



Training for Social Justice from the University Classroom: Intersectional Analysis as a Pedagogical Strategy for Ethical Commitment

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Abstract: This article presents a proposal for university education oriented to education for social justice, based on an intersectional approach that seeks to transform students' critical awareness and foster their commitment to equity. The proposal is structured in five progressive training spaces, designed to accompany students in a reflective process that ranges from self-knowledge to active exercise as allies of social justice. Through tools such as intersectional analysis, cognitive dissonance, and group work, a deep understanding of the dynamics of power, privilege, and exclusion that operate in society is promoted. The methodology is based on the ICAP model, which prioritizes active, constructive, and interactive learning as a means to achieve meaningful transformation. This study, contextualized in higher education in Córdoba, Colombia, seeks to contribute to the discussion on the role of the university in the construction of a committed, critical and supportive citizenship.

Keywords: social justice, ethical commitment, intersectional analysis, university education, critical education

Introduction

In recent years, the notion of **social justice** has gained strength in contemporary pedagogical discourses, not only as an ethical aspiration, but as a formative imperative in societies marked by profound historical inequalities. In Colombia, and particularly in regions such as **Córdoba**, where multiple forms of exclusion converge—ethnic, economic, territorial, gender—the education system faces the challenge of responding appropriately to these realities. In this scenario, university education must go beyond technical or professional training, and assume a critical role in the face of the reproduction of privileges, the normalization of structural racism and the narratives that sustain inequality. The classroom, therefore, becomes a non-neutral space where values are configured, identities are reaffirmed, and power relations are reproduced—or transformed.

This article presents a proposal for university education focused on the development of a **critical ethical awareness** through the use of **intersectional analysis** as a pedagogical strategy. This proposal was implemented with first-semester students from a private university in Córdoba, Colombia, and seeks to generate processes of reflection around one's own social position, structural privileges and experiences of exclusion that are intertwined in the fabric of daily life. Through a sequence of five training spaces, a progressive transition from self-knowledge to committed action as an ally of social justice is promoted, recognizing that individual transformation is a necessary starting point for any process of collective transformation.

From the theoretical point of view, the proposal is inscribed in the framework of **critical pedagogy**, understood as a current that seeks to unveil the mechanisms of oppression present in school and social life, and invites the subject to recognize himself as a political actor capable of transforming his reality. **Freire (1997)** points out that education must start from a critical reading of the world, understanding that all neutrality is ideological, and that teaching implies assuming an ethical commitment to historically excluded sectors. From this perspective, the role of the teacher is not limited to being a transmitter of content, but also becomes a facilitator of dialogic processes where learning arises from the encounter between knowledge, experiences and visions of the world. In the university context, this view invites us to critically review pedagogical practices that depoliticize education, reduce ethics to normative codes, and ignore the structural dimensions of injustice.

A second theoretical pillar of the proposal is **intersectional feminism**, particularly in its formulation by **Crenshaw (1991)**, who introduced the concept of intersectionality to describe how forms of oppression—gender, race, class—do not act in isolation, but intersect, configuring complex and specific experiences of exclusion. This perspective has been fundamental to understanding that not all people experience injustice in the same way, and that, therefore, any training proposal on social justice must recognize the multiplicity of conditions that structure social life. In the classroom, this implies problematizing social categories not as fixed identity labels, but as relational positions that grant or restrict power, depending on the context. Intersectional analysis thus makes it possible to denaturalize privilege, to make visible the oppressions that are considered "normal" and to generate empathy towards the realities of others.

In addition, the contributions of **education for democratic citizenship** are incorporated, in particular from the approaches of **Gutmann (2003)**, who argues that democracy requires not only fair institutions, but also citizens capable of thinking critically, of deliberating with others and of acting for the common good. Along these lines, education must foster experiences of participation, dialogue, and ethical confrontation, which allow students to question inherited normative frameworks and build a sense of social agency. This citizenship cannot be reduced to civic obedience or legal compliance, but must be traversed by the capacity to be indignant in the face of injustice and to intervene actively in public affairs.

On the methodological level, the learning model adopted is based on the **ICAP (Chi & Wylie, 2014)**, which establishes a hierarchy of cognitive participation – passive, active, constructive, interactive – that allows the design of activities that stimulate critical thinking and personal involvement. This methodological perspective breaks with traditional banking teaching schemes, and proposes that meaningful learning occurs when the student constructs meaning from his or her experience, in interaction with others, and in challenging contexts. In this proposal, the activities include case analysis, narrative construction, ethical debates, reflective writing exercises and group simulations, all aimed at mobilizing affectivity, reason and ethical commitment in a comprehensive training process.

This proposal is structured as a situated formative experience, anchored in the sociocultural context of Córdoba, which recognizes both the tensions and the possibilities of the environment. The research does not seek to generalize results, but to offer a theoretical and methodological systematization of a pedagogical practice aimed at forming conscious, sensitive subjects capable of acting in the face of the multiple forms of exclusion that make up society. From this perspective, social justice ceases to be an abstract concept and becomes an ethical horizon that questions the teaching profession, the role of the student and the very meaning of higher education on a daily basis.

Methodology

This study is part of a qualitative **research-pedagogical** approach, aimed at the systematization of a training experience designed and implemented with first-semester university students in a private university in **Córdoba, Colombia**. The research does not start from a hypothesis to be tested, nor does it intend to generalize results, but seeks to describe, interpret and critically reflect on the formative processes involved in the implementation of a pedagogical proposal oriented to ethical training from the social justice approach, using **intersectional analysis** as a didactic and conceptual strategy.

The proposal was articulated around **five training spaces** that constitute, in themselves, a progressive sequence: (1) self-knowledge, (2) awareness of personal privileges, (3) recognition of structural privilege, (4) analysis of situations of social injustice, and (5) training as ethical allies. Each of these moments was designed to facilitate a reflective transition, in which students could dialogue with themselves and their peers about personal experiences, social perceptions, and power structures that run through them. The development of the meetings was based on

principles of the ICAP model (Chi & Wylie, 2014), which guaranteed an active, constructive and interactive participation of the students in the activities.

The sample consisted of **40 students**, selected in a non-probabilistic manner, for convenience, as part of a compulsory course within the general training plan. The group was made up of young people between 16 and 20 years old, mostly from urban and rural environments in the Colombian Caribbean, with significant diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and previous educational trajectories. This diversity was key to the approach of the intersectional approach, since it made it possible to make visible how different social variables configure differentiated experiences of injustice, privilege and exclusion.

The collection of information focused on the documentation of the pedagogical process and the products generated by the students. The following techniques were used:

- **Participant observation**, through the systematic recording of what happened in the sessions, including reactions, debates, forms of interaction and moments of tension or resistance to the contents worked on.
- **Analysis of written productions**, in particular reflective essays, autobiographical stories, ethical narratives and argued responses to moral dilemmas, elaborated by the students in the different spaces of the proposal.
- **Reflective diaries of the teacher-researcher**, which served to reconstruct the process from a critical perspective on the design, implementation and reception of the experience, as well as to identify adjustments required during the development of the intervention.

The analysis of the information was developed through **thematic coding**, based on emerging categories such as recognition of privilege, ethical displacement, cognitive dissonance, active empathy and transformative agency. These categories were constructed inductively from the texts and records, and organized to interpret the meanings that the students constructed in the face of social justice and their positioning in relation to it.

In ethical terms, the **confidentiality** of the information, the **voluntary participation** of the students and the exclusive use of the productions for research and pedagogical purposes were guaranteed. The identity of the participants was preserved and respectful and horizontal treatment was sought in all phases of the work, in line with the principles of qualitative research in education (Flick, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

This methodology made it possible to understand not only what the students learned, but also how that learning transformed (or not) their way of thinking about themselves in relation to the social world. The most relevant results of this experience are presented below, organized according to the categories identified.

Results

The development of the training proposal made it possible to identify relevant transformations in the way students understood the notions of social justice, privilege and ethical responsibility. These transformations were evident both in his written productions and in his participation in discussion spaces, which made it possible to reconstruct a formative trajectory that started from ignorance or indifference towards the dynamics of exclusion, until reaching incipient forms of conscious ethical positioning. The results are grouped around **four major emerging categories**, constructed from the qualitative analysis of the information collected: (1) recognition of privilege, (2) ethical displacement, (3) cognitive dissonance, and (4) transformative agency.

Recognition of privilege

During the first few sessions, most students had a limited understanding of the concept of privilege. Some associated it exclusively with economic conditions, without considering its structural nature. Through activities such as the "privilege map" and guided discussions about real situations of exclusion, students began to identify the invisible advantages associated with their social class, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. In the reflective writings, expressions such as: "I had never thought that being able to walk calmly down the street is already a privilege" or "I take for granted things that others have never had". This recognition was not homogeneous or immediate, but it represented a turning point to open critical reflection.

Ethical displacement

Once students began to recognize their position within an unequal structure, a second category emerged: ethical displacement. This concept alludes to the process by which the subject decenters himself from his individual experience to place himself in the place of the other. The autobiographical narratives revealed how many students began to read their experiences from the perspective of other historically marginalized people or groups. In this process, feelings of discomfort, guilt, empathy and questioning appeared, which were channeled through collaborative work and case development. Some writings evidenced this shift with phrases such as: "I understood that being neutral is a way of sustaining injustice" or "now it makes me uncomfortable laughing at certain jokes that used to seem normal to me".

Cognitive dissonance

Another significant finding was the emergence of internal tensions in the face of previously naturalized beliefs. In several sessions, the students were confronted with content or testimonies that contradicted their frame of reference, generating states of confusion, resistance or defense. This cognitive dissonance was particularly evident in discussions about machismo, racism or homophobia, where some participants were confronted by their own practices or those of their family environment. However, unlike a closure or rejection, the majority chose to move through these tensions through argumentation and dialogue, which shows a

willingness to rethink their positions. This category allows us to value discomfort as an inherent part of the training processes that seek ethical transformation.

Transformative agency

Finally, the last stretch of the process was marked by the emergence of action-oriented discourses. Although still incipient, students began to outline commitments to concrete changes in their immediate environment. Some expressed their desire to intervene in everyday situations of discrimination, others volunteered in social initiatives or made proposals for intervention for their educational community. This transformative agency was not presented as a goal achieved, but as a process under construction, in which the student recognizes himself as a political subject with the capacity to influence, even if it is on a small scale. The statement "I want to start by talking to my friends about this" sums up the importance of ethical micro-movements as a starting point for structural transformation.

Taken together, these results show that a pedagogical proposal focused on intersectional analysis can generate **transformations in the ethical awareness** of students, not through moral impositions, but through the creation of spaces for reflection, encounter and problematization. These transformations are gradual, contextual and not always linear, but they open up possibilities to build a university committed to the formation of critical, empathetic and socially responsible subjects.

Discussion

The results obtained allow us to reflect on the pedagogical effectiveness of the intersectional approach as a tool for university ethics training oriented to social justice. Read from the framework of **critical pedagogy**, these findings show that when students are questioned from their own life experiences, and when they are offered conceptual and methodological tools to critically read reality, training processes are mobilized that transcend the accumulation of information to become trajectories of personal and social transformation. The identification of privilege, the decentralization of the self, the reflexive discomfort and the emergence of a desire for agency are signs of a learning that not only affects the cognitive, but also reaches the emotional, the ethical and the political.

One of the most relevant aspects is that the **recognition of privilege** was not presented as a moral fault, but as an opportunity for awareness and the exercise of social responsibility. This orientation is consistent with the approaches of **McIntosh (1988)**, who introduced the idea of the "invisible backpack of privilege" to describe the daily benefits that certain social groups obtain without being aware of them. In the context of Córdoba, where deep inequalities associated with territory, race, gender, and social class coexist, this recognition was particularly relevant, as it made it possible to make visible how university students—many of them the first in their families to access higher education—simultaneously inhabit positions of vulnerability and privilege. This complexity was key to breaking dichotomies and promoting a more nuanced understanding of social justice.

Likewise, the category of **cognitive dissonance** was central to the training process. Critical pedagogy has insisted that cognitive and affective conflict is necessary to activate processes of authentic reflection. **Freire (1997)** stated that true dialogue only occurs when certainty is questioned, and the possibility of other ways of thinking and being in the world is recognized. In this sense, the discomfort experienced by students should not be seen as an obstacle, but as an indicator that thought structures are being destabilized. The pedagogical task, then, is not to protect the student from discomfort, but to ethically accompany him in his transition to new understandings.

As for **transformative agency**, the emergence of ethical commitments, although modest, accounts for a willingness to act that is fundamental for an education oriented to social change. This idea is developed by **Nussbaum (2006)** in his defense of an education for democratic citizenship, where critical thinking must be accompanied by empathy and responsibility towards others. Students who expressed the desire to talk to their peers about inequality, or to intervene in school spaces marked by discriminatory practices, are beginning to build an ethical identity that assumes social justice as a horizon of meaning, and not as an external discourse imposed by the institution or the teacher.

Finally, the incorporation of **intersectional analysis** as a pedagogical tool was key to avoiding identity reductionism. The possibility of reading injustice from multiple axes of oppression simultaneously—gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability—allowed students to broaden their understanding of the social world and complicate their ethical positioning. In accordance with **Crenshaw (1991)** and **hooks (2004)**, the intersectional approach in the classroom made it possible to break with totalizing discourses, open space for diverse narratives and build a situated ethics, sensitive to the concrete conditions of the subjects.

In short, the findings of this pedagogical experience confirm that a university education committed to social justice requires active methodologies, spaces for authentic dialogue, recognition of experience as a source of knowledge, and teaching accompaniment from an ethics of care. Far from offering recipes, this proposal invites us to think of ethical training as a relational, contextualized and transformative practice, which must be constantly reviewed and adjusted according to the realities of the territory and the needs of students.

Conclusions

The implementation of this training proposal, based on intersectional analysis as a pedagogical strategy to promote social justice in the university classroom, made it possible to verify that it is possible to generate significant processes of ethical transformation in students when conditions are created conducive to reflection, dialogue and recognition of the social structures that shape their lives. Throughout the five training spaces that structured the experience, students not only accessed fundamental concepts of privilege, exclusion and power, but were also personally questioned, mobilizing emotions, memories and knowledge that normally remain outside the formal curriculum.

One of the central learnings of this experience was to understand that social justice cannot be taught as just another content, but must be lived, debated, and felt in the context of the classroom. To do this, it is necessary to break with traditional teaching logics, based on one-way transmission, and adopt methodologies that allow students to construct meaning from their situated experience. Critical pedagogy, in this sense, offers powerful tools to accompany processes in which subjects not only acquire knowledge, but also transform their way of understanding themselves, relating to others and positioning themselves in front of the world.

In the context of Córdoba, where structural inequalities are expressed with particular harshness, the intersectional approach was particularly pertinent, as it made it possible to address the multiple forms of oppression that affect students and their communities. Far from a homogeneous vision of exclusion, the intersectional analysis facilitated the recognition of how factors such as gender, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation are intertwined, generating complex realities that cannot be reduced to a single category. This recognition was key to denaturalizing privilege, developing empathy and fostering an active ethical disposition.

Likewise, the experience showed that the classroom can be a privileged space to build transformative agency. Although the commitments expressed by the students were, in many cases, modest or incipient, they revealed an ongoing process: the passage from passive observation to ethical concern, and from there to the intention to act. This trajectory is neither immediate nor automatic, but it constitutes the basis for a critical citizen education that is not limited to the normative, but is oriented towards social transformation.

Finally, this proposal leaves us with an open reflection on the role of universities in the construction of a fairer society. Training technically competent professionals is no longer enough. In contexts marked by exclusion, symbolic violence and the reproduction of privileges, higher education must assume the commitment to form ethically sensitive subjects, capable of critically reading their reality and acting responsibly in the face of it. Social justice should not be a peripheral issue in university education, but an articulating axis that crosses the curriculum, methodologies and pedagogical relationship.

From this experience, it is proposed to continue exploring pedagogical paths that, like the one systematized here, contribute to building a university truly committed to human rights, inclusion and the dignity of all people.

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