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ACTORS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS AS CREATORS OF A MORE EQUITABLE EDUCATION

PEDAGOGY STUDENTS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE: INITIAL EDUCATION AS SUPPORT IN ACTION AND FOR ACTION

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Introduction

We believe that progress toward equity can only be achieved through changes in the conception and practice of education that would involve dialogue and the adoption of a participatory approach by all stakeholders in the education system (Klees & Qargha, 2014). That is why we, as pedagogists, do not seek to define equity, but rather question our own role in advancing it in education. We rely on the premises that pedagogists can instigate change in education (Krnjaja et al., 2023) and that the focus should be redirected to pedagogists' role in supporting changes in education and developing their professional practice in an ethical direction (Pavlović Breneselović, 2013).

For individuals to develop as advocates for justice, their initial education must foster the critical analysis of their own practices, education, and society (Stančić, 2020). This means that pedagogists who initiate change need opportunities for action, reflection, and participation in their initial education. Research on student participation has highlighted the need for higher education institutions to continuously seek ways to enhance student participation in both academic and extracurricular activities (Weaver & Qi, 2005). What is a better way to examine the education of pedagogists than having them examine it with us? Studies have found that recognizing students as partners and granting them more opportunities for self-reflection during education can help increase their engagement and reinforce the continuity between their initial education and subsequent professional work (Cook Sather, 2007). Drawing on the core ideas of

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listening to students' voices – treating their perspective as a form of raw knowledge and focusing on a change in which young individuals are in charge of the activity (Cook Sather, 2002; Cook Sather, 2006) – the main purpose of this paper is to examine students' views on the importance and modes of their participation in changing the Serbian school system and society.
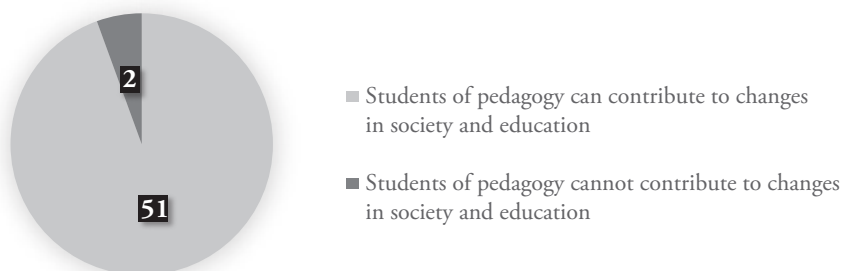
Method

In this article, we present a part of a qualitative study conducted in Belgrade in June 2023 that explored pedagogy students' perspectives on the engagement of pedagogists in improving the Serbian school system. The study involved 53 pedagogy students from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, including bachelor's students (N = 39), master's students (N = 9), and doctoral students (N = 5). Utilizing our pre-established contact with students, we sent invitations via email and interested students responded voluntarily.

The data were collected using an online questionnaire covering three main sections: (1) necessary school system changes; (2) pedagogists' involvement in initiatives to improve the school system; and (3) the participation of pedagogy students in changing the school system and society. This paper centers on the third section, or more specifically, the following questions: *Do you perceive opportunities for engaging pedagogy students in shaping educational and societal changes?* and *If so, how would you describe this engagement?* During the data analysis process, we examined survey responses and conducted a thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns, code responses, and categorize them (Lochmiller, 2021). We adopted an inductive approach, meaning that coding and category creation were based on the raw data obtained, rather than preconceived notions related to initial theoretical assumptions (Saldaña, 2015).

Results and Discussion

Out of a total of 53 participants, as many as 51 believed that pedagogy students *can* participate in changing the school system and society at large, while only 2 participants held the opposite view (Figure 1).

Figure 1 *Pedagogy Students' Opinions About Their Participation in Changes*

- Students of pedagogy can contribute to changes in society and education
- Students of pedagogy cannot contribute to changes in society and education

Analyzing positive statements regarding students' potential for participation in change (N = 51), we identified two categories of participation: collaboration with schools and local community engagement (Table 1). The fact that the majority of student responses could be grouped into only two categories indicates a strong consensus that enhances the value of our findings.

Table 1 *Forms of Pedagogy Students' Participation That Could Lead to Change*

Category	Excerpts From Students' Answers	F
Collaboration With Schools[2]	• Visiting schools more frequently to discuss the current issues in education with practitioners[3]; • Researching practices in specific schools to assist in improving critical areas; • Having curricular exam tasks relevant to solving the current problems in schools and sharing the results with practitioners; • Reducing classroom-only learning and increasing learning in practice; • Organizing workshops for learning with practitioners; • Collaborating with teachers in lesson planning.	34
Engagement in the Local Community	• Organizing public gatherings to discuss the current education-related topics; • Raising citizens' awareness of the significance of the teaching and pedagogy professions; • Initiating conversations about school issues on social media; • Hosting events in the local community to promote unity and collaboration as values.	10
Uncategorized[4]	/	7

2   Which involves all participants in school life: teachers, pedagogists, students, parents, and others.

3   In the text, the term 'practitioners' refers to teachers and school pedagogists.

4   Responses that were too brief or ambiguous to categorize but expressed a positive attitude towards students' potential for participation in changes.

In the Collaboration With Schools category, most responses pertained to the need for a more intensive collaboration with practitioners. Some students focused on their learning: *"We spend too little time at schools. How can we know anything about a pedagogist's work if we are not witnessing it? We should get more opportunities to do things in schools under the supervision of pedagogists and reflect with them on the school issues"* (second-year bachelor's student). Other students focused on helping teachers, parents, and students: *"It could be useful to organize workshops for teachers on topics they suggest, but also to have discussions with parents and students on topics such as conflict resolution, developing tolerance and embracing differences, or recognizing and preventing violence"* (master's student).

Regarding their engagement in the local community, students believed that their role could involve informing the community: "*We, as students, should raise non-expert citizens' awareness of the importance of the teaching and pedagogy professions*" (first-year bachelor's student). They suggested starting conversations on social media and organizing public events: "*We could organize public gatherings focusing on discussions about important questions in education, where the visibility of pedagogists would be crucial*" (fourth-year bachelor's student).

Students listed various forms of participation while highlighting the necessity of support for setting these actions in motion: "*Students are a strong source of motivation, new ideas, and initiatives for change. Honestly, if we get proper support and if we recognize the need to be somewhere and participate, we will carry it through to the end*" (third-year bachelor's student).

Pedagogy students' responses revealed that they already saw themselves as potential leaders. It is our responsibility to make an effort to sustain this perception, primarily through their initial education and by continually listen to their voices. We should support their participation *in action* by improving their school-based professional practice and enabling them to initiate micro-changes, reflect, and collaborate with stakeholders. We should likewise support their capacity *for action* by empowering them to increase proactivity, social involvement, and sensitivity to social issues. The obtained results are in line with previous studies showing that the encouragement of students' participation in social change involves developing a curriculum based on the fundamental values of equity (Cook Sather, 2007; Fonseca et al., 2019).

Conclusion and Implications

Based on the presented findings, we can conclude that pedagogy students recognized the significance of their participation in supporting changes within the Serbian school system. With the right support, they could see themselves as potential instigators of change. They envisioned their contribution as action through an enhanced collaboration with schools and increased involvement in the local community. One implication of this research pertains to the need for changes in pedagogists' initial education aimed at facilitating their participation. This could be achieved by expanding the scope of professional practice activities during initial education, but also by supporting students' critical reflective thinking to help build their capacities in action and for action. Our exploration of these questions with pedagogy students yielded potential, but not definitive solutions. Still, as stakeholders in the education system, we recognize that it is our duty to persistently listen to and support students' voices, if we truly want to make a change.

Keywords: equity, pedagogy students, initial education, participation, change

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