



Article Early Childhood Education Teachers' Perception of Outdoor Learning Activities in the Spanish Region of Extremadura

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Abstract: Over the years, it has been demonstrated that nature is a very important pillar in learning. Outdoor education is an innovative pedagogical approach that is gaining prominence and brings numerous benefits to the students who receive it. Previous studies have tried to show the positive relationship between education and nature and its benefits for children, but only a few reports refer to the specific perception of teachers on this issue, as well as possible differences according to the location of the school. Thus, taking into account the research questions, this paper aims to identify, analyze, and interpret the perception of early childhood education teachers in the Spanish region of Extremadura about outdoor educational practices. For this purpose, attention is paid to the implementation, difficulties, training, or area in which these outdoor educational practices take place, considering the location of the school. Findings showed that teachers are aware of the benefits of outdoor education, but most of them have not received specific training on it, perceive difficulties in carrying them out, or only carry them out at school. As a result, some differences can be perceived depending on the location of the school. Therefore, these results should make us change our perception of education and be able to propose alternatives, involving all the agents and participants of the education system and being aware of the benefits of outdoor education.

Keywords: outdoor education; education practices; teaching

1. Introduction

1.1. Outdoor Educational Activities' Context

The concept of outdoor education is considered to be an innovative pedagogical approach of formal education, mainly in Northern Europe, the United States of America, and Asia, where educational activities in natural environments, such as the forest, the countryside, or the beach, are carried out [1]. This movement began in the United States of America, with the State of California being the first in the world to develop this kind of outdoor learning and teaching program [2]. Later, Asia and Europe joined this movement, with examples in Denmark, the "Forest Schools" in Great Britain, or different programs in Spain [3,4]. Nowadays, outdoor education programs are increasing in countries such as Italy and Spain [5], as well as in the Central and Eastern European areas. In this way, several organizations have been formed to promote this movement, such as the European Network of Outdoor Sports (ENOS) [6], the European Institute of Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning (EOE Network) [7], Learning through Landscapes in United Kingdom [8], or the Association of all Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic [9]. These Central European countries have a long tradition of outdoor education emerged



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Copyright: © 2021 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https:// creativecommons.org/licenses/by/ 4.0/). as a means and a way of caring for the health and education of weak and sick children belonging to the working classes [4].

Despite this growth, in Spain there still seem to be few options for official training in outdoor education. Foundations such as "The Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente Foundation" or "Interprende" offer specific training courses in "forest schools", which refer to a naturebased pedagogy that emphasizes outdoor learning through a play-based, child-centered approach [10]. In the Autonomous Community of Extremadura, there are again limited training possibilities, with some companies such as "In Natura" standing out, which is often unknown to the teaching population. Moreover, in the initial training of the degree in early childhood education at the University of Extremadura, there is only one subject on knowledge of the natural environment, which is often only dealt with theoretically or with an insignificant practical part [11]. All these constraints reduce the possibilities for this type of educational practice.

1.2. Outdoor Educational Activities: Definition and Benefits

Outdoor learning is based on constructivism, as under this approach, the learner is an active participant. However, it also has a social dimension (social constructivism) as it promotes relationships among peers and with other agents, since learning is understood as a social activity [12]. Nature has been considered to be a primary learning environment for children and has great pedagogical value [13–16]. Outdoor education involves direct contact with the environment that surrounds us, being a very powerful and stimulating tool for students' learning. Therefore, outdoor education is defined by Martínez Murillo et al. [17] as learning through the body and the senses and in interaction with others, with experiences and reflections lived in specific places. Outdoor education arises on a series of fundamentals: it is an experimental method for learning, which takes place primarily in the outdoors, using all senses and domains, based upon interdisciplinary curriculum matter, and involves people and natural resources relationships [18].

Outdoor education is a very important tool to improve the educational curriculum [19]. By interpreting and analyzing outdoor phenomena, researchers give an experiential character to the learning process, making it possible to combine theoretical and conceptual content with the knowledge experienced first-hand by the students [17]. As today the ability to analyze and apply knowledge is beginning to prevail over the mere acquisition of theoretical concepts [20], pedagogies and teaching methodologies are beginning to focus on promoting competencies in individuals [17]. Many authors have defended the value of experiential learning to promote the ability to learn and all that this competence entails [21]. Thus, the acquisition of competencies and the ability to learn constantly require a correct interaction with the environment to be able to construct one's knowledge [17]. Streelasky's [22] revealed that outdoor space provided a context in which children could interact with each other and the environment in meaningful, creative, and collaborative ways, as well as contributing to our understanding of young children's ability to share their thoughts and the power of alternative learning spaces.

Working in natural environments promotes pupils' spirit of observation and study, and this contact with nature is necessary to analyze and systematize the information gathered later in another context [23]. This type of education allows children to reconnect with nature, both for their well-being and for ecological sustainability [24]. It is therefore clear that education has a key role to play in contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals [25,26]. In this line, Bascopé et al. [27] indicate the need for education systems to promote education toward sustainable development to create an adequate awareness of environmental and social challenges.

Nowadays, children today have less time to play outdoors than three decades ago [28]. Moreover, they tend to spend an average of 990 annuals hours in front of digital media, compared to 960 annuals hours at school [29]. This means that most 25 year-olds have hardly had experiences in nature, which could lead to a safety problem for future teachers when they have to carry out this type of educational practice [28]. Outdoor education brings

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different benefits. On the one hand, the daily stay in natural environments strengthens the immune system, as Grahn et al. [30] showed in their study in which children who attend a nursery school with a poorly anthropized environment missed 5% less school due to illness than pupils in ordinary schools. On the other hand, Häfner [31] showed that children who attended an outdoor preschool followed the content of the class better, paid more attention, did their homework autonomously, respected rules better, and resolved conflicts more peacefully than those who attend a standard indoor pre-school. According to this line of reasoning, Bruchner [1] highlighted that the success of this type of school lied in "less is more": fewer facilities but more space; fewer directed activities, but more autonomy; fewer conflicts but more concentration; etc. These benefits were also detectable from the learners' perspective. Nedovic and Morrisey [32] showed positive responses from children, who reported richer imaginative play, increased physical activity, and more positive social interactions.

1.3. Aim

The location of the educational center must be a factor to consider, since members of rural communities show different habits and behavioral patterns compared 7to those of an urban community, such as greater contact with nature and a conception of quality of life [33]. In Spain, rural communities are usually defined using demographic (e.g., less than 15,000 inhabitants) and geographical criteria (isolated or remote from the urban environment and with a wide dispersion of infrastructures and basic services) [33]. In addition, it is often the case that rural schools tend to maintain a stronger family environment, a higher level of parental involvement, and a stronger connection to the community, in contrast to urban schools [33]. Thus, some research has analyzed the perceptions about this type of educational practice in the United States of America [34,35], in Norway, or Oman [36]. However, teachers' specific perceptions about outdoor education, how this practice is carried out, or the main obstacles encountered depending on the location of the school are not yet known.

Therefore, we aim to identify and analyze teachers' perception of early childhood education teachers in the Spanish region of Extremadura. Thus, our research questions are as follows: (1) What do early childhood teachers think about the benefits of outdoor education? (2) What level of specific training do teachers have in outdoor education practices, how do they carry it out, and what barriers do they encounter in its development? (3) What are the main differences found according to the location of the school?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 246 early childhood education teachers working in schools from the two provinces in the region of Extremadura (Spain). They were selected using a nonprobability sampling method based on convenience sampling [37].

Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample according to gender, age, province and location of the school, and academic year.

2.2. Instruments

Google Forms was used to obtain sociodemographic data. Electronic questionnaires save costs and time, obtaining a higher rate of return and a quicker delivery [38].

The instrument on the conception of early childhood teachers on the development of outdoor educational practices, developed by Blanco, Rodríguez, and Camacho [13], and made up of 12 questions was used.

Variable	Categories	N	%
Gender	Men	14	5.7
	Women	232	94.3
	20-30	65	26.4
Age (years)	30–40	75	30.5
	40–50	72	29.3
	50–60	32	13
	>60	2	0.8
Province of the school	Cáceres	91	37
	Badajoz	155	63
Location of the school	Rural	103	41.9
	Urban	143	58.1
Academic year in which the teachers teach	First	67	27.2
	Second	86	35
	Third	93	37.8

Table 1. Demographic distribution of the sample (N = 246).

2.3. Procedure

To access the sample, an email was sent to early childhood education teachers in all early childhood education centers in the region of Extremadura, providing information about the aim of the study, as well as a URL to the questionnaire to be completed by teachers interested in collaborating with the research. The participants received information about the purpose of the study and the anonymity of the answers; therefore, if they wished to continue, they had to accept the informed consent by ticking the box provided for this purpose. To access the e-mail addresses of the different schools, we accessed the directory of the Regional Ministry of Education and Employment of the Regional Government of Extremadura (https://ciudadano.gobex.es/ciudadano-portlet/printpdf/pdf?typepdf=3443&idDirectorio=775 (accessed on 17 October 2019)). All the data collected were stored in a spreadsheet to transform the responses for further statistical analysis. Data collection took place between November 2019 and March 2020.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

The analysis of the data collected was carried out with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 for MAC. Pearson's Chi-square test was used to analyze the differences between each of the variables studied and considering the location of the school. To analyze whether the categorical variables complied with the assumption of normality, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used, which indicated that the assumption was not met; therefore, nonparametric tests were used. For all statistical tests, significance was set at p < 0.05.

3. Results

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of question 1 "Do you have any specific training in outdoor educational practices?" concerning the variable of the location of the school. If they had answered yes to this first question, the participants had to answer questions 2 "What level of training do you consider you have to carry out outdoor educational practices?" and 3 "Where did you learn to carry out outdoor educational practices?". Thus, the distribution of frequencies of these two questions is also presented about the variable location of the school. The existence or not of statistically significant differences according to the location of the school (rural vs. urban) was analyzed using Pearson's Chi-square test.

Variable	Frequency				
	Total	Rural	Urban	p *	
"Do you have any specific training in outdoor educational practices?"	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
Yes No	68 (27.6%) 178 (72.4%)	30 (29.1%) 73 (70.9%)	38 (26.6%) 105 (73.4%)	0.65	
"What level of training do you consider you have to carry out outdoor educational practices?"	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
High level Low level	19 (27.9%) 49 (72.1%)	12 (38.7%) 19 (61.3%)	7 (18.9%) 30 (81.1%)	0.07	
"Where did you learn to carry out outdoor educational practices?"	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
During university degree In the activities of public study centers In other courses, conferences, and congresses With associations and friends On my own	7 (10.3%) 8 (11.8%) 37 (54.4%) 6 (8.8%) 10 (14.7%)	4 (12.9%) 7 (22.6%) 11 (35.5%) 4 (12.9%) 5 (16.1%)	3 (8.1%) 1 (2.7%) 26 (70.3%) 2 (5.4) 5 (13.5%)	0.02	

Table 2. Frequency distribution of results for questions 1, 2, and 3, according to the location of the school (rural vs. urban).

Note: Analysis of statistically significant differences concerning Pearson's Chi-square test *p* *. Significant *p*-values are shown in bold.

Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of questions 4 and 5 distributed by the location of the school. In the case of not answering item 4 "Do you carry out outdoor educational practices?" affirmatively, participants did not have to answer question 5 "When do you carry out outdoor educational practices, in the psychomotor subject hour or outside of it?".

Table 3. Frequency distribution of results for questions 4 and 5 according to the location of the school (rural vs. urban).

Variable	Frequency				
	Total	Rural	Urban	<i>p</i> *	
"Do you carry out outdoor educational practices?"	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
Yes No	116 (47.2%) 130 (52.8%)	66 (64.1%) 37 (35.9%)	50 (35%) 93 (65%)	<0.01	
"When do you carry out outdoor educational practices, in the psychomotor subject hour or outside of it?"	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)		
In the psychomotor subject hour Outside the psychomotor subject	44 (38.3%) 71 (61.7%)	24 (36.9%) 41 (63.1%)	20 (40%) 30 (60%)	0.73	

Note: Analysis of statistically significant differences concerning Pearson's Chi-square test p *. Significant p-values are shown in bold.

Table 4 shows the distribution of frequencies distributed by location of the school about question 6 "Where do you do them?". This question was only answered by those teachers who answered yes to question 4. Teachers could indicate as many answers as they considered.

Variable			Frequer	ncy	
		Total	Rural	Urban	p *
"Where do you conduct outdoor education activities?"		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	
T · 1 /1 1 1	Yes	82 (33.3%)	44 (42.7%)	38 (26.6%)	0.00
Inside the school	No	164 (66.7%)	59 (57.3%)	105 (73.4%)	0.08
Outside the school	Yes	47 (19.1%)	32 (31.1%)	15 (10.5%)	<0.01
	No	199 (80.9%)	71 (68.9%)	128 (89.5%)	
	Yes	19 (7.7%)	8 (7.8%)	11 (7.7%)	
"Where do you conduct outdoor education activities?" Inside the school Outside the school In the urban environment In the seminatural environment	No	227 (92.3%)	95 (92.2%)	132 (92.3%)	0.98
	Yes	37 (15%)	25 (24.3%)	12 (8.4%)	0.01
In the seminatural environment	No	209 (85%)	78 (75.7%)	131 (91.6%)	<0.01
	Yes	14 (5.7%)	11 (10.7%)	3 (2.1%)	0.01
In the natural environment	No	232 (94.3%)	92 (89.3%)	140 (97.9%)	<0.01

Table 4. Frequency distribution of results for question 6 according to the location of the school (rural vs. urban).

Note: Analysis of statistically significant differences concerning Pearson's Chi-square test *p* *. Significant *p*-values are shown in bold.

Table 5 shows the frequency distribution of the difficulties that teachers find in carrying out outdoor educational practices, depending on the location of the school. This question was only answered by those teachers who answered yes to question 4. Teachers could indicate as many answers as they considered.

Table 5. Frequency distribution of results for question 7 according to the location of the school (rural vs. urban).

Variable		Frequency			
		Total	Rural	Urban	<i>p</i> *
"What kind of difficulties do you find in carrying out outdoor educational practices?"		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	
Difficulties related to educational administration	Yes	30 (12.2%)	20 (19.4%)	10 (7%)	<0.01
	No	216 (87.8%)	83 (80.6%)	133 (93%)	<0.01
Difficulties related to colleagues	Yes	17 (6.9%)	13 (12.6%)	4 (2.8%)	-0.01
	No	229 (93.1%)	89 (87.4%)	139 (97.2%)	<0.01
Difficulties related to the management team	Yes	12 (4.9%)	6 (5.8%)	6 (4.2%)	0.55
	No	234 (95.1%)	97 (94.2%)	137 (95.8%)	
Difficulties related to the organization of such	Yes	14 (5.7%)	8 (7.8%)	6 (4.2%)	0.00
practices	No	232 (94.3%)	95 (92.2%)	137 (95.8%)	0.23
Difficulties related to the characteristics of the work	Yes	12 (4.9%)	5 (4.9%)	7 (4.9%)	0.00
practices	No	234 (95.1%)	98 (95.1%)	136 (95.1%)	0.98
Difficulties due to the characteristics of the	Yes	22 (8.9%)	12 (11.7%)	10 (7%)	0.00
environment close to the school	No	224 (91.1%)	91 (88.3%)	133 (93%)	0.20
Difficulties related to the availability of outdoor areas	Yes	24 (9.8%)	15 (14.6%)	9 (6.3%)	
within the school	No	222 (90.2%)	88 (85.4%)	134 (93.7%)	0.03
	Yes	30 (12.2%)	21 (20.4%)	9 (6.3%)	0.01
Other difficulties	No	216 (87.8%)	82 (79.6%)	134 (93.7%)	<0.01

Note: Analysis of statistically significant differences concerning Pearson's Chi-square test *p**. Significant *p*-values are shown in bold.

Regarding the reasons why teachers do not carry out outdoor educational practices, Table 6 shows the results of the answers to question 8 "What are the reasons why you do not carry out outdoor educational practices?", distributed according to the location of the school.

Table 7A,B show the frequency distribution according to the location of the school for questions 9 "To find out more about outdoor educational practices, what would help you?" and 10 "If you have a shortage of suitable materials and facilities, could you alleviate it?".

Variable		Frequency			
		Total	Rural	Urban	<i>p</i> *
"What are the reasons why you do not carry out outdoor educational practices?"		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	
I don't like them	Yes	2 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.4%)	0.22
	No	244 (99.2%)	103 (100%)	141 (98.6%)	0.22
I don't know them well	Yes	78 (31.7%)	26 (25.2%)	52 (36.4%)	0.00
	No	168 (68.3%)	77 (74.8%)	91 (63.6%)	0.06
I don't think they are useful or heneficial	Yes	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	_
I don't timik they are useful of beneficial	No	246 (100%)	103 (100%)	143 (100%)	-
I don't have adequate materials or facilities	Yes	26 (10.6%)	2 (1.9%)	24 (16.8%)	0.01
I don t have adequate materials of facilities	No	220 (89.4%)	101 (98.1%)	119 (83.2%)	<0.01
Passausa of safaty and risk issues	Yes	21 (8.5%)	6 (5.8%)	15 (10.5%)	0.10
because of safety and risk issues	No	225 (91.5%)	97 (94.2%)	128 (89.5%)	0.19
I consider other estimities many increases	Yes	9 (3.7%)	1 (1%)	8 (5.6%)	0.07
I consider other activities more important	No	237 (96.3)	102 (99%)	135 (94.4%)	0.06
	Yes	6 (2.4%)	2 (1.9%)	4 (2.8%)	0.44
Other reasons	No	240 (97.6%)	101 (98.1%)	139 (97.2%)	0.66

Table 6. Frequency distribution of results for question 8 according to the location of the school (rural vs. urban).

Note: Analysis of statistically significant differences concerning Pearson's Chi-square test *p* *. Significant *p*-values are shown in bold.

Table 7. (**A**) Frequency distribution of results for question 9 according to the location of the school (rural vs. urban). (**B**) Frequency distribution of results for question 10 according to the location of the school (rural vs. urban).

(A)					
Variable		Frequency			
		Total	Rural	Urban	<i>p</i> *
"In order to find out more about outdoor educational practices, what would help you?"		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	
That this type of practice be included in the initial training of early childhood teachers, graduates, or technicians	Yes No	149 (60.6%) 97 (39.4%)	64 (62.1%) 39 (37.9%)	85 (59.4%) 58 (40.6%)	0.67
That in-service training courses on this subject be held	Yes No	183 (74.4%) 63 (25.6%)	78 (75.7%) 25 (24.3%)	105 (73.4%) 38 (26.6%)	0.68
That colleagues at my workplace carry them out and share their experiences	Yes No	74 (30.1%) 172 (69.9%)	33 (32%) 70 (68%)	41 (28.7%) 102 (71.3%)	0.57
They should be included in the official curriculum	Yes No	74 (30.1%) 172 (69.9%)	39 (37.9%) 64 (62.1%)	35 (24.5%) 108 (75.5%)	0.02
Other reasons	Yes No	9 (3.7%) 237 (96.3%)	3 (2.9%) 100 (97.1%)	6 (4.2%) 137 (95.8%)	0.59
(B)					

Variable			Frequen	cy	
		Total	Rural	Urban	<i>p</i> *
"If you have a shortage of suitable materials and facilities, could you alleviate it?"		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	<i>p</i> *
Using regular materials	Yes	133 (54.1%)	58 (56.3%)	75 (52.4%)	0.54
Using recycled materials	No	113 (45.9%)	45 (43.7%)	68 (47.6%)	
Using materials from the natural environment	Yes	159 (64.6%)	65 (63.1%)	94 (65.7%)	0.67
	No	87 (35.4%)	38 (36.9%)	49 (34.3%)	
Using conventional materials that are available	Yes	103 (41.9%)	41 (39.8%)	62 (43.4%)	0.57
in the classroom	No	143 (58.1%)	62 (60.2%)	81 (56.6%)	0.57
Using common areas of the school that are in the outdoor	Yes	135 (54.9%)	58 (56.3%)	77 (53.8%)	0.70
Using common areas of the school that are in the outdoor	No	111 (45.1%)	45 (43.7%)	66 (46.2%)	0.70
Going out frequently to the closest surroundings of the	Yes	98 (39.8%)	48 (46.6%)	50 (35%)	0.07
school to carry out activities	No	148 (60.2%)	55 (53.4%)	93 (65%)	0.06
	Yes	8 (3.3%)	1 (1%)	7 (4.9%)	0.00
Other reasons	No	238 (96.7%)	102 (99%)	136 (95.1%)	0.08

Note: Analysis of statistically significant differences concerning Pearson's Chi-square test *p**. Significant *p*-values are shown in bold.

Table 8 refers to the distribution of frequencies according to the location of the school for question 11 "Do you think it is important to develop outdoor educational practices with students?" and for question 12 "Indicate the educational possibilities that you think can be promoted through outdoor educational practices."

Table 8. Frequency distribution for results of questions 11 and 12 according to the location of the school (rural vs. urban).

Variable	Frequency				
		Total	Rural	Urban	p *
"Do you think it is important to develop outdoor educational practices with students?"	N (%)		N (%)	N (%)	
Yes No	231 (93.9%) 15 (6.1%)		97 (94.2%) 6 (5.8%)	134 (93.7%) 9 (6.3%)	0.88
"Indicate the educational possibilities that you think can be promoted through outdoor educational practices."	N (%)		N (%)	N (%)	p *
Completing the work of different content blocks in the classroom	Yes No	133 (54.1%) 113 (45.9%)	57 (55.3%) 46 (44.7%)	76 (53.1%) 67 (46.9%)	0.73
To propose interdisciplinary activities and work	Yes No	130 (52.8%) 116 (47.2%)	60 (58.3%) 43 (41.7%)	70 (49%) 73 (51%)	0.14
To increase the responsibilities of my students	Yes No	50 (20.3%) 196 (79.7%)	20 (19.4%) 83 (80.6%)	30 (21%) 113 (79%)	0.76
To have practical experiences that promote and stimulate cohesion and interrelation	Yes No	172 (69.9%) 74 (30.1%)	71 (68.9%) 32 (31.1%)	101 (70.6%) 42 (29.4%)	0.77
Other	Yes No	0 (0%) 246 (100%)	0 (0%) 103 (100%)	0 (0%) 143 (100%)	-

Note: Analysis of statistically significant differences concerning Pearson's Chi-square test p *.

4. Discussion

The main purpose of our research was to identify, analyze, and interpret the perception of early childhood education teachers in the Spanish region of Extremadura about outdoor educational practices, segregating the data according to the location of the school.

As Noriega states [39], outdoor education seeks to achieve meaningful learning and well-rounded education and to provide the activities with a playful component. This is in line with the findings of Guardino et al. [34], who showed that both teachers and students perceived a greater sense of well-being, pleasure, and interest in teaching and learning in outdoor education. Fernández-Palma [40] affirm that the model of outdoor education is an effective option that can meet the needs of children at this stage and guarantee a happy education in contact with nature. Early childhood is shown as the ideal time for children to develop a set of attitudes and values that enable them to move toward a culture of sustainability. However, it should be noted that not all children are alike; therefore, although many children may experience this happiness through participation in an outdoor education program, there is no way to guarantee the same outcome for all children, as shown by Bixler [41] in his study on outdoor sensitivity and aversion. To achieve this, curriculum and pedagogical approaches need to be oriented toward this approach, teacher training in this area needs to be improved, and families and the community need to be involved [42]. Following this approach [43], Greek primary school teachers show that the most necessary prerequisite for a successful outdoor education is a new curriculum that supports an outdoor classroom and safe conditions for children and teachers.

Based on the frequency distribution of the results obtained in each of the questions of the questionnaire, statistically significant differences, if any, were analyzed, depending on the location of the school. Given the difference shown according to school location and being in line with Noriega [39], it is quite clear that nature, the natural environment, and the connection to education are issues that create debate and show differences in Spain

since this natural culture is extolled, but in several cases, these educational practices are not developed and are only shown in a theoretical way. It is indeed a country and a culture rich in rural and natural areas but with some evolutionary tendency toward urbanization. Even so, as our study shows, most teachers agree to use the available natural areas and are aware of their benefits for students. In total, 72.4% of all teachers said they have no specific training in outdoor educational practices, with similar percentages in both rural and urban schools. Furthermore, 72.1% of those surveyed stated that they had a low level of training, with this value reaching 81.1% in urban schools. In this regard, Samuelsson and Kaga [42] state that it is necessary to improve teacher training in this area to be able to teach these subjects correctly to their students. Statistically significant differences (p = 0.02) were found between rural and urban schools in the question "Where did you learn to carry out outdoor educational practices?", indicating that they had learned it in other courses, conferences, and congresses (70.3% in urban schools and 35.5% in rural schools). All these results can be explained by the fact that, as previously indicated to the best of our knowledge, in the Autonomous Community of Extremadura and Spain in general, there is only one subject related to knowledge of the natural environment in the early childhood education degree, which makes it difficult for teachers to be properly trained in this topic. Therefore, it would be beneficial to increase the number of contents and subjects related to educational practices in the natural environment in the curriculum of these university degrees in early childhood education, thus achieving better teacher training.

In several studies, such as Martinez's [4] or Robertson's [44], pointed out that outdoor education is more widely practiced in rural areas than in urban areas. This is consistent with our results, where statistically significant differences (p < 0.01) are shown on whether they engage in outdoor educational practices. In rural schools, 64.1% of teachers do carry out this type of practice in the environment, while in urban schools, only 35% carry them out with their students. Noriega's study [39] also shows that in Spain, there are more rural schools and more contact with nature in the less urbanized regions, which tend to have an economic tradition more focused on agriculture and livestock farming. This, therefore, underlines the importance of promoting and proposing alternatives for example by taking advantage of sunny days to teach outside the classroom, accessing local parks near the school, or even using the playground, so that such practices can be carried out in urban areas as well so that learners can reap the full benefits more often [44]. It is also indicated that most of the teachers carry out these educational practices outside the psychomotor subject. In this way, several teachers understand outdoor learning as a subject, discipline, or curricular area. Others, however, consider it as just one of many resources available to them [45]. Comparing these results with those found in Skarstein and Ugelstad's study [35], these authors show that teachers more often work with these topics through spontaneous situations than through planned activities, highlighting nature as an environment with many opportunities for spontaneous activities.

Considering the area or facility in which these educational practices can be carried out, significant differences are found in the responses from outside the educational center, in the seminatural environment, and the natural environment, with the percentages of these responses being significantly lower in urban schools. These data are of interest, as there are multiple benefits mentioned by some authors about teaching in the natural environment [30,44]. In general, it is very clear that all theoretical foundations and all teachers consider that the relationship between children and the natural environment provides them with multiple benefits, both physical and psychological, in socialization, problem-solving, healthy lifestyles, reduction of medical problems, work on imagination, experimentation, etc. [39]. However, 94.3% of the teachers in our study stated that they do not carry out these educational practices in the natural environment. It should be added that the most frequently mentioned answer is that they usually carry out these practices inside the school (33.3%). This search for alternatives is consistent with Robertson's study [45], which states that it is most convenient to take advantage of the natural terrain surrounding the school, as it requires less time, preparation, and money.

Another important variable to know is the difficulties that these teachers have in carrying out outdoor educational practices. In this case, there are significant differences between rural and urban schools concerning difficulties related to the educational administration, colleagues, the availability of outdoor areas within the school, and other difficulties, which are the reasons why these teachers do not carry out outdoor practices with their students. It should be noted from these results that all teachers are aware of the usefulness of outdoor educational practices and recognize their benefits, but many of them do not know them well (31.7%). In addition, there are significant differences for the responses that they do not have materials or facilities nearby, since 16.8% of teachers in urban schools do not carry them out for this reason. This can be compared to the study by Ihmeideh and Al-Qaryouti [36], who stated that they feel teachers need to know more about how to maintain safety standards in this natural environment while highlighting the scarcity of materials and the need for correct policy implications and pedagogical recommendations. In Freire's study [28], many teachers do not carry out outdoor educational practices because they pose a safety problem, although it has been shown that, today, they are not a real danger [28]. Other studies [46] affirm that there are teachers who would like to initiate these outdoor educational practices but do not do so because of administrative or business problems, lack of personnel, or because of fears and mistaken beliefs. In total, 60.6% of the teachers would like outdoor education practices to be included in the initial training of the university degree, and 74.4% would like specific in-service training courses on the subject. Similarly, these teachers believe that the lack of materials and facilities could be alleviated using recycled materials, materials from the natural environment, or outdoor areas in the educational center. Likewise, some studies [45] propose alternatives for working with the group of students in natural areas. Outdoor education provides several advantages, benefits, and possibilities that cannot be provided in a closed classroom. Therefore, most of our respondents (93.9%) believe it is important to develop them in their students. Teachers mainly emphasize that by developing them, students will be able to have practical experiences that promote and stimulate cohesion and interrelation (69.9%), as well as completing some content or proposing interdisciplinary work.

For this reason, through this study, we try to show several effective implications to develop this type of outdoor education practice efficiently in the future. It would be interesting to reflect and give importance to outdoor education practices in the curriculum of university degrees in early childhood education, thus putting an end to the deficient training in the topic perceived by the teachers themselves. In this way, the teaching practices contemplated in the university degree curriculum that is developed by students are usually carried out in the classroom and in closed environments. A good option to achieve greater involvement would be for students to carry out these teaching practices in the natural environment and the outdoors. In addition, to address the problems reported by teachers regarding the lack of facilities and specific materials, it would be beneficial for education administrations to provide part of their expenses for this purpose, facilitating the work and development of this type of practice. Likewise, reducing administrative problems in schools and with colleagues would also reduce many barriers in terms of time delays and help to streamline the processes required for outdoor educational practices.

Our research has the following limitations. The most notable has been that convenience sampling has been used; therefore, the sample will not be fully representative of the whole population. Related to this limitation, it may be that teachers with a closer relationship with the natural environment are reluctant to use digital media; therefore, using digital formats and platforms such as Google Forms may lead to this type of teacher not participating in the study. In addition, the low participation in the study of teachers over 60 years of age (0.8%) may be due to the digital data collection model used. Another limitation is to the best of our knowledge, the lack of specialized bibliography on the topic in Spain as it is a system that is just beginning to be implemented, meaning there are few studies on these outdoor educational practices. Regarding future lines, our study could be extended to primary school teachers, as well as to university degrees. The data can also be compared with other early childhood and primary schools in other regions of Spain and even internationally. Therefore, future research would be beneficial to complement the existing research and can be developed in the future by other researchers based on the data we have obtained.

5. Conclusions

Findings show that teachers consider that they do not have adequate training to carry out outdoor educational practices. For this reason, they consider it important to receive specific training in this type of practice during their university degree, as well as complementary training courses. Most of the teachers are aware of the benefits that this type of educational practice offers to their students and how important it is to develop it properly. However, they point out the difficulties in developing these practices due to the lack of materials or facilities and difficulties on the part of the administration.

In this respect, they suggest using recycled and natural materials as an alternative, such as water, plants, or ropes, as well as making the most of the outdoor areas of the schools themselves. The main statistically significant differences according to the location of the school are shown in the results regarding where outdoor teachers have learned to carry out these educational practices, regarding whether they carry out educational practices outdoors, regarding the area or facility in which these educational practices can be carried out, and regarding the difficulties encountered.

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