Ask me what I think: Service learning and the development of civic skills in pre-service teachers' training

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1   INTRODUCTION

Recognized for its benefits, SL has been widely adopted across the US and many other countries (Bentley-Williams & Morgan, 2013; Carrington, Mercer, Iyer & Selva, 2015) in different educational settings: from kindergartens to high schools (Kielsmeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain & Neal., 2004), colleges, teaching universities, research universities and graduate schools, (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Furco, 2001) and in community-based organizations Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014).

Many authors have discussed the applicability of service learning in teacher education, proposing different curricula (Anderson, 1998; MacPhail & Sohun, 2018; Lee, Park & Chun, 2018). Arguing about SL and teacher education, Anderson (1998) proposes a simple and efficient definition of SL presenting it as "both a philosophy of education and an instructional method" (Anderson, 1998, p. 2). The relationship between this wide vision on education (a civic and engaged approach) and an instructional approach (didactic) is particularly close for pre-service teachers who are involved in learning how to teach and need to have themselves a clear vision of the meaning of teaching. The pedagogical competence, in fact, is a practical wisdom rooted in a theoretical view that nurtures the conception of teaching action (Mortari, 2007). It's years since literature showed that carefully planned SL projects in teacher's training can contribute to both K-12 students' and pre-service teachers' development and learning (Root, 1997; Vess, Cavendish & Li-Barber, 2018).

Even if many Universities have adopted SL programs in teacher education programs (Anderson & Erickson, 2003), only few scholars have carried out research on them (Kirtman, 2008). Most of the research on SL and teacher education focuses on the social aspects of learning, while only a few studies deal with the learning of teaching methods and strategies (Kirtman, 2008). Available researches have demonstrated that SL has an important impact on pre-service teacher learning for: understanding society dynamics (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Kronick, 2007); de-constructing stereotypes and group stigmas (Hale, 2008); attention for students with different social and ethnical background or coming from disadvantaged contexts (Hunt, 2007; Carrington & Saggers, 2008); working with children with special needs or ESL (Russel, 2007; Neeper & Dymond, 2012); building a learning community of practices involving both pre-service and in-service teachers (for example during training sessions) and the entire school or social community (Swick, 2001); a deep understanding of social challenges (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; Carrington & Saggers, 2008); the comprehension of teaching as an occasion for acting care and social justice (Mortari, 2017; Petersen & Henning, 2018). Conner (2010) underlines that all these goals can be really achieved only within a carefully planned and guided curriculum: on

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the contrary, initial stereotypes and prejudices about "in need" people or teaching profession can be enforced (Baldwin, Buchanan & Rudisill, 2007; Erickson & O'Connor, 2000;).

Despite of the ample series of research, few are studies that examine the outputs of a SL experience from a bottom-up perspective, starting from students' lived experience. The research experience carried out at the Verona University (Italy) has this aim.

2   OBJECTIVES

Within the Master's Degree in Primary School Education is enrolled a SL Program: this program involves (a) students of the last two years, (b) in-service teachers coming from different schools and (c) an academic team that has collectively assumed the role of supervisor. This program is characterized as a Community Research Service Learning (Mortari et al., 2017) because students not only achieve academic outcomes through a service action aimed to respond to a specific need of a community (in this case a school community) but they are also requested to develop an educational research related to their service action and to write a research dissertation on this. On one side, this strengthens the link with the community and on the other supports the pre-service teachers' research skills, which have been identified by the European Union (2014) as key skills for teachers' training. the development of research skills of future teachers is central, because in order to understand what is happening in a real context, a teacher must know how to get in touch with the authentic and not idealized everyday life and therefore must know how to look "inside" it (Mortari, 2007.

This program, that started in 2014, at the moment involves about 100 students (pre-service teachers) and as many in-service teachers, supervised by five teachers and four academic tutors.

The program is implemented with five steps.

In the **first step** students learn what they need to attend the SL program during the Course of Educational Research (60 hours) and the related Workshop (15 hours): they learn about SL theoretical basis, its success elements and the outputs expected. They also learn the necessary tools to plan, observe, document and analyse their SL experience. More specifically, they learn how to intend a school need, how to design an intervention starting from it, how to use qualitative observation tools, how to create a qualitative report of the experience and how to analyze actions for improving efficacy.

In the **second step** the pre-service teachers are put in connection with the in-service teachers: it's a delicate phase because, after choosing the level of school in which they want to be trained (kindergarten, or primary school), they have to build a good relationship with their mentor, since they have to share two years of school together, whose value is strategic for both their and children's education.

The **third step** of the program is focused on the identification of the community's need. Similarly, to many SL programs, in the first period, students are involved in a survey phase: but, in Verona program, this phase does not precede the entrance of the pre-service teachers in the context. The need is defined during the first weeks of their induction as a result of the cooperation between the in-service and pre-service teachers. Putting in action what they had learnt during the Course of Educational Research the students, together with the in-service teacher, identify the "problem" on which the action will be focused: a problem that is relevant for the class.

The **fourth step** of this program concerns the service action: pre-service and in-service teachers are called upon to design an action (an educational program, a teaching program, an evaluation program, etc.) aimed at responding to the previously identified needs. Their roles within the different phases of this action are decided by mutual agreement not only with the aim of implementing the action itself, but also with the aim of gaining the training objectives of the SL experience. During this phase, the academic team has the responsibility to supervise the design of the action, to support pre-service and in-service teachers in case of need and to mentor the pre-service teachers in order to guide their academic learning. Moreover, in this step, the pre-service teachers use called upon to develop an educational research that uses qualitative tools to collect and analyse the data about the action they have conducted. Thanks to a cooperation in the research (3rd) and action (4th) phases, our SL becomes an opportunity to build a dialogue between two kinds of knowledge: the academic "news" brought by pre-service teachers and the deep experiential wisdom elaborated by practitioners.

Finally, the **fifth step** of this project regards the development of the final dissertation of the Master's Degree based on SL experience. Our SL program has a straight aim: to develop research skills. Research skills, in fact, are increasingly seen to be essential for the professional definition of teachers (European Commission, 2014), as they allow them to reach the transition from technicians to competent professionals (He & Prater, 2014), even if it is rarely cultivated during teacher training programs. Moreover, this methodology starting from real problems, gives to future teacher the possibility to become more and more suitable to the needs of the context (Kellehe & Farley, 2006). The writing of the dissertation is the moment when students put in words their research project, from the need's identification to the collection and analyses of data. Thanks to this writing they reflect on the practice and really learn a pedagogical posture.

In order to optimize the program, we decided to conduct a research aimed at investigating which achievements, among those gained from the SL experience, students consider to be important for their personal and professional growth. Hence, we developed a research which wants to answer to the following research question: "starting from their experience, what achievement the students think they have gained from their involvement in SL Program?".

3 METHODOLOGY

Coherently to our aim, we chose an ecological paradigm that follows the epistemic principle according to which, in order to understand experience, we must study the world of meanings in which a person moves (Merriam, 2002). We choose a phenomenological approach because it is particularly suitable to explore the meanings that people give to their experience (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The method of inquiry is inspired by the phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy, because its aim is to examine the problem starting from the subjects' lived experiences.

The tool chosen to collect data are the reflexive texts that students are requested to write at the end of their SL path. This way of gathering data leads the researchers to acquire direct knowledge of the subjects' world, following the principle of adherence to reality. The phenomenological analysis of the data allows to identify relevant units and to label them through a share labeling process (Mortari, 2007). This analysis procedure implies a high investment in conception and in critical and reflexive thought, in order to guarantee a rigorous epistemological framework. For this reason, it involves detailed and consistent analytic-critical practices and frequent confrontations among researchers.

The main principle of this method involves searching for a descriptive theory which was inductively constructed. In order to achieve this aim, we adhered to the following 'experiential rules':

- reading data many times;

- exploring data without a map of ideas and epistemic moves already defined (i.e. cultivating open attention);

- recursively going back to data to have the possibility of understanding the smallest details;

- being patient: the researcher must develop a restful posture of the mind in order to listen to the text;

- during the process of constructing the descriptive theory, monitoring the words to enable them to express with faithfulness the meanings emerging from the analysis

(Mortari, 2007).

Data analysis produces "working theories" inductively built, that enables the gradual structuring of the interpretation process and ordering of the emerging data (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 38).

4 RESULTS

The research was conducted between October 2017 and January 2018 and involved 40 students. The inductive process of the phenomenological-hermeneutic method adopted (Mortari, 2007) brought us to elaborate a coding structured in two different levels (labels and categories). In the following table, we propose the coding system attesting the achievements recognized by students at the end of their SL experience:

Table 1

Coding system

Professional skills	Increasing of the professional knowledge
	Completion of the professional profile
	Development of reflective skills
	Development of a service perspective
	Development of research skills
"Transversal" (or "personal") skills	Development of the skill to learn from mistakes and to manage crisis
	Development of the skill to handle the unexpected
	Development of self-critical skills
	Supporting the motivation
Inter-relational skills	Development of the collaborative skill
	Development of empathic listening
	Development of a child-centred approach

In this paper, we won't present the entire research, so we decided to focus our attention on the civic skills. We chose to "go through" the data and the labels, looking for the civic skills that students affirm to have gained thanks to the SL experience. Actually, in the coding emerge labels connected to the civic skills transversally in the three categories. This is coherent with a perspective that see civic skills not as something that characterize only a specific "side" of human life (professional, personal, etc..) but that cross all these aspects. Moreover, "this diversity points to a strength of service learning in that it does not insist on any particular definition of civic and can be designed to address any of a range of contextor discipline-specific conceptualizations" (Bringle & Clayton, 2012, p. 112). Coherently with that we can define civic skills as all "the cognitive operations that enable the learner to understand, explain, compare, and evaluate principles and practices of government and citizenship" (Patrick, 1997, p. 2). They are defined as what makes people able to act collectively for a community goal, leading to civic engagement and enhancing participation and democracy (Hatcher, 2011; Putnam, 1995).

From our analysis, what emerge are four labels that appear connected with civic skills: (a) the ability to act in a service perspective; (b) the empathic listening; (c) the self-critical skills and (d) the collaborative skills. In this paper, it is not possible to go deeper into all these four elements and for this reason we have decided to focus on the first two of them.

As regard a **service perspective**, according to our students the SL experience helps them to develop an ethic posture that enhances the role of service, lived as an action aimed to take care of the other, making the difference for someone.

"I was able to experience what it means to offer a service [...] For the first time, helping the teacher, I really felt that what I was doing was useful" (Student B2, reflective text, December 15, 2017)**.**

This sincere desire to help someone is strictly connected to respect, a virtue that needs reciprocal knowledge and time (to be developed):

"As the time goes on, you learn how to know others. Knowledge is the prelude to respect and respect leads to the desire to help the other." (Student S1, reflective text, February 12, 2018)

The service made of respect, knowledge and time and aimed to be useful, is not only one-way: students affirm they received in return trust and acceptance.

"I felt the trust that the teacher had in me and her desire to feel supported by me" (Student G2, reflective text, December 20, 2017)**.**

The student affirms to live a "service" intended not as "charity", a position that hides a non-democratic relationship. From our students' words, it emerges a vision of the service as an ethical gesture based on mutual care, whose aim is the empowerment of the whole community for the achievement of a common goal. Assuming a community-based perspective and being part of the community itself is what maximizes the transformative potential of SL (Lake and Jones, 2008), but it is also the result of the development of a solid grammar of civic skills (Mortari, 2017).

The second skill that we want to analyze in this presentation is the **empathic listening** that our students define as the capability to listen to someone taking into account his/her feelings: "people can be fragile" (C1) and an unreflective action could be hurtful:

"The program makes me reflect on how it is important to act respecting others' emotions because people can be fragile. But to do this [respect others' emotions] you first must listen to them carefully."

(Student C1, reflective text, March 7, 2018)

Moreover, this empathic listening presupposes to pay attention to someone taking into account his/her points of view: for students, the SL program helped them to learn how to "put themselves in brackets", welcoming others' world.

"I learned that you must see things from points of view which are different from your own, because otherwise you can't really listen others." (Student C1, reflective text, March 7, 2018)

Our students' words underline that to be an empathic listener also implies the capability to deal with silence: not only to be silent but also to accept and understand others' silence.

"[SL] helped me to make my mind open to welcome another world, a world that can be made by words or by silence. Indeed, the silence is fundamental to welcome others." (Student S3, reflective text, January 17, 2018)

This vision of empathic listening echoes the concept of *epoché*, the epistemic move that founds a phenomenological approach to research and knowledge. *Epoché* is defined as a way of "going back to the things themselves'" (Husserl, 1970, p. 252), a way of staying faithful to the phenomenon, bracketing preconceptions, silencing the human tendency to read reality through our habitual filters.. Nevertheless, this attitude implies an ethical posture able to listen to others' needs: this should not be understood as a passive bending to others' requests, but as the ability to be engaged in actions whose goal is useful for everyone involved in the context (Mortari, 2017).

5 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, according to our analysis, the Verona Program enforces service perspective and empathic listening in personal and professional life of pre-service teachers. These elements are coherent with an enhancing of civic skills because it improves in future teachers a cooperative vision of teaching, related to a deeper civic engagement of these professionals (Battistoni, 1997; Lavery, 2007; Mortari, 2017). But what these elements have in common? We think that what connect them is an ethical vision of life inspired by care. Indeed care, in its ethical core, means to act looking for the good not only of the individual but also of the others and of the institutions (Ricoeur, 1992). But, in order to do this, you should be able to put yourself in brackets, because otherwise you can't understand what is good for the others, and then to direct personal actions in a service perspective (Mortari, 2017, 2018).

These reflections are coherent with what emerged from our students' feedback, and this show us that our SL program improve in our students' civic skills inspired by an ethic of care. An ethic of care that puts this concept into a political framework that go beyond a narrow vision of the teaching profession and see it as the core element to reach a more democratic vision of society that nourishes a public life inspired by the principles of solidarity, responsibility, commitment to the community.

6 REFERENCES

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