The OSCAR PUBLISHING Services
International Journal of Pedagogics

VOLUME Vol.06 Issue01 2026
PAGE NO. 138-142
DOI 10.37547/ijp/Volume06Issue01-30

Improving The Methodology Of Introducing Preschool Children To The Environment Through Ecological Values

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Received: 25 November 2025; **Accepted:** 16 December 2025; **Published:** 20 January 2026

Abstract: This study examines the enhancement of methodological approaches for introducing preschool-aged children in preparatory groups to their surrounding environment through the lens of ecological values. The research addresses the critical need for integrating environmental education with early childhood development, proposing innovative pedagogical strategies that combine traditional ecological wisdom with contemporary educational technologies. The methodology encompasses experiential learning, nature-based activities, and value-oriented pedagogical approaches tailored to the cognitive and emotional development stages of preschool children. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of early ecological education and provides practical recommendations for educators working with preschool children in preparatory groups.

Keywords: Ecological values, preschool education, environmental awareness, preparatory group, nature-based learning, sustainable education, early childhood development, pedagogical methodology, ecological consciousness, environmental education.

Introduction: The formation of ecological consciousness and environmental responsibility in early childhood represents one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary education. As global environmental concerns intensify, the role of early childhood education in developing ecological awareness becomes increasingly significant. The preschool period, particularly the preparatory group stage (ages 6-7), constitutes a critical window for establishing foundational attitudes toward nature and the environment that will persist throughout an individual's lifetime.

Traditional approaches to environmental education in preschool settings have predominantly focused on superficial acquaintance with natural phenomena, often neglecting the deeper integration of ecological values into children's worldview formation. This limitation necessitates a fundamental reconceptualization of methodological approaches to introducing young learners to their surrounding environment. The contemporary educational landscape demands pedagogical strategies that transcend mere knowledge transmission, emphasizing instead the cultivation of genuine ecological consciousness grounded in values, ethics, and practical engagement with nature.

The preparatory group phase represents a unique developmental period characterized by intensive cognitive growth, emerging abstract thinking capabilities, and heightened receptivity to value-based learning. Children at this stage demonstrate remarkable capacity for developing empathetic relationships with living organisms and natural systems, making it an optimal time for introducing comprehensive environmental education programs. However, the effectiveness of such programs depends critically on the pedagogical methodologies employed and their alignment with children's developmental characteristics.

This research addresses the gap between theoretical recognition of early ecological education's importance and practical implementation of effective

methodological frameworks. By examining the integration of ecological values into environmental familiarization processes, this study seeks to contribute both theoretical insights and practical tools for educators working with preschool children in preparatory groups.

The theoretical foundation for ecological education in early childhood draws upon multiple pedagogical traditions and psychological frameworks. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of cultural tools and social interaction in cognitive development, suggesting that ecological values can be effectively transmitted through guided participation in culturally meaningful environmental practices. Piaget's constructivist approach highlights children's active role in constructing environmental understanding through direct interaction with natural phenomena.

Contemporary research in environmental education emphasizes the concept of "ecological literacy," defined as the ability to understand natural systems and the principles of sustainability. Palmer (1998) argues that early childhood experiences in nature significantly influence lifelong environmental attitudes and behaviors. Sobel (2008) advocates for "place-based education," emphasizing the importance of connecting children with their immediate natural environment before introducing abstract global environmental concepts.

The integration of values into environmental education has been extensively examined by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002), who developed a comprehensive model linking environmental knowledge, values, and behavior. Their research demonstrates that cognitive knowledge alone is insufficient for developing environmental responsibility; emotional connection and value-based commitment are equally essential. This finding is particularly relevant for preschool education, where emotional and experiential learning predominate over abstract conceptual learning.

Chawla (2006) conducted longitudinal research on significant life experiences that shape environmental consciousness, identifying early childhood nature experiences as foundational. Her work emphasizes the importance of positive, emotionally engaging encounters with nature during formative years. Wilson (2008) further developed this concept through "biophilia" theory, suggesting that humans possess an innate affinity for natural systems that can be cultivated through appropriate educational interventions during early childhood.

Cultural contextualization of environmental education has been emphasized by Sterling (2001), who argues that ecological values must be embedded within culturally relevant frameworks to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. This perspective is particularly significant for diverse educational contexts where indigenous ecological knowledge and traditional environmental practices can enrich contemporary pedagogical approaches.

Recent research by Ardoin et al. (2020) synthesizes findings from environmental education studies, concluding that early interventions combining experiential learning, emotional engagement, and value-based reflection produce the most substantial and lasting impacts on environmental attitudes and behaviors. Their meta-analysis supports the integration of ecological values as a core component of early childhood environmental education.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies to comprehensively examine the enhancement of environmental familiarization practices in preschool preparatory groups. The study was conducted over an 18-month period involving 240 children aged 6-7 years from 12 preschool institutions, along with 48 educators.

Qualitative data from observations and open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis using inductive coding procedures. Multiple researchers independently coded transcripts to ensure reliability, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus-building.

EVQ results demonstrated profound differences in attitude development. Experimental group children exhibited significantly stronger ecological values across all measured dimensions:

Empathy for Living Organisms: Experimental groups showed 68% increase in empathy scores compared to 23% in control groups. Children in experimental groups demonstrated sophisticated understanding of animal needs and expressed genuine concern for organism welfare.

Appreciation of Natural Beauty: Aesthetic appreciation scores increased 72% in experimental groups versus 31% in control groups. Experimental group children spontaneously commented on natural beauty and expressed desire to protect beautiful natural spaces.

Environmental Responsibility: Perhaps most significantly, sense of personal responsibility for environmental protection increased 81% in experimental groups compared to 28% in control groups. Experimental group children more frequently articulated connections between their actions and environmental consequences.

BOP data revealed substantial behavioral differences between groups. Experimental group children demonstrated notably more environmentally responsible behaviors:

Waste Management: Experimental group children initiated proper waste disposal without prompting 76% of observed opportunities, compared to 41% for control groups.

Resource Conservation: Water and material conservation behaviors occurred 3.2 times more frequently in experimental groups.

Nature Interaction Quality: Experimental group children exhibited more respectful, gentle interactions with plants and animals, with only 8% of interactions coded as potentially harmful compared to 34% in control groups.

Spontaneous Environmental Advocacy: Experimental group children frequently reminded peers and family members of environmental responsibilities, a behavior rarely observed in control groups.

ESI results indicated that educators in experimental groups reported significant professional development. Ninety-two percent expressed increased confidence in environmental education implementation. Eighty-seven percent reported that value-integration approaches enhanced overall classroom climate and interpersonal relationships beyond environmental topics.

Educators identified several factors contributing to program success: concrete, age-appropriate activities; emotional engagement through storytelling; visible outcomes from conservation projects; and family involvement reinforcing school-based learning.

The research findings confirm that integrating ecological values into environmental familiarization methodologies produces substantial improvements in preschool children's environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. The magnitude of differences between experimental and control groups suggests that value-integration represents not merely an enhancement but a fundamental transformation of environmental education effectiveness.

Results support sociocultural learning theory's emphasis on culturally mediated knowledge acquisition. Ecological values, transmitted through meaningful activities and social interaction, appear to provide cognitive frameworks that organize and give significance to environmental information. Children in experimental groups did not simply accumulate more facts; they developed coherent understandings of human-nature relationships grounded in values and ethics.

The findings also validate developmental theories suggesting that preschool age represents an optimal period for values formation. Children demonstrated remarkable capacity for internalizing ecological values and translating them into consistent behavioral patterns, supporting the hypothesis that early childhood represents a critical period for environmental consciousness development.

Particularly noteworthy was the effectiveness of incorporating traditional ecological knowledge and cultural narratives into the curriculum. Folk tales featuring harmonious human-nature relationships resonated deeply with children and provided culturally meaningful frameworks for environmental values. This finding suggests that environmental education achieves greatest impact when rooted in culturally relevant contexts rather than presenting universalized content.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The study focused on urban and suburban settings; rural contexts may present different challenges and opportunities. Long-term follow-up studies are needed to determine persistence of observed effects into later childhood and adolescence. Additionally, research should examine optimal approaches for diverse cultural contexts and varying climatic conditions

affecting nature access.

Future research should investigate specific mechanisms through which ecological values influence behavior, particularly the role of emotional connections with nature. Comparative studies examining different pedagogical approaches to value integration would refine methodological recommendations. Research should also address scaling challenges for system-wide implementation of enhanced environmental education approaches.

Environmental learning assessment should encompass knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors rather than focusing exclusively on factual recall. Observation-based assessment during natural activities provides authentic evaluation of environmental consciousness development. Portfolio approaches documenting children's environmental projects and reflections offer comprehensive pictures of growth over time.

Effective environmental education requires partnership with families. Schools should provide families with resources for nature-based home activities, communicate about environmental learning occurring at school, and create opportunities for family participation in environmental projects. Regular communication about the values dimensions of environmental education helps families reinforce school-based learning.

This research demonstrates that enhancing environmental familiarization methodologies through systematic integration of ecological values produces substantial improvements in preschool children's environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. The preparatory group stage represents a critical opportunity for developing ecological consciousness that can establish foundations for lifelong environmental responsibility.

The findings challenge traditional approaches that treat environmental education as primarily informational, demonstrating instead that values, emotions, and experiential engagement constitute essential components of effective early childhood environmental education. When children develop genuine emotional connections with nature, grounded in explicitly articulated ecological values, they demonstrate remarkable capacity for environmental understanding and responsibility.

The practical feasibility of implementing enhanced methodologies in typical preschool settings suggests that broader adoption is achievable without requiring extraordinary resources or institutional transformation. However, success depends on adequate educator preparation, regular nature access, age-appropriate pedagogical approaches, and meaningful family engagement.

As environmental challenges intensify globally, the importance of cultivating ecological consciousness from early childhood becomes increasingly urgent. This research contributes to understanding how educational institutions can effectively fulfill this responsibility, offering both theoretical insights and practical tools for educators committed to developing environmentally responsible future generations. The integration of ecological values into environmental familiarization processes represents not merely a pedagogical enhancement but a fundamental reorientation toward education that acknowledges human interdependence with natural systems and the ethical dimensions of environmental relationships.

Future educational research and practice should continue exploring optimal approaches for developing ecological consciousness in early childhood, recognizing that today's preschool children will inherit unprecedented environmental challenges requiring both knowledge and deeply held values of environmental stewardship. By establishing strong foundations of ecological consciousness during the formative preschool years, educators contribute to cultivating generations capable of creating more sustainable and harmonious relationships between human societies and the natural world.

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