

Population Growth as the Elephant in the Room: Teachers' Perspectives and Willingness to Incorporate a Controversial Environmental Sustainability Issue in their Teaching

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Abstract : It is widely agreed among scientists that population growth (PG) is a major factor that drives the global environmental crisis. Many researchers recognize that explicitly addressing the impact of PG on the environment and human quality of life through education systems worldwide could play a significant role in improving understanding regarding the links between rapid PG and environmental degradation and changing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors concerning the necessity to reduce the fertility rate. However, the issue of PG is still rarely included in schools' curricula, mainly because of its complexity and controversiality. This study aims to explore the perspectives of teachers with an academic background in environmental and sustainability education (ESE teachers) and teachers with no such background (non-ESE teachers) regarding PG as an environmental risk. The study also explores the teachers' willingness to include PG in their teaching and identifies what predicts their inclusion of it. In this mixed-methods research study, data were collected using questionnaires and interviews. The findings portray a complex picture concerning the debate about PG as a major factor that drives the global environmental crisis in the Israeli context. Consistent with other countries, we found that the deep-rooted pronatalist culture in the Israeli society, as well as a robust national pronatalist agenda and policies, have a tremendous impact on the education system. Therefore, we found that an academic background in ESE had a limited impact on teachers' perceptions concerning PG as a problem and on their willingness to include it in their teaching and discuss its controversiality. Teachers' attitudes related to PG demonstrated social, cultural, and politically oriented disavowal justification regarding the negative impacts of rapid PG, identified in the literature as population-skepticism and population-fatalism. Specifically, factors such as the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Jewish anxiety of destruction, and the religious command to "be fruitful and multiply" influenced the perceptions of both ESE and non-ESE teachers. While these arguments are unique to the Israeli context, pronatalist policies are international. In accordance with the pronatalist policy, we also found that the absence of PG from both school curricula and the Israeli public discourse was reported by ESE and non-ESE teachers as major reasons for their disregarding PG in their teaching. Under these circumstances, the role of the education system to bring the population question to the front stage in Israel and elsewhere is more challenging. To encourage science and social studies teachers to incorporate the controversial issue of PG in their teaching and successfully confront dominant pronatalist cultures, they need strong and ongoing scaffolding and support. In accordance with scientists' agreement regarding the role of PG as a major factor that drives the global environmental crisis, we call on stakeholders and policymakers in the education system to bring the population debate into schools' curricula, the sooner, the better. And not only as part of human efforts to mitigate environmental degradation but also to use this controversial topic as a platform for shaping critical learners and responsible and active citizens who are tolerant of different people's opinions.

Keywords : population growth, environmental and sustainability education, controversial environmental sustainability issues, pronatalism

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