

Environmental Education And Youth Protagonism: An Analysis Of The Young Environmental Agent Program In The Municipality Of Canindé – CE

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Abstract:

This article aims to analyze the actions of the Young Environmental Agent Program (Law No. 17,383, November 5, 2021) of the Government of the State of Ceará as a promoter of environmental education and youth protagonism in the municipality of Canindé – CE. Methodologically, it is exploratory in nature, with a documentary and bibliographic approach. The study was conducted in the municipality of Canindé – CE. The findings indicate that the combination of Environmental Education with youth protagonism has resulted in positive impacts at both the individual and collective levels. The young participants of the program, in addition to learning environmental concepts, are able to put this knowledge into practice through concrete projects, as exemplified by initiatives focused on selective waste collection and seedling planting. The autonomy granted to young people within the program has provided not only the acquisition of practical skills but also the development of values such as responsibility, collaboration, and collective awareness. By becoming active agents in their communities, these young people have contributed to building a more sustainable society, showing that youth protagonism is a valuable tool for promoting positive change. In light of the results observed, it can be inferred that the intersection between Environmental Education and youth protagonism is a promising path to addressing socio-environmental challenges. The Young Environmental Agent Program stands out as a model of this integration, providing not only knowledge but also empowerment to young people, consolidating itself as a relevant strategy for building a more conscious and sustainable future.

Keywords: Environmental Education. Youth Protagonism. Young Environmental Agent Program. Sustainable Transformation.

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I. Introduction

For millions of years, humanity has been engaged in the exploitation of natural resources to ensure its survival, resulting in an ecological imbalance. This unrestrained exploitation has led to harmful consequences for the harmony of ecosystems and, consequently, for the planet's well-being (Coutinho, 2017). In the environmental sphere, one of the most relevant aspects is the growth of humanistic thinking, which drives discussions and actions related to the ecological environment. Thus, environmental issues are no longer confined to environmentalist, academic, or governmental spheres, but have gradually expanded into society, generating intense debates regarding exploitation practices that lead to environmental imbalances (Miranda et al., 2019; Sganzerla et al., 2021).

In this context, over the last decades, the debate on public policies has gained increasing prominence and attention, as society seeks to actively participate in the decision-making process that concerns them. The population views engagement in this exercise of citizenship not only as a means of ensuring their constitutional rights but also as a necessity to exercise social control and promote more efficient public management (SOUZA, 2021).

This social control entails strengthening all available mechanisms for transparent and horizontal public management, establishing a closer relationship with civil society. In today's complex political scenario, addressing environmental issues is not limited to the measured reduction of exploitation but encompasses all its dimensions

and specificities. Brazil, as a country rich in natural resources, faces significant challenges in managing these resources, making this a central topic in social, economic, and political discussions. The goal is to achieve a sustainable development model that is both democratic and viable (Souza, 2021).

In this regard, Sorrentino et al. (2013) emphasize that fostering dialogue represents both a challenge and an essential requirement for implementing Environmental Education (EE). This approach strengthens individuals' autonomy and confidence, promoting balanced coexistence between personal and collective realities and contexts, modernity and traditions, technology and simplicity of life (Lopes; Monteiro, 2022).

Several studies (Andrade, 2013; Silva, 2016; Monteiro; Sorrentino, 2019) indicate that experiencing and learning dialogue are crucial aspects in the formation of environmentally conscious individuals engaged in the transition toward sustainable societies. However, a challenge identified by Andrade and Sorrentino (2014) and Monteiro and Sorrentino (2019) for a dialogical EE is the development and implementation of dialogical pedagogies in formal and informal educational contexts. In this sense, educators must constantly question and reflect upon their practices in light of the dialogical approach (LOPES; MONTEIRO, 2022).

As highlighted by Freire (2015), the process of building education requires respect for students' prior knowledge. It is essential to collaborate with learners and, through joint reflection, analyze social demands. By promoting collective reflection and valuing the perceptions and knowledge students bring to school, institutions can incorporate youth protagonism into their practices. This approach constitutes a pathway to an emancipatory, active, and meaningful education.

The relevance of studying the intersection between Environmental Education and Youth Protagonism lies in understanding how young people can play an active role in promoting sustainability, contributing to the construction of more conscious and ecologically balanced societies. Youth, by their dynamic and innovative nature, represent a driving force capable of influencing attitudes, public policies, and everyday practices toward a more resilient and responsible future.

This article aims to analyze the actions of the Young Environmental Agent Program (Law No. 17.383, November 5, 2021) of the Government of the State of Ceará as a promoter of environmental education and youth protagonism in the municipality of Canindé – CE.

Critically deepening discussions on Environmental Education proves to be of great importance, especially when addressed in the context of public policies aimed at the environment, reflecting aspects of daily life and the actions of society as a whole. It is essential to consider the environment in which young people are inserted, encouraging the development of their critical thinking. This ensures that Environmental Education is not merely a concept but an effective social practice capable of confronting the serious socio-environmental crisis (Sganzerla et al., 2021).

The debate surrounding various forms of environmental preservation and care has become crucial, as well as an increasingly significant pedagogical approach in the teaching and learning process. Environmental Education stands out for its importance, providing knowledge and practices related to environmental health. One example of its positive impact on society can be seen in initiatives such as "Seed Paper," which promotes material reuse and fosters innovation (Coutinho, 2017).

II. Materials And Methods

In methodological terms, this study is exploratory in nature, employing a documentary and bibliographic approach to analyze the actions of the Young Environmental Agent Program, established by Law No. 17,383, dated November 5, 2021, by the Government of the State of Ceará, in the municipality of Canindé – CE. The figure below shows the location of the city of Canindé – CE:

Figure 1 – Location of the municipality of Canindé (Ceará, Brazil)



Source: IBGE, 2022.

Document analysis was central to understanding the guidelines, regulations, and actions implemented by the program. Official documents, reports, press releases, and other materials made available by the state government will be examined in order to identify and understand the objectives, strategies, and outcomes of the Young Environmental Agent Program.

Simultaneously, a bibliographic study will be conducted to provide the theoretical foundation for analyzing programs aimed at environmental education for young people. Books, scientific articles, related legislation, and publications relevant to Environmental Education, youth protagonism, and similar programs in other locations will be reviewed. This literature review will allow the Young Environmental Agent Program to be contextualized within the broader landscape of Environmental Education and youth protagonism practices.

III. Results And Discussions

Environmental Education as Public Policy

In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in experiences related to Environmental Education (EE), both as a field of research and as a social practice. The “alternative” reflective approach proposed by EE has transcended its origins linked to pedagogical practice and the “educational act,” gaining theoretical and methodological cohesion. Gradually, EE began to incorporate a political dimension into its proposals, opening new perspectives for research and social construction (Souza, 2011).

The relentless pursuit of a critical understanding of the concept of Environmental Education and the implementation of its fundamental guidelines has given rise to a variety of practices and knowledge disseminated in different ways, both within and outside the school context. In this process, non-formal Environmental Education has expanded, guiding practices aimed at raising awareness among social actors, especially within environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (Loureiro, 2002).

This pedagogical approach, centered on contact with “nature” and focused on the discourse of behavioral change, has occupied—and still occupies, to some extent—a large part of the practices labeled as Environmental Education. These practices have been shaped by specific preconceptions about how educational activities should be “applied” and how the aspirations of Environmental Education could be translated into action (Souza, 2011).

The incorporation of the environment as public policy in Brazil had significant origins after the 1972 Stockholm Conference, when the United Nations sought to integrate environmental issues into governmental agendas. As a result, the Special Secretariat for the Environment (SEMA) was established, linked to the Presidency of the Republic. However, it was only after the 1977 Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education in Tbilisi that environmental education was incorporated as a strategy to promote global environmental and social sustainability (Sorrentino et al., 2005).

Regarding the creation of legal frameworks, Peccatiello (2011) highlights the relevance of introducing the Water Code in 1934 and establishing the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), as well as the demarcation of national parks and forests. The implementation of these measures not only enabled broader regulation but also provided a stronger basis for more effective regularizations related to the use of natural resources. Furthermore, it paved the way for the creation of protected areas with greater effectiveness.

As for development models that reconcile economic relations with social well-being and responsible management of natural resources, these emerged only in the 1970s, with the concept of ecodevelopment proposed by Ignacy Sachs (1986). In 1983, under the leadership of Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Brundtland, the World Commission on Environment and Development was created, which, in 1987, published *Our Common Future*, known as the Brundtland Report. From this report, the concept of sustainable development replaced the term ecodevelopment, becoming the basis for reorienting development policies in relation to environmental issues (Sorrentino et al., 2005).

In 1989, the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources – IBAMA – was established in response to the recommendations and efforts of the *Nossa Natureza* program. Its creation aimed at formulating, coordinating, and executing the national environmental policy, encompassing the preservation, conservation, promotion, and control of renewable natural resources throughout the federal territory. In addition, IBAMA was tasked with protecting the genetic banks of Brazil’s flora and fauna and promoting Environmental Education in its various forms (Dias, 2004).

In 1992, Rio de Janeiro hosted the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, a landmark environmental and social event. Known as Rio-92, it is recognized as the most significant international gathering since the organization of modern society, addressing crucial topics for sustainable development. In its Chapter 36, the conference addresses the Promotion of Education, Training, and Awareness, highlighting the promotion of sustainable development, increasing the capacity of populations to deal with environmental and developmental issues, fostering awareness and values, and prioritizing local control in activities aimed at promoting public awareness (Sorrentino, 1995).

During Rio-92, both at the official and popular forums, more than 170 representatives participated in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), resulting in five documents that

committed participants to promote sustainable development in the 21st century, integrating environmental protection with development. The first of these documents was the Convention on Climate Change, committing to stabilize and reduce emissions of polluting gases from fossil fuel combustion, especially by developed countries. The main motivation for this commitment was concern over the increase in the planet's average temperature and the consequent climate change (Santos, 2018).

Another relevant document was the Convention on Biological Diversity, which established principles and values for biodiversity protection, threatened across various ecosystems. The convention sought to encourage the identification and conservation of species in a sustainable manner. The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, in turn, comprises 27 principles and obligations that States must fulfill in relation to the environment and development. This declaration reaffirmed the sovereignty of States over the use of their resources, guiding such actions according to sustainability. It also emphasized the importance of women's participation in ensuring sustainable development (Ferreira, 2011).

The Global Agenda 21, signed by participating countries, established principles and actions for sustainable environmental management, aimed at guiding civil society at different levels of organization. It is noteworthy that, although it originated from the Rio Conference, Agenda 21 is not limited to an environmental agenda but rather constitutes a development agenda (Grandisoli; Curvelo; Neiman, 2021).

A significant outcome of the Civil Society Forum was the Treaty on Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies and Global Responsibility. This treaty emphasized environmental education as a tool to build fairer and more ecologically balanced societies. It stressed interdisciplinarity, diversity, and individual and collective responsibility at local, national, and international levels (Grandisoli; Curvelo; Neiman, 2021).

The National Meeting on Methodological Policies for Environmental Education, held in Brasília, was crucial for the development of regional meetings. At this event, key measures were proposed, including training human resources, adopting teaching materials that address social, political, economic, and cultural aspects, and developing activities both inside and outside schools to raise awareness and foster behavioral change (Grandisoli; Curvelo; Neiman, 2021).

In 2012, the "Rio+20" United Nations Conference was held in Rio de Janeiro, bringing together 193 diplomatic delegations with the purpose of reaffirming States' commitment to sustainable development. Its central aim was to secure political commitment to sustainable development, assess progress achieved so far, address existing gaps, and tackle emerging challenges. The main focus was on promoting a green economy in the context of sustainable development, eradicating poverty, and building an institutional framework conducive to such development (Távora, 2012; Grandisoli; Curvelo; Neiman, 2021).

According to Távora (2012), United Nations Conferences and their final documents always reflect the prevailing balance of international forces at the time they are held. As a result of all these debates, Environmental Education witnessed, throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, continuous and growing evolution in its concepts and practices. This has significantly broadened its reach, influencing the formation of a new ethic and attitudes toward the environment (Grandisoli; Curvelo; Neiman, 2021).

Reflecting on the environmental policy landscape naturally leads us to the realm of environmental education, considering individuals as integral parts of a whole. In this context, it becomes crucial to foster greater awareness of sustainability based on society's consumption habits and their influence on the development of such policies (Souza, 2021).

In this sense, environmental education aims to guide people to live in harmony with nature, involving the active participation of all citizens in solving and preventing environmental issues. To achieve this goal, it is essential to understand the dynamics between natural ecosystems and social systems (Schneider, 2020).

Therefore, it is imperative that each of us be aware of our role as citizens, highlighting the importance of preserving natural resources and developing environmental education from the earliest years of life. This approach has the potential to generate positive impacts when conceived and implemented collectively rather than in isolation (Souza, 2021).

Thus, we understand that the context of environmental management emerges with the goal of positively impacting the mitigation of the environmental crisis in various regions, raising awareness among social actors in the face of harmful exploitation and pollution that have reached alarming proportions. This not only gradually influences climate events but also challenges the quality of human life.

The Young Environmental Agent Program (Law No. 17,383, November 5, 2021)

The Young Environmental Agent Program (AJA), created by State Law No. 17,383 on January 11, 2021, is a pioneering initiative of the State of Ceará, implemented by the State Secretariat for the Environment (SEMA). Its primary purpose is to promote the social and environmental inclusion of young people in situations of social vulnerability, providing valuable opportunities for personal development, professional training, and active participation in socio-environmental projects (SEMA, 2023).

The general objective of the AJA is to encourage the effective participation of young people in sustainable initiatives, with an emphasis on social and environmental inclusion. Through this program, the aim is to expand participants' skills and competencies, foster youth protagonism, and contribute to environmental preservation.

The specific objectives outline clear goals, starting with training in Environmental Education. The program seeks to provide tools that enable young people to promote environmental awareness in their communities, highlighting the importance of sustainable development policies. In addition, it encourages civic participation, aiming to mobilize young people for collective actions that foster local sustainability (SEMA, 2023).

A crucial aspect of the AJA is the personal development of participants. The program strives to create an environment that fosters self-esteem and a sense of belonging, promoting a positive life perspective among young people. Simultaneously, it aims to provide social and professional qualification through socio-environmental actions, opening doors for future income-generating opportunities (Government of the State of Ceará, 2021).

The program will be implemented in different stages, detailed in a specific instrument provided for in the legislation. Participant selection will take place through a public notice, which will establish requirements, rules for the selection process, and the rights and duties of the Young Environmental Agents (Government of the State of Ceará, 2021).

Benefits offered to participants include a monthly financial allowance, a training course to improve skills, provision of uniforms for identification, accident insurance for protection during activities, and certificates upon program completion recognizing the young people's contributions. Additionally, the program provides for the possibility of participation by monitors, who will be selected through a simplified process. These monitors will play a key role in coordinating and guiding the activities of the Young Environmental Agents, enhancing the expected socio-environmental outcomes (SEMA, 2023).

To ensure the program's effectiveness, the Executive Branch, through SEMA, may establish partnerships with public or private entities for co-financing and enhancing the program's actions (SEMA, 2023).

The Young Environmental Agent Program represents a comprehensive and innovative strategy for promoting social inclusion, professional qualification, and environmental preservation in the State of Ceará, positioning it at the forefront of state-level initiatives in Brazil.

Youth Protagonism Through the Young Environmental Agent Program in The Municipality of Canindé – CE

In the municipality of Canindé, located in the state of Ceará, 101 young people participate in the Young Environmental Agent Program. These youths, aged between 15 and 29, are engaged in the program's activities, contributing to the promotion of social and environmental inclusion. It is worth noting that the program extends to both urban and rural areas, comprehensively encompassing different contexts and realities. The active participation of these young people reflects a strong commitment to environmental awareness and sustainable development in Canindé.

The Young Environmental Agent Program unfolds in two significant stages. Initially, the youths participate in a comprehensive training process, in which they are exposed to theories related to environmental education, social transformation, youth protagonism, and other relevant topics. This training phase is conducted through a distance learning (EAD) format, providing flexibility and accessibility to participants.

In the second phase of the program, the youths are challenged to apply their knowledge by designing and implementing a community action plan. This initiative aims to encourage the practical application of what was learned during training. It is essential to highlight that the action plan must be developed considering the local reality of each participant, being implemented in various settings such as schools, parks, neighborhoods, associations, and other community spaces.

The projects developed by the youths must address environmental issues, covering topics such as selective waste collection, solid waste management, environmental conservation, responsible water use, soil-related issues, planting practices, and other relevant environmental concerns. In this way, the program seeks not only to provide theoretical knowledge but also to promote practical application and concrete actions aimed at improving the local environment and raising community awareness.

According to Ferreira (2010), protagonism seeks to promote activities that encourage young people to take the initiative and assume an active role, moving away from the passive position of spectator to become protagonists, playing a central role. This is an educational process that involves carrying out practices that enable young people to exercise values and develop a sense of belonging, highlighting the construction of social capital.

Costa (2001) states that Youth Protagonism consists in creating opportunities for adolescents and young people to be active and contribute to problem-solving, engaging in constructive actions. He emphasizes that the term refers to a type of educational action that establishes spaces and conditions enabling young people to engage in activities aimed at solving real issues, acting as a source of initiative, freedom, and commitment. The essence of protagonism, therefore, lies in the active and constructive participation of young people in school life, in the community, or in society at large (Costa, 2001).

Thus, Youth Protagonism is understood as an essential strategy for Education, as it recognizes the learner as an active and interactive being, breaking away from the traditional conception of teaching that viewed them as passive (Santos, 2014).

In this context, most of the proposed actions aim to integrate youth in situations of social vulnerability. The active participation of young people, both in the formulation of these actions and in their implementation, is considered the fundamental foundation of the proposed policies.

Figure 2 presents an example implemented in the municipality of Canindé – CE of a project focused on selective waste collection.

Figure 2 – Example of a project developed by young participants of the Young Environmental Agent Program focused on selective waste collection.



Source: Research Data, 2023.

Figure 2 presents a concrete example of the impact of youth protagonism in promoting selective waste collection in the municipality of Canindé – CE, as a result of the Young Environmental Agent Program. The active engagement of these young people in the design and implementation of projects, such as the one shown in the figure, underscores the vital importance of youth protagonism in the pursuit of local environmental solutions.

The use of a participatory and dialectical approach in the construction of knowledge not only improves the quality of relationships but also fosters the creation of partnerships toward shared goals. Dialogue, when built collectively, promotes a process of co-creation and maturation, enabling the practice of citizenship through the recognition of others' rights, the capacity for tolerance, the defense of ideas, social interaction, and conflict management. Approaches such as these are of substantial importance for adolescents because, according to Vygotsky's socio-interactionist perspective, a challenging environment is essential to stimulate adolescents' intellect, while the absence of such a challenge may delay or even prevent the full development of intellectual functions (Pereira, 2016).

In this context, youth protagonism represents not only the ability of young people to act as agents of change but also their willingness to assume responsibilities and lead actions that positively impact the community. Selective waste collection is a fundamental environmental practice for sustainability, reducing waste, promoting recycling, and minimizing environmental impact (Martins, 2022).

Through selective waste collection, young people not only demonstrate their commitment to environmental preservation but also educate the community about sustainable practices. This approach not only contributes to efficient waste management but also raises public awareness of the importance of conscious habits. Thus, the intersection between youth protagonism and selective waste collection creates a virtuous cycle of awareness, practical action, and positive impact, shaping the community's present and sustainable future (Martins, 2022).

Another example is presented in Figure 3, focused on seedling planting activities with early childhood education students.

Figure 3 – Project developed by young participants of the Young Environmental Agent Program focused on seedling planting



Source: Research Data, 2023.

The involvement of young people in promoting seedling planting, especially with early childhood education students, highlights the importance of environmental education from the earliest years of development. In addition to being a practice that benefits the environment, seedling planting involves crucial educational aspects, such as raising awareness about the importance of trees, preserving nature, and fostering individual responsibility in building a sustainable future.

Public policies aimed at environmental education should strengthen the connection between schools and the community through various actions, such as holding lectures on the conscious use of natural resources (water, soil, air, etc.) and implementing environmental practices that involve both the school community and the general population. These activities aim to foster and cultivate environmental awareness (SANTOS, 2015).

Thus, these two examples not only highlight the positive role of young people as agents of transformation but also emphasize the relevance of educational approaches that directly engage the younger generations.

IV. Conclusion

The intersection between Environmental Education (EE) and Youth Protagonism, as revealed through the analysis of the Young Environmental Agent Program in the municipality of Canindé – CE, demonstrates an innovative and effective approach to promoting environmental awareness among young people. The integration of these two elements has proven fundamental for the development of a critical and participatory mindset in youth, enabling them to play an active role in socio-environmental transformation.

From the study, it was possible to verify that the combination of EE with youth protagonism resulted in positive impacts both at the individual and collective levels. The young participants of the program, in addition to learning environmental concepts, were able to put this knowledge into practice through concrete projects, as exemplified by initiatives focused on selective waste collection and seedling planting.

The autonomy granted to the youths within the program not only fostered the acquisition of practical skills but also the development of values such as responsibility, collaboration, and collective awareness. By becoming active agents in their communities, these young people contributed to building a more sustainable society, highlighting that youth protagonism is a valuable tool for promoting positive change.

In light of the results observed, it can be inferred that the intersection between Environmental Education and Youth Protagonism is a promising path to addressing socio-environmental challenges. The Young Environmental Agent Program stands out as a model of this integration, providing not only knowledge but also

empowerment to youth, consolidating itself as a relevant strategy in building a more conscious and sustainable future.

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