

## Experiences of Environmental Leadership by Young People: Implications for the Constitution of the Ethical-Political Subject

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### Abstract

This article presents a study about youth protagonist experiences of young people who take part in a social and environmental collective. It sets up an exploratory field research with a qualitative approach, which was attended by three members of a young collective of social-environmental actions. Data were collected by conducting a focus group and analyzed through constructive-interpretative analysis. The study revolves around the theoretical concepts of youth and the environmental role of experience and the ethical-political subject. The results indicate that youth protagonist experiences of participation by young people are products and producers of new relationships with each other, and others will be through personal transformation, by collective autonomy promotion, by the possibility of sociopolitical organization and by the expansion of the political collective commitment. The findings indicate that experiencing social and environmental activities made it possible for young people to strengthen social and political commitment and increased awareness as agents of change in their reality, in themselves and others, with respect to caring for the environment; thus, in this way demonstrating a caring concern, buoyed in ethical political conduct.

**Keywords:** Youth, environment, ethical-political subject, Environmental education.

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## Vivências de Protagonismo Socioambiental por Jovens: Implicações na Constituição do Sujeito Ético-Político

### Resumo

Este artigo apresenta um estudo acerca de vivências de protagonismo juvenil por jovens que atuam em um coletivo socioambiental. Configurou-se numa pesquisa de campo de abordagem qualitativa, da qual participaram três integrantes de um coletivo jovem de ações socioambientais. Os dados foram coletados por meio de um grupo focal e analisados por intermédio da análise construtiva-interpretativa. O estudo se desenvolve em torno dos conceitos teóricos de protagonismo juvenil e socioambiental, de vivência e de sujeito ético-político. Os resultados indicam que as vivências de protagonismo juvenil pelos jovens são produto e produtoras de novas relações entre si e com os outros seja por meio de transformação pessoal, pela promoção de autonomia coletiva, pela possibilidade de organização sociopolítica e pela ampliação do compromisso coletivo político. As conclusões indicam que vivenciar as atividades socioambientais possibilitou aos jovens o fortalecimento do compromisso social e político, além da conscientização enquanto agentes transformadores da sua realidade, de si e do outro, com relação aos cuidados com o meio ambiente. Demonstrando, desta maneira, uma preocupação solidária, balizada numa conduta ético-política.

**Palavras-chave:** Jovens, meio ambiente, sujeito ético-político, Educação ambiental.

## Experiencias de Liderazgo Ambiental por los Jóvenes: Implicaciones para la Constitución del Sujeto Ético-Político

### Resumen

En este artículo se presenta un estudio sobre el protagonismo juvenil de experiencias para los jóvenes que trabajan en un colectivo social y ambiental. Se establece un campo de investigación exploratoria de carácter cualitativo, a la que asistieron tres miembros de un joven colectivo de acciones ambientales. Los datos fueron recolectados mediante la realización de un grupo de enfoque y se analizaron mediante un análisis constructivo-interpretativo. El estudio gira en torno a los conceptos teóricos de la juventud y la relevancia medioambiental de la experiencia y el sujeto ético-política. Los resultados indican que las experiencias de participación de los jóvenes por los jóvenes son el producto y la producción de nuevas relaciones entre sí y la otra es a través de la transformación personal, la promoción de la autonomía colectiva, la posibilidad de organización sociopolítica y la expansión del compromiso colectivo político. Los resultados indican que la experiencia de las actividades sociales y medioambientales hacen posible que las personas jóvenes para fortalecer el compromiso social y político y una mayor conciencia como agentes de cambio en su realidad, usted y la otra con respecto al cuidado del medio ambiente. Demostrando de esta manera una preocupación cuidar, impulsado en una conducta ética política.

**Palabras clave:** Juventud, medio ambiente, sujeto ético-política, la educación ambiental.

The concept of experience, in which this study is anchored, is based on the premise that the person is politically integrated with their reality. Thus, Freire (2001) understands experience as a human possibility of existing as an eminently relational, dynamic, concrete, historical and cultural being that modifies and is modified

from social interaction and the awareness that arises from these experiences. In other words, becoming aware of their position in the world allows the transformation of the subject's relations with themselves and with their environment, a process that is constituted in the phenomenon understood as experience (Freire, 2001).

It is in this context connected to the concept of experience that the ethical-political subject is understood as being built from their relational experiences, implied with their individuality, collectivity and the world. Becoming an ethical-political subject is experiencing the process of emancipation with social and political responsibility, developing an understanding of society through a more supportive and interdependent concept (Freire, 2000).

These concepts dialogue with protagonism, understood by Silva (2010) as the process of overcoming adversities, resisting pressures, changing their reality and adapting to the demands of today's world. In the context of the environment, socio-environmental protagonism emerged in the 80's as a consequence of social movements interested in preserving the environment (Ziglio, 2012). These groups direct collective efforts into intentional and deliberate civic actions in order to change systemic causes of environmental problems and to promote a sustainable environment (Alisat & Riemer, 2015). This movement gained prominence as a result of the increasingly emerging environmental problems, with the concern of reversing this scenario and transforming the way society interacts with the environment.

In the youth context, young people who participate in socio-environmental groups are engaged in fighting for a healthy environment for society, and they seek to raise awareness among people to preserve the environment through Environmental Education activities. Studies indicate that young people involved in these groups develop a critical understanding of the environment and are politically organized (Albuquerque, 2012).

In this sense, Lazzaretti de Souza, Finkler, Dell'aglio, and Koller (2010) define that socio-environmental youth protagonism is characterized by actions that have taken place in different areas, emphasizing the importance of young people through activities that affirm engagement and social mobilization. Fostering protagonism among young people is anchored in the recognition of their ability to critically perceive the en-

vironment, and from this, to take an active stance on constructing alternatives to improve social realities.

The Ministry of Environment – MMA (2005), proposed the creation of Youth Councils during the *1 National Children and Youth Conference for the Environment* in an attempt to recognize young persons' ability to engage collectively and to act in the socio-environmental sphere, and which later came to be called the Youth Environment Collective (*Coletivos Jovens de Meio Ambiente - CJ*). The creation of such groups was aimed at creating spaces in which young people could collectively reflect on local demands and develop proposals for improvements to the context in which they were inserted. Thus, we've reflected on the concept of youth protagonism, and have brought to light a theme that has been discussed in various contexts, and that still remains little explored, especially with regard to the environmental education themes and the constitution of the ethical-political subject.

Given the issues above, this article has the purpose of analyzing youth protagonism experiences in a youth collective (CJ) and to question the extent to which this form of youth participation becomes forms of political participation by young people.

## Method

A field research using a qualitative approach was developed to analyze the experiences of youth protagonism of the participants. The qualitative epistemology proposed by González Rey (2011) was adopted as a perspective, guided by three guiding principles for qualitative research: the defense for the interpretive constructive character of knowledge, considering that this is human production; legitimation of the singular as an instance of production of scientific knowledge; and understanding research as an essential process of communication. Thus, the methodology used in this research is based on guiding the construction of comprehensive models of the studied phenomena, seeking to develop spaces of intelligibility on the subject.

### *Study Context and Participants*

The study<sup>1</sup> was carried out with members of the Youth Environmental Collective (CJ) of Iranduba, a city in the metropolitan region of Manaus. The CJ members began to articulate in 2003, when they participated in the National Children and Youth Conference for the Environment, when they pledged to take the issues they had developed during the conference to their cities, thus marking the first signs of the collective organization. The CJ became official in 2006 with participation in the “*Show das Águas, Meio Ambiente e Cidadania*”, an action developed by the *Fundação Rede Amazônica* (Amazon Network Foundation), which aims to develop citizenship actions in communities of the Amazon. At that time, the CJ developed environmental education workshops in public schools as they felt the need for greater articulation and unity of the Youth Collective.

Since then, CJ has been acting in citizenship and environmental education activities in the municipality of Iranduba. Nowadays, it develops environmental education actions and political articulation of the city’s youth, promoting discussion about youth rights, the Youth Statute, the National Youth Policy and youth’s local demands, as well as reflecting on and developing ways of coping with the problems experienced by the local youth. Other activities developed by the CJ are partnership actions with the State Department of Education (SEDUC), developing activities during the “*Show das Águas, Meio Ambiente e Cidadania*” in public schools ran by the State, and in “*Projeto Permanecer*” which seeks to encourage young people remaining in

schools, working in schools in the poor areas that have high school dropout rates in the final years.

Contact with CJ youth members occurred because they participated in a research activity at the Laboratory of Psychology and Environmental Education of the National Institute of Amazonian Research - INPA, coordinated by the third author. They were then invited to participate in the study, and three member (1F; 2M) leaders of the CJ agreed to participate. In order to guarantee the anonymity of the participants, they were identified using the following acronyms (YF1, YM2 and YM3), where the letter Y stands for Young, the second letter represents gender (M = male and F = female), and the numbers represent the initial sequence of group participation. The participants were from low-income families, aged 18 (YM1 and YM2) and 17 (YM3) years of age. Two of them (YM1 and YM2) lived in a municipality of the metropolitan region of the city of Manaus and studied in the capital, and YM3 was residing in the eastern part of Manaus. YM1 and YM2 were university students, while YM3 was a high school student.

All the ethical aspects were preserved by the signing of the Free and Informed Consent Form by all participants, based on the principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation and acceptance of research risks. The project was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of INPA, under the opinion number 231.007.

### *Instrument*

Data collection was carried out through a focus group lasting one hour. Two meetings were held with the young people at the Human Development and Education Laboratory of the Faculty of Psychology of Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM) in 2014. Meetings at the laboratory were scheduled after the invitation to participate, being the place that had space available for the group. The first meeting was carried out to explain the research objectives, methodology, ethical aspects and voluntary participation, as well as promoting an initial bond with research participants. The second meeting devel-

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<sup>1</sup> The research project was funded by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPQ), through the 2012 Edital Universal from 2012 to 2014, and called Youth Protagonism: constitutive aspects and psychosocial implications of the mobilization and participation in socio-environmental activities of young people in the metropolitan region of Manaus-AM (Protagonismo juvenil: aspectos constitutivos e implicações psicossociais da mobilização e participação em atividades socioambientais de jovens na região metropolitana de Manaus- AM).

oped the Focus Group itself, with conversation development based on the following guiding questions: What does it mean to be a youth environmentalist? What does it take to be a young environmentalist? What social changes did you bring to the community through the CJ? What personal achievements did you realize through your participation in the CJ? Data was recorded on an MP3 audio recorder. The topics that the researchers consider most relevant and that guided the content produced during the group meetings were written down in the minutes.

### *Data Analysis*

The information produced in the research from the focus group was analyzed based on the information construction process in the perspective of Qualitative Epistemology, as defined by González Rey as (2011, p. 4) “qualitative research that considers the principles of Qualitative Epistemology is characterized by its constructive-interpretative, dialogical character and for paying attention to analyzing the singular cases”.

Thus, the information was analyzed based on the constructive-interpretative perspective (González Rey, 2003, 2011). The constructive-interpretative character of knowledge conceives reality as an infinite domain of fields interrelated in a complex way, from which it is possible to approach part of it through research practices, but not its totality. This premise bases the understanding of knowledge as a human production, and not as a linear appropriation of the studied reality.

In this sense, our research excelled in adopting an active character and intellectual responsibility for constructing information, which will be the research outcome according to a “progressive and open course of a construction and interpretation process that accompanies all the research moments” (González Rey, 2011). Thus, based on the theoretical model that guides this research, the information construction process began by elaborations and interpretations, which represent forms of concretizing and organizing the constructive-interpretative process, allowing

its development through the categories that will be exposed in the following section.

Regarding the procedures, the analysis was developed as follows: (a) **focus group audio transcription**: the transcription process enabled an initial “reading” of the dialogue developed in the group and a previous evaluation of the procedure, at which time it was possible to have a previous interpretation regarding the information; (b) floating reading and organization of transcription material, as a sort of **pre-analysis**, which consisted of marking and highlighting the elements that were significant, considering that the theoretical support that sustained this moment was considered from the beginning of the research, and that the active process of knowledge construction is present throughout the research; (c) next, a systematic reading was carried out which provided **identification of indicators**, which are “elements that acquire meaning thanks to the researcher’s interpretation, meaning that their meaning is not directly accessible to the experience, nor does it appear in a correlation system” (González Rey, 2011, p. 112). The indicator is only developed based on implicit and indirect information, since it does not determine any conclusion by the researcher in relation to that studied; it only represents a hypothetical moment in the information production process; (d) from the identification of indicators, we moved on to the **construction of thematic categories**, which

are instruments of thought that not only express a moment of the studied object, but rather the historical-cultural context in which this moment appears as meaning, and with it the researcher’s history/background, which is a relevant element in the explanation of their creative sensitivity. (González Rey, 2011, p. 60)

Unlike the understanding that the definition of categories is a fragmentation of the collected data, in Qualitative Epistemology this process reveals the theoretical construction that the researcher elaborates based on the information produced with the participants in the empirical moment.

Due to the characterization of the analysis process it can be understood that the results found should be seen as dynamic and open to new interpretations, breaking with the conception of final and universal results that are exhausted in a single research (González Rey, 2011).

## Results and Discussion

The study sought to highlight how socio-environmental youth protagonism was experienced by the young individuals, considering their multiple determinations and the implications for constitution of the ethical-political subject. For these young people, protagonism emerges as the product and producer of new relationships with themselves and with others through personal transformation, through the promotion of collective autonomy, through the possibility of socio-political organization, and through the expansion of collective commitment and political commitment.

The results of the research are presented below through construction of four thematic categories: Social and environmental protagonism as a means of personal transformation; Social-environmental protagonism and the promotion of collective autonomy; Socio-environmental protagonism and socio-political organization; and Socioenvironmental protagonism and broadening of the collective and political commitment.

### *Social and Environmental Protagonism as a Means of Personal Transformation*

The involvement with the youth group focused on socio-environmental issues was characterized around the meanings that involve personal achievements and transformations and the constitution of the ethical-political subject, as emphasized by the following speeches:

*My achievement was more personal, because from the beginning, since childhood, I did not like the environment. But over time, with the conversations, seminars and classes, I began to reflect on what the environment would be/mean for me and for other people who were and are by my side.*

*Over time, I was interested in reading books about the environment . . . and over time I really liked it, I really liked the environment, so much so that I wanted to go deeper and deeper and participate in groups, lectures, classes, I even took technical courses on afforestation. When I started taking the technical course, I really really really loved it. (YM1)*

The speech from YM1 unveils that the socio-environmental protagonism promoted a transformation of distance from issues that until then characterized his way of being. The group allowed him to move towards having commitment as an ethical-political subject, and in the pursuit of social participation towards the common good. In his speech, YM1 verifies that protagonism stems from being involved in events that enabled greater knowledge about the environment and his relation with it, in such a way that from “*Conversations, seminars and classes, I began to reflect on what the environment would be/mean for me*”. Having knowledge about the environment is understood by the participant as an achievement-transformation in his personal life, also implying appropriation of an environmental ethic. It is this environmental ethic that distinguishes the ecological subject in apprehending a series of values and beliefs that constitute them as such (Santos, 2016). This young protagonist seizes capabilities that he considers vital for a transformed world, compatible with the ideal of better people and sustainable behavior (Santos & Higuchi, 2014).

This discourse is consistent with Vygotsky’s (2001) conception of human development as being of a social nature, in a way that the subject is constituted in social relations. Thus, the phenomenon mentioned by the participant as a “personal achievement” must be understood as resulting from social and individual processes of knowledge construction, which is determined by socially mediated interactions. However, the environment here results from the observation that, in addition to the relational dimension, there is also the physical dimension, which is the scenario for social events, but they in themselves constitute a world where vital energy flows (Capra,

2003; Fischer, 1994; Gibson, 1966; Gifford, 2005; Ingold, 2000).

We can therefore understand that the human being is not born ready, they are born with possibilities of human construction, and they are always subject to transformations as new events are incorporated into their repertoire of experiences, which demands a new significance and therefore, transformation in their posture in view of the signified phenomenon. Regarding YM1's speech, this phenomenon would be his fondness for the environment, which was procedurally/successively modified according to the new experiences that he had. Development is then perceived in an intertwined way with cultural and educational practices, including the learning process, as he indicated in his learning experiences and implication with the collectivity of the world in which he is engaged.

This implication developed in social interaction can be interpreted according to Lemos and Higuchi (2011), who discuss that every environmental relation presupposes a relation of the people between them, and of them with their environment. In this sense, environmental ethics is constituted, which implies in silencing or not silencing the other. Thus, it is argued that socio-environmental protagonism provides a behavior of Environmental Ethics among young people towards themselves and the environment, promoting transformations in themselves, with others and with their surroundings/environment.

Protagonism can have positive repercussions in the educational and intellectual process, in political formation, in the qualification of interpersonal relationships, in the development of ecological behaviors, on accountability, solidarity and citizenship, as evidenced in the following speech by YM2.

*I, at least, notice that the members of the CJ have a level of criticality, of looking at reality very different from other young people at the same age. We are a little more selfless than some people, we have this ability to put ourselves in the shoes of others, we are very ethical, you know. (YM2)*

YM2's discourse points out that social interaction among young people is mediated by

caring for others in an individualized and social way. This mediation expands to environmental concerns/actions (Boff, 2005).

The speeches of these young environmentalists point out necessary elements for taking care of life in society. In this aspect, the socio-environmental protagonism presents itself as a possibility for transforming attitudes, raising awareness for accountability, acquiring intellectual knowledge, increasing the level of criticality and empathy with the environment and with life. Interaction with others through language is an important way to change cognitive, affective and behavioral pro-environmental aspects, in caring for others, for life, for society and for the environment.

These findings are consistent in the discourse of Higuchi and Farias (2002), who assert that human actions in/on the world create changes in the structure of consciousness that arise from individual and collective experiences, and that the conceptions and forms of environmental commitment play a fundamental role in the attitudes and behaviors of subjects on the environment.

The psychosocial aspects that motivate socio-environmental protagonism of young people are based on friendship relationships that involve: exchange; experience; friendship; thinking about the collective; caring for the environment; acquisition; expansion and knowledge. In this context, their experiences are related to the motivations that have led them to participate in the young collective.

*"Sharing experiences and having cool conversations, friendship bonds . . ." (YM1).*

*"Noticing my friends who have been participating for some time, and that I was not much into this area of environment. I did not care. But then those conversations with my friends influenced me" (YM2).*

*"The friendships that we made were not only within the CJ, but with other partner institutions. We have made friends in the CJ, friends in the Forum... . ." (YM3).*

The dialogues reveal that these youngsters have friendship as a motivating aspect for protagonism, built and strengthened by the ex-

change of experiences, permeated by similar opinions ranging from politics to birthday celebrations. The dialogue established among the young protagonists, based on the speeches of YM1, YM2 and YM3, allows us to identify that they exchange experiences and knowledge intertwined in learning from the socio-environmental reality.

The importance of affectivity in creating joint political positions is presented in the speech of the young people. In other words, the friendship relationship strengthens the possibility of dialogue and effective exchanges among young people. These lines can be understood in the light of Freire's (2000) dialogue conception, who defends an education without the loss of creativity and the affective element, in which it is built together. Based on concrete relationships and affective positioning in the face of the experiences lived by the groups, it is possible to establish frank and open dialogue, through which it becomes possible to critically analyze the problems of their world.

In addition, we can highlight the importance of affectivity in the semiotic processes of the human being, since according to Aguiar (2006), we understand that the subjective process is constructed from the experience of each subject within their interpersonal and intergroup relations, in which affections, values, habits and customs are involved. This process is quite visible in the speeches produced by the young people when they highlight their relations of friendship resulting from the activities of the young collective.

Another relevant aspect is that the young collective acts as a space to think about the collective. This becomes a motivating aspect for their protagonist performance. Since, according to the following discourse by YM1, society is increasingly individualized and the young collective allows for expressing caring ethical behavior.

*. . . So if everyone did their part the world would be better, because the society of the twenty-first century only wants money. But for nature, the animals or every issue that involves the environment, society does not*

*care. And so, the focus of society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is money, work or fashion . . . (YF1)*

The excerpt above presents another motivating aspect, the concern for the environment in a society that gives little importance to this discussion, who is only worried about immediacy and individualism, represented by their preoccupation with fashion and with money. For these youngsters, being part of the collective enables the exchange, expansion and acquisition of knowledge about environmental education from a critical perspective.

Friendship and dialogue built by socio-environmental protagonism is based on environmental ethical behavior. On this aspect, Boff (2003) considers that ethical behavior is characterized as a set of aspirations, values and guiding principles of human actions in their relationship with nature, society, with others and with oneself. Thus, setting an attitude of responsibility and care with life, of social coexistence, conservation of natural resources and of the beings inhabited by it, and not failing to consider what is regional and cultural.

### ***Social-Environmental Protagonism and the Promotion of Collective Autonomy***

Socio-environmental protagonism can promote another important factor - autonomy. This fact can be verified in the way the experiences and decisions in the young collective were reported. It is possible to identify the relevance of autonomy in YM2's speech.

*We were actually born from a public policy, so in the meetings, we said: we are no longer a public policy, we are not children of the MEC [Ministry of Education], we are a socio-environmental movement of young environmental educators. That was our greatest achievement, it gives us pride because the idea came from us, it came up in one of our Manaus-Iranduba interchange meetings. And even those who were not there, they benefited a lot from the Statute, from the meetings, because they knew that the idea came from there. (YM2)*

As verified in the discourse of YM2, socio-environmental protagonism allowed young



people to become autonomous. Through group discussions and their own norms in meetings and technical studies, it is possible to perceive that they sought recognition of the need to fight for their emancipation as a young collective responsible for social transformation, aware of the possibility of going beyond what had been proposed to them by the Ministry of Education - MEC.

Thinking and acting are inseparable elements for liberating reflections and promoting autonomy. Since education is an act of awareness, this action becomes (or can become) liberating and transforming, generating changes (Loureiro, 2003), taking on a social commitment based on the experienced reality is a protagonist task, which in turn requires the protagonist to be able to "act and reflect" (Freire, 1979). This requires an exercise of "detachment" and concomitant "reflection on" the context in which they are involved in order to objectify and transform it. Moreover, this commitment must be carried out by a concrete being, with concrete existence in a concrete situation in the physical world. The Freirean perspective considers that there is no way to truly commit oneself without deep involvement.

Therefore, the actions of these young people are tied to the varied dimensions that the construction of a critical thought provided to them, such as the search for social transformations. This statement is also corroborated by the following speeches:

*"We see the determination of young people in changing their cities and fighting for their citizenship, improving the places where they live"* (YM2).

*"The CJ has devoted a whole year to training youth and the creation of the Pact for Youth which was signed by all candidates at the Iranduba city hall"* (YM3).

The speech of YM2 allows us to verify that socio-environmental protagonism brought political organization to these young people, with concrete reflexes on their reality, since they managed to implement public policies for the youth in the municipality. In this sense, a rational discourse can be identified among them in which they perceive themselves as active and

they can intervene in society, acting in the care of the environment, youth and human life.

The performance of these young people is reflected in the idea of autonomy, discussed by Paulo Freire as enlightened and free actions, and are among the alternatives presented to them (Freire, 1996). According to this concept, the person must be able to act in a rational way, choosing between alternatives presented to them and understanding the consequences of their choices. Thus, respecting autonomy is recognizing that people and the community are the ones who must deliberate and make decisions; it is to consider the individuals' rights, motives and reasons (Fortes & Zoboli, 2004). Through the speeches of YM2 and YM3, these young people identify themselves as active citizens and subjects of their own stories. It is the young people who take on political conduct and processes, taking on life in its totality, including a greater responsibility with the environment in which they live in. In this process of experiences and psychosocial productions, young people also show that internal and contextual elements can be co-adjuvant in forming protagonist beings.

### ***Socio-Environmental Protagonism and Socio-Political Organization***

Participation in the socio-environmental group allowed the young people to have a political organization in which they could act for defining the places and possible causes for political influence. By composing a CJ, the group had to learn what the function of their organization was, their history of action and what possibilities of action arose from this composition.

*... in the beginning of our performance as CJ ... the group was born in 2003, but we only joined the group in 2009. So we already had a history with the group when we joined them, we did not exactly know what CJ did, what the CJ was, then we acted as if it was a student council/student association in schools.* (YM2)

It is noticeable that the political activity, the spaces and political roles exercised were constructed by the young people. In not being sure

what the CJ's role was, their performance was based on the experience they had already gained by the experience of a student body. From this initial position and the demands found in acting along with their creativity, new possibilities for constructing a political action model were brought forth based on the reality that the young people experienced.

Facing such a configuration of youth performance based on the understanding of citizenship developed by Stamato (2008), which is exercised as a historical process, contextualized, and extremely complex, it does not happen in a magical, spontaneous, natural way as a result of only a certain age group or stage of development. According to what the author advocates, it is possible to perceive that in order for young people to become active citizens, an educational action was necessary, which in turn allowed them to transcend the role of mere social actors, learning to read the world, the reality where they should act, and the group that they began to compose in a critical manner, and act in this context in a transformative way.

From this reflection we can conclude that learning to act in the CJ and to organize politically was not a natural process, but rather a strengthening relationship between the subject and the group, in which the community turned into a space of discovery and experience of otherness (Stamato, 2008). The participation of the young people in the groups allowed them to be able to realize achievements that brought social and environmental benefits, in addition to contributing to strengthening their identity and autonomy.

*. . . having learned to fight politically is an achievement, because many CJ groups have not learned, and CJ Amazonas learned how to do it. One of the achievements that I think was very important was the fact that we organized the national meeting. That the national meeting was the idea of our CJ here, so much so that the coordination was from Amazonas, even though the event was happening in Goiás. The idea was ours and the effort to make it happen was ours, in fact, our first idea was that the meeting would*

*happen here, but because the Amazon is far from the rest of the country it would be much more expensive. (YM2)*

*"We are not the children of MEC, we are a socio-environmental movement of young environmental educators" (YM2).*

The achievements are analyzed as a process of strengthening autonomy and a matter of human development, since the experiences of the achievements enabled constructing a political identity on how experiences are lived/perceived, and they began to compose the meaning for themselves.

This understanding is consistent with the understanding of human development constituted on the basis of a dialectical process of men with the social (Oliveira, 2008; Vigotski, 2001), and adolescence as a historical and cultural construction (Ozella, 2003). The development of political protagonism by the young people occurred through their mediation with the world in a complex dialectical process, in which qualitative transformations occurred in the way of politically acting and articulating. The political action was based on concrete reality, and contributed to the development of individual aspects of each young person, their autonomy, participatory political identity and protagonist identity, in an imbrication of internal and external factors, thus constituting the objectivity/subjectivity dialectical unity in which the individual and the social are inseparable, and the particular contains in itself the universal (Lane, 1995; Oliveira, 2008; Vigotski, 2001).

Thus, we can understand that within the scope of the CJ, the protagonist role functioned as an element of mediating the emancipation process of the young, changing their form of insertion in society, culminating in the achievement of relevant results in the context of environmental policy.

### ***Socioenvironmental Protagonism and Broadening of the Collective Political Commitment***

The participation of these young people in the collective through mobilizing civil society contributed to constructing a political commit-

ment, mainly through the representatives and social movements. Some authors reaffirm that the environmental commitment is represented by the actions resulting from recognition of nature's limitations and in applying measures that permeate care with life and the environment, in which an interdependent articulation of individual and collective responsibilities is developed (Boff, 1999; Leff, 2001, 2003).

*“... creation of the Youth Pact [Pacto Pela Juventude] that was signed by all candidates at the Iranduba city hall. In the Youth Political Action of 2012, we mobilized that entire city, it was incredible” (YM3).*

*... we had an event at the City Council with 99 of the claims, which was the Popular Government Plan, with claims of a lot of people from the rural workers' union, women's group, and for everything it was us who mobilized them. We went for it, then we went to see what their demands were. We put it into a document, we spent a lot of time writing it, transcribing all that and organizing it; 'no, this here is similar to that, then take this one out, then this part is out, it will be just on education, so one part will be only for education, culture, sport, youth' and so on. (YM3)*

*We finalized the document, and in the end we call it the Youth Pact, which was something that was happening in Bahia, an initiative of the National Youth Council that was the Youth Pact. But their pact was one page with some agreements regarding the youth, and we had made a huge document that contemplated everyone in the civil society of the city, ours was not only a youth pact, but it was a popular plan of government, around 20 some pages, 23 pages. And this was cool because we invited all the candidates, there were 6 candidates from the city hall, all 6 went and they all signed. (YM2)*

The speeches of young people demonstrate a political commitment to the community and are protagonist forms of experiencing political participation in order to subvert the limitations that are imposed on youth political participation several times.

According to Carrano (2006), there is an intimate relationship between the material conditions of life and social and political participation, so that the worsening of living conditions of the majority of the young Brazilian population directly affects the increased sense of insecurity in the present and uncertainties about future life; and it is within this framework of growing instability and hopelessness in the face of the State's capacity to promote rights, social welfare and security that the main obstacles are established, and may represent challenges in the form of democratic public policies for the development of youth citizenship.

It can be noticed that in the case of young CJ members, there is a creative participatory political production, and also committed to the social. Thus, based on Carrano (2006), we understand that the spheres of youth protagonism can be spaces for formulating, criticizing, and creating reflexive policies, and also coping with problems that may or may not become public policies. The transformation of collective demands presented by the young people as public commitment was the result of the capacity of collective actors to guide socio-environmental problems into the political spheres.

The same author (Carrano, 2011) defines that groups are laboratories of democratic public life, however, their practices need to be experienced in territories where different subjects of the cities meet. The composition of the CJ, therefore, was able to induce young people meeting who, provoked by emerging issues, could rearticulate the current political practices in accordance with their perceptions and demands.

## Final Considerations

This article sought to present the ways in which young people participating in a youth environment collective experienced youth socio-environmental protagonism. The understandings presented by young people circumscribe socio-environmental protagonism in the realm of caring attitudes for the environment, promoting autonomy of the youth, strengthening friendships and exchanging experiences among the mem-

bers of the group. The young people stand for political organization, realizing achievements obtained by virtue of political articulation and extending the collective political commitment. We can thus notice that through mobilizing groups and environmental action, young people take on a social solidarity and political commitment that allows them to become transforming agents of their reality. Moreover, the group empowers them so that they can contribute to forming an environmentally friendly society based on ethical conduct. From this study, it is possible to affirm that the care with the environment can be a subsidy of transformation, de-alienation and political strengthening of the youth. Socio-environmental protagonism based on the attributed meanings also enables social participation by making them feel involved in social justice through awakening cooperation and solidarity; important principles for human and earth's survival with its ecosystems.

The political action of young people contributes to constituting critical and participatory subjects in the process of social transformation, with exercising citizenship committed to the collective. This youth movement allows us to deconstruct the recurrent association of youth with violence or as a phase of life in which the subject does not want to assume transforming responsibilities. In addition, socio-environmental protagonism plays a major role in the forming processes of young peoples' identities. It was from that moment on that they became part of the socio-environmental group, and organized in this context young people came to perceive the group power of a politically articulated youth, and this was remarkable for their performance in realizing relevant achievements in the environmental aspect, for being recognized as an active group and strengthening the collective, culminating in the commitment of several other political representatives to the causes that were defended by them.

Although this study has limitations in terms of sample coverage, the results allow us to highlight the importance of creating public policies that strengthen the participatory and protagonist potential of young people in various social, en-

vironmental, education, the arts, and sporting spheres, etc. It is imperative that the youth has developmental possibilities with regard to social relations and critical citizen actions in the contexts where they live. It is considered that socio-environmental protagonism is one of those ways to enhance the capacity of young people to be agents of social transformation and producers of their history, committed to social welfare and disparities.

### *Authors Contributions*

Substantial contribution in the concept and design of the study: Maria Inês Gasparetto Higuchi

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Contribution to critical revision, adding intellectual content: Iolete Ribeiro da Silva, André Luiz Machado das Neves, Fernanda Priscilla Pereira Callegare, Maria Inês Gasparetto Higuchi.

### *Conflicts of interest*

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to the publication of this manuscript.

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