

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: RELATIONS WITH THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY



<https://doi.org/10.56238/arev7n4-308>

Submitted on: 03/30/2025

Publication date: 04/30/2025

Paulo Roberto Serpa¹, Veronica Gesser² and Bruna Carolina de Lima Siqueira dos Santos³

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the integration of Environmental Education in Early Childhood Education, with emphasis on the relationships established between the school and the school community. This is an excerpt from an ongoing doctoral research, which investigates the transition to sustainable educational spaces in early childhood education. The present research aims to discuss how Environmental Education is developed in the pedagogical practices of Early Childhood Education and how the participation of the school community contributes to the transition of the school to a sustainable educational space. The methodological approach adopted is qualitative, based on interviews with different professional categories of an early childhood education school defined after documentary analysis in the MAXQDA software in carrying out an environmentalization diagnosis. As this research conducted interviews with human beings, it was initially approved by the ethics committee, under code 69685523.1.0000.0120, with an approval date of July 28, 2023. The results point to the importance of integration between school and community in the continuity of actions and practices developed in the school environment for the socio-environmental formation of children.

Keywords: Environmental education. Early childhood education. School community. Families. Participation.

¹CAPES/PROSUC scholarship holder in the Doctorate in Education at the University of Vale do Itajaí – UNIVALI.

E-mail: pauloserparoberto@gmail.com

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/5118531827150850>

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3642-8848>

²Dr. in Education. University of Vale do Itajaí – UNIVALI.

Email: gesserv@univali.br

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/0666108693463895>

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2170-064X>

³Dr. in Education. University of Vale do Itajaí – UNIVALI.

E-mail: bruna_siqueiras@hotmail.com

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/2387862154032685>

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7305-5083>

INTRODUCTION

The environmental crisis we are currently experiencing is expressed as a result of the development model based on the excessive exploitation of natural resources, which has demanded profound transformations in society's ways of thinking and acting. In this context, Environmental Education presents itself as an essential pedagogical and political proposal for the formation of conscious, critical subjects committed to sustainability (Jacobi, 2003). The school, in turn, occupies an important place in this process, especially in Early Childhood Education, a fundamental stage for the integral development of children and for the awakening of an ecological awareness.

Childhood is a phase particularly conducive to environmental awareness, as it is in it that affective bonds with nature, sensory perceptions of the world and the first social values are constituted. Thus, Environmental Education in Early Childhood Education must be incorporated in a transversal, continuous and integrated way into the daily routine of pedagogical practice (Torales, 2006). In this sense, educational practices focused on the environment should be meaningful, playful, exploratory and based on the child's concrete experience with their surroundings, valuing play as a way of knowing, interacting and caring for nature.

A fundamental aspect for the strengthening of Environmental Education in Early Childhood Education is the involvement of the school community. The school does not act in isolation, but inserted in a social, cultural and environmental territory, where relationships with families, neighbors, and other social agents can enhance educational practices and generate a collective sense of belonging.

In view of this, this work proposes to discuss how Environmental Education is developed in the pedagogical practices of Early Childhood Education and how the participation of the school community contributes to the transition of the school to a sustainable educational space.

METHODOLOGY

This study is an excerpt from an ongoing doctoral research that investigates the possibilities of transition to sustainable educational spaces in Early Childhood Education, with a focus on the integration of Environmental Education (EE). The methodological design adopted is qualitative in nature, as it understands that the phenomena investigated

are complex and are directly linked to the experiences, perceptions and practices of the subjects involved (Minayo, 2001).

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1994), the qualitative approach is adequate to study human processes and relations in their natural environments, valuing the perspective of the participants as a legitimate form of knowledge production.

The methodological path began with the documentary analysis of the institutional political-pedagogical projects of different Early Childhood Education units and the curricular proposal of the municipality of Porto Belo/SC, aiming to identify signs of environmentalization. This stage was conducted with the support of the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA, which enabled the organization, codification and categorization of data in a systematized way, facilitating the identification of signs of environmentalization in the documents. The use of qualitative analysis software has been widely recognized as a resource that increases analytical consistency and data traceability.

After selecting the school unit with the most signs of environmentalization, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 subjects from different professional categories of Early Childhood Education, including teachers, managers and other members of the school team. The selection of participants took place with the support of the unit's manager, who articulated the indication of professionals willing to contribute to the research. In addition, a representative of the Municipal Department of Education was interviewed, appointed by the department itself, in order to bring the perspective of public management on the integration of EE in the context of municipal policies.

The interviews were conducted in three visits to the school unit and one visit to the Department of Education, which took place in November and December 2023. This strategy made it possible to listen attentively, respecting the specificities and the different shifts of operation of the school. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and later analyzed in the light of Discursive Textual Analysis (DTA), as proposed by Moraes and Galiuzzi (2016), which presents itself as a methodology especially suitable for qualitative research in education. DTA allows the construction of meanings from the fragmentation and reconfiguration of the texts produced, enabling the emergence of analytical categories based on the subjects' discourse.

In the analysis process, initially 39 categories were generated, which, after reviewing and recategorizing the data, resulted in six final categories. These categories were transversally present in the three dimensions proposed by the Sustainable Educational

Spaces (EES) - management, curriculum and physical space - according to the National Curriculum Guidelines for Environmental Education (Brasil, 2012a). The recategorization was conducted with the aid of textual search tools (Ctrl+L) and careful review of the discursive fragments, allowing the identification of correlations between units of meaning and ensuring greater precision in the interpretation of the data.

The choice to listen to different professional categories is in line with the perspective that the construction of a sustainable educational space depends on the collective and integrated action of the entire school community. EE proposes the dialogue between knowledge, transversality and articulation between subjects, overcoming punctual and fragmented practices. In this sense, the methodology adopted contemplates different voices, as it considers them as constitutive of the analysis and construction of interpretations.

The integration between school and community, emerging from the analyses as an emerging category of analysis, reaffirming the importance of the involvement of the community in the construction of sustainable practices.

Chart 1 expresses the legend of the terms used in the coding and categorization of the units of meaning of the interviews:

TABLE 1: Legend of codes used in the unitarization of the interviews

R2PI BEATRIZ U1	R2G BEATRIZ U1	R21C BEATRIZ U1	R2EF BEATRIZ U1	CL BEATRIZ U1
R- Answer; 2- Question; PI - Initial questions; G- Management; C- Curriculum; EF - Physical space; CL- Free comments; Beatriz - Name of the interviewee; U- Unit; 1- Unit number.				

Source: Prepared by the researcher.

Next, the metatext on the relations with the school community that emerged from the interviews during the ATD process is presented. This metatext represents the interpretations made from the main ideas and meanings extracted from the answers of the interviewees.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: RELATIONS WITH THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The relationships with the school community highlight the importance of the connections between the school, the families and the various actors in the community for the effectiveness of Environmental Education (EE) in Early Childhood Education. These

relationships are fundamental to expand the impact of pedagogical practices and consolidate EE as an integrating and transforming element:

Through pedagogical practices, [...] the formal space can be configured as a mechanism towards changes in social practices, considering that the transformation of individuals is only possible as long as they become protagonists. It is in the set of active subjects – transformed and transforming individuals – that a new society becomes possible as a horizon, resulting in collective solutions to the problems that affect society (Back, 2021, p. 44).

Thus, EE in Early Childhood Education should not be an isolated process within the school, but a collective and participatory movement that involves children, teachers, families and the community. As stated by Krügel *et al.* (2019, p. 02): "EE helps to understand environmental problems, bringing the population information and alternative ways to promote sustainability". Only through this articulation is it possible to promote concrete changes in society.

The role of the school as a space for social interaction that can radiate environmental practices and values beyond its walls is emphasized. Because "[t]he EE enables the population to expand the knowledge of environmental problems to conscious attitudes towards the environment, leading to attitudes of respect and collaboration to promote environmental care" (Krügel *et al.*, 2019, p. 02). This interaction allows the school to function as an articulating pole of socio-environmental changes, strengthening collective awareness about environmental issues.

Borges (2011) emphasizes that the school must be consistent with the principles it defends and become an educational model for the entire school community. Therefore, "[...] the school must be the living reference of the values and knowledge that it proposes to work on and, thus, create conditions for the teaching-learning relationship to actually happen" (Borges, 2011, p. 14).

Brasil (2012b) complements by emphasizing that:

The most important thing is that the physical space offers multiple opportunities for the school to demonstrate sustainability practices that can become life lessons for students: references to be used by families and communities as practices incorporated into their daily lives (Brasil, 2012b, p. 39).

The family-school relationship is another aspect present. When this relationship is strengthened, a synergy is created that enhances EA's learning. However, as highlighted by Albuquerque and Zortéa (2018, p. 167-168):

The participation of Families is a challenge to the educational practice, which needs to be planned in the daily life of the school, and it is necessary to build a space to know in a more singular and punctual way the plurality of logics and cultures of families. It is necessary to provide families with a recognized collective and democratic space, which has dialogue, listening and communication as its principle.

The partnerships reveal the establishment of collaborations with other institutions. These partnerships can provide material resources, technical support and training, in addition to enabling the realization of broader projects, promoting an exchange of knowledge and practices that enrich educational experiences.

It is worth mentioning that work projects need, in turn, to have a meaning for those who choose them, otherwise, we are faced with a project distorted from reality and curiosity, and as a result of this we, the teachers, lose the chance to develop proposals that go beyond the curriculum and that demonstrate the greatness and compassion of opening space for protagonism and participation of each one (Freitas; Imhoff, 2023, p. 80).

In general, the construction of solid relationships with the school community expands the possibilities of EE's action, connecting school knowledge with social practices and creating a network that facilitates the implementation of educational actions.

The school, as an aggregating institution of the school community, can play an important role in social mobilization, and teachers, as elements of institutional reference, are potentially key players in the composition of scenarios that favor the articulation of social responses to the socio-environmental demands emerging in the social context (Torales, 2006, p. 59).

Beatriz reveals that the community has an important role in cultural practices in the context of children's EE. For her, the neighborhoods have their own characteristics, which reflect on the habits of families and the way they deal with issues related to environmental preservation.

R2EF BEATRIZ U1 – "It depends on the community, this is very related to the cultural issue and each neighborhood has a characteristic".

R2EF BEATRIZ U2 – "[...] In some neighborhoods you realize that the father takes the belief and the child takes the candy wrapper, throws the candy wrapper on the ground along the way, while others, you realize, if a father notices a garbage that was there, he already puts it in the trash can".

Beatriz brings to light the historical and social role of childhood and how the culture of each community influences the way children relate to the natural world. Kramer (1999)

emphasizes the idea that children have their own history and are shaped by the contexts in which they live, whether in the family, social or geographical space.

The ways in which the various communities coexist with the natural world are intimately linked to their historical and cultural processes, to the values that sustain their existence. Thus, childhood, as a social and historical construction, is conceived and treated based on the culture of each time and each people (Lima, 2015, p. 42).

Souza (2017) highlights that the school should not be seen as an isolated space, disconnected from the social, environmental and cultural context that surrounds it. On the contrary, it must be attentive to the issues of the environment, the community in which it is inserted and the problems that directly affect the lives of children. By bringing the environmental issue into the school space, it becomes possible to reflect on the conditions of the environment itself and the relationship of children with this space.

Bianchi (2016) corroborates by reflecting that the educational space can be designed in a way that sensitizes children to the natural world, encouraging a commitment to sustainability, resignifying the local culture.

Regarding the family-school relationship, the analysis of the units of meaning extracted from the interviews demonstrates varied perceptions about the involvement of families with school practices, especially in the context of Environmental Education and collaboration in the educational environment. Parents often contribute resources or manpower to improve school infrastructure.

R2EF CARLA U5 – "Now, we still got a donation from a father, for APP, an awning back there that we needed".

R2EF ELOAH U4 – "Oh, our awning on the other side, it was a student's father who did it. He came, he did, he made the awning, he fixed the awning, he came, screwed, nailed, because on sunny and rainy days, the children used the other, the gate doesn't have one, and then, he thought it was a sin for the professionals to stay there at the gate on a sunny and rainy day, cowering on the edge of the roof, He went there and did it, so the parents here are wonderful, they really take care of the things at school".

R2EF CRISTAL U3 – "Look, it's... I observed the care of a father this week, which I thought was very nice, that an awning was donated outside, because at the exit of the Pres there they were [...] next to the rooms because there is no awning, it was just a little water like that, so they stayed there or else they had to stay inside the cafeteria waiting for the parents because it was raining. Then, then, a father donated the awning, it was placed there where they will be able to stay where the parents come to pick it up, right".

R2EF FERNANDA U3 – "[...] The father saw that there was not the same cover there as here. A father came and covered for us. He donated it to us, so that we wouldn't be in the sun. That's what we were requesting this for Education, but he

saw it and he has a company that works with this, so, you know... Parents look at it a lot, because they see the return that it is taken care of, that it is good".

R2EF ELOAH U3 – "And the parents help a lot, because they are very participative here, everything you request, everything you ask for help, they are ready to help you".

There are efforts to involve families in events that celebrate children's work, as they promote greater connection and visibility of what happens at school.

R3G ROBERTA U1 – "Yes, through the meetings, you know, through these fairs that bring parents to school, what else... is... When there is a family party, this is also a stimulus for parents to be coming, participating in their children's lives".

R1G CRISTAL U2 – "The projects they do, where they have... Oh, several things that they do, that they use. Disposable things, crops, everything is shown there to the family."

R1G CARLA U2 – "And so, the moment we have to ask for the help of parents is exactly like that. For example, now they did Yellow October? Yellow October! The girls asked for yellow plants and made a bed of yellow plants. So, it is in these issues, like, that there is the collaboration of parents, right?"

R1G CRISTAL U1 – "So, they do it, there's a sample they make of fame, called Family Day at school, you know. That parents come and they make a kind of exhibition there, all the work that is done with the children, right? So, there are classrooms, there are outsiders, and then they are presented there to the parents, you know".

R2EF CRISTAL U4 – "And there is also the donation of clothes. A box is placed outside, the parents bring, you know, clothes for donation and those who pass by are also placed there. He puts it every day in the morning at the door, you know, it's put outside. Both the people... Parents who need it, can take it and also those who have to donate are also placed there too, you know? So, there is this participation of theirs like this".

R5EF CRISTAL U2 – "There are even these moments when they come with the children with fruit, that sometimes, then, they ask their parents for the fruits too, I think they do, because there is a lot of fruit. And then, they, you know, they take it outside to do this thing and stuff, and that's more or less it."

Some families showed active interest in helping, questioning the needs of the Child Development Center and appreciating the environment they find.

R2EF CARLA U2 – "Parents, [...] Here they are very participative, right. They are well, they collaborate a lot, and sometimes they question if they need something, right".

R2EF CARLA U4 – "But like, they're always questioning if they need something."

R2EF FERNANDA U4 – "When they come to meetings, when we open the doors to receive them in celebrations, at parties, in meetings, we open them for visitation in the room, because he also came to see the room where his son is. Since he doesn't have this contact, they are... They really like what they see, they really like what they see about caring for the school."

However, there are still challenges in strengthening the bond. The limitation of families' physical access to schools, which began during the pandemic, affected the bond, which is expressed in a participation below expectations.

R2EF ELOAH U1 – "[...] I'm going to give my opinion and tell you that, after the pandemic, our school didn't come back with parents entering the school, right. Our school still receives and delivers at the gate, I'll tell you to keep it up. Why, cleanliness, organization and hygiene, because you think 200 parents coming and going, all the time inside the school and the child walking there, it's dirt, it's worm, it's bacteria, and the parents being no matter how much they take care that they put their foot down, I don't know what, it ends up not helping, you know, it doesn't clean like that, No... And I'll tell you that it was the best option at the school, we continue to receive at the gate".

R2EF FERNANDA U2 – "[...] This year, we chose to open two gates. Before, the students all come here. Parents have not entered our school since the pandemic. We chose it because there are many more children circulating... Many more people circulating here, we made this option and the secretariat supported us, so the parents leave it there and we carry the children to the classroom".

R2EF CARLA U6 – "But as they can't enter space, they can't observe what needs to be changed like that, right".

R1G FERNANDA U3 – "The parents were a little... they did not attend the activities as much as could be done [...]".

R2EF ELOAH U2 – "[...] We miss the contact with the father, because those who receive at the gate are the professionals of the secretariat and the mobile professionals who do this is the one who has this function".

R1G CECÍLIA U3 – "[...] This exchange with parents, I believe it has not yet happened".

Even so, Environmental Education projects, such as vegetable gardens, plantations and the use of recyclable materials, have proven effective in promoting interaction between families and schools, arousing interest in sustainable practices.

R1G ELOAH U3 – "This year I made the souvenir of the exhibition. It was a bag with sunflower seeds. They kept sending it when the seed was already being born [...]".

R1G ELOAH U4 – "[...] I read the strawberry book there, I forgot the name of the strawberry book... Forgot. And I gave strawberry seedlings, they also took them, they took care of them, they are very participative, the parents here".

R1G ELOAH U5 – "Basically that would be it, like, their participation, parents' involvement in pedagogical practice".

R2EF ROBERTA U1 – "Yes, they have a good conscience even. Very good. They don't smoke, they don't throw paper in front of the school. I also realize that. Be careful, right? You see that the school has no graffiti. Let me see what else... The parents, they are very conscious, like that".

Lima (2015) addresses the importance of collective work that contributes to the construction of a more humanized and integrated education, in which the active participation of all those involved strengthens children's learning and well-being.

Louv (2016) highlights the importance of concrete actions in various contexts, that is, not only at school, but also in family life, as in Eloah's proposals. Even so, the author indicates that:

In family life and in schools and in all the environments in which we live, we can do a lot - right now - to stimulate the reunion between nature and children. But in the long run, unless we change cultural patterns and the built environment, the distance from nature will continue to widen (Louv, 2016, p. 297).

Carla and Luara address the family-school relationship with a focus on the need to expand the space for collaboration and the recognition of the contributions that family experience can offer to the school context.

R1G CARLA U4 – "Actually, we don't give much space, I believe that we have to, you know, add more, both in environmental education and in all other aspects, like, right".

R7C LUARA U3 – "But I think the debate, the proposal, the intention has to be broadened, because the child, he's there, he has a lot, he brings baggage from home, right? So, you know a little more about this family reality, have more experience with the family, it's a difficult process, it's time-consuming, but you have to have the will, you know... will, motivation and enjoying what you do".

Albuquerque and Zortéa (2018) underline the importance of a close bond between education professionals and the families of children served in schools. The relationship between school and family must be an active partnership, as both contexts are fundamental for the learning process and for the formation of children's values and attitudes. We understand that education does not happen in isolation and, by working together with families, the school expands the possibilities of building meaningful learning, adjusting to the realities and particularities of each child.

Even so, the contributions of parents are punctual, and the lack of access to the school environment can lead to low attendance in activities. This analysis reveals the potential of the family-school relationship to enrich educational experiences and strengthen pedagogical practices.

The interviewees also address the partnerships and collaboration between different entities and NDI in educational practices for the development of projects, especially in the area of Environmental Education. The partnership initiatives show the value of the articulation of NDI with local institutions promoting EE.

R4G FERNANDA U1 – "We have a lot of support from the City Hall, from the people from the garden, who sent seedlings, FAMAP sent seedlings for us to take home, to plant each one on their own tree. Always, everyone would have their own tree, like, at home. That I planted my tree. So, we had a lot of support."

R4PI CARLA U3 – "[...] We asked the... It wasn't for... For the garden, they sent soil, we got seedlings, we planted them in pots and then replanted them [...]".

R4G PÉROLA U1 – "We have a lot of help, right, from the Department of Agriculture, right? They come, bring material for us to work with the children and then it is worked. Very good".

R4G BEATRIZ U2 – "We have partnerships with other departments, such as the Department of Agriculture, so every time they get in touch, they can do it".

R4G BEATRIZ U3 – "And there are also schools that have partnerships with foundations... neighborhood association".

R4G BEATRIZ U4 – "We even have a daycare center in the municipality that has a vegetable garden all financed by the neighborhood association".

Silva and Silveira (2016) highlight that the transformation in the school environment does not occur only from isolated actions, but through the mobilization of the community. This implies seeking external partnerships, establishing a support network that can strengthen actions.

The partnerships established between schools and different public and community entities play an essential role in strengthening pedagogical practices, especially in projects aimed at Environmental Education. The units of meaning presented demonstrate that these collaborations not only provide material and technical support, but also create a network of interaction between the school, the community and institutional bodies.

Louv (2016, p. 237) also indicates some more possibilities when he advises that,

[t]he schools could build stronger and more meaningful links with agricultural associations, nature centres, environmental organisations and bird refuges, rather than using them for one-off visits. Instead of waiting for a turnaround in the school budget, these organizations could come together to hire environmental educators to work in classrooms, organize activities with parents, teachers, and students, and help teachers learn to integrate nearby school territory, parks, forests, fields, or canyons into the core curriculum. Ultimately, these efforts lead to more effective education (Louv, 2016, p. 237).

Therefore, the analysis of the relationships with the school community, in the context of EE, highlights the relevance of the connections between the school, families and local institutions as an articulating axis of transformative educational practices. These interactions enable the dissemination of socio-environmental values and the consolidation of projects.

Finally, with the analysis of the interviews, many important points emerged that were discussed, such as the existence of isolated socio-environmental actions; working with projects acting from an interdisciplinary perspective and as a possibility to connect actions; the need for the involvement of the school community; the lack of continuing education for all professional categories; and the lack of wider natural spaces in Early Childhood Education schools.

CONSIDERATIONS

The present investigation, as an excerpt from an ongoing doctoral research, enabled a reflection on Environmental Education (EE) in Early Childhood Education, especially with regard to the relationships established with the school community. The semi-structured interviews conducted with several professional subjects of early childhood education revealed the complexity, challenges and powers existing in the consolidation of an integrated environmental education from the first years of schooling.

The analysis of the interviews showed that the practices of Environmental Education in kindergartens are still manifested in a punctual way and often disjointed from each other. However, they also revealed the existence of significant movements, especially when the school proposes to act in a network with the school community and with partner institutions.

The relations with the school community, highlighted in this production, stand out as an articulating axis of transformative educational processes. The statements of the interviewees showed that, when there is approximation between school, families and community, there is also a strengthening of pedagogical actions aimed at sustainability. Such relationships expand the reach of educational proposals and give meaning to the environmental actions developed with children, anchoring them in real and shared experiences.

However, the data also revealed important structural and training weaknesses. There were recurrent mentions of the lack of ample natural spaces in the Early Childhood Education unit investigated, the absence of a continuing education policy focused on EE and the difficulty of effective involvement of families in school projects and actions. The analysis also revealed that project work is a powerful alternative to integrate environmental themes into the Early Childhood Education curriculum, overcoming the fragmentation of knowledge and promoting the collective construction of knowledge and participation of the school community.

It is concluded, therefore, that Environmental Education in Early Childhood Education needs to be conceived as a collective movement, which goes beyond the limits of the classroom and involves all subjects of the school community in processes of listening, dialogue and resignification. To this end, it is important to strengthen the relationships between school, families and the community, as well as the institutional

commitment to teacher training and the development of school environments that reflect and promote the principles of environmental education.

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