SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN EDUCATION: PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study explores pre-service teachers' views on the features and causes of social exclusion in the context of educational unsustainability. The data from expert questionnaires, assessment of research participants' personal experience with social exclusion in educational setting, their current understanding of the problem and individual suggestions for solving it were analysed qualitatively. The results indicate that, in teachers' opinion, social exclusion in education can be caused by subjective and objective factors – pupils' personal characteristics, school climate, parental influence and social causes. The research participants particularly emphasise teacher's role in reducing pupils' social exclusion by adhering to values, such as fairness, equality, empathy, cooperation and respect. The research results highlight the need for addressing the issue of social exclusion in teacher education programmes by raising future teachers' awareness of the problem and their responsibility to overcome it.

Key words: social exclusion, educational unsustainability, pre-service teachers, teacher education

Introduction

Year 2010 has been declared the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. Scientific circles and broader society begin to realise the gravity of these problems and the necessity to seek possible solutions. At the same time, discussions about the essence and causes of social exclusion are still topical. Interpretations of this problem can vary, thus producing different accents and directions for solving it.

Several studies closely relate the notion of social exclusion to the issues of poverty. Estivill (2003) metaphorically interprets poverty as a photo, but social exclusion as a film, emphasising its procedural nature. Researchers argue that social exclusion is a set of factors and processes (Arthurson & Jacobs, 2004) through which individuals or groups are fully or partially closed out from participation in their local communities due to low income, limited access to employment, social benefits and services and various other aspects of social and cultural life (Kammerman, 2001). It is a process when imaginary or real characteristics hamper a person's or group's participation in social situations

(Williams, Wesselmann, & Chen, 2007); a process or model of relations when persons are forbidden participation, solidarity and access to social processes – consumption, production, political engagement and social interaction (Hobcraft, 2007). Social exclusion is, thus, concerned with a specific form of relationships among people and groups and is manifested as inability to participate in social processes, as well as a lack of access to social goods and services, which can be caused by a series of objective or subjective factors.

In some studies, social exclusion is viewed through the prism of a horizontal spatial metaphor (not a vertical model of inequality). Namely, to be socially excluded means to be ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the mainstream society, not ‘above’ or ‘below’ in the hierarchy of income distribution (Todman, 2004; Daly, 2006; Béland, 2007). Social exclusion is therefore closely related to the notions of belonging, membership and participation, and to be excluded means to be on the margins of the society, devoid of the opportunity to feel and act as a rightful part of it.

Some researchers believe that social exclusion is not a real phenomenon and does not describe a concrete problem. Instead, it is regarded as a theoretical concept or specific outlook – a lens through which we can perceive the reality and society (de Haan, 1999, 2000). As Saraceno (2001) puts it, social exclusion is a paradigm, on the grounds of which society becomes aware of its dysfunction. At the same time, some authors argue that social exclusion is not merely a theoretical concept that characterises a series of social and economic problems, but also a powerful socio-political discourse (Kamerman, 2001; Saraceno, 2001; Béland, 2007).

Arthurson & Jacobs (2004) admit that the concept of social exclusion is exceedingly wide, that is why almost everyone or everything can be regarded as socially excluded. Béland (2007) agrees that the notion of social exclusion can have various meanings. The authors of this paper tend to share the opinion of those researchers who underscore that no universal definition of social exclusion exists and that interpretations of this phenomenon can vary considerably (Micklewright, 2002; Todman, 2004). Such a lack of a unified perspective, however, can pose serious challenges. If there is no clear understanding as to what exactly social exclusion is and what it comprises, seeking and implementing solutions to this problem will be delayed or only part of the total problem will be addressed, ignoring its other aspects. Thus, studying the essence of social exclusion still remains topical.

Depending on the type of perspective, the researchers highlight different features of social exclusion (Figure 1). As seen in Figure 1, social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses the diverse aspects of human life through its economic, political, social, cultural and moral dimensions (Arthurson & Jacobs, 2004). Consequently, social exclusion is an accumulative process which can be the result of various causes that are mutually interactive and influential – either intensify or lessen each other. Social exclusion is also a dynamic process – a progression or trajectory where one problem leads to another just as past leads to present and future (for example, if a child is excluded from education, he or she is potentially excluded from opportunities to get fully included in the labour market in the future). Social exclusion can be characterised as a relative and contextual phenomenon where specific circumstances play a crucial role – a socially excluded person or group, for example, can find themselves in less advantageous conditions as compared to another person or group and lack opportunities for participation and involvement. Therefore, social exclusion is also a

relational process that is concerned with a certain distance or a kind of isolation when particular persons or groups are rejected, prohibited social support and/or denied opportunities to become included in the community. It can be concluded that social exclusion is a complex phenomenon, inextricably bound with person's life activity in social and natural systems.

Figure 1. Features of social exclusion

What causes social exclusion? Different studies underscore different causes of social exclusion, which are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Causes of social exclusion

Socioeconomic causes	
– Unemployment and lack of employment opportunities	<i>Kamerman, 2001; Saraceno, 2001; Arthurson & Jacobs, 2004; Béland, 2007</i>
– Poverty and continuously low income	<i>Kamerman, 2001; Arthurson & Jacobs, 2004; Béland, 2007; Hobcraft, 2007</i>
– Health problems (invalidity, disability, mental disease) and a lack of access to medical facilities	<i>Kamerman, 2001; Arthurson & Jacobs, 2004; Béland, 2007</i>
– Living environment (inadequate place of residence, impoverished physical and social environment)	<i>Arthurson & Jacobs, 2004</i>

Sequel to Table 1 see on p. 88.

Sequel to Table 1.

Legal causes	
– Discrimination and unrealised rights	<i>Todman, 2004; Béland, 2007</i>
– Lack of social and legal rights	<i>Saraceno, 2001</i>
Changes on the macro level	
– Mass migration	<i>Saraceno, 2001</i>
– Mass deindustrialisation	<i>Saraceno, 2001</i>
Institutional and structural causes	
– Changes in the labour market	<i>Todman, 2004; Levitas et al., 2007</i>
– Extension of knowledge society	<i>Todman, 2004</i>
– Globalisation	<i>Todman, 2004</i>
– Socio-demographic changes	<i>Todman, 2004; Levitas et al., 2007</i>
– Territorialism and geographic prejudices	<i>Todman, 2004</i>
– Failures of socioeconomic policies	<i>Todman, 2004; Levitas et al., 2007</i>
Individual causes of self-exclusion	
– Lack of information or experience	<i>Le Grand, 2003</i>
– Myopia (acting without considering long-term results)	<i>Le Grand, 2003</i>
– Antisocial and self-destructive behaviour, morale and values of the excluded individuals	<i>Le Grand, 2003</i>
– Individuals'/groups' special experience of (self-) exclusion	<i>Saraceno, 2001</i>
– Lack of the sense of belonging and loyalty	<i>Saraceno, 2001</i>
Specific causes of children's exclusion	
– Child's exclusion as a result of the activity of parents, school, employers, government, or children's activity towards themselves and other children	<i>Micklewright, 2002</i>
– Dim future prospects	<i>Micklewright, 2002</i>

As seen from Table 1, social exclusion can have various causes, many of which can affect people already in childhood or youth, int. al. in educational contexts. Education is one of the basic human rights and a precondition for successful socialisation and life activity. One of the contemporary tendencies in education is its reorientation to address sustainability (UNESCO, 2005), which envisages promoting persons' responsibility before themselves and every member of the community, as well as before nature and the world at large, awareness of this responsibility and consequent ethical and moral choices and actions (Jämsä, 2006). Conversely, unsustainability in education is understood as orientation towards consumerist mechanisms by dividing people in winners' and losers' and as a focus on a false and narrow economic and social development which is not directed towards humane, spiritual, ethical and relational peculiarities and values (Jämsä, 2006; Mandolini, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative that the process of education for children and youth be implemented in accordance with the core ideas of

sustainability. Obviously, social exclusion ought to be decreased or even totally eliminated in education, because it hampers not only pupils' learning and participation in the social and academic life of the school, but also undermines their future prospects and opportunities for a full-fledged involvement and participation in the labour market, social and civic processes. Teacher education programmes hold great potential for reaching this aim, since they strongly influence and, to a great extent, form teachers' views and attitudes, and it is the latter that play the crucial role in maintaining teachers' activity in the contexts of sustainability and social inclusion (Silverman, 2007; Salite, 2008).

Research design and methods

This paper attempts to establish what features can be identified in pre-service teachers' reflections about their experiences related to the manifestations and causes of social exclusion in the context of educational unsustainability. The issue of educational unsustainability was brought forth during the action research based study course *Education for Sustainable Development*. 24 first year female students of pre-school and basic school teacher education programmes and one male student participated in the study.

In order to answer the research question, the study was structured deductively in four stages (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Research structure and stages

Data were gathered in written form during practical classes which were organised and conducted as workshops. The research participants were engaged in reflective activities both individually and in small groups or pairs. During the first research stage (A), the research participants ($n=25$) were asked to individually formulate 10 manifestations of unsustainability that they had observed in contemporary educational milieu in Latvia and evaluate them by using the expert questionnaire method, i.e. determine the significance of each item with respect to each of the other items. During the second stage (B), the research participants individually evaluated their personal experience with social exclusion (things felt, observed, read and heard) on the grounds

of their individual views that are partly subjective, but authentic to their personal experience. The research participants formulated three features of social exclusion in education, proceeded by evaluating them in small groups or pairs in the context of various experiences and selected the most significant features. During the third stage (C), the research participants continued to work in groups and formulated their views about the issue of social exclusion in education on the grounds of the ideas triggered and conclusions made at the previous research stages. During the fourth research stage (D), the research participants individually sought possible ways for reducing social exclusion in education on the level of teacher's individual activity i.e. formulated action guidelines that they would follow in order to reduce social exclusion in their classroom(s).

Research results

(A) Social exclusion as a feature of educational unsustainability

The first research stage permitted to identify the features of social exclusion from the perspective of pre-service teachers. The data obtained via expert questionnaires indicate that, when examining the unsustainability of contemporary education, pre-service teachers mention several processes and phenomena related to social exclusion. Five sources can be recognised for social exclusion and its causes (Figure 3): individual pupil's level, teacher's level (int. al. teacher–pupil relations), classroom/school environment level, parents' level (int. al. parent–child relations) and the broader social level (objective factors).

Figure 3. Unsustainability in education: the sources and features of social exclusion from the perspective of pre-service teachers (n=25)

One of the main features of social exclusion, in pre-service teachers' opinion, is pupils' disbelief in their powers and abilities, which is increased by teachers' and parents' disinterestedness in pupils' development, feelings and academic achievement. The research participants believe that pupils' exclusion is the result of inequality among them and the fact that teachers often tend to neglect academically less successful children and pay more attention to the more successful ones. Consequently, many children become disinterested in their learning and lose the desire to attend school, which results in lack of motivation for learning, nonattendance and failing to continue studies at a higher level (secondary and higher education). In the pre-service teachers' opinion, the latter tendency may also be caused by the costliness of education. The research participants admit that social exclusion in education is characterised by children's fear i.e. lack of security, int. al. security about the future. The students also mention such factors that increase social exclusion as violence at school, conflicts between pupils and teachers and among pupils, a lack of mutual respect, language barrier, egoism and inability to accept a different point of view. Pre-service teachers recognize that these problems can be the result of upbringing at an early stage (at home or kindergarten), as well as may proceed from the unsustainable social processes and tendencies in a contemporary society. It is possible to conclude that the research participants are aware of the mutual inter-relatedness of various processes and phenomena in school, family and community contexts, which cause social exclusion in education, and relate them to the manifestations of educational unsustainability.

(B) Individual experience: Evaluation of personal experiences with social exclusion

The second research stage permitted to obtain evaluation of pre-service teachers' personal experiences in the context of social exclusion. When characterising their individual experiences with social exclusion in education, the research participants emphasised that in every class and school there are children who, for one reason or another, are excluded. Among the major factors that cause social exclusion the research participants mention visual appearance and behaviour, poverty and low material status, academic achievement (in this case research participants argue that both high and low achievers may become excluded in the classroom), health or lack thereof (disability, special needs), religion, gender or family problems. In pre-service teachers' opinion, these factors may lead to inequality and discrimination, which they perceive as both causes and manifestations of social exclusion. The research participants also underscore the teacher's role in the context of social exclusion and argue that it is often the result of teacher's indifference and disinterestedness, conflicts with pupils, disrespect towards pupils and vice versa, comparing pupils, disbelief in their abilities, paying excessive attention to the more successful and active ones and neglecting the silent ones and those with learning difficulties.

When characterising a socially excluded pupil (Figure 4), pre-service teachers admit that such children are often reserved and self-contained and fail to become included in the class. Socially excluded pupils are shy, lack self-confidence, attend school unwillingly because they feel lonely and have few or no friends. Such children are often humiliated, ridiculed and afraid to express their opinions for fear of being criticised, laughed at and rejected. They have poor communication skills, low self-esteem and often fail to establish a good rapport with their peers.

Figure 4. A socially excluded pupil from the perspective of pre-service teachers (n=25)

Summarising the results of this research stage that dealt with research participants' individual experiences with social exclusion, it becomes possible to conclude that pre-service teachers relate the causes of social exclusion to pupils' individual characteristics, family influence and teacher's and peers' activity. The research participants recognise that socially excluded pupils have difficulties to participate in the academic and social life of the classroom and particularly emphasise the psychological problems that such children tend to encounter.

(C) Generalisation: Formulating a general explanation

The third research stage permitted to obtain a generalised formulation of social exclusion in education from the research participants' working in small groups. The findings indicate that the pre-service teachers understanding of social exclusion comprises the causes, manifestations, influence factors and results of this problem. The research participants recognise such main causes of social exclusion in education as material inequality and different-level academic achievement. In pre-service teachers' opinion, social exclusion in education is manifested as racism and discrimination on the grounds of person's religion, gender or visual appearance. The students note that social exclusion generates conflicts and misunderstandings among people, when they do not realise that they are hurting others. The research participants emphasise that social exclusion is manifested as both intentional (conscious) and unintentional (unconscious) action and behaviour. Social exclusion precludes empathy, helpfulness, cooperation; those who are weaker or different are rejected, ridiculed, humiliated, unaccepted, which leads to instances when such children lose their self-esteem, are afraid to express their opinion and avoid participation in classroom processes. The research participants particularly underscore the teacher's and parents' role in provoking children's social exclusion. The students believe that the major factor is parents' indifference towards their children's academic progress and behaviour and the fact that teachers tend to divide children into winners' and losers' under the influence of pupils' social background or other people's opinions. In general, pre-service teachers

ascertain that social exclusion not only hampers children's academic and social development, but also reduces the quality of education, prevents its development and degrades the society. Therefore they underscore the teacher's responsibility and mission in preventing social exclusion both at the pre-school and school levels.

(D) Teacher's individual activity: Seeking solutions in the form of personal guidelines

The results of this research stage reflect pre-service teachers' aims and practical intentions for reducing and preventing social exclusion in their future pedagogical activity at school. The research participants state that, when working and interacting with their pupils, they will try to avoid being violent or aggressive and will attempt to prevent or adequately solve conflicts among pupils. Pre-service teachers' resolutions testify their intention to preclude discrimination in their teaching and upbringing work, avoid stigmatising children according to their social status, previous grades and academic achievement, not to compare their children with one another, not to humiliate them, treat them so that they would feel equal, but resort to individual approach when such becomes necessary. The students admit that in their future pedagogic activity they will attempt to prevent children's fear and make them feel confident by praising their successes, listening to their opinions and try to avoid displaying indifference towards their feelings, needs, interrelations and emotional experiences. Pre-service teachers realise how important it is to try to make pupils feel safe at school, stress each individual's contribution and value diversity in the classroom, involve everyone, not to reject anyone, stimulate cooperation and mutual respect. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the research participants, already as pre-service teachers, have started to be aware of their responsibility and role in reducing social exclusion at school. It is therefore important to strengthen these good intentions in teacher education programmes, by enabling students to broaden respective attitudes and values, as well as acquire practical abilities and skills, so that future teachers not only desire, but also be practically capable to ensure the inclusion of all their pupils in the social and academic life at school.

Discussion

The findings presented in this paper can be compared to the results of a broader international study conducted in 2006 within a project Teacher Education for the Future (Conner & Greene, 2006). Its aims were to qualitatively research pre-service and in-service teachers' vision of the aim of education, teacher's role and educational challenges in the present days and in future in Fiji, Korea, the USA and Latvia. The study determined that some of the main aims of education are the holistic development of pupils, int. al. social, emotional, physical spiritual and intellectual one, emphasis on promoting cooperation and values for a better society, as well as sensitivity towards beliefs and values of others (Greene, Thorpe, Kim, & Hilligoss, 2006; Salite, 2006; Tuinamuna, Burnett, Dorovolmo, & Koya-Vaka'uta, 2006; Yoon, 2006). Some of the most important research findings from Fiji, the USA and Latvia about the aim of education are the following:

- Fiji – going beyond a vision of schools as suppliers of human resources for the local and global labour market and striving for a better society by creating changes in attitudes and beliefs (Tuinamuana, Burnett, Dorovolmo, & Koya-Vaka'uta, 2006);
- USA – promoting students' growth as respectful individuals, capable of empathising with other representatives of the society, fostering a sense of belonging and awareness of one's self-worth in the learning community (Greene, Thorpe, Kim, & Hilligoss, 2006);
- Latvia – teachers' concern with the problem of alienation in education and attempts to reduce it through emphasis on cooperation and general human values as some of the main aims of education (Salīte, 2006).

These findings partly correspond to the idea actualised in the present study – future teachers' awareness of the effect that their and their pupils' views and attitudes, which are manifested in action, have on reducing or increasing social exclusion in the educational setting. In the present study it has been established that pre-service teachers consider respect and sensitivity towards the feelings and differences of others necessary to prevent social exclusion of pupils, make them see themselves as a valued and accepted part of the classroom and school community. It means that teachers in Latvia continue to feel the need to realise a more inclusive approach to education – one that would be based on overcoming estrangement, nurturing values and more spiritual relationships among those involved in the process of education.

The role of teachers and teacher education was actualised in the *Teacher Education for the Future* project research:

- Fiji – teachers should assume a more caring' and humanistic role in relations with their pupils, adding a spiritual and moral focus to teacher education programmes. Teacher's task is to provide not only for the child's academic, but also social development, enabling him/her to fit into the community, learn to appreciate others and their differences in values, opinions and culture (Tuinamuana, Burnett, Dorovolmo, & Koya-Vaka'uta, 2006).
- Korea – teacher's task is to help students recognise respect for human life and consideration for others, establish an open, accepting classroom climate, be understanding and helpful towards their pupils (Yoon, 2006).
- Latvia – the need to promote spiritual relationships, including a vision of education in a wider ecological context (Salīte, 2006) and foster a deeper insight in the environment, sustainable development and social needs (Kravale, 2006), while admitting that currently educational process does not have a sufficient social orientation and is focused on anthropocentric and individualised values and environment (Stakle, 2006).

These ideas are mirrored in the opinions of the participants of the present study who, when contemplating their future pedagogical activity aimed at reducing social exclusion, express their intention to value diversity, promote everyone's involvement and be sensitive towards their pupils' feelings, needs, social interactions and emotional experiences. The pre-service teachers who participated in the present study also relate the issue of social exclusion to the manifestations of unsustainability in education, and their personal guidelines reflect the tendency to orient their future pedagogical activity towards a more sustainable and inclusive approach.

Conclusions

The results of the present study reveal several tendencies in pre-service teachers' reflections about their experiences related to the features and causes of social exclusion in the context of educational unsustainability. The results of stage (A) indicate that the research participants relate social exclusion to the manifestations of unsustainability in education. The following features of social exclusion in education can be identified in the research participants' reflections on this issue:

- lack of such humane and ethical values as compassion, mutual respect and supportiveness;
- dividing pupils into more and less successful ones, into 'winners' and 'losers';
- decrease in pupils' motivation and interest in learning and participation in the social life of the school;
- emergence of personal barriers, fear, reserve and loss of self-confidence.

These features of social exclusion were detected by research participants not only on the level of an individual pupil, but also on the teacher's, parents', classroom and the broader community levels. The pre-service teachers recognise the interrelatedness and interaction of the various factors that provoke social exclusion in education, when one problem leads to another and causes a series of side effects that can result in further complications.

The results of stage (B) reveal that the main causes of social exclusion in education, which were identified in research participants' experience, are:

- inequality and discrimination as a result of unappreciated diversity;
- pupils' individual characteristics (physical appearance, gender, behaviour, academic achievement, health issues, religion);
- social causes (low material status);
- family influence and actions of teachers and peers.

Similarly as in stage (A), the pre-service teachers emphasise internal and external barriers and problems that prevent socially excluded pupils from inclusion and involvement in the social and academic life of the classroom. Besides, at this stage the research participants particularly underscore the teacher's role in reducing or provoking social exclusion of pupils. The research participants, as future pedagogues, realise that the teacher's attitude and actions directly determine whether the pupils will be and feel excluded or included in the classroom, as confirmed by several other studies (Bricker, 2000; Silverman, 2007; Pijl & Frissen, 2009).

Generalisation of the research participants' experience in stage (C) reveals that the preservice teachers consider material inequality and pupils' diverse academic achievement as the main causes of social exclusion in education. They provoke conflicts and discriminatory attitudes and actions both from the part of the teacher and peers. The research findings permit to conclude that pre-service teachers interpret social exclusion as a dynamic and multidimensional relational process, which mirrors the interpretations of this issue presented in theoretical studies (Béland, 2007, Hobcraft, 2007). Similarly as in stages (A) and (B), the research results reveal research participants' persuasion about the teacher's mission and responsibility to eliminate social exclusion in education.

The results from stage (D), which reflect the research participants' personal action guidelines for future teaching work, permit to conclude that pre-service teachers realise the necessity to attempt to reduce not only the manifestations of social exclusion, but

also its causes and influence factors. The research participants declare their resolution not to allow violence and discrimination, to treat all pupils with justice and equality, but resort to individual approach when necessary. Action guidelines of future teachers are grounded in the understanding of the value of diversity and embody such other core values as mutual respect, cooperation and empathy.

Consequently, the results of the present study confirm the need to address the issue of social exclusion in teacher education programmes by raising future teachers' awareness of the problem and their responsibility to overcome it. Teacher education should address not only cognitive, but also affective dimensions – beliefs, attitudes, feelings and values related to teaching and learning, since they determine the teacher's professional activity and his/her influence on the pupils (Conner & Greene, 2006) and can either lower or increase the level of social exclusion in the classroom. In future studies, it would be expedient to explore which other values and attitudes teachers consider important for reducing social exclusion in education. Moreover, it would be advisable to test whether the tendencies that were revealed in the views about social exclusion of the pre-service teachers who participated in the present study are identifiable in other pre-service teacher groups and how they differ from in-service teachers' perception of this problem in education.

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