

## **Conscious Consumption, Activism, and Environmental Citizenship: Dimensions Necessary for Contemporary**

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**Abstract:** *The argument used in this article assumes that there are needs to adopt positions and practices based on principles of citizenship given the ethical respect inherent to the human being and other species of the planet. The objective is to contribute to the reflection about citizen training and the practice of conscious consumption as opposed to exacerbated consumerism. It also seeks to identify alternatives that may help in the educational processes of eco-formation. Specifically, considerations regarding the environment and environmental education are presented as complementary and necessary dimensions for rethinking current production and consumption modes. This study results from research in the literature and is based on regulatory frameworks of Brazilian policies and, in authors such as Luzzi (2012), Sauv  (2005), Sauv  and Orellana (2001), Hil rio and Reis (2009), Reis 2014), among others. The goal is to problematize the role and responsibility of educational institutions in providing critical education and emancipating that results in the formation of citizens capable of exercising the prerogative of questioning the world from school knowledge. Among this knowledge, we highlight the knowledge of several areas that can offer space for interdisciplinary projects that offer a scientific education capable of shedding light on the construction of an environmental conscience. It is hoped that students, sensitized, and enlightened, will be able to act actively and position themselves in the face of market and consumption appeals, helping other citizens to engage in a more democratic and less exclusive model of society.*

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### **I. Introduction**

At present, there is growing awareness about the need to adopt positions and practices based on principles of citizenship given the ethical respect inherent to humans and other species on the planet. Also included in this theme, are the rational use of natural resources, reduction of consumption, reuse, and recycling of disposable materials, among many others. In the field of human behavior, we list common attitudes that range from observing parking places for cars for the elderly and wheelchair users to the simple attitude of parking the car correctly without compromising the viability of other citizens to occupy the space next to it. In the midst of this everyday scenario, there is a question of environmental citizenship.

The cited examples occur in different contexts so that the relationship with the environment can be understood as a crucible for personal development as a citizen in the world (Sauv , 2005). In other words, the interaction with the environment is essential to the eco-formation of the human being. According to this author, eco-formation comprises three articulated movements: socialization, personalization, and greening. These movements are articulated to the planes of hetero-formation, of self-formation, and of the actual formation (Sauv , 2005).

Hetero-formation is the social dimension that concerns the education that is received from two institutions: the family and the school. The latter institution is not only committed to preparing students to receive the cultural heritage and to understand the scientific knowledge produced by humanity. Beyond these dimensions, as Zeichner (1993) points out, the school must bear in mind its democratic and emancipatory

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purpose in order to realize the social and political dimensions of education. Citizen education has been a reference in all levels and contexts of teaching. Brazilian official documents, elaborated from the Federal Constitution of 1988, such as the National Education Guidelines and Bases, the National Curricular Parameters (NCP), the National Curricular Guidelines (DCN) and, more recently, the National Curricular BNCC) emphasize that school education should encourage the development of capacities that foster understanding and intervention in social and cultural phenomena.

In the field of self-formation, Sauv  (2005) presents few words, but it is understood that it is the responsibility of the person to promote his/her self-formation as a complementary pole to his/her hetero-formation. Among the aspects of self-formation, is the personal interest in studying, reading, cultivating healthy habits and attitudes, seeking self-knowledge, and willingness to be an ethical and proactive citizen in society. This follows what Sauv  and Orellana (2001) place at the core of the relations with the environment: the sphere "I with myself" (p.278), that is, in the sphere of the self, the construction of personal identity.

The third, more discrete, pole is the eco-formation that, according to Sauv  (2005), is probably the most forgotten. It focuses on what each person receives in their physical environment and enables the formation of their ecological history. The space between the person and the environment is not empty. It is in this space that the relationships with others and with the world that culture is formed, and that social values of life, production, consumption, and behaviors are defined. Therefore, in the space between the person and the environment, there is no vacuum. This space is filled with cultural artefacts (Luzzi, 2012). It is in this sphere of relations with the environment, also understood as a way of life, that environmental education is located, according to Sauv  and Orellana (2001).

In the dimension of eco-formation there is the understanding of citizen training and the practice of conscious consumption as opposed to consumerism, which, constantly encouraged by the media, makes people dependent and robotized by the force of propaganda. In this sense, the central objective of this study refers to the analysis of the mentioned issues, encouraging the citizen training and the practice of conscious consumption, as opposed to exacerbated consumerism. It also seeks to identify alternatives that may help in the educational processes of eco-formation. Thus, in the course of the paper, considerations about the environment and environmental education are presented as complementary and necessary dimensions for rethinking current production and consumption modes.

The present article results from a qualitative investigation of the bibliographical review type. According to Gonalves (2010), this research modality should be understood as a simultaneous interrogative and reflexive process based on a comprehensive perspective, arising from the need to understand and interpret the meaning of social phenomena. For the accomplishment of this investigation, secondary sources were consulted regarding the environmental theme and education for conscious consumption.

## **II. Environment and Environmental Education: Theoretical and Practical Considerations**

This paper is based on the premise that there is consensus among the authors that the environment is a complex reality that goes beyond any precise, global and consensual definition. It is also based on the premise that environmental education is not a type of education but rather a "structuring element of the curriculum that demarcates a political field and practices that mobilize different social actors" (BRAZIL, 2012). In this perspective, the object of environmental education is not the environment itself, but the relationships established with / in and about the environment (Sauv ; Orellana, 2001).

The present authors understand that more important than a definition is to understand the various representations associated with the environment. They understand, then, the environment as: nature that can be appreciated and preserved; as a resource that needs to be managed; problem, which must be prevented and resolved; means of life, which must be known and organized; system that needs to be known to make better decisions; territory as a place of belonging and cultural identity; landscape, which needs to be interpreted; biosphere, as a place to live together and in the long term; and community project, with which there is a need to commit (Sauv ; Orellana, 2001).

The interrelated and complementary dimensions of the environment, as pointed out by Sauv  and Orellana (2001), determine the relationships that are established with, in, and on the environment. The present authors emphasize that an environmental education focused only on one of these representations would be incomplete and reductionist. This allows us to infer that, in the field of environmental education, it is necessary to have a broad view of the socio-environmental, political, and cultural issues prevailing in contemporary society, also considering the historical context in which the school or other spheres of action are inserted. It is also observed that the environmental theme comprises the dimension of citizenship and, therefore, influences the predominant conceptions of the environment in each time and context. Loureiro (2007) argues that environmental problems are treated in the classroom, linked to the social, political and economic contexts to which they are closely related.

For Carvalho (2008), the environment assumes a complex character since it comprises a field of interactions between culture, being the set of habits, customs, beliefs and behavior of a society, the physical, and biological structure of the organisms that constitute. From these relations the dynamics of the forces and phenomena that affect the same place change. The environment, in the perspective presented by this author, assumes the character of a space of relations, in which the human, like the other species, belongs to a web of relations and interactions between the biotic dimension, therefore, natural, abiotic, social, and cultural interactions between them.

Dias (2000) brings the concept of the environment closer to the exercise of citizenship, since every Brazilian citizen has the right to an environment that assures life, as a common good, in this sense: "The environmental issue is based on human rights, in the exercise of citizenship and in a policy to meet the biological, historical, psychosocial, economic, political, and axiological dimensions considered from an evolutionary perspective" (p.175). As it is possible to verify, the author brings to the concept of environment the influence of the Sociology, contemplating the concepts of democracy, citizenship, and social participation. From this position a critical posture is raised in relation to the interactions that man establishes with the environment.

Environmental education should be understood as "political education, in the sense that it claims and prepares citizens to demand social justice, national and planetary citizenship, self-management and ethics in social relations and with nature" (Reigota, 2001, p.10). In the understanding of this author it is possible to think of the medium as a social representation, that is, a vision in constant construction, that evolves in time and depends on the social group in which it is contextualized. It is these representations that define what each area of knowledge or person conceives as environment.

Used to indicate a particular space, the environment is formed by biotic and abiotic elements, as well as their interactions in which a being lives and develops, exchanging energy and interacting with it, being transformed and transforming it during the cycle of life (Sánchez, 2006). However, most human societies conceive the environment as a specific place in which the natural and artificial elements that in turn are related to the species that inhabit a certain ecosystem. These relationships are determinant for cultural, technological, and social processes to dialogue with the changing environment (Reigota, 2010).

Thus, the environment for the human being is flexible, mutable, and in constant transformation. In this direction, the environmental transformations resulting from anthropic actions and the amount of solid waste generated, mainly by the mode of production and consumption adopted from the last decades of the twentieth century, jeopardize the sustainability of the Planet and of the human species itself. These controversial issues are related to the need for a citizen education, focused on conscious consumption.

### **III. Citizen training and education for conscious consumption**

To have a democratic and non-exclusionary society requires the active and critical participation of citizens. Reis (2013, 2014) understands that "more than citizens of the future, students are already citizens in the present". In this way, the formation of competences for citizenship includes aspects such as: i) being able to express their value judgments; ii) to differentiate between personal decisions of individual scope and collective decisions of public scope; iii) recognizing and accepting rights, duties and opportunities in a pluralistic society (Krasilchick; Marandino, 2004).

In the field of environmental education, people are expected to be prepared to act locally, through processes of understanding reality, acquiring socio-environmental knowledge, developing skills, attitudes, values and behaviors aimed at social participation. The characteristics of environmental education refer to the design and structuring of educational content, pedagogical strategies and the organization of learning methods. These characteristics are disciplined in different approaches aimed at solving environmental problems, educational processes of an interdisciplinary nature, integration of education in the community, which requires active methods that encourage the participation of students (Boer; Moraes, 2006; Vestena; Boer; Scherer, 2016). It is in this bias that education is located for the conscious and responsible consumption, central focus of this study.

For Bencze (2014), there is a close relationship between the exercise of citizenship, consumerism, and education. Weiss (2004, p. 307) states that "today, educational processes make possible the existence of a consumerist mentality, taken as a natural." The appeal to consumption is so intense and audacious that we dare to say that if we do not consume, we have less value as individuals in our society, to the point of being - or feeling - excluded. In this sense, Weiss (2004, p. 308) insists that "our lives, our feelings, are auctioned every day on television programs by advertisements: everything is sold, everything is bought". The question we ask is whether in this context of exaggerated appeal to consumption, one can fully exercise citizenship.

Hodson (2003) warns that addressing the problems affecting today's societies presupposes understanding, making decisions and acting. It is believed that school education should contribute to the students' participation in debates and decision-making processes. Among these are the themes related to

socioenvironmental knowledge that allow the citizen to the conditions to "discuss the consumption that, in some way, is to discuss the aspects of modern subjectivity and its mechanisms of affirmation" (Weiss, 2004: 310).

In the face of this understanding, what is desired is that these citizen students move from awareness to informed action, i.e., to become active producers of knowledge, through research and the attempt to change situations and behaviors - socio-political action (Hilário and Reis, 2009; Reis, 2013). Thus, it is necessary that they are consciously and actively involved in the learning process. This is what is called activism.

According to Hilário and Reis (2009), activism is promoted from educational experiences, in which controversial issues of socio-scientific issues are discussed, which constitute an enriching and potential educational experience in the development of multiple competences. For Hodson (2011) collective action, or social activism, arises from the need of each citizen to make themselves heard and to be able to participate in matters related to science with implications on their quality of life and quality of life in general. This involvement of students in collective activism initiatives on issues of environmental and social interest, based on research and research, allows them to increase their knowledge about the problems involved and to develop research and participatory citizenship skills.

In this aspect, in particular, school education may contribute to the development of appropriate attitudes that encourage conscious consumption, as opposed to unbridled consumerism. Sensitized and enlightened students will be able to help other citizens to engage in a more democratic and less exclusionary model of society. In this context, teachers play an important role as mediators of the eco-formation of their students. Giroux (1997, 163) points out that "teachers as intellectuals should be seen in terms of the political and ideological interests that structure the nature of discourse, social relations in the classroom, and values that they legitimize in their teaching activities." And he concludes by saying that "teachers should become transformational intellectuals if they are to educate students to be active and critical citizens" (163).

It is inferred from Giroux's (1997) assignments that for the teacher to develop the critical spirit of his/her students, it becomes necessary to invest in active methodologies that stimulate the investigation and promote the capacity of reasoned argumentation to enable them to actually act as citizens.

Considering that, since the 20th century, consumption has emerged as a personal fulfillment, citizenship, that is, the way an individual participates in society is influenced by the objects of consumption that he/she can obtain. For Santos (1999, p. 127), the current population identifies more with consumption classes than with social classes. People of the same class of consumption are "simultaneously identified by things that are consumed and dominated by these same things."

A critique in this sense is proposed by environmental education programs known, initially, by three "R": Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. Subsequently, the words "Refuse and Rethink" were added to the five "R's". These programs generally emphasize the development of skills geared to environmental management and eco-visibility. They involve individual actions in the perspective of collective projects, such as education for consumption (Sauvé, 2005). Based on the COREN Association of Belgium, the author summarizes the main steps of eco-consumption that includes questions such as: "Does this purchase correspond to a need? Will this purchase not be redundant in relation to what we already have?" (P.20). This stance helps to avoid wasting and making useless purchases, argues Sauvé (2005).

The author then guides the choice of the product in a responsible way by examining its life cycle and proposes questions related to the production, distribution, use and elimination of the product. We transcribe, practically in its entirety.

Regarding production: What is this product made of? Are the components harmless? Do they come from renewable materials or recyclables? Do the manufacturing criteria meet the environmental and ethical criteria?

For distribution, please note: Where was this product manufactured? Where and how can it be purchased? How is it packed? Is the packaging disposable?

In relation to use: How is it used? Does it have an effect on the environment and health? Does its use require the consumption of other resources like water? Is the material repairable, reusable, reusable?

In relation to its elimination: at the end of its use, can be reused in another way? Is there a way of recycling? If not, what are the controlled forms of elimination? In which bin should be put? How much does it cost? (Sauvé, 2005).

It is considered that these orientations pertinent to the conscious consumption are part of the eco-formation, necessary to the environmental activism that we defend in this study. It falls again in the role of school education as a mediator and propeller in training and citizens aware and committed to the environmental cause.

#### **IV. Study Discussion**

Situating eco-formation and eco-consumption in the environmental field, some aspects of the National Policy on Environmental Education - Law 9.795 / 99 (BRASIL, 1999). This law was established with the objective of providing conditions for the realization of Brazilian environmental education, in the conception of being a continuous process by which individuals and collectivity build social values, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and skills aimed at the conservation of the environment, as well as of common use of the people, essential to a healthy quality of life and its sustainability (Brasil, 1999).

The humanistic, democratic, and participative approach, the conception of the environment in its totality, considering the interdependence between the natural, socioeconomic and cultural environment, under the focus of sustainability, the pluralism of pedagogical conceptions, in the perspective of inter and transdisciplinarity, and ethical linkage to education and social practices, are guiding principles of environmental education, foreseen in the stated law (Brasil, 1999).

The National Environmental Curriculum Guidelines (DCN) understand that the "environmental" attribute constitutes a structuring element that demarcates a political field of emancipatory values and pedagogical practices capable of promoting ethics and environmental citizenship (Brasil, 2012).

Promoting ethics and environmental citizenship in the context of school education is in accordance with what was exposed in this article regarding consumerism exaggerated only by having or giving an opinion, without satisfying basic needs. In this context, we highlight Cardia and Bastos's (2005) argument in favor of consumer education, presenting some components that could integrate it, such as studying the fundamentals of consumption, the awareness that individual and group actions can influence the relationship between service providers and products and consumers and the development of capacity to act, which translates into activism. It is important to note that in order to achieve the objective of providing the experience of social activism, it is necessary to move from a fragmentary conception to a unitary conception of knowledge. This can be achieved by conducting interdisciplinary projects and experiencing active methodologies.

Esperto (2013) understands that with activities in the area of activism, in the classroom, it is possible to introduce practices that develop research, discussion, criticism, reflection, communication, sharing. The author stresses that "[...] collaborative work and reasoning, progressively acquiring core competencies that will enable young people to understand social contexts and issues and, consequently, will contribute to the exercise of an active and responsible citizenship" (Esperto, 2013, p.105).

On the other side, consumerism stimulated by the media and reinforced by the culture of having, to the detriment of being, is one of the great responsible of the environmental degradation caused by the pollution originating from the inappropriate disposal of the products. We live in a society that consecrates the time of the ephemeral, in which throwing away and buying again is more seductive than repairing. In this society, more and more, the use of disposable products, in which cars, computers and household appliances have a very short duration, quickly becoming scrap. Our houses and buildings are built of aluminum and glass, whose cooling in the summer and winter heating consume a lot of energy (Santos, 2014). The planet Earth is in danger and we live the world's worst financial crisis in recent years. The intrinsic relationships between environmental degradation, poverty, stability and peace are increasingly evident, Santos (2014) warned. We need to bet on the constitution of sustainable societies, taking into account the constitutive inseparability between social, economic and ecological. It is urgent that the different curricular opportunities be converted into educational experiences in the sense of sustainable knowledge.

Assuming that a sustainable world is possible and that education in science, traditionally presented in the classroom, does not contribute to that goal, we must invest in a scientific education that enables the citizen to understand the world and make political decisions and social. Therefore, the school must assume that the construction of knowledge is only a means to achieve something more valuable than the mere acquisition of this knowledge (Martins, Veiga 1999). The development of conscious social behaviors implies a real understanding of local and global problems, Galvão et al. (2006). Faced with this, the assertion is that "[...] the teacher and scholar work is fundamentally an intellectual action that involves thinking, and thinking constitutes criticism as it looks around, which breaks the sameness from the interrogation: Why do the consumer practices not go through a process of reflection in school? (Weiss, 2004, p.309).

The perception we have is that the current school is still very focused on the teaching of pre-determined contents, with its greater concern focused on the good performance in external evaluations. For the promotion of a citizen education, it is necessary to prioritize the process of autonomous and critical learning, through significant contents for the student. Therefore, it is not enough for the student to accumulate scientific knowledge and not know how to use this knowledge when buying products in the supermarket or shopping mall, for example, by checking price, expiration date, chemical composition and storage conditions. In this new culture of conscious consumption, it becomes important to realize that "saving is not for the poor but for the intelligent" (Martins, 2015). Therefore, before consuming it will be necessary to evaluate the real necessity of this consumption and, if affirmative, the care in the form and quantity of that consumption.

## V. Conclusions

In this study, the central objective was to address the dimension of eco-formation that includes citizen training and the practice of conscious consumption as opposed to exaggerated consumerism as a mark of contemporary capitalist societies. The theoretical review carried out allowed the following considerations to be elaborated.

The subject of study is in the field of environmental education and for this it is important to bear in mind that there is consensus among the consulted authors that the environment is a complex reality that goes beyond any precise, global and consensual definition. Environmental education, understood as a structuring element of the curriculum that demarcates a political field and practices that mobilize different social actors, opens the possibility of encouraging activism in the contexts of teaching.

Moreover, the consequences of exaggerated consumerism result in numerous economic and ecological problems in view of the fact that production processes accelerate the extraction of natural resources. On the other hand, waste from consumption increases environmental contamination.

Finally, given the crucial importance of providing students with the possibility of experiencing citizenship from an early age, it seems important to us to recommend that we begin with a critical practice of today's life models, among them the question of excessive and unnecessary consumption. In view of this, it is necessary and urgent to encourage education for consumption in schools, in interdisciplinary projects that stimulate research for decision making in a scientifically argued and grounded manner.

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