Disaster Education

“Education is important and represents a priority, because if human beings don’t become aware of disaster risks, acquire the knowledge necessary, and develop the appropriate behavior, attitudes and level of involvement, they will not be able to prevent them. It is important for education to facilitate and contribute to the creation of a culture of prevention and for the population and communities to take action to prepare for a disaster.”

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In the last three decades (1970-1990), extreme natural phenomena have caused increasing economic and social losses. For this reason, in 1989, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 44/236, designating the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR).

This was considered the first universal effort for disaster prevention and mitigation, and it highlighted the idea that human beings have increased responsibility for planning and for regulating what the environment can be exposed to and how it should be used.

The United Nations community intensified its efforts to increase and improve information, education, and public awareness around natural disasters. Prevention and early warning systems were strengthened, as were emergency responses, damage restoration, and reconstruction processes. However, in spite of all these efforts and actions, the occurrence and intensity of potentially damaging natural phenomena, such as drought, floods, landslides, tornados, seismic activity, and tropical cyclones, have increased in recent years. These phenomena have caused losses that endanger the development of many communities and have affected, in particular, the poorest sectors of society.

For many years now, the education sector in the Americas has been including environmental and disaster-related content material in educational processes at all levels. However, the level of preparedness and results shown thus far, as well as the capacity of institutions and organizations to meet basic needs (e.g. rescue survivors, take care of the injured, put out fires, control leaks of hazardous substances, provide shelter, water, and food for victims, evacuate the population to safer places, reestablish communication systems, restore public order and security, and identify and dispose of dead bodies, among others) do not appear to be sufficient for the population to manage disasters adequately.

In recent years, it has been confirmed that the development of attitudes of students who are actively engaged in environmental protection and disaster prevention depends on multiple influencing factors, but that two of the most important elements are the teaching-learning process at school and the ties students have with their families and communities.

For the teaching-learning process at school to be able to truly influence the definition and development of students’ attitudes and establish a culture of disaster prevention, it is imperative that existing curricula include environmental issues and disaster prevention in their objectives, content, and activities, and that they serve as guiding principles. These topics should be included both in materials for teachers and in student textbooks and workbooks. The process should focus on ecological problems, their causes and effects, and their prevention and solution. Students should be able to participate actively in the learning process.

Activities carried out in the classroom are related to and complemented by fieldwork and research conducted by the students. Schools are also directly linked to civil defense and disaster response plans in their regions.
In this way, the educational contents related to disasters and potential hazards become part of the school experiences, research, and projects. This contributes to the creation of a culture of prevention that can lead to reducing disaster risks and establishing an interactive and mutual learning process between the population and the institutions. This kind of process also helps recognize and make use of traditional wisdom and local knowledge about protection against natural hazards.

Although current program objectives and contents, methodological guides, textbooks, and workbooks for teachers and students address issues related to disasters and environmental protection, there is still the need to promote, highlight, and go into these issues in greater depth. Every school must be able to carry out this educational work aimed at preparing students, teachers, and parents. They must be able to guarantee efficient training on disasters, environmental protection, and the preservation of human life.

We can be confident that students who graduate from these schools will know how to live up to their convictions and put their knowledge, skills, and attitudes about environmental protection and disaster prevention into practice when they become active workers in their respective jobs and careers.

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Education for disaster prevention through curricular and non-curricular activities must not become simply a list of tasks. This type of education must be built upon the principle of integration, which facilitates the process of developing educational work in order to introduce variables and issues related to environmental protection and, in particular, to disaster prevention.

The subject matters addressed and the activities carried out with the students must be easy to understand and adapted according to the interests and needs of each region. They should also be flexible, dynamic, creative, participatory, and subject to changes and adjustments.

This type of educational work does not require special programs or methodological orientations in a particular field. It requires only the teacher’s experience and creativity in order to provide a space for reflection and training that allows students to learn in greater depth about the world that surrounds them.

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