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Pursuing the goal of sustainable action in the basic training of teachers

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Abstract

School can and should promote the development of sustainable lifestyles that lead communities to be fairer and more responsible and respectful with the environment and people. Thus, Environmental Education must focus on the development of a competence for action based on critical thinking, independent decision-making and participation. The objective of this study is to analyse if teachers in pre-service training are aware of the main purpose Environmental Education must pursue and what this implies. The research was carried out via mixed methodology, contrasting the data obtained through a Likert scale of attitudes with other qualitative data. The analysis of the data suggests the existence of future teachers' frequent predisposition to believing that the essential aim should simply be an awareness of environmental problems, perpetuating in this way the gap that separates the daily educational practice of the current environmental philosophy.

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1. Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century, unprecedented steps were made in the progress of many fields such as health benefits, food availability, material well-being and life expectancy. However, these advances have come at a

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great cost to ecosystems (Worldwatch Institute, 2015). Therefore, there are important environmental problems we must face in order to achieve a sustainable future, such as increasing and borderless pollution, or climate change. The underlying reasons are related to mankind's lifestyle and linked to political support for continuous economic growth based on the hyper-consumption and hyper-production of "developed" societies, which continue to grow as if Earth's capabilities were infinite (Bardi, 2011; Latouche, 2011)

These problems are a result of the shortcomings in the functioning of social systems and should be called socio-ecological problems, because they are environmental problems of social origin (Folch, 2011). Their perception has increased social sensitivity toward defending the environment, which has been seen within the citizenry for a few decades, although this change does not appear to have resulted in specific sustainable behaviours (Gifford, 2014)

The environmental challenge is one of the main challenges that 21st century education must address (Boff, 2011). Therefore, schools can and must promote the development of sustainable lifestyles that lead to communities becoming fairer, and more responsible and respectful with the environment and with people. So, in the last decades, numerous authors have supported a change in the main objective of Environmental Education (Mogensen and Mayer, 2005; Ferreira; 2009), far from behavioural flows. Thus, the focus must be put on the development of a competence for action based on critical analysis of environmental problems, independent decision-making and participation, forming committed and autonomous citizens able to reflect on their role in the system, make responsible and informed decisions and act in a sustainable manner (Varela Losada et al., 2016).

This approach implies a teaching and learning model based on social learning (Wals, 2007), that implies new student and teacher roles. And it is essential to use the EA models that provide a holistic view of the world and of the environment. These real-world situations should be integrative at a global or interdisciplinary level (Mogensen & Mayer, 2005), and involve student participation in the classroom and in the resolution of environmental issues (Mogensen & Schnack, 2010). All this needs to be carried out using critical thinking, embracing complexity and studying future alternatives (Kyburz-Graber, 2013), encouraging autonomous and informed decision-making through participation (Stevenson and Stirling, 2010). Consequently, it is necessary to use models that prepare students for individual and collective action. As a result, it is also necessary to create learning communities for action and establish positive interactions between the school and the community to execute actions in favour of the environment (Wals, 2007).

In this regard, Stevenson (2007) notes that there is a significant gap between the educational practice of EE, usually focused on the acquisition of environmental knowledge and awareness, and the current environmental philosophy, which defends approaches based on problem resolution and action-oriented objectives. For this author, this important problem stems from different sources: the historic purpose of schools, their structural organisation, teachers prioritising maintaining order and control, as well as their ideological assumptions on knowledge, teaching and learning.

Therefore, this research aims to analyse if teachers in initial training are aware of the main purpose or goal of Environmental Education and what it implies.

2. Methodology

The research was carried out with mixed methodology, using the data obtained via a Likert scale (see Annex A), previously built and validated ($\alpha=0.804$), with a sample of 889 students of Degrees in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education from the Universities of Vigo and A Coruña (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2016). This data was compared to other qualitative data obtained from a convenience sample of 25 people, who were also included in the final sample. Thus, to analyse trainee teachers' attitudes toward the main objective of EE, we used the answers to four of the scale's questions, an open-ended question on that subject and a question where the respondents had to numerically prioritise a list of objectives. These data were processed using content analysis and descriptive statistical analysis.

3. Results

The results were analysed taking into consideration all the data obtained in the research. Table 1 shows the

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