

Theoretical reflections on the formation of environmental attitudes in early childhood

Rolvis Pérez Frómeta^{1*} <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0137-4114>

Hector Márquez Lores¹ <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2646-8061>

Jesús Piclín Minot¹ <https://orcid.org/000-0002-1490-5084>

¹Universidad de Guantánamo. Cuba.

*Author for the correspondence: rolvis720527@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The theoretical reflections for the formation of environmental attitudes in early childhood that are offered can be taken into account by teachers when developing activities through three fundamental elements: environmental perception, environmental sensitivity and environmental behavior. The study proposes methodological work tools that are suggestive in the exchange with the children, in such a way that it nourishes with propitious contents to guide and mold attitudes in early ages for their future environmental behavior in society.

Keywords: Environmental Attitudes; Environment; Surrounding Environment.

Introduction

Environmental education favors the formation of citizens with optimal conditions to conduct themselves in the environmental processes with which they interact through responsible behaviors towards the surrounding environment.

This education is considered one of the most debated processes in the contemporary world, given the need of today's societies to achieve an environmental culture in their population that has repercussions on development models in accordance with the preservation of nature. It is described as an educational process, aimed at forming

attitudes, values, modes of action and behaviors in favor of the environment, so that to achieve an environmental approach in line with current trends it is necessary to transform the attitudes of citizens and acquire new knowledge from existing ones.

The purpose of environmental education in early childhood is to achieve the maximum possible development of each child, considering this development as integral, which includes intellectual, affective, emotional, motor, values, attitudes, forms of behavior and the formation of the personality. It also consists of designing and developing resources, scenarios, tools and pedagogical methodologies that result in significant pedagogical experiences for children, with the objective of strengthening competencies and skills that contribute to the care, conservation, protection and optimal use of ecosystems from an early age.

Such approaches are closely linked to the elements that make up attitudes, a term of social psychology, which in its essence is responsible for measuring the degree to which people act differently in similar situations and goes through the formation of cognitive and affective elements in the individual that will result in behavior.

The objective of the work presented here is to offer theoretical reflections to teachers who work with early childhood children in order to contribute to the formation of environmental attitudes, recognizing that there are still deficiencies that become needs that should continue to be addressed, while recognizing the different contributions promoted in studies of this nature.

Among the most relevant deficiencies are those related to the limitations in linking early childhood activities with the surrounding environment, an aspect that was addressed through elements related to perception, sensitivity and environmental behavior at this age.

Development

The formation of environmental attitudes in early childhood

Early childhood is considered an essential stage for the development and formation of the individual's personality, and is at the same time one of the most important in terms of education. Therefore, forming in children of these ages environmental attitudes that favor the acquisition of good environmental habits will place them in conditions to be able to carry them out spontaneously from the beginning of life.

Childhood is a period of learning for the child where they will acquire basic skills to interact with the world in which they live, which involves a series of increasingly complex changes in the main areas of development of children and involves the progressive acquisition of skills.

It is at these ages that the child learns most of the skills he or she will need for life, since most intelligence is formed before the first seven years (Ruiz, 2019).

In such a way, children who grow up in an adequate environment and acquire positive environmental attitudes can be nurtured with adequate social and cultural values in terms of environmental protection, contributing and transmitting that same knowledge to future generations.

Significant international research on the formation of environmental attitudes in early childhood has served as a basis for identifying the achievements and needs that still require further work in this field. Some of the most relevant findings are presented below:

Perez (2020), promotes the use of all the attitudes that children have at an early age, to experiment and implement environmental education and the correct management of urban solid waste with the application of the different workshops designed, one of the conclusions reached by the author is that it was evidenced that the children at all times presented attitudes of interest and disposition towards the activities carried out.

This contribution validates the importance of forming environmental attitudes from an early age, where such knowledge may be permanent for life.

Flen-Bers (2001) in her work investigated teachers' attitudes towards environmental education in preschool found some limitations with respect to methodological strategies for teaching and implementing environmental education, so she proposed actions for their treatment.

Mendoza (2020) considers the existence of difficulties that teachers who attend children in these ages have to establish pedagogical strategies with which they can teach environmental education to boys and girls.

Rojas (2017) proposed the design of a program of environmental strategies aimed at teachers to promote environmental education in children, insisting on the need to develop didactic strategies, which would allow the child, the development of fundamental values such as: love, respect, cooperation and solidarity towards the environment.

The systematization of these studies leads to the consideration that early childhood children who are inculcated with positive environmental attitudes, favor the formation of environmental values that will put them in conditions to become citizens committed to the care and protection of the environment.

The above becomes a fundamental antecedent to the extent that it is also a priority to initiate the formation of such attitudes from an early age, since the child is a being that investigates on his own around his environment and makes his first discoveries by perceiving, identifying and recognizing the existing relationships between things, to later experiment and assimilate all the information he receives, to order it and incorporate it into his mind as new learning that will last until he reaches school where it will be reinforced and then be put into practice by him.

To achieve this training, the teacher must also take into account the cognitive, affective and behavioral components that make up attitudes.

The cognitive component is based on the perceptions, criteria and information that one has towards an object. In this sense, objects that are not known or of which there is no information, cannot generate attitudes, that is, for an attitude to exist, it is necessary that there is also a cognitive representation of the object that generates attitudes.

This knowledge must be marked by a growing demand for information that takes into account the beliefs, concepts, ideas, values, judgments, prejudices, and others towards the different objects, that interrelates at the same time the knowledge with the lived experiences and allows recognizing and interpreting the present reality, creating solid convictions that are difficult to change.

On the other hand, the affective component is the set of emotions, feelings and impressions in relation to the object, being congruent with the cognitive aspect of the attitude, generated from the experiences lived and, above all, in the relationship with people who are or have been significant (parents, teachers, friends, among others). The source of this component is found in the evaluation of people, events or situations.

And in its case, the behavioral component is framed in the action, the individual's response to an object, the specific intention manifested before or towards an object. In short, it is the set of actions, that is, the image shown to others. It is the only thing that can be observed, although it depends on the other components.

In this sense, the formation of environmental attitudes in early childhood implies a change in teachers' work, since they must articulate it with the environmental reality that children live, that is, contextualize knowledge in the search for solutions through reflection and analysis carried out by themselves, which implies seeking pedagogical and didactic strategies that help in the analysis of everyday environmental problems.

According to García, 2007, the relationship between children and their environment is essential, since he considers the latter as the environment that surrounds the child, where there are conditions or circumstances proper to their individual development, which are manifested in the attitudes of respect, care and conservation of the environment.

Knowledge of the environment favors the formation of environmental attitudes, a result that connotes the appropriation of environmental contents as an essential element for the integral development of children. This assertion implies the necessary integration of the cognitive, affective and volitional spheres that should characterize them in the different formative, family, institutional and community contexts.

At the same time, environmental contents favor the formation of attitudes, feelings and qualities of children about the environment, that they learn to act responsibly before the phenomena of inanimate nature, the animal and vegetable world, work in nature, care and protection of the environment, care of plants, their cultivation, the importance for food, how to protect and preserve nature, respect the work of people, maintain the care of animals, among others.

The formation of environmental attitudes allows the child's relationship with the environment, so that they in turn are able to mitigate environmental problems in the family, institutional and community environment.

Children's experiences and representations of nature broaden their environmental perceptions and contribute to their sensitivity to such phenomena, thus shaping their environmental behavior. The development and well-being of the environment that surrounds them is favored, because to the extent that they know the environmental contents, they appropriate them and internalize them as a necessity for their modes of action.

The environmental attitude towards the care, conservation and protection of the environment in children in early childhood is favored when the activities are developed in a playful environment, supported by teaching means, essentially, of direct use, didactic means, toys, dioramas, models, photographs, plates, maps, posters, illustrations, paintings and audiovisual media, television, video, cinema, computers that allow them to assume responsible environmental behaviors.

Children at this age reach an intense intellectual development, so it is necessary to modify their way of thinking and acting to develop a responsible and participatory environmental attitude, leading to sustainable development and improvement of the quality of life. This activity must be subordinated to the acquisition of new knowledge and representations about the environment, the care and protection of the environment, the ways of exchange with the natural and social world, linked to the need to protect nature.

When talking about the interaction between children and their environment, we must also keep in mind the elements that are part of this space such as people, animals, plants, things and objects, an important aspect here are also the relationships established between these elements. This interaction allows children to cooperate, participate, and show affection to the environment, without forgetting that many times the way they interact or the way they express themselves towards nature is conditioned by the customs or social culture in which they grew up.

All these variables affect the formation of attitudes of the individual and the way they relate to the environment, all these elements condition the way children react or express themselves in front of their environment and living beings.

The child is highly receptive and observant. This is a key formative stage for the teaching of good habits and is the best time to start transmitting conservationist concepts and messages aimed at active, conscious and responsible participation in the individual.

From an early age, children establish contact with nature; their way of discovering the world is through their interaction with it; they also explore and confirm their knowledge of the environment through experiences that help them recognize and identify the world around them.

The interaction of children with their environment should be made possible; playing, exploring, discovering, rehearsing, sharing ideas and perspectives with other people in everyday situations, since this interaction between children and nature and the living

beings that inhabit it becomes the way in which they recognize the world and establish relationships in such a way that they manage to transform or build a more abstract knowledge of the world around them.

This stage is undoubtedly very important in the relationship that children have with their environment, since it is precisely at this moment when they begin to build their understanding of the world and to establish affective relationships based on sensory experiences that will finally direct their first habits to form their personality.

As a consequence of the processes of assimilation and accommodation, he forms new structures and this process allows the development of his intelligence, but it should be emphasized that in this process of modification of mental structures of each child it is relevant to articulate environmental education which is a process based on the mediation between the direct relationship between the human being and the environment in order to create awareness of their reality and measure the consequences of their actions.

By way of example, and taking as a basis for this, the affective, moral and cognitive development of children can be obtained by observing their attitude towards animals (Cuya Simeón (2019)). In this sense, it is recognized that the attitudes that children manifest towards animals can be closely related to the moral development of the individual, which influences their environmental development. In this case, the behavior that a child chooses to interact with an animal is a learned behavior, that is, if children grow up in a hostile environment in which they observe violent or aggressive behavior, it is very likely that the child will tend to be aggressive in the future.

Hence, environmental formation plays a very important role between the moral and intellectual development of the individual, children learn from their culture and their own experience. The development and formation of environmental attitudes is mainly a socialization process that begins with the parents at home, who are the first model that children have to imitate.

How to shape environmental attitudes in early childhood.

Since the best way for children to learn is through direct experiences, the best way for them to learn about nature is by being immersed in it, that is, in the environment. Teachers working with this age group can focus their environmental pedagogical

performance on three fundamental elements: environmental perception, environmental sensitivity, and environmental behavior.

Environmental perception in children establishes an interdependence between the understanding of nature and the environment created by man, resulting from the interaction of biological, physical, social, economic and cultural aspects, the acquisition of knowledge, qualities, behavior and practical skills to participate responsibly and effectively in the prevention and solution of environmental problems (Pérez-Borroto, 2002).

Likewise, it pursues the protection of the environment, in pursuit of a responsible environmental behavior on the natural and social environment, so that they are able to: recognize environmental problems, stimulation of environmental education practices and knowledge of the socio-cultural environment of environmental education.

Environmental sensitivity is the external expression of the surrounding world in the child, it has an involuntary character, it appears and disappears easily, which denotes its environmental and unstable state, since the interpretation they have of the surrounding world, varies their attitude towards that world.

These activities are designed so that children are able to: achieve the formation of environmental feelings, to feel autonomy and independence for the environment, as well as the environmental construction of the natural and social environment.

Environmental behavior is manifested in the child's actions on the environment, these may or may not modify behavior, but at the same time they can prevent and solve environmental problems, actively participate in the improvement and protection and environmental care, through responsible consumption to make better use of natural resources with the reduction of waste produced, aims for children to be able to: achieve self-regulation and self-evaluation of environmental behavior, self-awareness of environmental behavior and the ability to act in the face of environmental diversity.

Based on these elements, the teacher must keep in mind some aspects that may raise questions for the children, for which clear messages must be conveyed. The following are proposed:

- To consider which are the environmental problems that affect the environment of the locality in which they live.
- To know that there is soil degradation, produced fundamentally by the indiscriminate exploitation of the soil.

- The existence of pollution from industries that leave their solid waste impregnated in the soil, due to the lack of vegetable products to fertilize them and water for irrigation.
- Deforestation is one of the existing environmental problems, which essentially affects forests, fields and mountainous places, which occurs due to the constant felling of trees for the construction of furniture, houses and fuels, due to the lack of seeds for planting and the replacement cycle of those that are cut, as well as the lack of rain to keep the planting balanced.
- The loss of biological diversity is mainly caused by the destruction of species, the decrease of birds, due to hunting and environmental pollution, the decrease of fish, due to fishing and pollution of the sea, as well as the existence of animal species that are in danger of extinction due to environmental pollution.
- The contamination of inland and marine waters affects the environment, and this is produced by the presence of contaminating sources of terrestrial waters, contamination of coastal and marine areas, by dumping of waste and agricultural, industrial, urban and boat waste without proper treatment.
- The deterioration of sanitation in population settlements is another problem that is manifested by the deterioration of the aqueduct and sewage networks, which in many cases produce leaks due to breakage and maintenance, the lack of green areas and trees in many areas and places in the city and the countryside.
- The situation of the means of transportation that pollute the environment due to excessive smoke, waste from factories, fires in the fields, the quality and lack of water in some places of residence, garbage dumps in populated areas, the lack of systematization in garbage collection, the raising of farm animals in unhygienic conditions and the presence of vectors due to the lack of hygiene in some towns, are also present as environmental problems.
- Teachers should also take advantage of the skills that children develop at this age and use them to promote their progress.
- The development of activities related to the following are suggested:
- The observation of the natural elements that make up the surroundings of the educational institution where the teaching-educational process takes place through small tours led by the teacher. It can also be done through photographs, videos, among others.

- Explore places that stand out for their beauty or natural curiosities so that the children can insert themselves in that environment and, with the teacher's help, express their feelings about what they have experienced there.
- Describe phenomena observed both at school and at home. Suggestions include the development process of flowers, the occurrence of a natural phenomenon, the rain falling, the sun setting, etc.
- Differentiate and classify the elements of nature, differentiate living beings from non-living beings, observe the development of plants in all their parts: root, stem, leaves, flowers and fruits.
- To compare and group ornamental, medicinal and food plants, as well as animals in terms of the way they move from one place to another and by their external appearance, to differentiate the parts of the human body and their functions.
- To differentiate man from the rest of the living beings that speak and transform nature according to their needs, interests and motives.

With these and other elements, it should be achieved that children assume responsible behaviors towards the environment, starting from having achieved an adequate perception of the phenomena that take place and an adequate environmental sensitivity to solve the problems that damage their environment.

In this way, it is considered that the development of actions for the formation of environmental attitudes in early childhood is essential for the development of human behavior since they will become guides for their future behavior towards the environment.

Conclusions

The theoretical reflections offered constitute a tool that serves as a guide for teachers to promote environmental attitudes in early childhood, a decisive moment in the life of individuals that allows molding future behaviors.

The results in the treatment of perception, sensitivity and environmental behavior demonstrate the possibilities of forming environmental attitudes from the earliest ages,

and the need for this to be achieved in close harmony with the initial training at these ages.