

Prospective Primary School Teachers' Perspectives on Environmental Education, Cultural Heritage, and Values Education: An Action Research Study

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Key Words:Abstract:cultural heritageIn today's globalized world, rapid population growth, technological advancement, digital dependency, overconsumption of natural resources, and increasing environmental pollution have significantly influenced cultural values' erosion. While technology facilitates daily life, it threatens public health and disrupts ecological systems. This study employs an action research design to integrate core cultural values – rooted in Turkish-Islamic philosophy – into the educational experiences of prospective primary school teachers through environmental education. In a primary school in Konya, Türkiye, the research utilized semi-structured interviews to investigate the effects of value-based and environmental education activities on pre-service teachers. Data were analyzed using descriptive and content analysis methods. The findings reveal that the activities produced positive outcomes by reawakening long-forgotten values and enhancing the participants' environmental sensitivity. The study demonstrates that action-based learning experiences significantly contribute to future educators' ethical and		
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Introduction

Humans' uncontrolled exploitation of the Earth's resources has led to critical environmental degradation. In response, scientists and educators have emphasized the importance of clean energy, renewable resources, and sustainability. Sustainability, increasingly recognized as a global imperative, is defined as meeting the needs of future generations without depleting or harming current resources (Kiremitçi, 2019). Achieving ecological sustainability requires minimizing reliance on non-renewable resources and maximizing the use of renewable alternatives (Bilgili, 2017). Education is pivotal in fostering this awareness, aiming to enhance the quality of life while preserving natural ecosystems for future generations (Bağmancı, 2019).

Technological innovation—such as the development of electric vehicles and renewable energy systems—exemplifies efforts to create a cleaner, more sustainable world. However, maintaining the status quo without improving the quality of life cannot be deemed sustainable (Keleş, 2015).

Accordingly, sustainable environmental education is crucial in cultivating environmentally responsible individuals. Equally vital within cultural heritage is the role of values education. Increasingly prevalent societal issues such as environmental apathy, lack of compassion, and manipulative behavior underscore the necessity of value-oriented instruction. The intergenerational transmission of values sustains societal identity and reinforces national integrity. Therefore, classroom teachers are responsible for instilling environmental awareness, sustainable practices, and national and spiritual values. As such, teacher preparation programs must prioritize environmental and moral education training. Prospective teachers are not merely information transmitters; they are the architects of future generations. Equipping them with ethical awareness and cultural consciousness enhances the quality of education and promotes social cohesion. Values education fosters moral development, ethical reasoning, and a sense of belonging, while cultural awareness promotes inclusive pedagogy. This study examines pre-service teachers' perspectives on values and environmental education, offering insights that can inform policy and curriculum development.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of values education in shaping character and identity. Pre-service teachers are expected to contribute meaningfully to students' holistic development by integrating these values into classroom practices. Group-based, hands-on activities offer lasting learning experiences supporting personal and professional growth. This action research model enables pre-service teachers to acquire value through experiential learning actively. The activities conducted collaboratively aim to internalize key values both explicitly and implicitly. The project aspires to foster heightened ethical sensitivity and longterm environmental awareness, contributing significantly to the literature on teacher education.

A sustainable environment refers to the continued availability of natural resources without depletion (Tetik, 2023). Resources that are not used sustainably cannot be passed on to future generations. Therefore, environmental education aims to cultivate individuals who use resources effectively, consciously, and responsibly, work to prevent or mitigate water, air, and soil pollution, and strive to leave a livable

environment for future generations (Hüseynova, 2023). Raising such environmentally conscious individuals is crucial for building a sustainable future.

Developing sustainable environmental behavior – minimizing negative human impact on the natural world – is essential in raising environmentally responsible generations (Do Paço & Laurett, 2019). For this reason, environmental education has been integrated into school curricula. In Türkiye's Social Studies curriculum, for example, students are encouraged to recognize the limits of natural resources, to care for the environment, and to adopt sustainable lifestyles (Ministry of National Education, 2023).

The increasing severity and global scope of environmental issues have revealed that passive approaches are no longer sufficient. Addressing environmental degradation requires active and deliberate educational interventions. Since the 1970s, the international community has emphasized environmental education in numerous national and global forums (Çelikbaş, 2016; Gülersoy et al., 2020). Notably, the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm was a milestone in uniting nations of diverse socio-economic backgrounds under a shared environmental agenda. The conference culminated in the "Declaration on the Human Environment," which affirmed humanity's obligation to preserve the Earth for current and future generations.

Subsequently, the 1977 Tbilisi Conference laid the foundation for modern environmental education by articulating its objectives and pedagogical principles (Gülersoy et al., 2020). These frameworks continue to guide contemporary environmental education programs globally. In Türkiye, structured environmental education began in the early 1990s, with courses such as "Environment, Health, Traffic and Reading" at the primary level and "Environment and Human" as an elective in secondary schools (Çabuk, 2019).

The Turkish proverb "The tree bends while it is young" encapsulates the importance of early environmental education. Instilling eco-conscious values early ensures they become part of students' character. Consequently, teacher candidates must be thoroughly trained in environmental education to lead this process effectively. Environmental education should be embedded in textbooks and accompanied by rich, activity-based content that promotes ecological awareness and action.

Each society possesses a unique set of moral and national values shaped by its cultural and religious foundations. These values inform individuals' understanding of what is good, right, and desirable, promoting personal well-being and social harmony (Aslan, 2021). The development of values begins within the family and is later reinforced through school and community interactions. While families are the primary agents of character development, schools play a critical role in solidifying and contextualizing these values (Yorulmaz, 2017).

Values education does not merely entail the transmission of ethical norms; it also seeks to cultivate reasoning abilities and essential life skills such as empathy, cooperation, and self-respect (Gülaçtı, 2021; Yıldırım, 2022). Unlike physical traits, values are not inherited but acquired through environmental interaction. Individuals adopt values that shape their identities, behaviors, and worldviews throughout their lives.

Through values education, individuals are introduced to universal ethical principles and culturally specific ideals that promote societal cohesion. One of the primary responsibilities of educational institutions is to prepare students for life by fostering moral development and positive self-concept. It is widely acknowledged that one of the central tasks of education is to raise awareness of ethical values, generate new ones when needed, and encourage the practical application of these values (Gürhan, 2017). In this sense, transmitting values across generations is a pedagogical goal and a form of cultural preservation.

The researcher implemented a two-month program designed for prospective classroom teachers in this study. The aim was to enhance participants' understanding of human values alongside environmental education and cultural heritage awareness. The program focused on six core values: responsibility, self-control, honesty, justice, respect, and benevolence. These themes were distributed across the two-month timeline and implemented through structured activities. This program is shown in the Table 1.

Months	Theme	Acquisition
	Responsibility	Being responsible to oneself, one's environment, homeland and family, keeping one's word, being consistent and reliable.
First Month	Self-Control	They control their behavior, take responsibility for their behavior, have self-confidence, are conscientious, and apologize when necessary. They also control personal and environmental cleanliness and pay attention to language cleanliness and speech.
	Integrity	Being clear and understandable, truthful, trustworthy, reliable, and keeping word. Being a person that everyone trusts. Never lie, even to the detriment.
	Justice	Fairness, equal treatment, sharing,
Second Month	Respect	Being humble, empathizing, valuing other people's personalities, being hardworking, solidarity, obeying rules and laws, loyal, sensitive to historical and natural heritage, and caring about the community. Making sacrifices, trusting, being compassionate, and being loyal.
	Benevolence	Being generous, cooperating, being compassionate, being hospitable, sharing.

Table 1. Themes and Outcomes	Table by Month
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Research Method

This study examined prospective primary school teachers' perspectives regarding activities related to environmental and values education. Specifically, the research sought to address the following questions:

- a. What are pre-service teachers' views on the importance and necessity of values and environmental education?
- b. How do they evaluate the effectiveness of the activities implemented within this framework?
- c. What challenges, if any, did they encounter during these activities?

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d. Do they believe these activities led to observable changes in their attitudes or behaviors?

These questions guided the data collection and analysis processes throughout the research.

This study employed an action research methodology, one of the qualitative research designs. Values are defined as enduring beliefs that guide decisions about what is right or wrong and influence behavior accordingly. Unlike attitudes or surface-level behaviors, values are more deeply rooted and resistant to change. Therefore, fostering value transformation requires intentional, sustained, and reflective practice.

Action research was selected as the most suitable design for this study because it focuses on practical problem-solving through cyclical planning, action, observation, and reflection processes. The aim was to address existing challenges, reinforce positive developments, and enhance the quality of teacher education. As Johnson (2014) emphasized, action research offers educators a systematic and reflective approach to examine their practices and generate context-specific solutions.

This study's participants consisted of 12 prospective primary school teachers completing their teaching internships at a public primary school. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure participants had relevant experiences related to the study objectives. As noted by Büyüköztürk (2019), purposive sampling enables researchers to select participants who are most likely to provide rich and meaningful data, even without randomization. Another reason for selecting this group was the researcher's direct role as a mentor to the interns, allowing for authentic engagement and observation throughout the process. Participants were coded as T1, T2, T3, and so on for data analysis and confidentiality.

At the beginning of the study, the prospective teachers were informed that they would be participating in a two-month activity program focusing on environmental and values education. A semi-structured interview form was developed to gather their reflections on the experience and to explore any observed personal or professional changes resulting from their involvement in the activities.

Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research to uncover participants' opinions, experiences, and emotions in a flexible yet systematic manner (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Depending on the depth of inquiry and the level of interviewer control, interview techniques can be categorized as structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (Lichtman, 2023; Merriam, 2013). The following questions were posed to the participants:

- a. What are your thoughts on the importance and necessity of values and environmental education?
- b. How do you evaluate the activities implemented during this program?
- c. Did you face any challenges while participating in these activities?
- d. In your opinion, did the activities lead to positive or negative behavioral changes among participants?

The advent of Industry 4.0 – characterized by digital transformation, big data, the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence, and autonomous systems – demands that individuals and societies adapt to rapid technological changes. In this context, education must not merely promote technological literacy but also nurture individuals who can think critically, identify problems, develop solutions, and contribute

meaningfully to society. While self-regulating machines may define the new industrial era, human self-regulation remains more important.

Self-control is a core personal competency that enables individuals to regulate their emotions, manage their reactions, and behave appropriately across various contexts. Individuals with strong self-control tend to be calm, solution-oriented, and resilient. One of the key responsibilities of educators is to cultivate self-regulated and emotionally balanced individuals—people who are at peace with themselves and others. Discover yourself, realize yourself, control yourself. Guided by these principles, a series of activities were designed to foster self-awareness and self-control among pre-service teachers.

The Clean School activity aimed to instill environmental consciousness by emphasizing a proactive rather than reactive mindset. The slogan "Don't clean the environment, prevent pollution" was the cornerstone of this initiative. The goals were to raise awareness of waste management, promote ecological consumption habits, and inspire environmental responsibility. The implementation included the following actions:

- a. Visual materials (posters, banners, mascots) highlighted themes such as "Environmental Health and Hygiene."
- b. Educational sessions were held on the concept of a "Sustainable Clean Environment."
- c. The number of waste and recycling bins was increased and their accessibility improved.
- d. Recycling teams were formed and led by the prospective teachers.

Through these actions, teacher candidates contributed to creating a cleaner school environment and modeled environmentally responsible behavior for younger students. As part of the Zero Waste initiative, they were informed about the economic and ecological benefits of recycling.

During the second month, weekly activities were implemented to support the development of universal ethical values such as honesty, benevolence, justice, and respect. One of the key events during this period was the Staff-Free Canteen Activity, which allowed pre-service teachers to practice and internalize these values through real-life experience.

This innovative activity was implemented in the school where the research was conducted. On designated days, the canteen operated without any supervising personnel. Before the activity, all pre-service teachers were briefed on ethical expectations – particularly trustworthiness, personal integrity, and the importance of respecting others' belongings. Here's how the activity worked:

- a. All products were displayed and accessible, but no staff members were present to handle transactions.
- b. Prospective teachers formed orderly queues, thereby promoting fairness and respect.
- c. A special three-compartment cabinet was set up, representing honesty, benevolence, and trust.

One compartment contained food items (e.g., crackers, juice, milk) and a donation box. Teacher candidates were expected to take a product and leave the corresponding payment—reinforcing the principle of honesty. Participants could

leave food items in the benevolence section for those in need. Students who faced financial hardship could take products from this compartment without payment. The final section functioned as a general safe for extra contributions or messages of support.

The activity was deemed successful when the collected money aligned with the value of the distributed items—an outcome that demonstrated a collective commitment to integrity. Minor misuses occurred, as expected in shared spaces, but overall, the event fostered a culture of trust and ethical awareness. It also created a meaningful opportunity for participants to experience values education through direct, real-world engagement.

Data analysis in qualitative research involves systematically interpreting data to extract meaning and identify patterns. It requires a rigorous process of synthesizing, organizing, and contextualizing participant responses, observational notes, and textual data. Among the most challenging aspects of qualitative inquiry is transforming raw data into coherent findings that reflect the participants' lived experiences.

As Merriam (2013) emphasizes, analysis often begins concurrently with data collection in qualitative research. This iterative approach allows researchers to reflect, adjust, and refine as themes emerge. In the context of action research, the ultimate goal of data analysis is to inform meaningful change by providing evidence-based insights (Johnson, 2014).

This study analyzed data collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations using descriptive and content analysis methods. Descriptive analysis was employed to summarize participants' views about the predefined research questions, while content analysis identified recurring themes and deeper insights. The combination of these approaches enhanced the trustworthiness and depth of the findings.

Results and Discussion

The following section presents the major findings from interviews with preservice primary school teachers. Responses were categorized according to the guiding research questions.

a. Perceptions on the Importance of Values and Environmental Education

T1: Values and environmental education enhance prospective teachers' awareness of nature and responsible resource use. They promote self-awareness and ecological sensitivity, essential for personal and professional growth.

T3: These forms of education contribute to environmental sensitivity, self-recognition, and the internalization of family, societal, and humanitarian values.

T4: Participants reported improved self-care, health consciousness, spatial-temporal awareness, and social engagement skills.

T8: Emphasized that such activities foster love for one's country, appreciation for historical and cultural heritage, and appropriate use of technology.

b. Reflections on the Activities' Effectiveness

T12: Expressed deep concern over the erosion of core values such as compassion, benevolence, and respect in the face of globalization. The program served as a reminder of these neglected values and sparked renewed moral reflection. The participant emphasized the importance of transmitting these principles to future generations.

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T9: Initially perceived the activities as overly simplistic but later acknowledged their significant impact. They rediscovered forgotten values through practical involvement and committed to instilling them in their future students.

c. Challenges Faced During the Activities

T2: Reported difficulties during the "Staff-Free Canteen" activity due to communication barriers with Syrian refugee students. These students mistakenly believed the free products were intended for them and attempted to take items without understanding the rules.

T7: Encountered similar issues during the "Clean School" activity, where some refugee students placed waste in incorrect bins. Language limitations made it challenging to communicate appropriate environmental practices.

d. Perceived Behavioral Changes

T1: Noted a renewed awareness of ethical behaviors, particularly honesty and environmental responsibility. The activities encouraged self-reflection and moral growth.

T10: Described how economically advantaged teacher candidates donated food to support disadvantaged peers. Although minor misuses occurred, the overall atmosphere promoted trust, generosity, and a sense of community.

Investments in development and innovation are critical for societal advancement; however, such progress often comes at the expense of ecological balance. While technological advancements aim to minimize environmental harm, the increasing demand for natural resources necessitates a deeper commitment to sustainable practices. In this context, Türkiye's Zero Waste Project, launched in 2017 and implemented across public institutions, has significantly promoted environmental awareness – particularly among future educators. Practices such as recycling and sustainability education have yielded positive outcomes, as supported by the findings of this study.

Recent research supports these conclusions. Eryılmaz and Kıran (2017) observed that although university students demonstrated awareness of climate change and environmental issues, they often lacked long-term behavioral commitment. Gülsoy and Korkmaz (2020) highlighted those perceptions of climate change varied based on students' socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, Özcan, Mertol, and Yılmaz (2020) found that students' metaphorical understanding of the environment – particularly as a core value – was influenced by educational content and lived experiences.

In addition to environmental education, values education has gained prominence in educational discourse. Bal (2019) notes that societal values are integral to maintaining cultural continuity and social cohesion. Societies risk cultural erosion and identity loss without deliberate efforts to embed such values in curricula. Therefore, ethical and environmental values must be considered fundamental educational objectives rather than secondary concerns.

The results of this action research underscore the transformative potential of integrated environmental and values education. Pre-service teachers gained awareness of sustainability and moral responsibility and reported increased personal reflection and ethical growth. Participants such as T1 and T3 described how the activities enhanced their understanding of environmental stewardship and the importance of ethical behavior in professional life.

T12 reflected on how globalization has led to the erosion of essential human values. It emphasized the emotional and cultural significance of revisiting concepts like Vol. 14 No. 1, 2025

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compassion, justice, and responsibility – particularly within the framework of Turkish-Islamic philosophy. T9, initially skeptical, later acknowledged the program's profound impact, demonstrating the effectiveness of experiential learning in fostering value internalization.

Nonetheless, challenges were observed – particularly those related to cultural and linguistic diversity. T2 and T7 reported difficulties communicating program goals to refugee students, suggesting that future implementations should incorporate inclusive strategies and culturally responsive pedagogy. These findings point to the necessity of adapting values and environmental education to diverse student populations in a globalized world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research affirms the critical role of environmental and values education in shaping responsible, ethical, and socially conscious individuals. The positive behavioral shifts observed among participants demonstrate the importance of embedding such programs into teacher education curricula. Values such as honesty, benevolence, respect, and environmental responsibility should not be treated as abstract ideals but as essential competencies for 21st-century educators.

Ultimately, the sustainability of any nation lies in the values it instills in its youth. Future generations must be educated in academic knowledge, moral integrity, and ecological awareness. Integrating environmental education and values education into teacher training programs will ensure the transmission of cultural heritage and prepare teachers to guide students in building a more just, respectful, and sustainable world.

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