

**Environmental Education in the Urban Setting:  
An Investigation in a Providence Classroom**

by

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## Abstract

The environmental movement has traditionally focused on issues concerning the physical environment. Most environmentalists have concentrated their energies on topics such as wildlife preservation and conservation of parklands. Environmental education to this point has reflected this agenda. Recently, however, the environmental justice movement began to assert that environmental issues include social issues such as environmental health. It contends that human health and environmental conditions are inextricably linked. If one is in crisis, both will suffer. I argue in this paper that environmental educators also should make this connection and include relevant social issues in their curricula.

In addition, I contend that the utilization of the local setting in environmental education programs is beneficial. This type of education can encourage children to identify with their "place", thus making them more likely to take action to care for or improve it. It also allows children to take part in their education actively by exploring and participating in their communities. Their education therefore addresses issues that directly affect their lives. This in turn teaches them how to define, accept responsibility for and work toward solving problems. These skills are necessary to initiate change, which is a major goal of environmental education. In addition, use of the local setting is advantageous because young children learn better in familiar settings than they do in novel ones. Also, even resource-limited schools have ready access to their local environment.

How do we tie these issues and the local setting into environmental education? The answer could be different in every community. Each area has its own characteristics ranging from social conditions to percentage of natural or built surroundings and level of pollution. Environmental education should therefore be modified to meet the needs of each setting. One way to achieve this modification is to include the learners in the determination of the curriculum. By investigating how children make meaning out of the world around them, educators can determine how best to teach them about environmental issues.

This study asks some of the questions necessary in planning an urban environmental curriculum in a fifth grade classroom in Providence, Rhode Island. Based on my interviews and focus groups with children, I argue that educators at Asa Messer Elementary School should include the topics of violence, crime and drugs in the planning for and content of an environmental curriculum. I suggest cooperative education as one means of including these topics.

In addition, this research points to the need to consider children's stage of cognitive development in the creation of a curriculum. It also indicates that these urban children have a sense of hope that conditions in their neighborhoods can change, but they believe that the power to impact the community is in the hands of others. To address these findings, I argue that local projects that result in visible change are both empowering and appropriate for children at this stage of cognitive development. Finally, the need for further research and teacher training is discussed as means for creating an environmental education curriculum that recognizes that every learner and every setting are part of the interconnected web known as the environment.