bringing up the whole society to be ready to appreciate the natural environment and to accept the environment in a conscious way.

Ecological education is both formal and informal. The valuable place of the realization of the children’s informal education is not only the family circle, the home, but the whole society as well. This is done through games and play, through the real contact with other people and the environment. Therefore, the next conclusion is that the whole society has to participate in ecological education: teachers, children of pre-school age and parents as well. The education process must be long, constant and systematic. Without the acceptance of environmental values by the whole society, the process of school learning is unrealistic.

The significant question is about the place of the family in this process. At the first stage of life, the role of the family is irreplaceable. The children of pre-school age in a special way are especially sensitive to the values that are accepted by the parents. The parents’ system of values is the most significant for children. The child identifies with them and imitates them (Wolny, 2002: 85). Starting from primary school, school friends are the second point of reference for the children. The children start to take the knowledge from the school, the television and the Internet (Tymańska, 2005: 211–212). However, parents are still in the first place. The contact between parents and children remains close and the child accepts their

¹¹ <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/english/Agenda21.pdf>.

values. The parents' role remains essential in bringing up the children. Therefore, parents must be prepared to present pro-ecological values.

At the age of six, children are interested in contact with their surrounding. They have a positive relationship with nature. We can emphasize that they are naturally interested in the environment. They ask questions about the preservation of nature as well. Like with other questions, parents must be prepared to give serious and relevant answers. Nevertheless, research shows that parents are not well-informed about environmental issues, even if the conclusions of ecological organizations are often exaggerated.

Ecological education is realized through three levels: the natural sciences, the economic and social sciences, which are delivered at schools and through the cooperation of the society. Without the interaction of the whole society, little can be done. The family is an integral part of the community because it is created by the society. To a greater or lesser extent, the parents accept the values of the society. They are also influenced by the society and at the same time, they influence the child. Then we can say that the family is a natural environment for the child. It creates the personality of the child, its social attitudes and determines the path of its life.

In Poland from 2009 a new basic program has been implemented. To meet the needs of this program, new materials and books have been prepared. The first aim of preschool education – we read on the Internet pages of the Polish Ministry of Education – is the building of the child's knowledge of the social world, nature and technical innovation, in addition to the development of the child's ability to present his own reflections in a way that is understandable for others. The next aim is shaping the new system of values and at the end of the process the children are able to recognize what is good and what is bad. To reach these aims, the child participates in games involving physical movement. The appropriate place to realize them is not only the gymnasium but also the park and the playing field. The child, who finishes preschool and begins the first class at primary school, following the basic program, is able to recognize plants and animals in different environments. This new program is a good basis for the development of ecological education, but in this process it is impossible to replace the family. Remembering the role of the family in the child's preschool years it is impossible for national, non-governmental and private institutions to replace its privileged role. This is because the emotional ties exist between the child and the parents. In the whole family circle, the ethical, cultural and social values are transmitted to the child. The parents stimulate the development of interests and the environmental sphere. If the family is to participate in this process of education, the parents must be educated as well. The above-mentioned documents emphasize that ecological education is a long process that includes the child, young people and adults. To

appreciate the environment, we must prepare throughout our whole lives. We are constantly informed about the pollution of the world, but at the same time, a new culture of life is being created. The process starts in childhood. As a result, ecological education is often called a return home. Returning to the basic program, a nine year-old child will be prepared to take the first steps in the protection of the environment. This is a serious task not only for the preschool and the school children but for the family as well.

In 2012 the 300th anniversary of the birth of Swiss philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau is being celebrated. He is an important person for people who are concerned with the environment. He stated that we can find the good in nature and he believed that feelings are the most important aspect in our activities. Today we know that without a basis in the natural sciences and economics, and the participation of the whole society, we cannot be responsible for the environment. At the beginning of this process, the role of the family is crucial.

Rola rodziny w edukacji ekologicznej

Streszczenie

Znaczącą rolę dla ochrony środowiska oraz edukacji ekologicznej odegrały międzynarodowe konferencje, które zorganizowane zostały w Sztokholmie (1972) oraz w Rio de Janeiro (1992). W historii edukacji ekologicznej zwraca się również uwagę na wyniki prac konferencji zorganizowanej w Tbilisi (1977). Wszystkie oficjalne dokumenty, które były opublikowane podczas wspomnianych konferencji, stwierdzają, że edukacja środowiskowa powinna obejmować całe życie człowieka, począwszy od lat przedszkolnych. Edukacja ekologiczna, która bywa czasami nazywana „powrotem do domu”, zakłada i domaga się również stałej i poważnej współpracy rodziców w procesie nauczania. Niemożliwe jest kształtowanie pozytywnych, proekologicznych wartości i postaw bez uwzględnienia w tym przedsięwzięciu rodziców. Ze względu na emocjonalne więzy, rodzice mają największy wpływ na kształtowanie wartości i postaw wyznawanych przez dziecko, także proekologicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, edukacja ekologiczna, proekologiczne wartości.

Summary

The international conferences which were organized in Stockholm in 1972 and Rio de Janeiro in 1992 had a significant role in the development of the environmental protection movements and ecological education as well. In the history of environmental education most sources emphasize the results of conference organized in Tbilisi 1978. All the official documents, which were published during the mentioned conferences, state that environmental education should include all the stages of life, beginning from the preschool years. Then, ecological education, which is sometimes called “returning to the home”, includes and demands the constant and serious cooperation of parents in the process of learning. It is impossible to create positive and pro-ecological values and attitudes without the participation of the family. Because of the