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College student knowledge and attitudes related to Sustainability Education and environmental health

Ligia Isabel Estrada-Vidal^a & Juan-Carlos Tójar-Hurtado^b *

^aFacultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad de Granada, Campus Universitario de Cartuja, Granada, 1807, España.

^bFacultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad de Málaga, Bulevar Louis Pasteur, 25. Campus de Teatinos. Málaga, 29071. España.

Abstract

Environmental Health Education (EHE) and Sustainability Education (SE) go hand in hand with promoting environmentally sustainable and healthy attitudes and behaviors. Initiatives, legislation and recommendations issued by international organizations and public administrations, which do not always reach the citizenry adequately, have proliferated. Both disciplines have an interdisciplinary, even transdisciplinary, character, and involve numerous professionals with very diverse initial college preparation. The research presented was carried out with students from various branches of knowledge at the University of Granada. Specifically, they were students from the fields of social sciences and health sciences (n = 428). Survey methodology was employed by building an ad hoc instrument combining Likert-type items, 5-value Environmental Health Education (EHE) and Sustainability Education (SE) scales and multiple-option items. SE deals with environmental, social and economic spheres. Reliability and validity tests (content and construct) were performed on the questionnaire. The results allow identifying the knowledge and attitudes of the college students in Granada, in the aforementioned fields, contributing relevant data in regard to future interventions relating to sustainability and environmental health.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-952-132-543; fax: +34-952-132-575.

E-mail address: jctojar@uma.es; ligia@ugr.es.

1. Environmental Health Education (EHE) and Sustainability Education (SE)

SE is a discipline that is being developed transversely at all levels of society to improve the environment of our planet, as its health impacts directly on that of human beings. Unsustainability may produce various problems or risks such as unhealthy food, respiratory problems due to atmospheric pollution, decrease in food variety, or transmission of diseases caused by an environmentally deteriorated and unhealthy environment.

Therefore, it may be said that SE is always related to EHE, where human behavior causes an impact on the environment, thus generating a healthy or noxious environment for the conditions for survival and coexistence among the various living creatures on the planet, since those conditions may affect our health directly, or indirectly by being related to other living beings (since these beings are our food, companions, objects of leisure or are used by us for transport).

Evidence of this may be found in the lines of study of research that concerns itself with improving environmental health, whose field of action pertains to various professional profiles coexisting multi- or interdisciplinarily.

Thus, studies are found on the environmental rights of workers laboring under precarious conditions, living and working in polluted environments (Wanga et al., 2016). There are also studies on environmental dispossession (Big-Canoen and Richmond, 2014), the thermal and environmental conditions in dwellings or in urban areas (Shafaghata, Keyvanfara, Manteghib & Lamitb, 2016; Zhang et al., 2016), crop production (Fray et al., 2016), environmental chemicals or geochemistry (Rivera, Giráldez & Fernández-Caliani, 2016), buildings (MacNaughton et al., 2016), waste water reuse (Shakir, Zahraw, Hameed & Al-Obaidy, 2016), health status and reproductive performance of animals (Wilkanowska & Kokoszyński, 2015), as well as other environmental and socioeconomic factors (Song, Li, Hao, Li & Wang, 2016). In this manner, we find a great variety of studies on human beings, animals and environmental contexts analyzing the potential risks that are related to environmental health.

Nevertheless, EHE is not only about the impact that an unhealthy environment has on people's health, it is also about the health of the environment, and therefore it is also about the health of animals, plants or the physical environment. Thus, to speak of EHE is to speak of SE, where education must be aimed at caring for the planet, taking into account that human activities may have a decisive influence.

However, the main pillar is human behavior, which in addition is very much related to knowledge and attitudes. Therefore, it can be said that an improvement in environmental health is fostered by the more and better pro-environmental knowledge and attitudes people have. Specifically, the improvement of knowledge and the solution of environmental problems improves critical attitude, enabling people in power to position themselves on better foundations, being more aware of environmental problems, and thus allowing them suitable development of their environmental behavior. In this manner, there is a strong relationship among SE, environmental health, and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors of students.

There are studies where a special correlation between SE and knowledge has been shown, being relevant to the formation of attitudes on sustainable consumption and, thus, the awareness for the need to change to more suitable lifestyles (Zsóka, Szerényi, Széchy & Kocsis, 2013).

At the higher education level, strategies are being developed to environmentalize the university. It is relevant for all individuals, groups, educational levels and universities to participate, implement and institutionalize sustainability in this transformation (Lozano, Lozano, Mulder, Huisingsh & Waas, 2013).

To that end, universities include SE more and more in teaching, research, outreach and campus administration (Ananda, Bisailonb, Websterb & Amor, 2015; Cortese, 2003; Lisetskii, Terekhin, Marinina & Zemlyakova, 2015; Lozano, 2006; Lozano et al., 2013a; Lozano et al., 2013b; Ramos et al., 2015T; Waasa, Verbruggenb & Wrightc, 2010), where strategies are also being developed for environmental management.

Be it in the architectural (Dessouky, 2016), design (Deniz, 2016), geographical (Walker-Springett, 2016), biological or geological aspect (Kallas, Solovjeva & Minakova, 2015), or that of environmental educators (Tójar, 2013), universities are crucial for the transformation of society (Barth & Rieckmann, 2012), whose emerging interest is in education based on competency development; which combines knowledge, skills, values and attitudes (Baethge et al., 2006; Lambrechts et al., 2015; Rychen & Salganik, 2003). Therefore, learning by SE and EHE in the university facilitates better environmentalization in professional (Fernández-Manzanal et al., 2015) and individual development.

In a different direction, professionals in the health area feel that awareness must be raised on the effects that human-induced environmental degradation has on health, through continuous education of health professionals (Truckner,

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