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Preschool Education Professionals as Mediators of Environmental Health Education

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Abstract

Environmental health can be integrated in the education system through Environmental Education (EE). The present research aims to state the perceptions of Preschool Education (PE) teachers regarding EE. More specifically, we aim to find out the predisposition of these professionals when including EE in their daily practice. Interviewed subjects showed good predisposition to include EE topics in their professional practice since 33% of them thought they would slightly modify their curricula to include EA topics after their participation in an EE awareness raising course, while 66% of them thought they would considerably modify it.

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1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization, environmental health is a discipline which comprises those aspects of human health, including quality of life and social welfare, which are determined by physical environment factors as well as chemical, biological, social and psycho-social factors. Hence the need for educating citizens from an early age in pro-environmental values which stand for respect and conservation of their surrounding environment. This allows for prevention of both short and long term problems of current and future

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generations. Environmental Education (EE) is an optimal way to integrate environmental health in the education system.

We are facing an environmental crisis which lays out the necessity of including new proposals from early stages of education which help the students to create positive attitudes to the environment. There comes into play EE as an instrument to integrate novel contents which are demanded by the new society. There exists a wide-ranging discussion in our society on how to integrate new and not merely academic contents in the curriculum (Gutiérrez, 2011). In short, the main goal is to complete the training process including abstract concepts related to ethics, social skills, values, etc. EE is taking off and is currently being incorporated to the education system through experiences, which are conveyed by aware education professionals to the students by means of activities and programs oriented to the respect and care of the environment. EE is a process which takes place in parallel to the permanent training of every citizen. Therefore, Preschool Education (PE) should be considered as a key development stage to approach the students to a global conception of the environment as a system of multiple relations. This will permit the clarification of values and the development of attitudes which allow them adopt a critical and participative position regarding the issues related to conservation and exploitation of natural resources (Cano, 1992). EE enriches and provides new meanings to the education of young students. Moreover, it helps them on how to learn to feel and interpret the environment in which they are immersed in order to be able to act in it, so when they grow and move forward in the education system they can acquire a more globalized vision of the world they live in.

One of the main goals of any education system is to prepare new generations to face systems of norms and values which are considered essential in each moment by the society, and which are worth to be transmitted to the youngest citizens. The Spanish Organic Education Law from the 4th of May 2006 (LOE, 2006), states that PE has as purpose to contribute to the physical, affective, social and intellectual development of children. The development of their affective abilities through the observation and exploration of the family and the natural and social environments is also considered an objective of this stage. Moreover, it stands for the progressive acquisition of elementary coexistence and social relations guidelines as well as for the practice of pacific conflict resolution.

This work is in the context of a training course for PE professionals from municipal schools in Granada which aimed to raise the awareness of the participants in EE and pro-environmental issues. In addition, another objective was to provide them with basic knowledge and ideas which can be applied in their daily practice with their students. At the beginning of the course we enquired the degree of familiarity of the participants with EE and their predisposition to include it in their daily practice. Along this text, we show the perceptions of PE professionals with respect to EE as well as their willingness to include it in their curriculum.

2. Research Procedure

Our research is based on a descriptive study since it is a preliminary approach to the reality which may open doors to future research about the professional needs of PE. We chose an interview study for this approach. This type of research is widely used within the education field because it is very useful to describe and predict educational phenomena and it is very efficient to obtain a first approximation to reality (Bisquerra, 2009). In our case, the chosen population is composed of the participants of the EE training symposium, who are all PE teachers. The chosen sample is composed of 15 teachers from different municipal schools in Granada and its province. The components of this sample have an average professional experience of 13.4 ± 11.2 years. 93.3% of them are women and 6.66% are men. The employed sampling is intentionally non-probabilistic since we chose the individuals we estimated representative of the whole population.

Regarding the information gathering tool, we opted to elaborate a survey composed of a set of questions which may provide us with information about their professional experience and daily practice (questions #B1-#B9). All questions were of the triple-answer kind. In order to extract more information about their perception of the importance of EE in early stages, we also elaborated a value scale (questions #A1-#A15). The value scale depicted 15 statements related to EE and PE and the participants had to choose between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). The questions in both the survey and the scale value are listed in the next page.

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