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Healing the Planet, Healing Ourselves: Exploring Environmental Education's Influence on Youth Mental Health

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Index Terms:

SDGs 3 – good health and well-being, SDGs 13 – climate action, awareness, environmental education, psychological resilience, eco-anxiety

Abstract. This study explores the impact of environmental education on university students, particularly in relation to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and 13 (Climate Action). Through a quantitative research design, data were gathered from fourth-year BS Biology and BS Psychology students using structured survey questionnaires. The study aimed to assess students' awareness of climate change, the effects of eco-anxiety, and the role of environmental education in promoting sustainable behavior and psychological resilience. The findings indicate the importance of environmental education significantly enhances students' understanding of climate change issues, equipping them with the knowledge and motivation necessary to engage in meaningful climate action. Additionally, results suggest that increased environmental awareness helps alleviate eco-anxiety by fostering a sense of empowerment and proactive engagement, replacing feelings of fear and helplessness with a sense of purpose and involvement. Students exposed to environmental education demonstrated higher levels of resilience, emotional well-being, and commitment to sustainable practices. These results underscore the need for integrating environmental education into university curricula to reinforce both ecological responsibility and mental health resilience. By equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and mindset to address climate challenges. Educational institutions can play a pivotal role in shaping a generation that is not only environmentally conscious but also psychologically prepared to cope with the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of the link between environmental sustainability and human well-being, especially concerning youth mental health. It also captures environmental education's dual influence in promoting ecological responsibility and psychological strength in young individuals. This closely corresponds with two important United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). SDG 3 focuses on guaranteeing healthy lives and enhancing well-being across all ages, highlighting mental health as an essential aspect of overall health (United Nations, 2015). Conversely, SDG 13 emphasizes the need for immediate measures to address climate change and its effects. Studies have demonstrated that involving young people in environmental education not only provides them with the knowledge and skills needed to tackle climate challenges but also offers significant psychological advantages.

As noted by Hofman-Bergholm (2024), being in nature and engaging actively in sustainability efforts are linked to lower anxiety, boosted mood, and an enhanced sense of purpose. Environmental education offers a platform for youth to understand ecological challenges while simultaneously cultivating coping mechanisms for eco-anxiety—a rising issue associated with the perceived dangers of climate change. This strategy enhances mental health resilience by cultivating a bond with nature and equipping young people with practical solutions (Hernandez Gonzalez, 2023). Therefore, incorporating environmental education into curricula fosters both environmental responsibility and mental wellness, harmonizing educational methods with the twin objectives of sustainable development and health enhancement.

The intersection of environmental sustainability and mental health has received considerable focus within the framework of global issues tackled by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) highlights the importance of maintaining healthy lives and enhancing mental well-being, whereas SDG 13 (Climate Action) urges immediate measures to address climate change and its effects. The two objectives are fundamentally connected, as environmental degradation, pollution, and climate change increasingly impact both physical and mental health (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Young people, especially, are vulnerable to climate anxiety and eco-distress, experiencing feelings of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of environmental issues and uncertainty regarding the future (Hickman et al., 2021).

Environmental education stands out as an essential approach for tackling these issues, providing a twofold advantage: enhancing ecological awareness and reducing mental health concerns through encouraging active involvement and empowerment. Research indicates that being in nature and engaging in environmental education can lower anxiety, boost mood, and enhance cognitive abilities in young individuals (Hofman-Bergholm, M. 2024). It also equips young people with the abilities and assurance to engage in climate action, fostering a feeling of meaning and optimism that counters sensations of powerlessness (Ojala, 2016).

This research aims the impact of environmental education on the mental health of young people, aiding in the incorporation of sustainable methods in educational policies that align with SDGs 3 and 13. Understanding these connections is essential for creating comprehensive interventions that emphasize both planetary health and human welfare, acknowledging their intertwined relationship.

Objectives

This research aims to identify the impact of environmental education on young people's mental health, aiding in the incorporation of sustainable methods in educational policies that align with SDGs 3 and 13.

Specifically, it aims:

1. To determine respondents' demographic profile;
2. To identify the respondent's environmental awareness and knowledge;
3. To assess the impact of environmental education on youth mental health;
4. To explore the relationship between environmental education and climate action among youth, and
5. To evaluate how environmental education promotes sustainable behaviors and well-being.

Methodology

The study's research design utilizes a quantitative approach that involves creating surveys and structured questionnaires incorporating validated scales. These will be distributed to assess the correlation between involvement in environmental education programs and changes in mental health outcomes for young individuals. It also enables a thorough investigation into how environmental education affects young individuals' mental health by combining statistical data with detailed personal perspectives.

The target population focuses on fourth-year Bachelor of Science in Biology and Bachelor of Science in Psychology university students participating in environmental education initiatives in schools. A stratified random sampling method will be utilized to guarantee varied representation from different demographic groups.

SPSS software will be utilized to perform statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics will condense demographic information and mental health metrics. Regression analysis will investigate the relationships between involvement in environmental education and mental health outcomes.

Ethical considerations will also be addressed, ensuring that informed consent is obtained from participants and that anonymity and confidentiality are upheld during the study. The study will comply with ethical standards established by pertinent educational and psychological organizations

Results and Discussion

This section provides an in-depth analysis of the collected data, highlighting trends, patterns, and significant relationships between environmental education and youth mental well-being. The key findings of the study "Healing the Planet, Healing Ourselves: Exploring Environmental Education's Influence on Youth Mental Health."

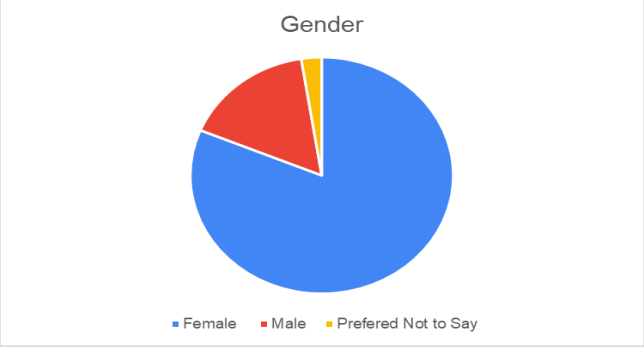

Figure 1: Gender of the Respondent

Figure 1 data reveals the gender distribution of the respondents. A majority of 65 individuals identified as female, while 13 identified as male, and 2 preferred not to disclose their gender. This indicates a significant female representation in the study, with a smaller proportion of male participants and a minimal number opting for non-disclosure. The gender distribution may have implications for the study's findings, as different gender perspectives could influence environmental education to their mental health.

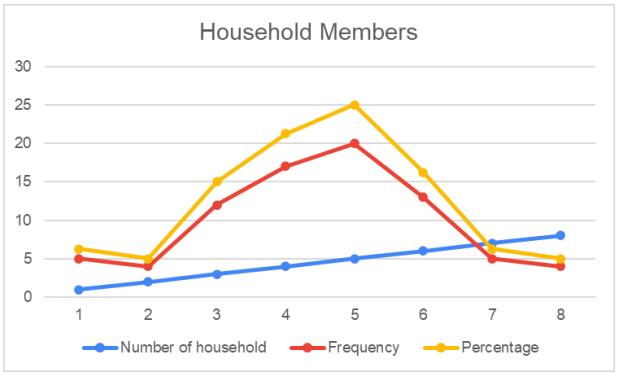

Figure 2: Number of the Household Member of the Respondent

Figure 2 presents the distribution of household sizes among the respondents. According to the findings, 1-member households make up 6.25% of respondents, while 2-member households account for 5%. Households with 3 members represent 15%, whereas 4-member households constitute 21.25%, and 5-member households make up the largest portion at 25%. Additionally, 6-member households account for 16.25%, followed by 7-member households at 6.25%, and 8-member households at 5%. This distribution suggests that most participants come from medium-sized households, particularly those with 4 to 6 members, while smaller and larger households are less common. Household size may play a role in how youth experience environmental education and mental health, as family dynamics and support structures can influence mental health.

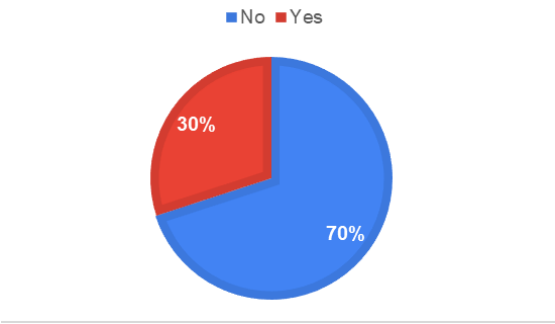

Figure 3: Participation in Any formal or Informal Environmental Education Program

The data in figure 3 indicates the participation rate out of the total respondents, 56 individuals (70%) reported not having participated, while 24 individuals (30%) stated that they had participated in such programs. This distribution suggests that a majority of respondents have not been directly involved in environmental education initiatives, which may influence their awareness and perspectives on environmental issues and how it contributes to their mental health. Thus, the lower participation rate could highlight the need for more accessible and engaging environmental education programs to reach a broader audience and maximize their potential benefits on mental health.

	Mean	SD
a. Definition (environmental sustainability and mental health)	**3.31**	**0.763**
b. Understanding of environmental issues	**3.41**	**0.736**
c. Health impacts (feel anxious or stressed about climate change)	**3.39**	**0.716**
d. Environmental education (participation in environmental program)	**3.03**	**0.821**
Total Mean	**3.284**	

0-1.0 Not aware; 1.01 – 2.0 Less aware; 2.01 – 3.0 Much aware; 3.01 – 4.0 Very much aware

Table 1: *Environmental awareness and knowledge*

Table 1 indicates the analysis of environmental awareness aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 and 13. The average score for understanding environmental sustainability and mental health is 3.31, indicating that they are very much aware about environmental awareness and knowledge that corresponds with SDG 3, and as mental health is vital for overall functioning. Environmental challenges like pollution can heighten mental health issues, including eco-anxiety (Clayton et al., 2020). Similarly, the understanding of environmental issues scored 3.41, underscoring awareness supporting SDG 13, which advocates for knowledge and proactive measures against climate change. This understanding is crucial for mitigating health problems like respiratory diseases (WHO, 2021). The awareness of climate change's mental health impact averages at 3.39, similarly reflecting to their higher awareness on the abovementioned topic, signifying the recognition of climate-related stress, particularly among youth (Hickman et al., 2021). This awareness reinforces SDG 3 and promotes engagement in climate actions stemming from climate anxiety. The participation in environmental programs (a measure of environmental education) has a mean score of 3.03, still indicating that they are very much aware in participating to different environmental programs. Environmental education is vital for SDG 13 because it fosters healthier behaviors, thus contributing to SDG 3. With a total mean of 3.284, the findings suggest a solid base for advancing both climate action and mental and physical health improvements through increased awareness and community involvement.

The data reveals that individuals have a high level of awareness regarding environmental sustainability, climate change, and health impacts. This is significant for achieving SDG 3, as it highlights the importance of addressing climate-related mental health concerns, and for advancing SDG 13, as increased awareness can drive climate action. Strengthening environmental education and implementing action-oriented policies can further support these sustainable development goals.

	Mean	SD
Environmental education has enabled me to encourage an optimistic perspective on the future.	**3.19**	**0.594**
Environmental education helps lessen the feelings of eco anxiety (worry regarding environmental harm).	**3.19**	**0.572**
Environmental education has improved my skills in handling stress and emotions.	**3.06**	**0.695**

Discovering sustainable practices fills me with optimism regarding environmental solutions.	**3.13**	**0.781**
My involvement in environmental initiatives has enhanced my feeling of personal satisfaction.	**3.14**	**0.685**
I feel empowered in discovering positive environmental initiatives.	**3.21**	**0.563**
Understanding climate change has raised anxiety.	**3.06**	**0.695**
Participation in environmental education enhances resilience.	**3.23**	**0.591**
Being environmentally conscious enables a good bond with nature.	**3.31**	**0.664**
10. Engaging in environmental activities improve my overall emotional health.	**3.13**	**0.678**
Total Mean	**3.164**	

0-1.0 Not aware; 1.01 – 2.0 Less aware; 2.01 – 3.0 Much aware; 3.01 – 4.0 Very much aware

Table 2: Impact of Environmental Education on Youth Mental Health

Table 2 shows that the impact of environmental education on youth mental health aligns closely with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, which focuses on Good Health and Well-being, and SDG 13, concerning Climate Action. Findings indicate a solid understanding with mean 3.164 of how environmental education enhances emotional resilience and mental health among youth. The education cultivates optimism about the future with mean of 3.19 and alleviates eco-anxiety of mean 3.19, demonstrating that sustainability knowledge can mitigate feelings of helplessness related to climate change. This supports SDG 3 by addressing anxiety linked to environmental challenges (Clayton et al., 2020). Engagement in sustainable practices with mean of 3.13 and empowerment in positive initiatives with mean 3.21 highlight the psychological benefits of being involved in climate solutions, thus reinforcing SDG 13 (UNESCO, 2021).

Additionally, environmental education boosts emotional resilience with mean of 3.23 and equips youth with better emotional management skills of mean 3.06. While understanding climate change has heightened anxiety with mean 3.06, active participation in environmental activities with mean 3.13 helps mitigate this stress, reflecting the dual objectives of both SDGs. Strengthening environmental education can thus yield lasting benefits for mental well-being and climate resilience.

	Mean	**SD**
1.Environmental education allows inspiration to personally act in contrary to climate change.	**3.06**	**0.695**
2. Environmental education can increase individual involvement in eco-friendly habits at home.	**3.26**	**0.627**
3.Engaging in environmental education programs can strengthen support to climate policies.	**3.35**	**0.614**
4.Environmental education increases understanding of strategies for mitigating climate change.	**3.23**	**0.689**
5.Learning environmental concerns motivates to lower carbon footprint.	**3.21**	**0.684**
6.Environmental education allows better involvement in local climate action projects.	**3.23**	**0.547**
7.Environmental education favorably influence choices for sustainable living.	**3.19**	**0.594**
8.Being active in promoting for environmental sustainability can increase participation among peers.	**3.23**	**0.612**
9.Environmental education can improve understanding of the connection between human health and climate action.	**3.28**	**0.612**
10.Trainings about climate change can heighten my responsiveness of duty to safeguard the environment.	**3.31**	**0.624**
Total Mean	**3.234**	

0-1.0 Not aware; 1.01 – 2.0 Less aware; 2.01 – 3.0 Much aware; 3.01 – 4.0 Very much aware

Table 3: Relationship Between Environmental Education and Climate Action Among Youth

Table 3 shows that the relationship between environmental education and youth climate action is closely aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 13: Climate Action and SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being. Data indicates a high awareness level (mean 3.234), suggesting that environmental education significantly boosts youth participation in climate initiatives and sustainable practices. Environmental education fosters personal motivation to act against climate change with mean 3.06 and enhances eco-friendly habits at home with mean 3.26. This aligns with SDG 13, which emphasizes the importance of individual and collective climate action to mitigate environmental damage (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, participation in environmental education programs strengthens support for climate policies with mean 3.35 and increases understanding of climate mitigation strategies with mean of 3.23, reinforcing the idea that informed youth are more likely to advocate for and support sustainable policies (UNFCCC, 2019).

Moreover, education encourages individuals to lower their carbon footprint with mean 3.21 and engage in local climate action with mean of 3.23, vital for achieving SDG 13. The influence extends to promoting sustainable lifestyle choices with mean 3.19 and peer engagement mean of 3.23. Environmental education also improves awareness of the connections between human health and climate action with mean 3.28 and fosters responsibility for environmental protection with mean of 3.31, highlighting the synergy between SDG 3 and SDG 13. Strengthening these educational programs is essential for enhancing youth involvement in climate resilience and public health safeguards.

	Mean	**SD**
1.Environmental education influences everyday behaviors, leading me to make more sustainable decisions.	**3.23**	**0.570**
2.Engaging in environmental education increases sense of accountability for conserving natural resources.	**3.24**	**0.617**
3.Understanding the connection between sustainable practices and individual health has advanced due to environmental education.	**3.20**	**0.621**
4.Embracing environmental practices enhances sense of well-being.	**3.25**	**0.680**
5.Environmental education allows to continue practicing the three Rs (reduce, reuse, and recycle).	**3.39**	**0.602**
6.Understanding climate solutions enhances everyday individual actions.	**3.35**	**0.572**
7.Engaging in eco-friendly school programs improve mental satisfaction.	**3.29**	**0.574**
8.Environmental education increases mindfulness regarding environmental conservation efforts.	**3.28**	**0.681**
9.Environmental education allows individuals to be more inclined in choosing eco-friendly transport methods.	**3.24**	**0.597**
10.Environmental education has encouraged sustainable lifestyle choices that beneficially influence mental health.	**3.30**	**0.621**
Total Mean	**3.275**	

0-1.0 Not aware; 1.01 – 2.0 Less aware; 2.01 – 3.0 Much aware; 3.01 – 4.0 Very much aware

Table 4: Environmental Education Promotes Sustainable Behaviors and Well-being

Table 4 presents the relationship between environmental education, sustainable behaviors, and well-being strongly aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3: Good Health and Well-being and SDG 13: Climate Action. With a total mean of 3.275, the findings indicate a very much aware level of understanding among individuals regarding how environmental education promotes sustainability and enhances well-being. The highest mean score (3.39) is associated with the ability of environmental education to encourage the three Rs—reduce, reuse, and recycle. This reflects a strong commitment to waste reduction and resource conservation, which directly supports SDG 13 by mitigating pollution and reducing carbon emissions (UNEP, 2021). Waste management and recycling are crucial strategies in climate action, as they lower greenhouse gas emissions from landfills and production processes. Additionally, understanding climate solutions enhances everyday individual actions (mean 3.35), further reinforcing SDG 13 by encouraging sustainable daily habits that contribute to environmental preservation (IPCC, 2022).

On the other hand, the lowest mean (3.20) is associated with understanding the connection between sustainable practices and individual health. While still within the very much aware category, this suggests that more efforts may be needed to strengthen awareness of the direct health benefits of sustainability. This aligns with SDG 3, as sustainable practices, such as reducing pollution and promoting green spaces, significantly impact respiratory health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life (WHO, 2021). Increasing public knowledge about the health benefits of sustainability could further encourage proactive engagement in eco-friendly behaviors.

Other notable findings include the positive impact of environmental education on mental well-being, with engagement in eco-friendly school programs improving mental satisfaction (mean 3.29) and sustainable lifestyle choices benefiting mental health (mean 3.30). This supports SDG 3, as research has shown that exposure to nature, sustainable habits, and climate action participation can reduce stress, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness (Clayton et al., 2020). Furthermore, embracing environmental practices enhances a sense of well-being (mean 3.25), highlighting the psychological benefits of living sustainably.

The highest and lowest mean data suggest that environmental education effectively promotes sustainable behaviors and well-being, particularly in fostering waste reduction and climate-conscious actions (SDG 13). However, there is still room for improvement in linking sustainability to individual health benefits, which is crucial for achieving SDG 3. Strengthening environmental education programs that emphasize health-related aspects of sustainability can further enhance both personal well-being and climate action efforts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study highlights on how vital environmental education is for boosting climate awareness and mental well-being among university students. By looking at the views of fourth-year Biology and Psychology students, the research shows that environmental education not only deepens their understanding of climate change but also acts as a buffer against eco-anxiety.
The results indicate that students who engage in environmental education are more inclined to adopt sustainable practices and feel empowered to tackle climate-related issues. Additionally, weaving environmental topics into academic programs enhances students' psychological resilience, helping them manage the uncertainties and stress that come with climate change. With these findings in mind, it's crucial for educational institutions to strengthen environmental education as a key strategy for fostering both sustainability and mental health.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, we suggest several recommendations to boost the effectiveness of environmental education in promoting climate awareness and mental well-being among university students:

Integrating Environmental Education Across Disciplines Universities should weave environmental education into a variety of academic programs, not just those focused on science. This interdisciplinary approach can help students from all backgrounds grasp climate issues and their psychological effects. Considering the connection between climate awareness and eco-anxiety, institutions ought to incorporate mental health support strategies into their environmental education programs. This could involve mindfulness training, stress management techniques, and conversations about emotional resilience when facing climate challenges.

Experiential and Community-Based Learning We should encourage hands-on activities like environmental conservation projects, fieldwork, and community engagement initiatives. These experiences allow students to turn theoretical knowledge into action, fostering a sense of empowerment and alleviating feelings of helplessness regarding climate change. Promoting Sustainable Campus Initiatives Universities need to roll out sustainability programs that focus on waste reduction, green energy use, and biodiversity conservation. Student-led initiatives can further cultivate environmental responsibility and foster a culture of proactive climate action within the academic community.

Strengthening Partnerships with Environmental Organizations Collaborations between educational institutions and environmental organizations can open doors for students to engage in internships, research projects, and advocacy work. These experiences can deepen their understanding of real-world environmental issues and potential solutions.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.