

Eco Clubs: Nurturing Environmental Awareness

Kirti Lamba

Eco Clubs is a significant Government of India initiative designed to enhance environmental awareness among students. Students are encouraged to participate in eco-friendly activities, thereby cultivating a sense of responsibility toward nature. This article shares the experiences of one such Eco Club led by a teacher at a Delhi government school.

When classroom lessons connect to students' lived realities, learning becomes meaningful and assured. I attempted to establish this connection in my classes, and the results were surprisingly positive. The class VII Social Science textbook has a chapter titled 'Environment', and the class VIII textbook has one titled 'Resources'. Both chapters offer a rich academic foundation for imparting Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) through the formation of an *Eco Club*.

Keeping the context of these two chapters in mind, I introduced LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment) to my students. As part of this initiative, I formed an 'Eco Club' in the school, now known as 'Eco Club for Mission LiFE.' These 'eco clubs' nurture the values and behaviours essential for

sustainable living and heightened environmental awareness and consciousness among students.

We began with a 'Walk and Talk' session for class VII students to explain the concepts of biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) components of the environment.

Through the campaign 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam' (A Tree in Mother's Name) campaign, students planted a sapling dedicated to their mothers and pledged to care for them.

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Figure 1: Students preparing the soil for plantation.

Some students prepared handmade placards with the names and other scientific information of their plants, placing these with the saplings. The next morning, without any instructions from teachers, students arrived early to school to inspect their plants and water them. The sight of students looking after their plants was beautiful. This was the beginning of a curiosity about nature and the forging of a deep bond with it. Through this experience, students were no longer mere passive recipients of facts; they became active agents of change for the environment. Thus, the club was born out of genuine, collective curiosity and a heartfelt spirit of care for the environment.

Reflecting on ground realities

A discussion on sustainable development within the chapter 'Resources' sparked a debate on the club's purpose. Students began to think deeply and ask questions. For instance, Ayesha from class VII asked, 'Ma'am, why is there a water shortage despite water being a renewable resource? Why this contradiction? We hear about water scarcity in the news every day. Why is that?'

This common-sense question became the centre of a serious reflection in the classroom that day. And later, during a discussion on another lesson, 'Environment', students' curiosity emerged. Ayesha's question turned their attention from a 'textbook theory' to a 'ground reality.' The arc of the classroom discussion moved towards limited availability of freshwater, its unequal geographical distribution and human wastage, eventually connecting directly with one of the core goals of our Eco Club for Mission LiFE - Water Conservation. The students not only took an oath to save water but also made a collective resolution to make it a part of their lifestyle.

Nisha from class VIII asked, 'Ma'am, how can we conserve natural resources?' Nisha's question was a bit innocent and yet very complex, 'So, to keep natural resources safe, should we stop using them?' Ayesha was quick to intervene, 'No, it doesn't mean not using them; it means not misusing them.'

When Nisha seemed confused, Ayesha started explaining to her that throwing waste into rivers is misuse, while using river water for irrigation is 'use'. Drinking water is 'use', but letting it run unnecessarily is 'misuse.'

'Oh, okay! I understand this. I thought it meant something else,' Nisha said, reassured. Watching students question each other and clarify concepts reassured me that the Eco Club was moving in the right direction.



Figure 2: Students' handmade placards with the names and other scientific information about their plants.

Rather than answering the questions directly, I designed activities where they could arrive at the answers on their own. For example, I turned their questions into debate topics. Students began gathering facts on why there is water scarcity. Besides debates, activities included poster making, essay writing, and scripting puppet shows.



Figure 3: Students participate in a debate on the topic of cleaning the Yamuna River.

Emotional curiosity

During a discussion on a biodiversity project on the theme of 'Understanding Skills', Janhvi raised a question that was startling. 'Why don't we see sparrows these days?'

This single question stirred an emotional curiosity in the classroom. We investigated how modern concrete buildings leave no space for birds' nests and radiation from mobile towers are endangering our urban ecosystem. The significance of this collective reflection was affirmed when the conclusions of our discussions were linked to the formal objectives of 'Mission LiFE'.



The students realised that environmental issues and society are deeply interconnected.



Connecting this environmental understanding with the principles of 'Democracy,' students staged a vibrant '*Bal Panchayat*' (children's council) while they were studying the class VI Social Science chapter 'Grassroots Democracy: Local Government in Rural Areas.' Janhvi, wearing a turban, played the role of the 'Sarpanch' (village head), while students acting as the 'general public' raised serious issues, like sanitation and water scarcity. As Sarpanch, Janhvi offered a remarkably mature solution: 'Waste segregation is not just the job of officials; it is the responsibility of every citizen. Along with administration, citizen participation is equally necessary.' The students realised that environmental issues and society are deeply interconnected.

Deepening of understanding

The Eco Club was growing more vibrant with each passing day, and so was the students' understanding. The positive thing was that they were also taking responsibility for the Eco Club on their own. My role was simply to provide direction and motivation. I noticed that gradually, their questions began to acquire a new depth. They began raising questions, discussing among themselves, and then searching through textbooks and library shelves, in an effort to sharpen their thinking and to argue their points coherently. Occasionally, I would nudge them with new questions. This would give them new ideas, and their exploration would begin afresh. For instance, I asked: 'How much water can we really save by just turning off a tap? Or how much energy is saved by merely switching off one light?' To my surprise, the next day, students came back with data. They calculated how much water or energy would be wasted if a tap or switch remained on for an hour. They went further – estimating the wastage if each student in the school wasted a bucket of water, then extending the calculation to the entire city, and even the whole state.

To deepen their understanding, I encouraged them to reflect on managing water resources at the school level, helping them think more concretely and systematically about conservation.

The students' enthusiasm was soaring. They decided on a few themes for the Eco Club:

- Adopting a healthy lifestyle

- Adopting food habits that are in harmony with and dependent on natural resources
- Preventing the wastage of food, electricity, water, and other natural resources
- Stopping the use of plastic, etc.

Students first observed the places where resources were being wasted and where they could be used more efficiently in the school. A few points/questions emerged from these observations:

- A great deal of water is wasted during mid-day meals
- Water consumption can be reduced in the washrooms
- Can electricity wastage be stopped?
- What are the things that are being wasted in school that can be used?
- Are any plants wilting? Is anyone plucking the flowers?

After identifying these issues, the students systematically formed teams and took responsibility for preventing the misuse of resources. To develop a sense of belonging and collective responsibility, groups of environmentally sensitive students were chosen, divided into teams, and a duty chart was prepared. Rotating tasks kept the group active and maintained their energy through a sense of novelty.

The journey ahead

As a coordinator, my job was to help members navigate the initial challenges of starting an Eco Club. Once teachers, community members, and school staff were informed about the club's objectives, they began cooperating for the school's improvement. Members developed time-management and implementation skills by utilising lunch breaks, morning assemblies, and after-school time to ensure their studies were not hindered. Positive reinforcement and thoughtful problem-solving began to yield tangible results. Students started to feel a deeper, more personal connection with the lessons in their textbooks. Some of their curiosities were satisfied, while new ones were being born. As a teacher, their evolving questions and growing inquisitiveness were my deepest reassurance.

Sustaining interest and participation

Sustaining members' enthusiasm over time is undoubtedly a challenge. To meet this, I hold regular meetings and encourage nature walks and open conversations among the members. We have also organised ice-breaking activities, such as 'circle time' and 'adopt and name

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a favourite plant.’ Together, we brainstorm and plan programmes and activities, guided by the principle, ‘every member: an equal voice and an equal opportunity,’ ensuring that everyone has the space to express their ideas.

This sense of shared ownership became especially evident when some students noticed leftover paint after the school building had been painted. Rather than allowing it to be wasted, they collectively decided to use it to beautify the campus. Of their own free will, they set about painting the garden pots with care and beauty. This was not a teacher-assigned ‘task’ but a natural inspiration arising from working together.

Kitchen garden initiative

This initiative provides students with vocational experience while instilling values, such as the dignity of labour and the virtue of patience. Emphasis is placed on learning by doing—from initial gardening tasks to becoming skilled in gardening.

Students first carefully observe the germination of seeds inside a jar in a controlled setting, before planting them in soil. They measure the land area for planting and brainstorm about what must be kept in mind when choosing the right spot. We then divide sections for different teams. Students are involved in every decision – from choosing plant types to determining the height of fences made from locally available pipes and sticks. They learn how to fill the pits gently, rather than pressing the soil hard.

Based on lessons from the germination experiment, a watering schedule is planned. Attention is paid to the quantity of water, the timing of watering, and how frequently to water. They observe critical factors like the emergence of sprouts, plant height, pests, changes in leaf colour, and flowering. Students are told to touch the soil with their fingers to check for moisture before watering, ensuring it is moist but not waterlogged. They gradually learn that just as seeds cannot germinate in conditions of excess or insufficient moisture, the life of plants also depends on a balance of water; there is no universal rule for watering different plants. This is an example of experiential learning through the club’s active intervention, where students learn from direct experience.

Reaping the ‘fruits of their labour’ from the kitchen garden is a wonderful experience for everyone. When students see vegetables growing in their plots, they understand the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. The mud-stained hands of the students are proof of their firm resolution to save the environment.

Initially, we faced a minor problem when some students were plucking flowers just for fun. But this problem was resolved by talking to the students about it during the morning assembly. This was addressed not through a ‘do not pluck flowers’ sermon, but by nurturing an emotional bond between the students and plants. Students began observing the little guests who came to visit the flowers, such as bees, butterflies and realised that by plucking the flowers, plants lose their ability to ‘invite’ their pollinators. Now, they themselves care for the plants without a need for strict rules. During the school’s quiet hours, a pair of parrots and a peacock have been spotted wandering freely through the school premises — a living proof of the growing biodiversity within our school’s ecosystem.

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