Street Classroom: Moving towards a dissenting curriculum for social justice[1]

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*This article summarizes the findings of the author's doctoral dissertation titled *Street Classroom: A transdisciplinary experience for solidarity in higher education in values and practices of social justice and equity in health* presented on May 5, 2016 at the Department of Graduate Studies of the School of Education of the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus. Thesis is available in Spanish on ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global database (ID 1802312448).

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Citing this article (APA style):
Torres-Sánchez, A. (2017). Aula-Calle: hacia un currículo disidente para la justicia social. *Cuaderno de Investigación en la Educación, 32*, 11-29. Retrieved from http://cie.uprrp.edu/cuaderno/2018/01/18/aula-calle/

[1] The original version of this article was published in Spanish in the number 32 of *Cuaderno de Investigación en la Educación*, a peer reviewed academic journal licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. http://cie.uprrp.edu/cuaderno/

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the theoretical and practical guidelines generated from a qualitative research study that analyzed the meanings of learning experiences among a group of street medicine volunteers in Puerto Rico who offer services to the street homeless - a scenario of oppression and inequality. Participant observations, dialogues and document analysis brought together the volunteers' voices and practices that resulted in a six-category analysis framework. Narrative outcomes reveal that the *Street Classroom* is a transdisciplinary alternative education space from which volunteers, as co-actors, forge social justice and equity in health. The theoretical and practical guidelines brought forth contribute to the theorization and systematization of a dissenting curriculum for social justice education as it moves away from the traditional technical curriculum. This kind of curriculum applies to diverse academic disciplines and non-academic spaces who work with, or represent, populations oppressed by dehumanized social systems. The guidelines examined herein become a "letter of hope" proposing new forms to fight for a more just and equitable society, a responsibility that transcends academic disciplines.

Keywords: social justice education, curricular theorizing, transdisciplinary research, pedagogy of differences, education for liberation.

INTRODUCTION

Social inequality is one of the major concerns of the international community (OMS, 2011). Defined as the differences that are avoidable and unjust (OMS), inequality is one of the most important social determinants of the health of populations. This has resulted in a call for collaboration among sectors in favor of health equity and social justice (OMS, 2011; WFPHA, 2012).

This call for collaboration is inherent to the curricular practice of academic programs in charge of the training of health and other related professionals. The path to overcome this educational challenge depends greatly on the creation of learning spaces from which future professionals can learn to take on their responsibilities in a critical, sensible and empathic manner, in solidarity with social justice and other sectors of society.

However, academic training for health professionals continues to focus on the biomedical model of health based on Cartesian philosophy, which separates body and mind (Ríos-Osorio, 2011). Even though this model contributed to improving the health of populations (Libreros-Piñeros, 2012), it meant the abandonment of the human being as a whole and the institutionalization of the practice of medicine based on the disease rather than the patient (Ríos-Osorio, 2011).

Currently, one of the main criticisms to health curricula is that population needs are ignored as a society; a fragmented education is promoted, "focusing on theory and academic knowledge, isolated from reality and with little reflection on social practice" (Feo, 2008, p. 228). Inequality is a social issue, not an individual one, that cannot be understood only from a theoretical perspective. For health professionals to contribute their efforts in solving health

problems, their academic training should be reflective, emotional, pragmatic and transformative to gain insight into social inequalities from a social justice standpoint.

As of the 1950's, new notions about health processes began to take place from a perspective of complexity and interconnection of realities, allowing for a more critical and wider understanding of health and social inequalities. However, despite the developments that have allowed mastery of the discourse, evidence reveals the difficulty of implementation of these new notions in the academic training of health professionals (Libreros-Piñeros, 2012; Ríos-Osorio, 2011; Miranda & Yamin, 2008). This highlights the need to generate solutions and curricular proposals that transcend reductionist discourses and put into perspective the complexity of equity and social justice. The quest for social justice goes beyond the issue of health, it intersects with other disciplines, professions and civil society efforts.

Recent pedagogical works about transdisciplinarity shed light on this quest by encouraging theoretical and practical proposals for social justice education. Transdisciplinarity seeks for integration to be the purpose of education, not to be just a tool (Klein, 2006). For this reason, disciplinary boundaries disappear, and the concepts considered can be applied to diverse disciplines or are common to them. It is emergent knowledge, generated by dialectical methods that create more complex and integrated images of reality (Libreros-Piñeros, 2012). The transdisciplinary approach allows for the creation of spaces to find solutions to the complexity of issues related to social inequality.

A critical education for social justice will require the creation of dynamic, transdisciplinary curricula in solidarity with forces of social transformation. It is imperative to propose theoretical and practical guidelines that help committed educators guide the development of this type of curriculum. I'm referring to a practice moving towards the

creation of "projects of possibility" (Pascual Morán, 2013), to forge students' liberation from an education that disassociates them from their social context, and to commit them to being co-actors in the quest for a more just and equal society.

Street Classroom: Transdisciplinary crossroads for social justice

In 2008, I cofounded a health service program for the street homeless in Puerto Rico. This project engages volunteers to provide nighttime services to the homeless, one of the most marginalized populations of our society. As of today, many volunteer groups with the same approach have been organized around the island. One of these groups is called *From the Campus to the Streets* (FCTS) - or *Recinto Pa' La Calle* in Spanish – and provides services in the San Juan area. These volunteers call themselves *ronderos*, alluding to the action of making street rounds to engage with and visit the homeless in places where they sleep[2].

The core of their efforts are the experiences they share with one another and with the homeless. On a weekly basis, volunteers spark dialogue and exchange thoughts on the impact of these experiences on their lives, especially questioning social forces conducive to keeping the homeless socially excluded. The attributes of this context gave me the chance to better examine the scope of transdisciplinarity as means and end for the education and practice of equity and social justice within a real scenario of social inequality. For this purpose, I conducted an analysis of the meaning of the *ronderos*' learning experiences and its relation to values and practices of social justice and health equity. This allowed me to generate and

[2] In the context of United States and other parts of the world this effort is referred to as "Street Medicine".

propose five theoretical-practical guidelines that contribute to the theorization and systematization of a transdisciplinary curriculum for alternative education in social justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social justice is a prerequisite for reducing inequalities. The greater the social justice, the greater the equity. In the context of health, equity refers to all persons having the same opportunities to develop and maintain their health "through fair and just access to health care resources" (OMS, 1998, p. 17). To achieve greater health equity health initiatives must be grounded on a human rights-based approach (OMS, 2002) and therefore, in a practice of an education in and for human rights.

As a universal human right, health contributes to protect the dignity of every human being and to promote *comprehensive peace* in the world. To achieve the former, we must experience human rights in the education arena, creating free spaces that promote liberation from fatalism and the *single way of thinking* and foster collaborative strategies to seek solutions to the problems that pose a threat to world peace (Jares in Pascual Morán, 2013).

The duty of every human being is to exercise, uphold and defend human rights from the conscience of homeland and humanity, and among those duties are equity and solidarity (Hostos, 1939). An educator is responsible for the moral and social education of his or her students to prepare them to fulfill their obligations as citizens of the world and of their country, consequently contributing to the existence of a more just and peaceful society (Pascual Morán, 1991).

Social justice requires an education in democratic values to promote the achievement of civic participation and responsibility among all citizens (Hostos in Rojas-Osorio, 2012). Moreover, it makes possible the defense of our human rights and of others, in solidarity. It

is about a critical solidarity that fosters social cohesion, that is ready to act in defense of marginalized groups, that is geared towards education and educating us for social change (Pascual Morán, 2013). Here, solidarity is the co-conspirator of democracy, shedding off the shell of charity.

Various reports have demonstrated a direct relation between the democratization of institutions and improved health (Besley & Kudamatsu, 2006; Ruger, 2005). Ruger suggests that democracies broaden rights and freedoms, encouraging people to take control of their health risks, and enabling their participation in the pursuit of collective solutions to health problems.

However, democracy requires educational intermediaries. Dewey (1916) identifies two key elements in a democratic society that must be present in education: (1) human relationships, which refers to the fact that we are all connected, and it's necessary to seek interests we share; and (2) freedom to associate with diverse groups in society, which allows us to transform one another. This way we grow, we educate ourselves, and democracy is strengthened.

For all these reasons, the liberating act from inequality and oppressive practices must carry the social justice flag, woven from an optical of human rights, democracy, solidarity, and civic responsibility, all interacting in a way from which a humanistic act is generated and received. By "humanistic act" I mean one that implies the civic duty to denounce those social structures that oppressed some groups through inequality and exploitation. These groups are what I call the "unequal different" because they are depicted as deficient of the social hegemonic norms, contrary to the *different-diverse* which connotes greater acceptance. The

humanistic act also implies working at the same time for justice and the emancipation of all, maintaining a constant inquiry about our role in the human being-society-cosmos triad.

This humanism recognizes Paulo Freire's education for liberation as a fundamental means to attain fairness and social justice, thus becoming a tool of freedom and peace. It is a critical pedagogy that recognizes that educational matters cannot be explored outside the cultural, social and economic contexts in which they exist (Giroux, 2008). For this reason, education transcends classrooms and educational institutions (Cruz-Ignacio, 2007).

According to some *ronderos*, pessimist discourses such as "*it cannot be done*" and "*it's not worth it*" along with content memorization to pass exams permeates the education they're receiving. This is the "banking education" approach condemned by Freire (1970), in which educators deposit content into students, as receptacles, cultivating a passive and disaffected character in students with respect to what happens around them. This limiting form of education does not allow room for students to dream and create projects of possibility, turning education into mere training. What is needed is the type of education that will create critical thinkers with the ability to question matters that limit the advancement of health for all. The education for liberation proposed by Freire provides me with theoretical and methodological tools to better understand the learning realities experienced by the *ronderos* working in scenarios of inequality, grounded in the presence of their context.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study was inspired by Kemmis & McTaggart's (2005) principles of critical participatory action-research (CPAR) known for its social, participative, collaborative, liberating, critical, reflexive and transformative nature. I used CPAR in two ways: (1) as a participatory and collaborative process together with the *ronderos* between

nighttime rounds, in which the CPAR's spiral of cycles was defined by nighttime street rounds done once a week; and (2) as a plan for data collection that allowed me to do my own analysis and interpretation of the research study's results.

The data collection process included: 1) participant observations in ten nighttime street rounds and one closing meeting; 2) participation in eleven group dialogues (post-round and closing reflections); and, 3) review of four official documents created by the *ronderos* group. I used the triangulation method to organize various sources of information (Okunda-Benavides & Gómez-Restrepo, 2005).

The study's population sample were volunteers from the *rondero*s group *From the Campus to the Streets* (FCTS) composed mostly of students from medical, dental, public health and nursing programs in Puerto Rico. FCTS is an autonomous group not affiliated with the university where volunteers study, but it does receive technical assistance from the nonprofit organization Iniciativa Comunitaria. Among services provided by the *ronderos* are ulcer cleaning, harm reduction, orientation and referrals to housing and treatment programs, emergency room accompaniment, personal hygiene and food items.

For this study, the *ronderos* carried out service activities as usual. My role as participant researcher was to insert myself in the natural dynamics and processes of the nighttime street rounds during ten (10) consecutive weeks. The nature of the information shared by the volunteers in group dialogues, done at the end of each round, was the result of the experiences they were living in each round and between rounds, among themselves and with the homeless population.

I used Harry F. Wolcott's (1994) model and the strategy of hermeneutical triangulation (Cisterna-Cabrera, 2005) for data analysis and interpretation. The research

study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Human Research Subjects Protection Office of the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus.

FINDINGS

The development of theoretical and practical guidelines for equity and social justice education arises from the analysis of the meanings of the experiences of participant FCTS volunteers. This analysis consisted of the narratives' interpretation organized in six categories: 1) We Are Similar, 2) We Are Different, 3) We Reinvent Solidarity, 4) We Break Traditional Power Relations, 5) We Believe and Aspire to This, and 6) Street Night Rounds are Worth It.

Narrative Outcomes

In general, the category analysis revealed that the *ronderos*' learning, as well as the way of responding internally and externally to the inequality context to which they were exposed, are aligned with the values of justice, democratic citizenship, culture of peace and human dignity. The main outcomes of this first analysis are summarized in the following statements.

Statement #1: The stories of inequality from the streets liberate us from the single story.

In the continued exposure to real scenarios of inequality, listening to the street voices again and again becomes a mantra[3] for these volunteers. This metaphor refers to how street voices become the conductor of reflection. They discover that the homeless are equally vulnerable, and that they share the nature of being human - *"I am equal"*. A liberating act happens as they realized the single story they have been told about the homeless (the

[3] In some philosophical and spiritual doctrines *mantra* refers to words or sacred phrases recited and repeated as support for meditation.

deficient, distant and different ones from the norm) is false - "*it's when you experience this (the street night rounds) that you break away from that (the preconception, the single story)*".

The stories are the entry points to start seeing and comprehending the homeless from the realities of inequality of those that live inequality conditions, allowing for a connection among one another (student-homeless person) in a rediscovery plane of human equality: "*that sense of equality is the first thing one breaks, there is no difference*". The gap between us and them begins to close – *"(we begin to) see the homeless as people*".

The constant exposure helps us make ourselves visible and sensitive. This process of increased awareness is the emotional and volitional movement necessary to see, without self-censorship or prejudices, the truth of the reality of the one who suffers (Aranguren, 1997).

Statement #2: The encounter with the unequal different transforms our existence into prophecy.

At the same time, *ronderos* are shocked by the realities that enter through the door of unedited stories because they are different from theirs: "*I have a bed waiting for me at home and they are all (sleeping) outside, (in the streets)*". Here we see a personal encounter with the *Not-I* that experiences the injustice. It's one thing to discover we are all equal in human dignity, it's another thing to see we are different when it comes to living conditions.

Every week the students experience the crude scenario of the streets at an evident sensory level. They become witnesses of the negation of human rights (Reardon in Pascual Morán, 2013) of the homeless through what they hear, see, smell and touch. These are very dramatic experiences that feed the subjects' reflection process.

Meeting this reality includes looking at the *inner I*, because the *ronderos* discover the inequality construct that exists within them, a reflection of the inequality they see in society:

"*I still cannot let go of prejudice*". By encountering difference, we become aware of subjectivity (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010). In the context of the students, this means the factor *unequal different* (defective of the social norm) starts to become less disconnected and deficient. The act of demystification of the *Other* emerges as a prophecy of transformation, abandoning something of myself when the construct of inequality is also present in me. This contributes to the self-awareness process of *ronderos* becoming *present in this world*, which means assuming the responsibility to intervene in the world with hope to a more just world (Freire, 2006) – *"we are going to see them, even if the system 'whatever' (doesn't)"*.

Statement #3: Reinventing a loving and dissident solidarity from the streets.

During their introspection process, the *ronderos* commence to question themselves about the forces that prolong oppression for the homeless and the ones that hold them back as students and as a collective to advance social justice: *"how do we go about it?"* In other words, they start identifying their *limit-situations* that if tackled critically, can be perceived as surmountable (Freire, 1993). This evidences that acts of solidarity cannot be conceived outside a reflection process concerning the context in which these acts occur and to which they respond.

The students conceive a distinct way of declaring solidarity, a culture that denounces and challenges fatalist ideology and oppressive structures that perpetuate prejudice, exclusion and injustice of the most stigmatized and disfranchised groups: the unequal difference. Street solidarity is a "relation and encounter" of human nature (Buber in Aranguren, 1997); the human relationship gives way to the recognition of the violation of human rights which in turn elicits a response of *dissident action* such as providing services

on the streets. This solidarity is an "act of love" that restores our humanity and genuine kindness (Freire in Darder, 2003).

Statement #4: The streets are rescued as a classroom of dreams.

In the traditional academic classrooms, *ronderos* sense rejection from some educators for the street work they do. Students resent the hindrance erected by the structures of academic power, as they belittle and do not validate their humanitarian acts, which contribute to the advancement of social justice and equity in health. This fatalist ideology is reproduced in academic scenarios: "*they have prejudices and they instill them in us*". This contemptuous pragmatism is what predominates in the classroom when it focuses on technical training, depoliticizing education and killing the dream and the utopia (Freire, 2006), transgressing the human vocation of "being more" (Freire, 1970).

The *ronderos*' position is an example of resistance. The streets are rescued as a space of empowerment to achieve the dreams negated by academia. One doesn't ask permission to work for justice and equity, it is done where there is space for dialogue and transformational action, and that space is called *The Streets*. It is in the progress of a *positive peace* that we are demanded to come to terms with a profound paradigm shift facing all forms of domination and violence, from the everyday interpersonal relationships (Pascual Morán, 2013).

Theoretical and practical guidelines for social justice education

The struggle for social justice and equity in health responds to the complex nature in which human relationships occur that provoke the absence of these principles. Thus, the problems of social justice and equity should be examined and considered in a holistic manner. From a pedagogical context, according to Klein (2006), the transdisciplinary approach allows us to consider these matters, because the integration of disciplines goes beyond just being a

tool to become an end of education: a more just society where everyone can enjoy their human rights, including health.

Social justice and health equity relate to various disciplines such as social sciences, natural sciences and humanities, among others. However, it also transcends disciplines because it appeals to the civic responsibility of practicing a more harmonious coexistence in society. To make progress in social justice not only requires inclusive, collaborative efforts from various disciplines, but also from and with communal living spaces. Everyone participates in knowledge development and social well-being. If knowledge development circumscribes only to the disciplines, we would be ignoring the planes of reality of many other sectors that are excluded from the academic experience.

It is precisely the transdisciplinary approach that encourages a process from which foundations emerge that unify and identify common principles and formulates a common language that facilitates cooperation and exchange among the various realities (von Stillfried, 2007). To propose critical education in social justice requires the creation of a living transdisciplinary curriculum in solidarity with social transformation. This process must transcend academic spaces and its results must be applied beyond the disciplines, at all levels of the realities that exist at the same time (von Stillfried, 2007). It means to take on a dissenting curriculum and move away from academic hegemony, since as stated by Gaztambide-Fernández (2010), it is the result of the intersection of complex cultural, geographical, social, political, historical and psychological processes.

The narrative outcomes bring forth the transdisciplinary character of the *Street Classroom* as an alternative education model for equity and social justice in health in both academic and non-academic spaces. The *ronderos*' efforts are experiential, and the topics

and issues generated from the practice are transverse because they relate to various realities. In other words, topics such as inequality, discrimination, human rights, solidarity, democracy, power and solution-seeking participation are centered in the context of the students' experiences and various realities together with the experiences and realities of the persons that suffer social oppression.

The experience of this research study grants me the opportunity to propose some theoretical and practical guidelines that could contribute to the systematization of a transdisciplinary curriculum for an alternative education in solidarity with the practice of social justice. The richness of theoretical, reflective and practical knowledge (Diaz Quero, 2001) that comes out of this study is profound, complex and abundant. The following five theoretical and practical guidelines constitute the basis for the theorization of what I have called a *Dissenting curriculum for social justice*:

1. *Sustained and sensorial experience in a scenario of inequality.*

The continuous and sustained immersion in the real context of those who experience inequality provides for the learning and practice of social justice. The sensorial dimension of the experience must be able to manifest in these scenarios since the senses allow us to perceive and question the shades and rawness of inequality. These scenarios provide the opportunity to have real, cognitive, emotional and practical experiences, as well as opportunities to commit to the construction and defense of human dignity and rights (Pascual Morán, 2013).

2. *Humanize ourselves-together in the real context of inequality.*

Learning and practicing social justice is fostered by the process of humanizing ourselves in the real context, together with those who experience inequality. Humanizing

ourselves-together means looking into ourselves and validating ourselves mutually; it means demystifying the *Other* by breaking down his or her single story. This requires sustained encounters with the difference tinged by Freire's proposed dialogical method. I am talking about promoting a participatory process starting with what makes sense to those who participate and their concrete experiences, thus provoking authentic thinking (Pascual Morán, 2013).

By humanizing ourselves in this context, students are able to confront inequality within themselves. It lets them discover the lies about inequality and connect in a rediscovery plane of equality and human dignity. These encounters must be mutually questioned in a dialogical environment that promotes democratic communication and a permanent discovery in favor of mutual learning (Shor & Freire, 1987). This let us comprehend better our *presence in this world* and to move from being objects to subjects (Freire, 2006) in the fight for social justice.

3. *The practice of solidarity taught by the context of the unequal differences.*

The Street, as the context of inequality, is where one learns to practice loving and dissenting solidarity. Solidarity cannot be taught exclusively from a theoretical standpoint because theoretical dialogue must become dialogical in practice based on a dialogical pedagogy, in the context of a dialogical environment, and by means of a dialogical method (Shor & Freire in Pascual Morán, 2013).

By loving solidarity, I mean the sensitivity that appears from within to "taste the reality" with emotions while remaining reflective about the encounters. Based on that experience, which is incomplete and emergent, solidarity is reinvented in the context of the unequal difference. This reinvention is continuous to the extent that the encounter with the

unequal difference is sustainable allowing to see solidarity as a possibility and source of prophecy for a more just world.

4. *The fight against oppressive forces is inclusive to all the matters of the context.*

Many times, the efforts to question the underlying forces of inequality are limited to the immediate context of the most vulnerable groups to whom our efforts are directed. However, the dissenting curriculum must be sensitive and inclusive of the power issues that students, educators and practitioners face also in their immediate personal context. In the *Street Classroom*, students questioned relationships of power within academic structures as well as the ones related to the context of the homeless. The attention to these issues is related to the possibility of contesting *limit-situations* that deter solidarity. Those that work for social justice in community settings could confront similar situations, for instance, oppressive relationships of power at the core of a group or community movements. In these cases, the immediate personal context becomes also unequal context.

Social justice is learned by practicing it and by embracing all the challenges entangled in the context of the students' practice. This has to do with dialogical pedagogy, which recognizes the students' intersubjectivities and context as part of the whole. This poses a great challenge for both educators practicing in traditional academic structures and persons leading efforts to serve the most vulnerable populations. Educators and community leaders can perpetuate oppression if they pretend to teach about social justice without politicizing education and/or the system or culture in which they coexist. The dissenting curriculum for social justice should be inclusive and embraced from a transformational praxis, to let the teachings from the *Street* be the generator of solutions against the oppressive powers.

5. *Issues that emerge from an unequal context call for a pedagogy of differences intersected by a reflective practice.*

The encounters in the unequal scenario allow a better understanding of the issues that can move us to eradicate inequality and exclusion. This context demands a *pedagogy of differences in plural* so that instead of thinking in the different others, we can internalize the differences in reciprocity like those othernesses and intersubjectivities of which we are all made (Pascual Morán, 2014).

A flexible curriculum could be inspired by non-technical curriculum models, which are distinguished for considering curriculum development as an evolving process (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1993). This pedagogy of differences cannot be conceived independently from a sustained and constant reflexive process that allow students to interpret and question their world and be co-protagonists in the fight for social justice.

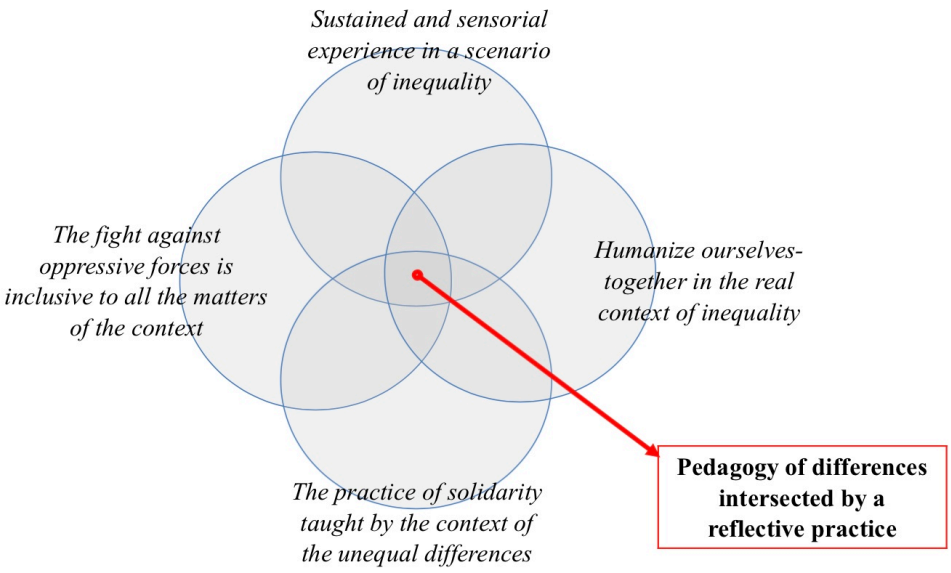

Figure 1. Dissenting curriculum for social justice education: encounter and relation between the theoretical and practical guidelines that emerge from *Street Classroom*.

CONCLUSION

Advancing social justice is one of the greatest challenges of our times. To address this type of ethical challenge entails wider capabilities like the ones provided by the transdisciplinary research approach (CIRET, 2012). It allows for an integrated comprehension of social justice as the foundation of human rights practice, which includes health.

The Street Classroom proposal, and the theoretical and practical guidelines it brings to light, represents a transdisciplinary space where differences and the *unequal different* emerge freely. All who coincide in that space are "students" and potential agents of change; acting, from the streets of our communities, on injustices and human rights transgressions. It is a garden of justice where plurality meets, creating an encounter of forces that announces the possibility of social transformation. The curriculum that emerges from the proposed guidelines is dissenting because it condemns inequality and is conceived as a solidarity alternative to the deficient, reductionist, fragmented, and mechanistic curriculum that obstructs the movement toward social justice.

The results of this research study are framed in the experience of interacting and providing services in a real scenario of inequality. Findings could be adapted to service learning courses and/or diverse community-based initiatives working with socially marginalized populations (i.e. LGBT, immigrants, indigenous people, refugees, poverty-stricken sectors) with educators committed to a pedagogy for liberation. We still need to see if the theoretical and practical guidelines proposed herein can be applied to work scenarios outside the context of inequality (i.e. clinics, treatment centers) or scenarios where human

contact is minimal (i.e. prisons, psychiatric hospitals). This topic is without a doubt something to further explore in future transdisciplinary research studies.

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