


ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN THE WORLD AND ITS DELAY IN BRAZIL: A NECESSARY REVIEW FOR YOUTH AND ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Environmental Education emerged globally as a response to the post-World War II environmental crisis, consolidating itself through *United Nations* (UN) events such as Stockholm (1972), Belgrade (1975), and Tbilisi (1977), which defined its interdisciplinary principles. These conferences also led to the creation of a dedicated body, the *United Nations Environment Program* (UNEP), and the *International Environmental Education Program* (IEEP). In Brazil, however, its trajectory was marked by institutional disinterest, delays, omissions, and a reductionist approach, especially during the military-civil authoritarian regime, which prioritized economic growth over sustainability. Pioneering initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s, Environmental Education was only institutionalized beautifully, with the redemocratization process and the Eco-92 conference, when the country assumed international commitments and created the *National Environmental Education Program* (PRONEA, in Portuguese) in 1994. Despite, its implementation within Basic Education institutions remained fragile, with gaps in teacher training and educational practice. This history has left generations of adults with a distorted or nonexistent environmental education, particularly in Youth and Adult Education (YAE), where the challenge is to overcome outdated views and promote a critical and contextualized Environmental Education. To achieve this, it is essential to align public policies with international guidelines, ensuring that Environmental Education is transversal, participatory, and capable of addressing Brazil's socio-environmental inequalities.

Keywords: environmental education; historical trajectory; youth and adult education.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental Education emerged on the international stage as an urgent response to the impacts of industrialization and accelerated environmental degradation in the post-World War II era. While developed countries advanced in the institutionalization of Environmental Education through conferences such as Stockholm (1972) and Tbilisi (1977), Brazil faced a path marked by contradictions, especially during the military regime, when the developmentalist discourse relegated the environmental issue to a secondary level. This historical delay was reflected in the educational formation of generations, especially among those who today seek to complete their studies in Youth and Adult Education (EJA), highlighting the need for a critical and contextualized approach.

In this context, analyzing the trajectory of Environmental Education in Brazil requires understanding not only international influences, but also the political and pedagogical challenges that hindered its consolidation. From the pioneering initiatives of the 1950s to the belated adoption of public policies in the 1990s, Brazilian Environmental Education has oscillated between symbolic advances and practical setbacks. This expanded summary seeks to reflect on how these historical gaps impact Adult Education today, proposing pathways for effective environmental education that overcomes reductionist views and promotes sustainability as a transformative axis of society.

1. (Mis)Paths of Environmental Education in the World and in Brazil

In the early 1950s, London, England, United Kingdom, was severely impacted by industrial air pollution known as smog, killing thousands of people in 1952. A year later, in Minamata, Japan, in 1953, thousands suffered neurological problems and genetic mutations during fetal development due to mercury pollution caused by industrial waste discharges into the water. In contrast, pacifist, women's liberation, and anti-racist movements emerged, coinciding with a growing rapprochement between scientists and environmentalists who were beginning to organize (Czapski, 1998, pp. 25-27).

In the wake of these events, the term *Environmental Education* (EE) emerged at the *Education Conference at Keele University* in England, United Kingdom, held in 1965. In 1968, in the same country, the *Council for Environmental Education was created*, bringing together more than fifty education and environmental organizations. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden issued official resolutions to introduce Environmental Education into the

school curriculum. The *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO) conducted a study in 79 of its member countries, highlighting the necessary interdisciplinarity and complexity of the subject, which until then had been viewed from a conservationist perspective and within the scope of Biology (Czapski, 1998).

Following this path, Environmental Education became internationally institutionalized at the 1972 *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* in Stockholm, Sweden (becoming known as the Stockholm Conference). As described by Genebaldo Dias (1991, p. 4), this event arose from “[...] the need to establish a global vision and common principles that would serve as inspiration and guidance for humanity.” Three results of the Stockholm Conference need to be highlighted: (i) the *UN Declaration on the Human Environment* was signed by the 113 countries that participated in the event, including, contradictorily, Brazil; (ii) the *United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)* was created; and (iii) the creation of the *International Programme on Environmental Education (IPEE)* was recommended (Czapski, 1998).

In 1975, UNESCO promoted the *International Meeting on Environmental Education* in Belgrade, in the former Yugoslavia, now the capital of Serbia; an event that developed the principles for the *International Environmental Education Plan (IEEP)*, summarized in the *Belgrade Charter* (UNESCO, 1975). The document points to the need for a new global ethic, promoting individual and collective behaviors and attitudes that resonate with humanity's position in the biosphere and that respond to the complex and dynamic sensitive relationships between human beings and with the rest of nature (UNESCO, 1975).

To that end, the document establishes the following objectives for Environmental Education:

- [1] Awareness: contributing to individuals and groups acquiring awareness and sensitivity towards the environment as a whole and the problems related to it.
- [2] Knowledge: providing a basic understanding of the environment, especially regarding the influences of human beings and their activities.
- [3] Attitudes: fostering the acquisition of values and motivation to induce active participation in environmental protection and the resolution of environmental problems.
- [4] Skills: providing conditions for individuals and social groups to acquire the skills necessary for this active participation.
- [5] Evaluation capacity: stimulating the evaluation of the measures effectively taken in relation to the environment and environmental education programs.
- [6] Participation: contributing to individuals and groups developing a sense of responsibility and urgency regarding environmental issues (Barbieri; Silva, 2011, pp. 55-56).

As early as 1977, UNESCO, in partnership with UNEP, held the *First Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education* in Tbilisi, in what was then the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This conference was the first step towards detailing the Integrated Environmental Education Plan (IEEP) for its implementation by countries. These details were structured into 41 recommendations that accompany the so-called *Tbilisi Declaration* (UNESCO, 1997), outlining principles, objectives, and strategies for Environmental Education. In short, according to the participants of the Tbilisi Conference, Environmental Education is defined as a dynamic, integrative, transformative, participatory, comprehensive, globalizing, permanent, and contextualizing process (Czapski, 1998).

And what about Brazil at this event? It was not present, at least not officially. The justification is, at the very least, curious: according to Regina Gualda, who at that time was the head of the Communication and Environmental Education Division of the Special Secretariat for the Environment of the federal government, our country did not maintain diplomatic relations with the Soviet bloc, which prevented participation. And, even after the event, several years passed before Brazilians had access to the 1977 documents, initially through some titles on the publishing market (Czapski, 1998, p. 30).

Concluding this brief history of Environmental Education worldwide, in 1987 the *Second Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education* (Moscow Conference) was held in Moscow, in the former USSR, now the capital of Russia. As Holmer (2020) points out, the event took stock internationally of the ten years of implementation of the recommendations of the Tbilisi Conference for the International Plan of Action on Environmental Education and Training and elaborated the *International Strategy for Action on Environmental Education and Training for the 1990s* as its final document.

As Genebaldo Freire Dias (1991) indicates, during this interim, while international organizations sought to define and deepen Environmental Education, the Brazilian government, at best, responded to international pressure for the institutionalization of the subject and issues related to the environment. This was the case with the creation of the *Special Secretariat for the Environment* (SEMA), within the *Ministry of the Interior*, in 1973, conceived as a pollution control body, but with an extremely limited role in Environmental Education due to the political interests of the time (Dias, 1991).

Dias (1991) also points out that there was great confusion regarding Environmental Education, interpreted from the perspective of Ecology, very close to the early origins of the subject. Even so, the author highlights the first effort to incorporate Environmental Education into the school curriculum, which occurred through an agreement between SEMA and the

Educational Foundation of the Federal District (FEDF), in Brasília, Federal District, during the mid-1970s, which, due to a lack of resources and political disagreements and incompetence, was soon discontinued. There were also the signing of some "letters of intent" between SEMA and the *Ministry of Education (MEC)* that never came to fruition.

In 1979, the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) and the *Environmental Company of the State of São Paulo (CETESB)* published the document "*Ecology: a teaching proposal for primary and secondary education*," with a reductionist approach focused on biological aspects and contrary to the recommendations of the then recently held Tbilisi Conference¹. This ambiguous and contradictory dynamic in Brazil continued until 1987, with the limited production related to the topic being largely due to the actions of state environmental agencies and the initiative of some academic centers and individuals.

According to Dias (1991), the few people who could do something serious were immediately removed to other sectors, without raising much of a fuss. Brazil did not even begin developing instructional resources for the practice of Environmental Education in schools that could be considered for the Moscow Conference. "Meanwhile, a bizarre confusion between Environmental Education and Ecology proliferated in Brazil, between identifying, analyzing and seeking solutions to community problems and promoting public acts in defense of whales" (Dias, 1991, p. 8).

With the return to democracy, even against the wishes of some, the environment was addressed as a theme by the *1988 Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil* (Federal Constitution of 1988). The *Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA)* was created in 1989. However, Environmental Education remained in need of better treatment, even though there was an effort for Brazil to return to the same path as other countries.

This realignment was achieved in 1992, when the city of Rio de Janeiro hosted the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, known as Rio-92 or Eco-92. Parallel to this event, where five important agreements were approved – *the Rio Declaration*, *Agenda 21*, *the Convention on Climate Change*, *the Convention on Biological Diversity*, and *the Declaration on Forests* – as indicated by Nascimento (2013), the *Brazilian Charter for Environmental Education* and the *National Program for Environmental Education (PRONEA)*

¹It is no coincidence that it was only in 1997 that the Tbilisi Declaration and Recommendations were translated and officially made available in Brazil in a book published by the *Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA)* (UNESCO, 1997) and on the website of the then *Ministry of Environment, Water Resources and the Legal Amazon (MMA)*.

were also approved by the Ministry of Education (MEC) as an unfolding of the 1988 Federal Constitution and the commitments made by the country at the Rio Conference. In turn, in 1997, after much debate, the *National Curriculum Parameters* (PCN) proposed the environment as one of the cross-cutting themes, along with others such as ethics, cultural plurality, and sexual orientation (Brazil, 2005).

Twenty-two years after the institutionalization of Environmental Education worldwide following the Stockholm Conference, the federal government is beginning to implement this theme from the proposed interdisciplinary perspective. As analyzed by Emerson Branco, Maria Regina Royer, and Alessandra Branco (2018, p. 193), the National Curriculum Parameters (PCN) “[...] reaffirm the transversal and interdisciplinary character of Environmental Education, since [...], in its emergence and notoriety of relevance, it is broad and encompasses all areas and disciplines proposed in Basic Education.” Considering also the *National Curriculum Guidelines* (DCN) and the *National Common Curriculum Base* (BNCC – Brazil, 2018), these authors indicate that “[...] although the non-disciplinary character of Environmental Education is recognized, it is evident that little has been effectively implemented in schools and in teacher training to guarantee, in fact, such teaching” (Branco; Royer; Branco, 2018, p. 200). In other words, the effective institutionalization of Environmental Education in the 1990s did not guarantee adequate training. However, in the 21st century there are references and instruments that allow for the treatment of the subject for its effective implementation in the teaching and learning process.

2. The Distorted Training of Generations of Brazilians in Environmental Education

Environmental education has its origins in the efforts of civil society in developed countries to highlight environmental issues that had been ignored in favor of industrial production, economic growth, and the nuclear arms race in the post-World War II era and during the Cold War between the United States of America (USA), leader of the "capitalist world," and the USSR, leader of the "socialist world."

In contrast to the rest of the world, under the authoritarian civil-military regime, Brazil stood out with a discourse that embraced environmental degradation in favor of increasing the *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP), while the country experienced what became known as the "Brazilian economic miracle." On posters, Brazilian representatives proclaimed: "Welcome to pollution, we are open to it. Brazil is a country without restrictions. We have several cities that would welcome your pollution with open arms, because what we want are jobs, are dollars for

our development" (Dias, 1991, p. 4). From then on, international organizations and the Brazilian government followed very different paths.

With this contextualization and unfolding of events, the perspective of the formation of generations of Brazilians who did not complete their Basic Education is introduced. In the few years they managed to complete between 1972 and 1994, adults between 30 and 50 years old, who in the 21st century seek to complete their formal education, had something that resembled a distorted education on Environmental Education. This becomes yet another challenge to be considered in Youth and Adult Education (EJA).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Environmental education in Brazil has followed a path of contradictions and setbacks compared to international advancements. While other countries developed consistent pedagogical practices, Brazil, under authoritarian regimes, limited itself to fragmented actions, generating training gaps, especially in adult education. Overcoming this deficit demands not only adopting international guidelines, but also a critical approach to the socio-environmental realities and historical inequalities of the country.

Therefore, the implementation of Environmental Education in Adult Education demands more than simply transferring content ; it requires a transformative pedagogical practice capable of reshaping these students' relationship with the environment. It is necessary to recognize that many adults carry environmental experiences or are even unaware of certain ecological debates, either due to lack of access to formal education or through ideological distortion.

In this sense, adult education can become a privileged space for reconstructing environmental knowledge based on local realities, promoting awareness, consciousness-raising, citizen participation, and co-responsibility in building sustainable societies. The challenge is to ensure that public policies recognize these potentialities in concrete actions, integrating environmental education in a cross-cutting and permanent way, as foreseen in legal frameworks, but still insufficiently implemented in practice.

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