

The Promotion of Ethical and Ecological Consumerism Among Pre - Service Home Economics Teachers

Background

According to Benn (2004) the aim of consumer education is to “teach and educate students to act as informed, rational and prudent consumers”.

Education for sustainable development extends beyond economic and social views to include the environment and the importance of maintaining and protecting the planet while meeting our development needs (Ubuntu 2006). The UN Declaration for a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005 – 2014 reinforces the importance of increasing consumer knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. In essence consumer education needs to develop social responsibility so that consumers can make ethically sustainable decisions.

Studies have shown that few people give thought to the level of impact their consumption habits have on class inequality, repressive power and the diminishing of the world's natural resources (Benn, 2004; Uusitalo & Oksanen 2004).

According to Mc Gregor (2002) participatory consumerism involves reflection, value clarification and socially responsible decision - making which takes into account social, ecological and generational consequences. This is the challenge, facing both educators and consumers, which motivated the undertaking of this action research project.

Aim

The aim of this study was to promote ethical consumerism among pre-service Home Economics teachers through the use of a cross curricular educational intervention. This was conducted in order to develop the attitudes, knowledge and intended behaviour thus ensuring pre-service teachers experience a holistic perspective on consumerism. It is hoped that this research will have a positive influence on the future practice of Home Economics teachers in relation to ethical and ecological consumerism.



Methodology

This project and the Ubuntu Network seek to enable participants to construct meaning and understanding of the world from the experiences, both cognitive and effective, presented to them in their teacher education setting.

The initial stage of this action research project was reconnaissance. At this information and fact gathering stage a questionnaire was distributed to the Bachelor of Education year 1 pre-service Home Economics teachers. Participants were asked to rate their attitudes, knowledge and behavioural patterns, in relation to ethical and ecological consumerism, in response to a number of statements. This data was analysed and employed to support the development of an educational intervention strategy which was delivered to pre-service Home Economics teachers in the areas of Food, Family Resource Management (FRM) and Textiles, Fashion and Design (TFD).

Participants were also required to critically reflect on the place of consumerism in their lives and the imperatives for sustainable ecological consumption and production. In order to facilitate this reflection and validate the findings participants were invited to complete reflections during and subsequent to the educational intervention obtaining valuable qualitative feedback.

Findings

Pre intervention responses to a series of statements in relation to awareness and attitudes towards the importance of ethical and ecological consumerism show that participants were not confident in the area. This was further evident in reflection comments

- “I hope to become a more discerning consumer.... It will broaden my knowledge”

- “I hope to become more aware and hopefully help in making a difference and passing it on to future pupils”

Behavioural patterns of the participants showed that purchasing trends did not have a clear ethical or ecological bias.

Post intervention there was a clear increase in awareness of and attitudes to ethical and ecological consumerism among pre-service Home Economics teachers. This was reiterated in reflection comments from participants

- “I feel much more informed than before the project”

- “I learned a lot about ethical and eco friendly consumerism which is knowledge for life”

- “I feel my knowledge is valuable in both my life and in my future teaching”.

An increase is also evident in the consumer behavioural patterns as ascertained from post intervention data;

“I know more about sustainability, ethical and eco friendly consumerism which will help me make wise choice when shopping”

Discussion

Previous studies in this field indicate that the attitude-behaviour gap is visible in many purchasing situations (Boulstridge & Carrigan 2000; Carrigan & Atalla 2001). Findings indicate that knowledge, attitudes and behaviours to ethical and ecological consumption have improved. However the “attitude-behaviour gap is still evident as the shift in behaviour from pre to post intervention has not been reflected so strongly.

The issue of student financial constraints has to be taken into account when examining a behaviour/purchasing shift. Students may find it more difficult than general consumers to make the trade off between ethical / sustainable and low price even when they regard it as important.

This research project is still in an introductory phase. The methods are to be developed and implemented further in a longitudinal study with students on the B.Ed programme at St. Angela's College.

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