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**WORKING WITH CHILDREN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE SCHOOL:
SKASIARCHIO'S SOCIAL PEDAGOGY GROUP IN ACTION****Anastasia Karagianni* Charalampos Baltas***

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the collaborative work of the Social Pedagogy Group of Skasiarchio Pedagogical Group and outlines its activities. The majority of the Social Pedagogy Group's members are teachers working in urban public schools, which are located in the heart of the multicultural city of Athens, Greece. Starting from the period of the pandemic and continuing up to this day, these teachers have been looking to establish new educational spaces outside the school settings in an aim to communicate and connect with students and families. More specifically, guided by the principles of Freinet Pedagogy, the group members meet, plan and act together, in an effort to create links with the children's neighborhoods and their public spaces, in close collaboration with the activist groups and grassroots organizations of their communities. The experience from our action led us to useful ideas and conclusions on how we could expand and enrich the idea of a

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MuseumEdu 8 / Spring 2024, pp. 56-66

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cooperative, democratic, community-oriented school. As,by standing in solidarity with the people and collectives of the community, social pedagogy manages to transcend the walls of the school building and joins the struggle against the constraints dictated by neoliberal capitalism that affect children's lives.

Keywords: freinet pedagogy, collaboration, democratic school, community-oriented school, social pedagogy

The primary objective of this paper is to function as a collective narrative and a reflection for the people who have been part of the Social Pedagogy Group of Skasiarchio for the past years. The group was first created during the quarantine in the pandemic of COVID-19, when teachers and students could no longer meet at the school setting, as it was closed. Many members of Skasiarchio had already been working with the idea of an open, community school and decided to expand it by enhancing it with the notion and practices of Social Pedagogy. While not aimed to be an academic text, the purpose of this paper is to derive conclusions from the experiences arising from the group's activities over the past three years (2020-2023). Additionally, the paper aims to establish connections with the theoretical principles of Freinet Pedagogy and the concepts associated with the community school, as we understand it. Through this exploration, we seek to draw insights and reflections that intertwine our practical experiences with these pedagogical frameworks (Lahlou, Mpaltas & Karakatsani, 2017. Mpaltas, 2020).

The Pedagogical Group of Skasiarchio

Skasiarchio is a pedagogical group, which brings together people from diverse fields, such as Education, Health, Culture and Arts, but is mainly composed of teachers working on all levels of education. Skasiarchio was created in 2010, during a period that structural inequalities and injustices, related to the economic crisis, became even more evident inside the Greek schools and the wider society. Skasiarchio's teachers, aka the Greek Freinet Movement, are inspired by the work of the French Teacher Celestin Freinet and his cooperative pedagogy. Since the creation of Skasiarchio, its members continue working together to discuss, exchange views, share ideas and make suggestions on how to cultivate a school culture where democracy could be promoted through everyday practice. For Skasiarchio's teachers, democracy is materialized through Freinet's techniques adapted to the Greek context, such as the class assembly, study-visits around the neighborhood, school press, interschool correspondence, free texts, little books, radio broadcasting, and cinema. Also, Greek Freinet teachers, from the very beginning, have experimented with the idea of a school that is open to the local community and has a vital relationship with it.

The main principles and values of Freinet Pedagogy

Freinet pedagogy is a cooperative, democratic and learner-centered approach that emphasizes experiential learning, democratic values, and the integration of real-life experiences into the educational process. The main

principles and values of Freinet pedagogy include free expression and communication, where students are encouraged to express themselves freely and communicate their thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Also, Freinet pedagogy emphasizes the use of work methods and techniques that promote active experiential learning. Learning through practical experiences and projects, such as printing, correspondence, and observation, is seen as crucial for students' intellectual and social development. Collaboration and cooperative learning are central to Freinet pedagogy. Students are encouraged to work together on projects and activities. The belief that cooperative learning fosters social skills, teamwork, and a sense of community among students (Lahlou, Mpaltas & Karakatsani, 2017. Freinet, 1974. Freinet, Clandfield & Sivell, 1990).

At the heart of Freinet pedagogy is the promotion and the implementation of democratic values within the classroom. Students are involved in decision-making processes, and there is an emphasis on equality and respect for each individual. It is a central value of this approach that democratic practices in the classroom contribute to the development of responsible and engaged citizens. Furthermore, students are given a degree of freedom and autonomy in their learning. They have the opportunity to choose topics, projects, and methods that interest them. Autonomy fosters a sense of responsibility, motivation, and a genuine interest in learning. Finally, this approach encourages observation of the natural environment and experimentation as methods of learning. The belief that firsthand experiences and observation contribute to a deeper understanding of the world, and that students learn by actively engaging with their surroundings. The underlying value here is that education should go beyond isolated subjects and be connected to the realities of life, society, and the world. These principles and values collectively create an educational philosophy that places the learner at the center, emphasizes active participation and collaboration, and seeks to prepare students for active and responsible citizenship (Lahlou, Mpaltas & Karakatsani, 2017. Freinet, 1974. Freinet, Clandfield & Sivell, 1990).

Skasiarchio and the ideas of Community School and Deschooling

Skasiarchio's teachers have been questing to establish schools of the community, a notion that is bears influences by many fields and theoretical traditions, such as Critical Pedagogy or Community Psychology. The political stake at the core of this endeavor is deschooling, that is, the quest to transcend the walls of the school in order to create links with the students' communities and actual lives. The main goal is to ensure that students are given space to talk about things that matter to them, by exploring the

history of their neighborhoods and their cities, and by sharing their visions for the presents and futures of their communities (Mpaltas, 2020).

More specifically, connecting the ideas of Freinet pedagogy with those of the community school involves integrating learner-centered and experiential learning principles with a community-oriented and inclusive approach to education. Both educational approaches share a commitment to holistic development, collaboration, and a connection between learning and the broader community. By combining the principles of Freinet pedagogy with the community school model, educators can create a learning environment that not only focuses on individual development but also actively engages students in the life and well-being of the community in which they live. This approach fosters a sense of social responsibility, citizenship, and a deeper connection between education and the broader community context (Mpaltas, 2020).

On the other hand, "Deschooling" is a concept that originated with educational philosopher Ivan Illich in his 1971 book 'Deschooling Society'. Illich argued that the institutionalization of education in formal schools was counterproductive and limiting. Deschooling, in Illich's view, involves challenging the traditional assumptions about education and questioning the need for compulsory schooling. The term 'deschooling' can have different meanings in different contexts, but it often suggests liberating individuals from the constraints of traditional educational institutions. This liberation allows for more flexibility in learning and the exploration of alternative educational approaches. Deschooling encourages a shift towards informal and non-institutionalized forms of learning. This could include learning through real-life experiences, and pursuing knowledge outside a formal school setting. Deschooling recognizes the value of collaborative and social learning experiences outside the traditional classroom setting. It's important to note that deschooling, unlike its neoliberal understanding, doesn't mean the elimination of formal education but rather a rethinking and reimagining of the educational process (Illich, 1971. Mpaltas, 2020).

The creation of Social Pedagogy Group

In 2020, though, the pandemic-induced restrictive policies dictated that schools should shift online. We were then all obliged to stay apart from each other. That's when we started wondering: How can our school communities stay together when we are forced to keep distances? How can we achieve democracy in our schools when our lives are constantly supervised? How can collaboration and inclusion be achieved in isolation? How could we even imagine that emerging inequalities would be reversed, while many of our students and families now had even more limited access to basic resources?

But that wasn't all. The new government's neoliberal, neoconservative agenda further impacted our local communities and our students' lives: the rapid privatization of our public spaces, the commodification of public resources, the criminalization of solidarity, the ban on public demonstrations, the discriminatory policies and state violence towards citizens and non-citizens, further fueled the existing inequalities and infringed on fundamental rights. In response to these hostile politics, many social grassroots movements arose locally, as people were reclaiming their right to their city.

The group's operations commenced with the adoption of the philosophy of social pedagogy. From our perspective, social pedagogy draws its foundational elements through collaboration with social movements, critiquing traditional schooling, embracing self-management, and advocating for communalism. The commitment to engagement, mission, inclusion, and the reorientation of sensory experiences for the betterment of children becomes a foundational aspect. This entails a deliberate confrontation and conflict with poverty, injustice, and lack of freedom, shaping both the constitution and subjectivity of those engaging in pedagogical actions.

The idea of social pedagogy

Karl Mager is widely regarded as the father of Social Pedagogy, having introduced the term in 1844 as an alternative to individual-centered and collective pedagogy. Mager laid the groundwork for Social Pedagogy by advocating for the continuous education of individuals throughout their lives and championing inclusive education for all social strata. His emphasis on social criticism as a starting point underscored the need for society's commitment to improving the educational and social circumstances of disadvantaged social groups.

In the 20th century, Social Pedagogy significantly evolved in response to events surrounding the First and Second World Wars. However, it is essential to note that the field of social pedagogy has never been a singular space, both in terms of ideas and common definitions (both academic and non-academic) and in terms of practical implementation. The ideas and principles of social pedagogy are found, in various forms, across many Western and Eastern European countries and further afield, as in some Latin American countries (Ucar, 2013).

As a concept, social pedagogy is founded on humanistic values and an image of children as active agents and competent, resourceful human beings.

Within social pedagogy, a transformative conceptualization of children emerged, viewing them as inherently equal human beings. Influenced by pedagogists as Korczak and by the New Education movement, children are seen as resourceful, capable, and active agents. Often social pedagogy is mentioned as 'education in its widest sense', a holistic approach towards children's experiential learning with head, heart, and hands (Moss & Petrie, 2019).

Social pedagogy extends beyond traditional educational settings to encompass a broader range of social and community contexts. Social pedagogy emphasizes the development of the whole person, taking into account their cognitive, emotional, social, and physical aspects. Building positive and supportive relationships is a central aspect of social pedagogy. Practitioners aim to create a respectful and trusting environment where individuals feel valued and understood. Social pedagogy seeks to empower individuals to take an active role in their own development and in the communities to which they belong. This involves fostering a sense of agency, autonomy, and responsibility. Social pedagogy promotes inclusivity, valuing diversity and recognizing the unique strengths and contributions of each individual. It seeks to create environments that are open, accepting, and respectful of differences. Social pedagogy often involves hands-on, experiential learning. Activities and experiences are designed to facilitate personal and social development, allowing individuals to learn from their interactions with others and the world around them. Social pedagogy is often associated with a commitment to social justice. Practitioners may work towards addressing social inequalities and promoting a more just and equitable society (Cameron & Moss, 2011). Social pedagogy can be conceptualized as an approach that combines social and educational interventions and perspectives to improve the human condition and change society for the better (Stephens, 2013).

In Greece, perhaps the most characteristic example of social pedagogy is the diverse action of EAM with the establishment of EPON. Michalis Papamavros and Rosa Imvrioti are some of his most emblematic personalities (Chrysis, 2020).

Social pedagogy and social movement

If in 2010 we started talking about a school linked with the community, in 2020 we could say that, for Freinet teachers, the community itself became the school. Standing in solidarity with the community struggles, Skasiarchio decided to create a social pedagogy group that would coordinate its action with the social movements. As we see it, social pedagogy draws its elements

from its collaboration with social movements, the quest for self-governance and communitarianism.

Freinet techniques do have elements of social movements. They include assemblies, minutes, posters, cooperatives, action, public sphere, radio, solidarity and love for the institutions that we ourselves create. Hence, we could say that, during and after the pandemic, Freinet collaborative pedagogy served as a compass for our social pedagogy group, in order to design interventions in free public spaces of the community that would invite children to join collective action, use their voice, share their views and claim new spaces in the city.

The relationship between social pedagogy practices and social movements is characterized by a shared commitment to social justice, inclusion, and the empowerment of individuals and communities. Social pedagogy, with its emphasis on holistic development, relationship-centered approach, and a commitment to addressing social inequalities, aligns closely with the goals and values of many social movements. Both social pedagogy and social movements often share foundational values such as equality, justice, inclusivity, and respect for diversity. Social pedagogy emphasizes empowering individuals to take an active role in their own development. Similarly, social movements frequently seek to empower marginalized or oppressed groups to advocate for their rights and create positive social change. The empowerment aspect of social pedagogy can resonate with the goals of various social movements.

Social pedagogy views education as a transformative force in individuals' lives and society at large. Social movements often recognize the role of education in raising awareness, challenging societal norms, and promoting change. The educational aspects of social pedagogy can complement the educational and awareness-building efforts of social movements.

Social pedagogy often involves working within communities and building strong relationships. Social movements, too, often rely on community engagement and grassroots efforts to effect change. The community-oriented approach of social pedagogy can contribute to and align with the community-building efforts of social movements. Solidarity in our neighbourhoods is a way of correcting inequalities in food, education, leisure and culture. For us, it is crucial that through social pedagogy we join collective action, we connect with the social movements on the ground, and we defend our public spaces which are being privatized and commodified. Social pedagogy stands as a critique to the mainstream, traditional, hierarchical school system, as an alternative educational approach. Through

collaboration with social movements, which would not be allowed in our schools otherwise, we also get to know our students and our communities even better. Social pedagogy teachers who are active in their school neighborhoods get more chances to interact with their students outside the formal school setting. Thus, teachers have more freedom to experiment with educational tools and approaches that otherwise wouldn't fit nor be welcome in school.

The actions of the Group for the past three years

Beginning to design and implement actions during the pandemic in the centre of Athens very soon we came across some important issues that further influenced our work. One consideration has to do with the fact that children become more and more absent from the public space. At the same time, child-friendly public spaces in the city tend to become fewer. Through social pedagogy interventions in the community, we intend to identify additional public spaces in the city that can be accessed and used by children. Some of our social pedagogy group actions took place in: Athens hills, parks-squares-and streets, self-managed community spaces and squats, as well as during protests and festivals. On Strefi Hill, Finopoulos Hill, Fokionos Negri, Plato's Academy, but also in Exarchia, children did radio, puppet theater and Karagiozis shadow theatre, worked with fairy tales, children's literature and haiku, created engravings and small books.

Pandemic pushed us to look for ways to continue meeting with our students when the schools closed. But after a three-year experience we confirm that meeting our students outside the school walls and hours, in social pedagogy contexts, allowed us to build stronger relationships not only with them, but also with their families and their/our communities.

Conclusions

From the actions and the activities of the Social Pedagogy Group of Skasiarchio we can draw some preliminary conclusions about the combination of the philosophy of social pedagogy with Freinet pedagogy.

The quarantine, during the coronavirus pandemic, led some members of the Skasiarchia to seek new ways of communicating and meeting with their students and their families, reasons to overcome distancing, but also to create educational spaces in the community and the neighborhood with the principles of Freinet Pedagogy as a compass and reconceptualizing some of its techniques. This period gave birth to useful ideas and conclusions for enriching the idea of a school that is collaborative, democratic, open to the

community, going beyond the walls of the school building. The "emergency" of the pandemic highlighted a new way of coexistence and cooperation inside and outside the walls, which redefined the pedagogical and social visions of the group. Finally, it underlined another important dimension, the need to defend public spaces and claim the presence of childhood in them, especially given that at this stage public spaces are increasingly shrinking. The pandemic in 2020 took us out of school. The center of Athens became a place of learning for children with public spaces claimed by social movements and gave the experience of unschooling in terms of resistance to the dominant educational discourse.

The combination of the principles and values of the Freinet Pedagogy with the ideas of Social Pedagogy can create a comprehensive democratic and learner-centered approach to education. Both approaches share some common principles, such as a focus on the holistic development of individuals, the importance of experiential learning, and an emphasis on active participation and collaboration. This approach can complement Freinet pedagogy's focus on experiential learning and real-life activities. In a combined approach, teachers can create environments that empower students to take an active role in their own education, fostering a sense of autonomy and agency.

Freinet pedagogy often involves hands-on, project-based learning. Social pedagogy can enhance this by incorporating real-world experiences and practical activities that not only contribute to academic learning but also promote personal and social development. Social pedagogy's emphasis on community and relationship building can be integrated into Freinet practices. Teachers can design projects that involve collaboration with the local community, encouraging students to connect their learning experiences with real-world issues. Freinet pedagogy is known for its democratic principles, and social pedagogy shares a commitment to democratic values. Social pedagogy's emphasis on inclusivity aligns with Freinet's principles. Educators can create learning experiences that celebrate diversity and accommodate various learning styles, ensuring that the educational environment is welcoming to all students. Both pedagogical approaches value reflection. Teachers can incorporate practices that encourage students to critically reflect on their learning experiences, personal development, and contributions to the community.

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