Recycling: Plastic And Food Contamination

In the year of 2018, the average contamination rate of communities and businesses is 25%, which is a fairly high number, and should be alarming. As stated in Josh Ocampo's article (2018), 25% means that around 1 in 4 items placed in the recycle bin isn't actually recycled, and this does more harm than good. Well-intentioned people can throw a non-recyclable item into the recycle bin, which can contaminate the whole bin. Improper recycling hurts more than just the planet, and it is done on a regular basis. Improper recycling can damage machines, as well as waste fuel, money, and time for the recycling business. Materials that could have been used end up going in the landfill, and recycling companies struggle to recover the cost of contamination. People aren't informed well enough of how to properly recycle, which is why recycling should be taught at a young age in school, therefore reducing recycling contamination.

Plastic bags are one of the worst recycling contaminations of all time. According to Mitch Hedlund (2018) who is a founder and executive director of Recycle Across America, one facility with $17 million dollar equipment suffered from similar issues with improper recycling. "Every 25 minutes almost on the clock, their equipment breaks down because of plastic bags or plastic films get stuck," Many people are not aware of the fact that putting plastic film and plastic bags in the recycle bin isn't proper recycling. There are separate companies that have to recycle plastic bags/film as it breaks the machines and gets clogged, which in turn leads to the employees having to take it out of the machine by hand and it's super dangerous. It's not that plastic bags can't be recycled; it's only a matter that they require different machinery than curbside recycling. Some facilities don't even bother with the bags and end up taking them to the landfill, which wastes gas.

Another huge issue with recycling contamination is food waste. If recyclable items that are thrown into the recycle bin contain remnants of food, they will quickly become garbage. As Nick Douglas states in a Lifehacker article (2018) "Excess food waste can attract rats and make it more expensive to recycle things. So if you're throwing filthy containers into the recycling bin, you might do more harm than if you just threw them in the trash." Everyone is guilty of this at some point, but very few of the population seem to understand that you need to rinse your recycles before throwing them in the blue bin. This comes from improper education or no education at all. To some extent you can leave a little residue, but if not clean, it often slows the faculty down and they throw the item away instead of recycling it. This, therefore, makes recycling more expensive, and wastes time.

In a study done by Sara Flanagan (2017), she states: "Being aware of where the materials to make products come from are one of the first steps in being able to make conscious decisions about responsible ways to discard waste." The research Flanagan conducted focused on how educating students about the life cycle of products can affect the waste habits of students. After reviewing the analysis from the surveys of Flanagan's study, 12 out of the 16 students answered a strong "yes" to the question of if the student's attitudes have shifted towards recycling after the change of curriculum. This would be equal to 75% of student saying this did have an impact. After reviewing the open ended question of "why", there seemed to be a noticeable trend that before being taught, they didn't know what material was actually recyclable, or much about recycling at all. Education involving recycling seems to be almost

nonexistent among new children, and this is what should change. After Flanagan provided fun activities and lectures about recycling, it was clear that more awareness and concern was brought among the children. Students need to be reminded of the importance of our resources, making sure they are properly discarded.

According to Hannah Williams, (2012) “Since children have fewer negative environmental behaviors to unlearn and have a longer time through which their behaviors will impact the environment, they represent a key population for environmental education.” This statement proves the fact that we need to start early with students to make an impact for the environment. Experts from Stanford have stated that younger brains may process information easier and learn things more easily, while older brains may store information, but not as well. “All three teachers interviewed, Mrs. Birky, Mrs. Hedman, and Mrs. Muhammad indicated that students do not receive environmental education except in the science curriculum. Environmental education was typically limited to first hand matters, such as energy conservation and recycling.” This experiment done by Hannah Williams represents the fact that due to a lack of time in curriculums, recycling is not taught as thorough as it should be, and it leaves students without a true understanding of what should be recycled and what shouldn’t, causing the huge contamination rate. All the teachers interviewed reported that they want to teach it, but it’s too time-consuming. Not all students are taught about recycling at home, so it’s important for schools to teach it. Teaching recycling to students creates responsible citizens, and makes them more aware of consequences.

Due to the conditions of our environment continuing to worsen, it’s very important to upcoming generations that our youth is educated on proper recycling. Being educated on proper recycling will reduce recycling contamination and other harmful issues that waste time and management which does more harm than good. Our young generations are the ones who suffer from past generations recycling errors and carelessness, but that can change just by simple changes of the curriculum.