
COMMUNITY-BASED PEDAGOGY AND SOLIDARITY PRACTICES IN TEACHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the way solidarity ‘identities’ are built through students’ participation in social justice activities. Throughout a university course focused on critical pedagogy, students were involved in community-based groups focusing on social justice practices (i.e., supporting education activities of children protection centers, preparing meals with community groups and Churches). Forty-three students participated in the critical action research. They carried out weekly-base social activities assigned by the community groups throughout the 2022 Spring semester. During the implementation of hands-on social activities, students had to develop academic assignments related to (a) keeping detailed record of their participation in social groups (i.e., journals, photo albums), (b) reflecting on and interpreting their solidarity actions (i.e., events interpretation, evolution of perceptions and ideas), (c) as well as drawing informed conclusions (i.e., connecting theory with practice, understanding their own development process). Data analysis shows that student-teachers were able to cultivate interrelated identities on their personal development (‘personal identity’), citizen actions

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(‘social justice identity’), and academic empowerment (‘student-teacher identity’). In conclusion, we support the idea that students negotiated and formed ‘solidarity identities’ that led them to manage a number of emotions (i.e., anxiety, frustration, love, empathy), as well as develop key-competencies necessary to implement solidarity practices (i.e., collaboration, planning, critical thinking).

Keywords: Pedagogy of solidarity, teacher education, critical early childhood education.

Introduction

It is supported that interaction between student-teachers and local communities may highlight transformative aspects of teacher education by redefining academic approaches through new perspectives; where everyone learns by being actively involved with social group practices (Dragonas et al., 2015; Pasko & Korzhov, 2019; Ross et al., 2023; Vigklas et al., 2020). Student-teachers' voices in teacher education programs provide the necessary placement to support student-teachers in designing their own practices for questioning the dominant ways of thinking as well as developing competences for implementing social justice and equity interventions in local social groups (Giroux, 1988, 1992). In this way, student-teachers have the opportunity not only to develop hands-on experiences through educational processes, but also cultivate critical perceptions of themselves as acting socio-historical and transformative subjects (Androusou & Tsafos, 2018; Grollios, 2016).

Solidarity practices promote a 'dialogue' between student-teachers and local communities in order to highlight action-research foundations for developing awareness, understanding, empathy, and respect for the needs of vulnerable social groups (Biewend, 2021; Broadhead et al., 2011; Silverman, 2017; Vittoria, 2016). Through solidarity practices, hands-on learning processes focus on student-teachers all-round development by cultivating creativity and critical thinking in order for the latter to be able to undertake initiatives in everyday life (Ross et al., 2023; Silverman, 2017). Hence, solidarity learning environments combine theoretical knowledge with hands-on experiences that support student-teachers to develop collaborative skills as acting members of solidarity groups within local communities (De Lissovoy, 2008; Freire, 2000; Riedninger et al., 2011; Wallace, 2013).

Having said that, it is important to highlight the reflective and transformative aspects of teacher education in order to support student-teachers to undertake solidarity practices by implementing social justice and equity interventions within their local environments (Freire et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2023; Silverman, 2017). In order to achieve that, in this paper we examine the 'identities' student-teachers develop by participating in solidarity practices within local social groups as well as the perspectives of student-teachers on cultivating new knowledges and competences in a pre-service teacher education course through implementing social justice and equity interventions (Darder, 2015; Pasko & Korzhov, 2019).

Research framework

The paper aims at researching solidarity 'identities' developed within a teacher-education program that promotes student-teachers' active engagement in practices for social justice and equity (Mertens, 2012; Zientek, 2017). In this context, critical

action research provides the necessary placement to student-teachers getting involved with local communities, developing, transforming and reflecting on social competences as well as challenging their own perspectives and attitudes on learning environments (Denzin, 2010; Wenger et al., 2002). During the 2022 spring semester, forty-three student-teachers of the Department of Early Childhood Education at University of Thessaly participated in a course aimed at caring out weekly-base social activities in order to assist community groups in Volos city of Magnesia region (i.e., supporting educational activities of children protection centers, preparing meals with community groups and Churches) (Freire et al., 2014; Pasko & Korzhov, 2019; Silverman, 2017).

To this direction, student-teachers interact with community groups, collaborate with local activists, design, organize and implement social justice activities as well as reflect on their practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Data collection were implemented through twenty-one (21) student-teachers assignments related to (a) keeping detailed record of their participation (i.e., journals, photo albums), (b) reflecting on and interpreting their solidarity actions (i.e., events interpretation, evolution of perceptions and ideas), (c) as well as drawing informed conclusions (i.e., connecting theory with practice, understanding their own development process) (Avgitidou, 2020). Moreover, student-teachers participated in reflective group meetings in order to provide feedback on social justice actions implemented by other course members. Within critical action research framework, it is argued that the present study highlights transformative perspectives of initial teacher education that promotes student-teachers' 'voices' on issues related to solidarity aspects, social critical awareness as well as collective action for liberation from oppressive ideologies by addressing inequalities that the least privileged social groups (Denzin, 2010; Mertens, 2012).

Results

Data analysis shows that student-teachers developed assignments on social practices that may be grouped into four thematic categories: 1) Child protection services, 2) Social kitchens - church charity handouts, 3) Stray animals' charities, and 4) Sunday-school services (see table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of student-teachers (N_1) and assignments (N_2) by thematic category.

Thematiccategory	N_1	%	N_2	%
<i>Childprotectionservices</i>	21	48,8	9	42,9

<i>Social kitchens - church charity handouts</i>	11	25,6	6	28,6
<i>Stray animal charities</i>	9	20,9	4	19
<i>Sunday-school services</i>	2	4,7	2	9,5
Total	43	100	21	100

Forty-three (43) student-teachers (N₁) implemented solidarity practices during the 2022 spring semester and developed twenty-one (21) individual or group student assignments (N₂). In particular, nine (9) assignments referred to ‘*Child protection services*’ thematic category, six (6) assignments to ‘*Social kitchens - church charity handouts*’, four (4) to ‘*Stray animal charities*’, and two (2) to ‘*Sunday-school services*’. Data analysis of reflective journals shows that student-teachers were able to develop interrelated identities on their personal development (‘personal identity’), citizen actions (‘social justice identity’), and academic empowerment (‘student-teacher identity’). Analysis results support the idea that student-teachers’ assignments incorporated all three ‘identities’ by promoting inter- and trans-disciplinary aspects as well as collaborative practices in order to approach the concept of solidarity. To this direction, student-teachers had the opportunity to develop creativity and critical awareness competences for their all-round development.

Personal identity

In their assignments, it is asserted that student-teachers highlight aspects related to ‘personal identity’ being constantly developed through active participation in solidarity practices. Analysis showed that student-teachers cultivated genuine interest and eagerness to get involved with social justice and equity activities in order to support vulnerable social groups in Volos region. In particular, relevant references identified in student-teachers’ reflective journals state that:

‘I was quite impressed by this voluntary action. The selflessness act is the most essential motivation. People brought food every day, to the point where the number exceeded expectations. In addition, I was initially struck by how many people offered their help without expecting anything in return’ (Student-teacher assignment 03).

Data analysis shows that student-teachers support the idea being involved with social justice practices in community groups provides opportunities for continuing self-improvement. By facing new challenges, such as managing difficulties and solving problems that arise, student-teachers believe they are able to develop new knowledges and experiences. Putting it with their own words:

'[...] Through the whole volunteering process, I personally got to know the essence of solidarity, of the so-called essential help to my neighbor, but also I've had the opportunity to understand better myself. It's a process I'd like to adopt generally in my life and haven't had the chance to be engaged with before [...]' (Student-teacher assignment 21).

In addition, it is supported that the development of student-teachers' personal identity contributes to cultivating empathy culture through understanding and respecting for the needs of people belong to vulnerable social groups. In this way, data analysis shows that student-teachers collaborate with social group members in order to gain their trust and cultivate a mutual understanding based on inter-personal and social relationships. Specifically, participants supported that:

'[...] we've learned to operate effectively in team-work by recognizing our personal skills. We've developed our social skills and created new friendships and partnerships. We've broadened our horizons by learning new things about life, the environment we live in, in order to improve the living conditions of some of our fellow citizens' (Student-teacher assignment 10).

It is argued that the implemented critical action research enhanced student-teachers personal identity by cultivating their interest to get involved with social justice practices as well as empower them to develop emotions, attitudes, and behaviors to support the function of local groups to promote social justice and equity (Freire, 2000).

Social justice identity

Student-teachers who participated in the university course had the opportunity to develop and strengthen their social justice identity by organizing and implementing solidarity activities. In particular, student-teachers were able to interact and communicate with members of vulnerable social groups, to develop emotions, exchange views as well as live new experiences. To this direction, student-teachers got involved with solidarity aspects in order to contribute to social justice and equity movement. Specifically, student-teachers reported that:

'Volunteering is a way of "answering" the problems of every citizen, while it has the power to defend and strengthen the rights of every social group' (Student-teacher assignment 05).

In addition, student-teachers' active involvement in social groups seems to widening frameworks for effective communication and interaction among members as well as to enhance social justice perspectives by developing reflective skills on solidarity practices. In particular, student-teachers' reflective journals include references such as the following:

‘Volunteering takes you out of fatalism, mobilizes you, gets you up from your comfortable couch to claim a better tomorrow for everyone. Through volunteering, I feel that my self-esteem and self-confidence are growing, as well as my faith in fellow citizens’ (Student-teacher assignment 16).

Data analysis shows that student-teachers’ participation in social activities is combined with continuous effort to improve social or educational assignments they undertake to implement in social justice groups. Moreover, based on content analysis of the reflective journals, it becomes clear that student-teachers develop feelings of fulfillment on issues related to their daily lives, despite the difficulties that may arise. To this direction, student-teachers develop feelings of empowerment of their inter-personal and social skills by interacting with social justice groups. In particular, student-teachers support:

‘A volunteer, motivated by feelings of solidarity and humanitarianism, has the ability to acquire experiences and diverse stimuli for significant emotional fulfillment’ (Student-teacher assignment 09).

Based on student-teachers understandings, it is argued that social justice identity presupposes the recognition of the inter-connection of solidarity practices with aspects related to critical qualitative research, such as analysis and preparation skills, critical reflection, and commitment. More specifically, student-teachers’ references focus on issues such as the following:

‘With the main values of solidarity and giving, we gain multiple benefits, mainly in our psychological well-being. Volunteering requires responsibility, commitment and consistency in the obligations we undertake to carry out’ (Student-teacher assignment 07).

It is asserted that social justice identity may contribute to cultivating experiences that can sensitize student-teachers to social justice and equity issues by developing aspects of active citizenship to address prejudices, stereotypes, and social inequalities (Freire, et.al., 2014; Wenger, et. al., 2002).

Student-teacher identity

Analysis results support the idea that student-teachers highlight interrelations between participation in social justice groups and professional development. In particular, through solidarity practices, student-teachers have the opportunity to develop knowledges and skills through designing and implementing teamwork actions that refer to social or educational assignments they undertake. In reflective journals, student-teachers state that:

‘Beyond the experience-based learning, that helps us acknowledge the difficulties of such an undertaking, it puts us in the process of

activating all the theoretical knowledge we have learned in the school'(Student-teacher assignment 19).

To this direction, solidarity practices within social justice groups contribute to formation of student-teachers' academic identity by providing professional experiences developed in challenging conditions. In particular, student-teachers assert that:

'It was an experience of knowledge and commitment for me. I've gained knowledge and became more comfortable with children. Finally, I understood that the more contact someone has with children from a pedagogical point of view, the better teacher he or she becomes over time' (Student-teacher assignment 06).

Student-teachers seem to perceive solidarity practices as an opportunity to develop hands-on experiences related to socio-educational dimensions of their future profession. Based on student-teachers' journal records, it is observed that student-teachers highlight connections between theoretical knowledge they acquire in school with praxis. Thus, socio-educational experience emerges as a necessity for developing comprehensive academic identity. Participating student-teachers support that:

'Regarding the connection of voluntary work with my studies, I think that it helped me a lot mainly because I gained experiences with children who were living in challenging social conditions'(Student-teacher assignment 12).

Thus, student-teacher identity is linked both to social and professional development of future teachers by cultivating social justice and equity in formal and non-formal learning environments (Freire, 2000).

Discussion and conclusion

The results presented in the paper suggested that critical action research provide student-teachers the opportunity to negotiate their personal, social, and academic identity by implementing solidarity practices throughout a university course related to critical pedagogy. Moreover, it is argued that solidarity practices where student-teachers engaged with contributed to cultivating self-awareness, collaboration, empathy, and critical aspects of democratic citizenship (Avgitidou, 2020; Freire, et al., 2014).

We support the idea that it is important to promote social justice practices in pre-service teacher-training programs in order to provide opportunities to student-teachers to develop their personal, collective, and academic identity within formal and non-formal learning environments (Kozol, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991). To this direction, the interaction of pre-service teacher-training programs with solidarity

practices may contribute to the comprehensive socio-scientific empowerment of student-teachers through academic (e.g., planning, collaboration, reflection) (Avgitidou, 2020; Wenger et al., 2002) and social (e.g., building the identity of compassionate citizenry, as well as understanding, designing and implementing solidarity practices) aspects (Androusou&Tsafos, 2018·Freire, et al., 2014).

The teacher's role in redefining solidarity is considered important in order to cultivate to students a sense of responsibility, as well as willingness to develop transformative practices in schools and local communities through cohesive pole of mass solidarity. To this direction, teachers' social responsibility is formulated by cultivating perceptions and attitudes focused on increasing care for society and humanity. According to Freire (2000), teachers contribute to developing students' personal and cultural identity by being part of the human activity that shapes, and is shaped by, solidarity in social justice groups (Zientek, 2017). This way, solidarity aspect reminds us that the more collective practices are strengthened for human civilization, the more we recognize a personal 'debt' we all have for local communities we live in by cultivating critical awareness for the needs of a democratic and human society (Tsiakalos, 2006). In other words, pedagogy of solidarity, in order to contribute to transforming local communities, presupposes the development of hands-on experiences in context of 'street' education in order to highlight solidarity as a hope of for cultivating social justice and equity values (Freire, 1993; Freire, 1994; Vittoria, 2016).

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