Pre-service teachers addressing children’s social exclusion in the classroom: The virtue of identification

Ginta Gedzune
Daugavpils University, 1-432 Parades Street, Daugavpils LV-5401, Latvia

Abstract
This paper shares an experience from a course “Education for Sustainable Development” in pre-service teacher education. When exploring social exclusion in classrooms as a threat to sustainable education, 28 pre-service teachers role-played a specific problem situation, identifying with a socially excluded pupil, her peer, their teacher and her two colleagues. Analysis of qualitative data from students’ group discussions and individual reflection which followed the said identification highlights the importance of organizing learning about mitigation of pupils’ exclusion in ways that supplement general, abstract deliberation with specific, hands-on learning experiences to foster deeper understanding, openness to multiple perspectives and personal commitment.

Keywords: Social exclusion, pre-service teachers, role play, identification;

1. Introduction
The concept of sustainability describes a desired quality of a better world where social cohesion is an important element (Salite & Pipere, 2006). A sustainable relationship is thus socially and environmentally inclusive (Schultz, 2002). Conversely, exclusion can be said to give an unsustainable coloring to a relationship. Social exclusion thus emerges as a problem to be addressed in aiming for a more sustainable present and future. Its significance across the entire social fabric cannot be overestimated, especially with regard to the most vulnerable amongst us – the young. Children’s suffering from social exclusion in their classrooms is widely recognized as a severe problem deserving the closest attention. Its solution generally rests on the shoulders of teachers with empirical research (Friedman, Razer, & Sykes, 2004) marking them as key figures in reducing children’s social exclusion in educational setting. It is hence crucial for teacher educators to seek better ways to prepare future professionals for dealing with this issue.

Such preparation can take various routes. What matters most, though, is rendering the teachers not only capable of identifying instances of social exclusion in their classrooms, but also able to become profoundly personally engaged with the situations they encounter, feel deeply for their participants and perceive the state of affairs from multiple perspectives of those involved in order to find the best solution. In other words, a teacher should be able to
identify with the participants of a situation involving social exclusion. Identification is conceptualized as the use of reflection and imagination to take on a perspective of another in order to enter into their situation and experience (Fox, 2000; Naess, 2000). Such empathetic taking on of another’s perspective is said to decrease the degree of separateness between self and other, and extend the boundaries of ego by including otherness (Schultz, 2000).

The study described in this paper rests on an assumption that identification can be used as a pedagogical technique in teacher education to prepare them for mitigating children’s social exclusion in their classrooms. The performed small-scale inquiry thus aimed to determine how identification with participants of a particular situation concerned with a child’s social exclusion in educational setting affects pre-service teachers’ view on the problem.

2. Context and method

The study was embedded in the process of implementing a course “Education for Sustainable Development” among first-year students of professional bachelor study programs “Preschool Teacher” and “Basic Education Teacher” at a regional university. The format of the course seeks to balance theoretical lectures with practical seminars where students reflect on and discuss the issues encountered during course acquisition with a view to enhancing sense-making and internalization of insights into their professional theories of practice (Gravett, 2004).

Data for the present study were collected from 28 student participants in May 2012. The process of data gathering can be roughly divided into three stages: (1) preparation – a lecture about the social dimension of sustainability and the problem of exclusion which undermines social sustainability, (2) action – a seminar where students identify with participants of a situation involving a child’s social exclusion in classroom environment, (3) reflection – oral group discussion at the end of the seminar and written individual deliberation at home about the students’ experience of identification. The second and third stages warrant some additional explanation.

During the seminar the students were introduced to a specific situation involving a child named Anna suffering from social exclusion in the classroom setting (Table 1) with key information about the parties concerned outlined on worksheets. Firstly, the students individually contemplated the situation from the perspective of the three teachers, wrote down and provided justification for the steps to be taken to solve the problem (first level of identification). Then an opportunity was suggested to role-play a meeting of the parties involved in the situation of Anna’s social exclusion in the classroom (second level of identification). Roles were assigned by random drawing. All students with the same role formed a group, discussed the situation and prepared their speech for the meeting, which was then role-played. At the end of the seminar, the students began reflecting on their experience of identification – discussed how they felt and what they believed to have learned. Reflection was continued at home by answering in writing the following questions: what solution would I propose to Anna’s situation? what is the justification for my proposal? what did the experience of identification make me as a future professional realize about children’s social exclusion in the classroom? did something change in my perception of this problem? The data sources for the study thus include worksheets for class work (where students wrote the steps to be taken from the perspective of the three involved teachers), role cards (where students wrote down the description of their role and prepared their character’s speech for the meeting between the parties involved) and worksheets for homework (where students reviewed their experience of identification). Qualitative content analysis (Granenheim & Lundman, 2004) was applied to these data – multiple readings to identify recurrent patterns and overarching themes.

3. Findings

The performed analysis surfaced a range of themes in the research participants’ perception of children’s social exclusion in educational settings, which will be discussed below and supported by extracts from the data pool.

I. Immediate and underlying causes. The students believe a child can be socially excluded by peers because of deviant behavior. The deeper causes for such child’s conduct, however, often are to be found in the family. Thus, neglect from parents is regarded as resulting in the child’s deviant behavior which is aimed at drawing the attention she does not sufficiently receive at home.
I realize it’s a hard time for the girl, that she feels unloved and deserted. Lonely because, although she lives with Granny, she lacks her parents’ attention.

Table 1. Situation and persons involved: Tips for students’ identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of the situation</th>
<th>Tips for Anna, her classmate Maria and Ms Hill:</th>
<th>Tips for Ms Cane and Ms Rose:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Hill, a primary education teacher, has trouble with Anna – a girl from her class. Recently Anna’s parents have procured employment in another country, leaving Anne to the guardianship of her Grandmother. Lately, Ms Hill observes changes in Anna’s behavior. The once lively, friendly, inquisitive girl has become different – comes unprepared for lessons, noisily disturbs her peers’ learning. The latest incidents involve picking a fight with her classmate and throwing a flowerpot off the windowsill. Anna’s desk mate refuses to sit with her. During recess, the children avoid talking to or playing with Anna. Ms Hill is confused about what to do. How to act in a way that would be ethical towards Anna and other children, how to find a solution that would benefit all? Colleagues suggest some advice. Ms Cane proposes to tighten the reins on Anna and not leave her antics unpunished while Ms Rose believes Anna needs help rather than penalty.</td>
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<td>Ms Hill, Ms Cane and Ms Rose: Prepare to describe the situation you find yourself in and give account of your side of the story during a meeting of teachers and children. What is happening in your class? Why do you think it is happening? How does it make you feel? What would you like to change? Do you need help? What kind of help?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms Hill, Ms Cane and Ms Rose: Prepare to describe the situation you find yourself in and give account of your side of the story during a meeting of teachers and children. What do you know about the situation in Ms Hill’s class? How do you see the situation and its causes? What is your advice to Ms Hill? Have you had similar experience?</td>
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II. Ethical concerns with regards to solutions. The participants were adamant that punishing the deviant behavior of a socially excluded child is a morally reprehensible approach rooted in the teacher’s short-sightedness and failure to address the root of the problem. The students believe that help rather than penalty is required to ensure a solution is found which benefits all the parties concerned. Possible paths to be pursued that were suggested by the research participants lead into three directions which, nevertheless, have one ultimate destination – child’s inclusion:

• **Teacher-child pathway, underpinned by faith in the virtues of dialogue and care**: paying special attention to the child in question, though, at the same time, taking care not to neglect others in any way, and calmly talking over the situation with the child tête-à-tête in a manner inviting confidence and candidness.

> I’ll treat Anna with love, respect and care. (...) I’ll pay more attention to her because she feels lonely and excluded in the classroom.

> First of all, I’ll definitely talk to the girl because it is of paramount importance to learn about her problems. I’ll start the conversation very carefully, will ask how she feels and tell her that she can trust me, that, despite everything, she is a very good, kind girl... My task is to draw Anna into a candid conversation and support her, make her feel that all will be well.

• **Teacher-child-peers pathway, underpinned by faith in the healing power of social interaction**: involving the child in the academic and social life of the classroom and in extracurricular activities together with other learners.

> Anna can’t be separated from other children; on the contrary, she should be involved in different events and hobby clubs so that she doesn’t feel alone (...). I would try to involve Anna with all the rest of the children in different games so that the children feel that Anna is just like them.

• **Teacher-child-family pathway, underpinned by faith in the nurturing effects of genuine participation of significant others in the child’s life**: discussing the issue with the child’s family to find ways to help the child.

> I think the girl feels alone, abandoned and not needed by anyone. In my opinion, her Granny should definitely be involved and together we can help Anna cope with this crisis.
III. Magnitude of the teacher’s role. The students believe it is the teacher’s professional responsibility to notice instances of children’s’ social exclusion in their classroom and do all in their power to remedy the situation. The teacher is seen as the key figure whose thoughtful, heartfelt and timely intervention or lack thereof either sustains or undermines a favorable climate in the classroom conducive to the children’s academic and social flourishing.

The teacher can hear the child’s thoughts and feelings, and give help (..) We must give the love that parents can’t give from abroad. After all, the teacher is the one who cares what happens to children in the classroom.

The study also suggests the following about identification as a pedagogical technique for facilitating pre-service teachers’ readiness to mitigate children’s social exclusion in educational milieu:

I. Benefit of specification

This activity helped me not only discuss this topical issue in general terms, but “enter” into a specific situation, find myself in the shoes of a particular child, take an in-depth look at the child’s behavior and underlying motives. To me, specification is very important, because sometimes we proclaim general ideas or profess impersonal beliefs and yet act in opposite ways when facing concrete situations.

II. Emotional involvement through evocation of similar past experiences

This activity made me think how Anne feels and how I would feel in her place. I’d feel very sad and bitter because it is very important for children, especially in junior forms, to have their parents close by (..) I have been in such a situation myself, so these feelings are familiar...

III. Openness to multiple perspectives

This activity enabled me, a prospective teacher, to examine the problem of exclusion from another point of view because, in my capacity as a pupil, I never tried to imagine myself in the teacher’s position, and looked at this problem of exclusion from a different perspective.

IV. Change of views – breadth and depth of insight

This activity helped me, a pre-service teacher, realize how many different approaches are there to be taken to solve Anna’s situation (..) My thoughts on this issue expanded and I began to view this situation as a problem.

My way of looking at this problem definitely changed. When we worked in groups to formulate our opinions in preparation for role-play, I listened to all my group mates and it made me understand that the child deserves help and support (..) I also changed my idea of what a good teacher should be like – kind and sweet.

V. Commitment to act

I think my view on this problem has changed for the best, because I truly and with all my heart wish to help children fit in the classroom and in the society.

It made me think of how I could help the child in her situation (..) I consider this problem to be very serious and just know that I’ll do all in my power not to allow it in my classes.

4. Conclusion

The present study explored the possibility of using identification as a pedagogical technique for facilitating pre-service teachers’ learning about children’s social exclusion in the classroom as an issue that undermines social sustainability in general and educational sustainability in particular. Role-playing a specific problem situation, which involved pre-service teachers’ identification, i.e. using imagination in order to enter in the perspectives of participants in a case of a child’s social exclusion, was supported by individual reflection and discussion in groups. The described research being a small-scale investigation into the particulars of a specific practice of implementing teacher education for sustainability precludes extensive generalization across other contexts. Yet it is to be hoped that the practice-bound insights achieved during this study can inform practice in similar situations. Most notably, the study yields support to the usage of identification in teacher education about schoolchildren’s social exclusion in
order to give future professionals an opportunity to change focus from the general to the specific, experience emotional involvement with an issue of concern, become open to a diversity of perspectives, have such openness expand and deepen their outlook as well as develop a personal commitment to contribute to the mitigation of social exclusion in educational settings.

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