
THE IMAGE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS HELD BY STUDENTS FROM TWO UNIVERSITIES

A IMAGEM DOS PROFESSORES DE EDUCAÇÃO FÍSICA DE ALUNOS DE DUAS UNIVERSIDADES

María Alejandra Ávalos-Ramos¹, María Ángeles Martínez Ruiz¹ and Gladys Merma-Molina¹

¹University of Alicante, San Vicente del Raspeig-Alicante, Spain.

RESUMO

Este estudo analisa a imagem que alunos de educação inicial de professores de educação física de duas universidades diferentes (Universidade de Alicante - UA, Espanha e Universidade Central do Equador - UCE) possuem professores de educação física. Este estudo qualitativo e comparativo utiliza uma abordagem metafórica. A metodologia qualitativa foi utilizada para analisar as metáforas dos alunos participantes, a fim de explorar se elas se adequam ou não às perspectivas atuais de aprendizagem e ensino no campo da Educação Física, e se as imagens transmitiram alguma diferença entre as universidades devido à influência do contexto na imagem do professor de Educação Física e nos estereótipos de gênero. Um total de 190 alunos participaram do estudo (n= 105 homens; n= 85 mulheres). O software AQUAD 7 foi utilizado para processar os dados. Os resultados mostraram que não havia diferenças de gênero óbvias que afastassem as mulheres da atividade física. Assim como não há diferenças excessivas devido ao contexto diferente dos participantes.

Palavras-chave: Educação inicial. Educação superior. Metáforas.

ABSTRACT

This study analyses the image that students of initial physical education teacher education (PETE) from two different universities (University of Alicante- UA, Spain, and Central University of Ecuador-UCE) have of physical education teachers. This qualitative and comparative study uses a metaphorical approach. Qualitative methodology was used to analyse the participating students metaphors in order to explore whether or not they suit the current learning and teaching perspectives in the field of Physical Education, and whether the images conveyed any differences between universities due to the influence of the context in the Physical Education teacher image and in gender stereotypes. A total of 190 students participated in the study (n= 105 men; n= 85 women). The software AQUAD 7 was used to process the data. The results showed that there were no obvious gender differences that keep women away from physical activity. As well as not excessive differences due to the different context of the participants.

Keywords: Initial education. Higher education. Metaphors.

Introduction

Research on student voices is gradually infiltrating the research perspectives of Physical Education (PE) continuous professional learning although with greater difficulty in Higher Education settings¹. This lower incidence of PE narrative research in High Education represents a loss for research as well as for the analysis of PE innovative methodologies. Since students will not be involved in their learning unless they are given the opportunity to express themselves, we used narrative research for being more consistent with our learning perspectives. Additionally, and in correspondence with Ensign et al.², we believe that to democratize the initial education of Physical Education teachers in an institution with strong teaching hierarchies they should be given the voice and the word if we want them to acquire a commitment to their learning.

The marginality of the students' voices prevents us from understanding their needs, their learning problems and making a real diagnosis. Likewise, many causes of their learning problems in PETE usually reside in the beliefs and thoughts with which they reach the initial university education. They must be able to understand their personal beliefs, analyse them and compare them with conceptual models is what can help them to give meaning to theory and

practice. All this entails some processes of reflection, without which there is no authentic learning. If this reflection on one's beliefs is carried out in collaborative processes of dialectic and discussion, we will achieve a greater understanding of the thinking of our students and they will achieve more effective conceptual changes³.

One of our concerns as teacher educators has been the palpable gender differences in learning opportunities in physical education. And to what extent the beliefs of the PETE students could be influenced by early experience. We agree with Ní Chróinín and O'Sullivan⁴ in the need to recover our beliefs, which are validated only by our personal experiences, and contrast them with the current perspectives in PE learning. Among these beliefs the equality of learning opportunities in physical education is one of essential reflection⁵.

Until a few decades ago, sport was a strongly androcentric setting. It was also an elitist, colonialist and Western-controlled space^{6,7}. However, major efforts have been made to overcome gender differences in all educational fields, such as the declaration of *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁸ and the *Framework for Action: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all*⁹. International organisations had warned of the gender gap in reports and declarations in the field of Physical and Sports Activity^{10,11}. One of the most widespread studies currently available includes the MINEPS VI final report⁵, which summarised UNESCO's strategies for ensuring access of women and girls to sports, one of its main objectives.

As has been indicated by Castejón and Giménez¹², physical education teachers, along with other agents, are clearly the architects that help or limit the opportunities and benefits that boys and girls can have in connection with their physical activity and sports learning. Numerous authors have emphasised that PE teachers can have a strong role in either motivating or demotivating students^{13,14}.

Adopting the perspective of sports sociology and focusing on gender differences, Kenschaft et al.¹⁵ has argued that the discourses based on sports aptitude and ability frequently used by teachers hinder girls more than boys in Secondary Education. This male-based discourse portrays them as being less competent in the competitive sports context, undermining their decision to participate. This view is consistent with the social analysis undertaken by Wright and Burrows¹⁶. The lack of female role models in the male-sport dominated media is also hardly motivating for girls¹⁷.

It has been acknowledged that the PE teacher has a strong impact on the learning processes of students. Therefore, it is important to study the identities and images that PETE students have of PE teachers. We therefore decided to enquire into the PE teacher model that underlay students' thinking, to see if a different image existed between the participating male and female students, and how this may have been influenced by different contexts.

Beliefs and attitudes are shaped at an early age by an individual's personal life experience, and they can create an unconscious barrier that hinders changes in our conceptual models¹⁸. In the case of the university students' perceptions about what it means to be a PE teacher, these personal perceptions need to be shared and discussed to assess whether they hinder or promote their role as future physical education teachers¹⁹.

There is a current tradition of narrative research in the field of PE^{20,21} that uses diaries, stories, open interviews and discussion groups to allow the genuine voices and views of the participants to emerge. Caution should be applied, however, as the participants' internal discourse may be distorted if they mask hidden beliefs in order to give a good impression, even in cases when anonymity was assured. Metaphor-based research avoids this problem, because when using a metaphor, the participant is not aware of its conceptual load. The process of metaphor construction is highly intuitive and therefore ensures that results are reliable.

Metaphors about PE teachers

The perception that a PETE student has of the functions and duties of a PE teacher is vital for their professionalisation. Although some referential studies have been conducted held by Initial Teacher Education students about what it is to be a teacher, they have not been widespread in the field of physical education. It is also important to obtain some insights into whether there are differences in these perceptions between male and female students. Given the existing gender gap in the physical education world, with all the missed opportunities for women this involves, we believe it is important to discover if the views of PE teachers can affect the participation gap between men and women.

Perceptions of PE teachers are formed at an early age through a process of acculturation. These initial experiences gained in the family and school experiences, together with those gathered in games and free-time, make up what Bordieu calls *habitus*¹⁸. Parents, sportspeople through the media, and the early experiences with teachers and friends provide intuitive images that remain in our mind^{20,22} as a personal *habitus* that is difficult to change at a more mature age, because it is not immediately conscious. In this interplay between mind and brain, an indissoluble embodiment takes place through our early experiences¹⁶. These images can be updated through metaphors and also by remembering²³. The power of metaphors in our lives has been recognised by many authors as a good way of revealing our beliefs. The space provided by PETE provides students with the opportunity to bring these beliefs to light through metaphorical narratives, so that they can be analysed, reflected upon and discussed.

For all of the above, this study analyses the views of two cohorts of students from two universities, the University of Alicante-UA in Spain and the Central University of Ecuador-UCE. Both cohorts were subdivided into male and female students with the aim of analysing how their mental patterns reveal the underlying models they had of PE teachers.

Method

The study involved a sample of 95 (n= 55 men; n=40 women) Sport and Physical Activity students from PETE of University of Alicante (UA), Spain, and 95 (n= 50 men; n=45 women) students from the Faculty of Physical Education and Culture from the Central University of Ecuador (UCE). Qualitative methodology was used to analyse and interpret their responses within a social context. The data consisted of the metaphors described by students, as this narrative tool contains the richness and variety typical of participants' stories.

The data collection and analyses involved three phases. In the first stage, the research proposal and objectives were briefly presented to the students, guaranteeing that their anonymity would be maintained. Later, the participating students were then asked to design a metaphor that would express the value and meaning they gave to their physical education teachers in their life and training. To design the metaphor, they had to reflect and write about the following phrase "PE teachers for you are like..."

In a second stage, the researchers carried out iterative readings of metaphors were carried out by researchers to establish a system of analysis codes. The AQUAD qualitative data analysis programme was used. AQUAD, developed by Huber and Gürtler²⁴, was chosen for its ability to add emerging categories from participants' narratives as required.

The data coding instrument was gradually adapted within the recursive process involving the participants' metaphors and the research questions. The categories that emerged after this process proved useful for coding the metaphors, according to the triangulation process carried out by a group of three experts in educational research.

In the third and last stage, after an in-depth analysis of the metaphors collected, the following emerging codes were determined that relate physical education teachers as a *guide*,

an *idealist*, a *transmitter of knowledge* and as a *parent*.

Results

The results of the study are presented using a coding structure with absolute frequencies (AF) and percentage of absolute frequencies (%AF), AF being the total number of occurrences of a particular concept, and %AF being the relationship of this concept to the total absolute frequency (AF.100 / total AF).

The students' perceptions of Physical Education teachers

The different codes were first extracted and compared by university (UA, UCE) and gender, as presented in Table 1.

Code 1. Teacher as a guide

The results show that that men from the University of Ecuador perceived the PE teacher as being a *guide* and facilitator of their learning process (47.43%) more than the men from the UA (34.17%). Female UA students saw their teachers as guides (42.64%) more than UCE female students (35.93%). Some of the students noted:

A PE teacher is like water for fish, a map that guides the traveller (male student_UCE_17).

My physical education teachers have been like guides in my journey towards a healthy body and as loudspeakers of my sports awareness (male student_UA_10). They are the walking stick that helps the blind person to cross the street. They have helped me to get from one point of my life to another, which is the finish point of the degree (female student_UA_06).

They are like a mirror in which I see myself reflected. Once you have identified with a particular teacher, you will always want to be like her and follow in her footsteps (female student_UCE_03).

Code 2. Idealised view

A metaphor that idealises the Physical Education teacher was more notably used by UA students (women: 32.35%, men: 32.91%) than UCE students (women: 28.12%; 20.51%). With regard to gender, the female UCE students had a more idealised vision than their male counterparts. There were no significant gender differences in the case of UA students. The following narratives contain metaphors that exemplify these results:

A Physical Education teacher for me is like someone who gives your life in the midst of so much frustration. They always appear at the worst moments when you need more air (female student_UA_09).

Like summer, because we all look forward to their class (male student_UA_31).

For me the Physical Education teacher is like a magical book, interesting from start to finish (female student_UCE_19).

The PE teacher is like the sea, because their daily mission is all-encompassing, that is, they do not only help to physically educate children and young people, but they also help them in their overall development, becoming a fundamental pillar for society (male student_UCE_36).

Code 3. Directive transmitter of knowledge

The male students from both universities used metaphors that perceived the teacher most as being a *transmitter* of knowledge and instructions, whereas they perceived students as

having a passive role, and merely reproducing that knowledge (UA: 24.05%, UCE: 21.79) The female university students identified to a much lesser degree with the teacher as a *transmitter of knowledge*, with female UA students accepting this transmitting and authoritarian role to a lesser extent (UA: 10.29%, UCE: 18.75%):

He is like the conductor of an orchestra, referring to the teacher with their students or a coach with their players. They tell you what you have to do (male_student_UA_10).

A PE teacher is like the grape is to wine, necessary to impart specific knowledge to the student (male_student_UCE_10).

The director of a company that must transmit their knowledge to employees (female student_UCE_28).

The Physical Education teacher is like the class trainer (female_student_UA_20).

Code 4. Paternalist teacher

The metaphors that associated PE teachers with *paternalistic* figures were more often found in the narratives provided the female UCE students (17.18%) and the female UA students (14.70%). To a lesser degree, this paternalistic perception of the PE teacher was also found in the narratives provided by the male UA university students (8.86%) and male UCE students (10.25%). Some examples of this perspective are presented in the following fragments:

The PE teacher is like a grandfather, their teachings are very good, and they are my reference point (female student_UA_18).

They are like a godfather in a baptism, as they are a very important figure in the development of children who will later may or may not engage in physical activity in their future (male student_UCE_09).

The PE teacher is more than a teacher, they are a friend who through physical or sports activity makes you smile or simply makes your body work to its maximum potential, by making the most of your accumulated energy (female student_UCE_02).

Like lions, they train their ‘cubs’ through games, while they learn from their mistakes (male student_UA_19).

Table 1. Comparison of the students’ metaphors referring to the Physical Education teacher, by university and gender

| The PE teacher is like... Codes | UA Women | | UA Men | | UCE Women | | UCE Men | |
|------------------------------------|----------|--------|--------|--------|-----------|--------|---------|--------|
| | AF | AF% | AF | AF% | AF | AF% | AF | AF% |
| 1 Guide | 29 | 42.64% | 27 | 34.17% | 23 | 35.93% | 37 | 47.43% |
| 2 Idealised | 22 | 32.35% | 26 | 32.91% | 18 | 28.12% | 16 | 20.51% |
| 3 Directive | 7 | 10.29% | 19 | 24.05% | 12 | 18.75% | 17 | 21.79% |
| 4 Paternalistic | 10 | 14.70% | 7 | 8.86% | 11 | 17.18% | 8 | 10.25% |
| TOTAL | 68 | | 79 | | 64 | | 78 | |

Note: AF, absolute frequency; % AF, absolute frequency percentage.

Source: Authors

Summary of Results

The metaphor that appeared most strongly was that of the *teacher as a Guide*. This was the metaphor most frequently found in the narratives provided by UCE male students (47.43%), UA female students (42.64%), female UCE students (35.93%) and male UA students (34.17%).

The second most common metaphor in frequency terms was the *Idealised* view of the PE teacher, with very similar percentages found among male UA participants (32.91%), female UA students (32.35%) and female UCE students (28.12%), but much lower percentages among male UCE students (20.51%). The latter supported the view of the PE teacher as a *directive transmitter of knowledge* to a greater extent (21.79%), which showed a certain discrepancy among the UCE male cohort with the perception of the PE teacher as a *Guide* in the first place. These results do not reflect very clear gender or context patterns.

Idealised and paternalistic view

However, a more detailed analysis shows that the *Idealised* and *Paternalistic* view of the PE teacher have certain similarities. They are positive perceptions to the extent that they transcend the functions of the teaching role.

When considering the sum of the two most similar emergent metaphors, the *Idealised and Paternalistic*, it can be seen that there was a closer proximity between the perceptions of female UA and UCE students (UA: 47.05% and UCE: 45.3%). There was also greater closeness between UA women and men (47.05% and 41.77%), whereas little convergence was found between the narratives provided by UA and UCE men (UA: 41.77% and UCE: 30.76%), and UCE women and men (45.3% and 30.76%), respectively (Table 2).

Table 2. Analysis shows that the *Idealised* and *Paternalistic* view of the PE teacher.

| <i>The PE teacher is like ...</i> | <i>UA Women</i> | | <i>UA Men</i> | | <i>UCE Women</i> | | <i>UCE Men</i> | |
|---|-----------------|--------|---------------|--------|------------------|--------|----------------|--------|
| | AF | AF% | AF | AF% | AF | AF% | AF | AF% |
| 1. Guide | 29 | 42.64% | 27 | 34.17% | 23 | 35.93% | 37 | 47.43% |
| 3. Directive | 7 | 10.29% | 19 | 24.05% | 12 | 18.75% | 17 | 21.79% |
| 2/4 Methacode: <i>Idealised/ Paternalistic</i> | 32 | 47.05% | 33 | 41.77% | 29 | 45.31% | 24 | 30.76% |
| TOTAL | 68 | | 79 | | 64 | | 78 | |

Note: AF, absolute frequency; % AF, absolute frequency percentage

Source: Authors

Evidence was therefore found of a convergence between female students in the *Idealised and Paternalistic* views, and between women and men in the UA. There was, however, no agreement between UCE males and females, and between UA and UCE males. It can be then concluded that the UA context produced smaller gender differences than the UCE context.

Guide and Directive Transmitter of knowledge

The images of the PE teacher as a *Guide* and a *Directive Transmitter of knowledge* are consistent with the views most aligned with the role of a teacher, and represent the two distinct methodologies found. These are: the more up-to-date perspective of the teacher as a guide and facilitator in the construction of students' learning, and the more traditional perspective of the teacher as a transmitter of knowledge who uses directive methods without allowing room for dialogue, discussion or controversy. Going further into the dialectic between the transmitting-directive view and the guiding view, the findings indicated that female UA students were very clear about the difference between both teaching models, and they strongly leant towards the more innovative perspective of the teaching role. This differentiation in the teaching model was not so marked in the other cohorts, so it is difficult

to ascertain that either gender or context had palpable differences in relation to teaching models, perhaps more influenced by school experiences than by experiential and social experiences.

Discussion and conclusions

The results show, significant keys in the perception of the professional identity of the Physical Education teacher, even within the limits of a case study research. The following summarizes our findings:

The research methodology has succeeded in extracting precise conceptions underlying students' beliefs about the identity of physical education teachers. The opportunity to give expression and voice to students shows that it is possible to know and obtain the guidelines that can guide subsequent action²⁵.

The use of student voices in Physical Activity and Sports Research, is a necessary methodology if we want all the complex variables that affect knowledge of the field to be considered. Attending to and analysing the voices of students allows us to involve them in educational decisions²⁶. We cannot forget that authentic learning needs reflection in collaborative and situated processes. All this contributes to a scientific action in the physical education spaces. Sfard and Prusak²⁷ defend the narratives and life stories to investigate learning as a culturally shaped activity. Individual identity is reflected in our voices and narratives, stories about our self, which when they agglomerate in a certain context, they become a collective voice of a given context. The aforementioned authors stress the need to take into account the thinking, beliefs, attitudes and values of the PE student in order to know the social and cultural influence of their environment. In this sense, Van Raalte, Vincent, and Brewer²⁸ propose the strategy of “self-talk”, used by teachers and coaches as an internal and reflective dialogue. Other researchers such as Whitehead et al.²⁹ have used cognitive strategies such as think aloud or self-reported as a research tool. Our professional identity is built through the analysis of different and diverse discourses; on the contrary, the weight of previous experiences that have not been confronted can limit new learning. When students come to PETE with such diverse beliefs, emerging from their negative and positive experiences, restrictive and comprehensive, we must transform these isolated beliefs into comprehensive discourses since the identity is composed of narratives that we explain to each other³⁰. In this sense we believe that methodology based on metaphors has produced its results. And it has shown in this research that the narrative methodology analyses the complexity, confusion and contradiction of the social context with depth³¹.

The high frequency of *Idealized and Paternalistic* visions of the teacher show that students continue to have a highly emotional vision of the Physical Education teacher that could be counterproductive, if not analyzed and reconstructed, with a vision of the teacher more in line with current perspectives in which teachers must maintain a high level of professionalization in updated knowledge, technical skills, teaching ability and sports ethics.

On the contrary, the idealised views were strongly present as a sweetened view of teachers in both the idealised and paternalistic images. In part, their views tended to rely mainly on their vocation, and magnified and idealised their profession. The most empathetic approach was emphasised: the teacher creates an atmosphere of parental support. These results are in accordance with the results from other similar studies³².

We have still found the emergence of the image of the teacher-based traditional model, as a *Directive* transmitter of knowledge, and this is a reason for concern, in line with Stylianou et al.³³, whose study equally identified teacher-centred and student-centred metaphors. The metaphors identified in the traditional model emphasise that the purpose of teaching is that students acquire the knowledge that is transmitted by teachers, but students'

metaphors mostly referred to teachers being guides in the construction of learning³. This means that the acquisition-knowledge metaphor and the metaphor of participation in PE learning have only partly been resolved because the traditional model is persistent. And the individual constructivism narratives that emerges is not close to the social learning conception of Sfard's metaphor³⁴. Clearly, the absence of metaphors oriented towards the perspective of a learning community indicate that the idea of a space where knowledge and practice are shared was not present in the participants' narratives³⁵.

It is relevant that the more traditional, *directive and paternalistic* vision coexists with a vision of the guiding professor and facilitator of student learning, since it indicates that they understand the professional role of teachers and this will undoubtedly influence their future teaching model. Despite the limits of the case study, the results reveal an encouraging picture of the internal views of PETE students. The emergence of the model that perceived the PE teacher *as a Guide*, the metaphor based on the cognitive-constructivist perspective of learning confirmed that students are moving towards the student-centred perspective which the European Higher Education Area has fostered since the implementation of the so-called Bologna Process for convergence in Higher Education. We believe that constructivist perceptions were the result of their academic experiences, as most of the students' schooling took place during the latest educational reforms implemented in both Spain and Ecuador, where the constructivist model predominated. However, it must be stressed that the individual constructivist perspectives have permeated PE more than situated perspectives and learning-community perspectives, which entail a more social vision of sports learning³⁶.

A major gap in students' understanding of the role of teachers has been identified. This initial detection is important in order to know where to concentrate training efforts. Despite the social importance of Physical Activity and Sport, despite the weight of team sports, students do not discover that learning has a high social dimension³⁵ and to obviate social learning is to leave personal learning unfunded. The notions of social learning, learning community and collaborative learning have already been researched in Physical Education. Current perspectives on learning in the international educational community underline the relevance of the social and situated construction of learning³⁷, coining the expression *learning in community of practice*³⁸. All these theories allude to the participation, and to make contrast with the traditional idea of learning that emphasises the acquisition and reproduction of knowledge. The metaphor of participation highlights that the learning of skills and strategies are transferred better when they are learned in the context of application and in a collaborative way³⁹, this is especially relevant for learning sports.

The complexity of education demands the construction of a diversity of perspectives; nevertheless, we are inclined towards a perspective where learning emerges from the group's social practices as opposed to the previous conception focused on the teacher's dictate. Additionally, the learning environment and context must be *authentic*³⁷, which means that students work in real and everyday environments, which is the basis of the identity of the situated learning.

In the field of sports and physical activity, the social and situated construction of learning has been recognized. Kirk and Kinchin⁴⁰ support learning as a model for sports education, due to its ability to apply and transfer its theory-practice by offering authentic learning experiences. And Goodyear and Casey⁴¹ explain the different models of learning in physical activity, underlining the model of community of practice⁴², among others.

The results alert us to the fact that students do not perceive the role of physical education teachers as a builder of collaborative environments or spaces for knowledge and development. Why does the perspective of social, situated and collaboratively engaged learning not emerge from students' perceptions? This doubt is perhaps an outcome that we should make a matter of research for future research. As Ni Chroin and Coulter²⁵ state, let us

ask the right question if we want students to understand the keys to learning and teaching in Physical Education. As stated by the aforementioned authors, the phases of acculturation socialisation and professional socialisation have to start from the shared analysis of the students' experiences and beliefs. It is evident that the understanding of PE is shaped by the cultural, social, economic and historical context of the person through their previous experiences.

In sum, although the findings showed that students had positive perceptions of teachers, one of the most worrying findings was the low value that students gave to socialising in the practice of PE. This cannot be ignored, especially since self-regulation in PE practice is also a result of interpersonal interactions⁴³. In other studies, conducted with adolescents (for example⁴⁴), both the socialising and the entertainment roles of sport had a greater presence. This may lead to the conclusion that the value of attaining goals as part of a team and collaborative contexts should be enhanced in Higher Education given that participants were unaware of the socialisation involved in engaging in sports activities. Perhaps too much individualistic learning has influenced their outlook; therefore, it seems to be necessary to work more on collaborative methods and to further underline the need to develop social skills in preliminary Sports and Physical Activity methodologies.

As Li et al.⁴⁵ emphasised, understanding the beliefs and thinking of pre-service teachers in physical education could help to support better learning decisions, and to introduce curriculum changes in teaching⁴⁶. And also, for increase scientific capital in PE in general⁴⁷. Given that participatory methodologies influence the learning involvement of preservice teachers³⁰, we hope we have made a small step in this task. Additionally, since there is a scarcity of narrative studies using metaphors in the field of research into physical education and sport, with the exception of the valuable precedent set by Stylianou et al.³³, we trust that this small contribution will be useful in the development of qualitative research methodologies in this field of knowledge.

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ORCID number:

María Alejandra Ávalos-Ramos: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4925-9174>

María Ángeles Martínez Ruiz: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6028-1877>

Gladys Merma-Molina: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9856-6314>

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Autor address: María Alejandra Ávalos-Ramos. C de San Vicente del Raspeig, s/n, 03690 San Vicente del Raspeig, Alicante. E-mail: Sandra.avalos@ua.es