


Local Experiences, Global Perspectives: Preparing Future Teachers for Diverse Societies through Community Engagement

Christoph Knoblauch, Laura Döller

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Abstract

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In light of societal diversity and the growing heterogeneity of educational environments, this paper examines the strategic integration of community engagement into teacher education. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of experiential learning, reflective practice, and authentic pedagogy, the paper reflects three complementary approaches to fostering future teachers' societal connectedness: (a) place-based initiatives, (b) digitally networked environments, and (c) international perspectives. Building on these conceptual foundations, a qualitative study with teacher education students examines how community engagement experiences can influence the development of professional identity, responsiveness to diversity, and reflective practice. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, project documentation, and participant observation and analyzed using thematic content analysis. The findings suggest that community engagement can foster the development of critical professional capacities, enhance students' awareness of diversity, and promote reflective and participatory teaching dispositions. The study underscores the potential of systematically embedding local, digital, and international community engagement pathways into teacher education curricula. The paper argues that through carefully designed and ethically grounded engagement structures, higher education institutions can prepare future educators to take on the complexities of diverse, dynamic, and globally interconnected educational landscapes.

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly recognized as critical contributors to addressing complex societal challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and the promotion of sustainable development (Altbach, 2013). Traditionally focused on research and teaching, many HEIs now integrate community engagement projects as a core mission to enhance their societal relevance and educational impact (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). In this context, the concept of community engagement can offer opportunities to connect academic learning with the diverse lifeworlds of local communities, thereby enriching students' educational experiences, fostering mutual understanding, and supporting inclusive and context-sensitive development.

Given current demands in teacher education, the diversity of societal lifeworlds and the heterogeneity of school classes pose significant challenges for schools, teachers, and families. Future teachers are increasingly required not only to possess disciplinary competence but also to demonstrate responsiveness to diversity, social responsibility, and adaptability in diverse educational contexts (Morais & Ogden, 2011). In this light, integrating community engagement

systematically into teacher education has gained attention as a promising strategy to support the professional preparation of future educators. Thus, community-engaged teacher preparation moves beyond theoretical instruction to promote situated learning experiences. By actively participating in local, national, or global community initiatives, students are exposed to multiple perspectives and complex social realities and can experience the dynamics of community collaboration (Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Engagement initiatives are thus increasingly regarded not only as supplementary activities but as essential pedagogical elements for preparing diversity-responsive, socially committed, and critically reflective teachers (Barnes & Marlatt, 2020).

However, community engagement in teacher education must be carefully conceptualized. It is not simply community service or volunteerism but a process grounded in democratic partnerships, reciprocal learning, and the shared pursuit of societal betterment (Hannibal & Robertson, 2023). Related concepts such as (a) civic engagement or (b) service learning highlight different aspects of this interaction.



(a) In addressing power dynamics as well as community knowledge, (critically) engaged civic learning emphasizes the need to incorporate self-reflection and self-awareness as essential tools to better understand one's individual and professional role within various institutional contexts (Vincent et al., 2021). (b) Service learning, for example, often emphasizes curricular integration and structured reflection linked to academic credit. Against this backdrop, community engagement adopts an even broader and more flexible framework of collaboration between HEIs and communities to address mutual needs and foster sustainable partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Recent conceptualizations of community engagement emphasize its multi-layered nature, encompassing local, regional, national, and international engagements, complemented by a cross-cutting digital dimension (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Local engagement remains foundational, allowing students to work directly with surrounding communities, while international collaborations expose future teachers to global educational dynamics (Knoblauch, 2024). Digital tools offer new possibilities for virtual collaboration, broadening access and innovation across all layers of engagement.

Against this backdrop, integrating community-related projects with internationalization efforts in teacher education is particularly significant in today's globalized world. As globalization reshapes educational landscapes, teacher education must prepare candidates for increasingly diverse classrooms in terms of culture, language, and socio-economic background. Combining local community engagement with international perspectives can promote cultural responsiveness, global awareness, and professional adaptability, enhancing the readiness of future teachers for interconnected educational environments (Walters & Nwagwu, 2020). In this context, community engagement aligns closely with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015. By engaging students in projects addressing issues like social equity, environmental sustainability, and inclusive education, community engagement can foster critical competencies for sustainable development. Project-based learning approaches, which combine real-world tasks with academic reflection, can further amplify these effects by promoting active learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and problem-solving capacities (Dewey, 1916; Kolb, 1984). At the center of these processes are the students themselves, who serve as

crucial mediators between HEIs and communities. Through their participation in community engagement initiatives, students can contribute to knowledge exchange, societal development, and the dynamics of institutional-community relationships. Partnerships between HEIs and local or international actors — such as schools, non-governmental organizations, municipalities, and cultural institutions — can enhance the scope and impact of community engagement initiatives. Despite these potentials, previous studies emphasize the need to develop integrative strategies that link local actions to global contexts and to institutionalize engagement practices systematically within higher education (Altbach, 2013). Creating sustainable, reciprocal partnerships requires attention to ethical collaboration, critical reflection, and mutual benefit—principles increasingly considered foundational for meaningful community engagement (Knoblauch & Böhmer, 2023).

This paper contributes to this discussion by examining how community engagement — particularly through (a) place-based initiatives, (b) digitally networked environments, and (c) global partnerships — can be systematically integrated into teacher education to support the preparation of future teachers for the realities of diverse classrooms. It presents findings from a qualitative study with teacher education students who participated in community engagement projects, focusing on their experiences and perceived implications for their future professional roles.

2. Theoretical foundation

Community engagement in teacher education builds upon several complementary theoretical traditions, including experiential learning, reflective practice, situated learning, and authentic pedagogy. While these approaches do not constitute a unified model, they offer a conceptual basis and perspective for examining how community engagement activities can support the professional development of prospective teachers and their preparation for addressing the complexities of diverse educational contexts.

2.1. *Experiential Learning and Situated Practice*

One of the primary theoretical foundations for community engagement is experiential learning. Dewey (1938) emphasized that education must be rooted in learners' lived experiences. He argued that authentic experiences enable learners to develop critical thinking, foster inquiry, and connect

theoretical understanding to real-world problems (p. 25). Dewey's concept of learning through experience remains central to current approaches to community engagement in teacher education.

Building on Lewin (1957), Kolb (1984) introduces a formal model of experiential learning, conceptualizing learning as a cyclical process involving (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation. Within community-related activities, teacher education students can move through these stages as they (a) actively engage with communities, (b) reflect on possible challenges, (c) generalize their learning to broader educational theories, and (d) apply new strategies in practice.

Similarly, as introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), situated learning theory highlights the social and contextual nature of knowledge acquisition. According to this perspective, learning occurs most effectively through participation in authentic community practices. When future teachers engage with real communities, they not only apply their theoretical knowledge but can also develop professional identities through meaningful interaction with diverse stakeholders (pp. 89-118). This concept aligns with the role of HEIs as institutions that prepare teachers to navigate complex, culturally diverse, and socially dynamic environments.

2.2. Reflection and Professional Identity Development

Reflection plays a key role in linking experiential learning to professional growth. Dewey (1933) identified reflection as the process of active, persistent, and careful consideration of beliefs, practices, and experiences, particularly in situations of uncertainty. For teacher candidates, processes of reflection can enable the examination of experiences within communities, fostering deeper understanding and informed professional decision-making. Schön (1983) further distinguished between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action involves critical thinking and adaptation during practice, whereas reflection-on-action refers to analyzing experiences after they have occurred. Both processes are crucial within community engagement, where unpredictable social dynamics require flexibility, adaptability, and thoughtful responsiveness.

In this context, structured reflective practices, such as reflective journals, group debriefings, and critical essays, are essential elements of community engagement projects (Van Manen, 1995). They can

encourage future teachers to critically assess their experiences, question assumptions, and align their pedagogical practices with principles of equity and inclusion. Within this, structures like the 4Rs framework—Reporting, Relating, Reasoning, and Reconstructing—can serve as a guide for facilitating deeper levels of reflection, moving beyond description toward critical engagement with social contexts and power relations (e.g., Ryan & Ryan, 2013).

Engaging students in reflective practice during community engagement can support their emerging professional identities. It can foster critical consciousness (Freire, 1970, pp. 71-87), strengthen ethical commitment, and promote a sense of agency in addressing educational inequities. Studies emphasize that such reflective learning environments are critical for preparing socially responsible and diversity-responsive teachers who view education as a means for promoting democratic citizenship and social transformation (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

2.3. Authentic Pedagogy and Societal Relevance

A frequently discussed foundation of community engagement is the concept of authentic pedagogy. In this context, three key criteria are often highlighted: (a) higher-order thinking, (b) substantive conversation, and (c) value beyond the school (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). These elements underscore the importance of connecting classroom learning to real-world issues and fostering intellectual engagement with social problems. (a) In community engagement projects, teacher candidates are challenged to design and implement activities that are not only theoretically informed but also socially impactful. (b) They can engage in substantive dialogue with community members, co-create knowledge, and collaboratively work toward solutions that have genuine relevance for communities (Wenger, 1998). (c) Through these experiences, future teachers can learn to appreciate education as inherently relational and context-dependent. They recognize that teaching is not a one-way transmission of knowledge but a participatory, dialogic, and transformative practice (Freire, 1970). Lund and Lee (2015) critically reflect on a purely competence-oriented approach, warning that it can result in a "safari experience" (p. 5). Limited encounters with diverse life realities should not be reduced to occasional visits to (marginalized) communities. Instead, the focus should aim to increase humility, as well as a self-reflective positioning that enables genuine and meaningful engagement. Authentic engagement with diverse communities can

cultivate dispositions of empathy, diversity responsiveness, and advocacy for social justice—qualities that are increasingly critical in contemporary classrooms (Banks, 2016). Moreover, engagement with communities can encourage students to appreciate the systemic dimensions of social challenges, fostering systems thinking and interdisciplinary approaches to problem-solving (Beane, 1997). These perspectives can become essential for preparing teachers to work within the complex and interconnected realities of modern education systems.

2.4. Global Perspectives and Diversity Responsiveness

In an increasingly interconnected world, teacher education programs are tasked with preparing candidates for work in diverse and global educational settings. Community engagement courses or initiatives that include international or digitally networked collaborations can offer valuable opportunities for prospective teachers to develop global perspectives and engage with complex dynamics (Morais & Ogden, 2011). Approaches associated with global citizenship education, for example, can emphasize awareness of global interdependencies, attentiveness to diversity, and a sense of responsibility for social justice that extends beyond national borders. When students participate in international partnerships or collaborate with linguistically heterogeneous communities, such experiences may expand their understanding of education as a globally situated and socially responsive practice. Teacher–community relationships in Indigenous contexts have been shown to highlight the significance of pedagogical approaches that attend to local knowledge systems (Densmore, 1998). For example, experiential engagement with local language environments, such as through linguistic community walks, can support the development of critical multilingual awareness and challenge dominant language hierarchies (Cárdenas Curiel et al., 2024). These forms of engagement may support teacher candidates in developing asset-based pedagogical orientations that recognize and build upon students' linguistic and experiential resources (Gay, 2010). They can also foster critical reflection on power relations in education and encourage a professional stance committed to inclusive and equitable learning environments. Even partial implementations of asset-based approaches may heighten future educators' awareness of existing resources within communities. The sensitive and deliberate recognition of these assets

can serve to critically deconstruct existing deficit-oriented narratives and establish a foundation for equitable and genuine relationships (Garoutte & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014). By recognizing valuable resources, top-down organizational structures are dismantled, and community-empowering and collaborative activities are brought to the forefront.

Moreover, globally oriented engagement efforts can be situated within broader international education policy frameworks, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (United Nations, 2015). Through participation in community-based activities with transnational dimensions, future teachers may contribute to efforts aimed at fostering more sustainable, inclusive, and equitable forms of education globally.

3. Research methodology

Building on the conceptual foundations outlined above, the following section presents the research methodology used to explore how teacher education students experience and interpret community engagement. To explore how it may contribute to fostering diversity-responsiveness and professional development, a qualitative study was conducted within a structured course setting. The design reflects core principles of experiential learning, reflective practice, and situated engagement.

The section outlines the course context, participant sample, data collection, and analysis strategies used to capture how future teachers engage with diverse communities and reflect on their professional growth.

3.1. Research Design

The study follows a qualitative research design. This approach is suitable for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena, allowing for a differentiated and open-ended reconstruction of the participants' perspectives (Flick, 2018; Patton, 2002). The focus, in this case, is on the students' experiences and reflections regarding community engagement and its relevance for their future professional practice as teachers. The qualitative approach enables the capture of nuanced meanings and subjective experiences that are crucial for understanding professional development processes in educational contexts (Mayring, 2015).

3.2. Course Context

The empirical study was conducted within the framework of a university course on community

engagement, offered to teacher education students. The course was structured into three phases:

- (1) **Introduction and Conceptual Foundation:** Students were introduced to theoretical frameworks related to community engagement, diversity education, experiential learning, and reflective practices.
- (2) **Reflective Preparation and Project Work:** Students designed and carried out their community engagement projects, critically engaging with challenges and documenting their experiences.
- (3) **Presentation and Discussion:** Students presented their projects and engaged in critical discussions with their peers, connecting practical experiences with theoretical and professional questions.

This structure aimed to foster experiential learning and reflection as central processes of professionalization.

3.3. Participants

The sample consists of 19 teacher education students who participated in the course. A purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was employed, focusing on students who had previously actively engaged in community projects and were willing to reflect critically on their experiences.

Participation was voluntary. All participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's aims, procedures, and ethical safeguards.

3.4. Data Collection

Data collection combined several qualitative methods to allow triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018):

- (a) **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Guided by a thematic framework, the interviews explored students' (1) understandings of community, (2) their experiences in project work, (3) reflections on diversity, (4) perceived professional learning, and (5) suggestions for community networking. The construction of the interview guide followed established methodological principles for qualitative interviews (Helfferich, 2011; Kallio et al., 2016).
- (b) **Project Abstracts:** Each student submitted a written abstract summarizing the aims, activities, and reflections related to their community engagement project.
- (c) **Participant Observation and Recorded Discussions:** Observations during project

presentations and recorded class discussions provided additional data, capturing interactional dynamics and collective reflections.

An overview of data sources is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of Data Sources

Data Source	Description
Semi-Structured Interviews	Individual interviews focusing on five thematic areas (see below)
Project Abstracts	Written summaries of community engagement projects
Participant Observation and Discussion	Observations and recordings of project presentations

3.5. Instrument: Interview Framework

The semi-structured interviews were organized around five thematic themes (deductive categories):

- (1) Awareness of community and community engagement
- (2) General Experiences with Project Work
- (3) Experiences with Diversity
- (4) Community engagement and Future Professional Work
- (5) Recommendations for Strengthening community networking

This framework allowed systematic yet flexible exploration of the students' experiences and perspectives (Helfferich, 2011).

3.6. Data Analysis

The analysis followed the principles of qualitative thematic content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018; Mayring, 2015). It combined deductive and inductive strategies:

Deductive Category Development: Based on theoretical frameworks on community engagement (Barnes & Marlatt, 2020; Boyer, 1990; Byrne, 2019) and the thematic structure of the course.

Inductive Category Refinement: Additional subcategories were identified from the data where necessary.

The analysis steps included:

- (1) Repeated reading of the material

- (2) Assignment of initial codes
- (3) (inductive) Category system development
- (4) Thematic condensation and synthesis across data sources

This approach ensured a systematic yet open handling of the data, allowing the students' subjective perspectives to be reconstructed in a theory-sensitive manner.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards in educational research (BERA, 2018). Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Students were informed that participation or non-participation would have no impact on course grades or academic standing.

4. Results

The following section presents the findings of the qualitative study, structured along the five deductive categories introduced in the preceding chapters. In addition, the final section incorporates inductively developed subcategories, as it centers on students' concrete recommendations for enhancing community engagement.

4.1. Awareness of Community and Community Engagement

The interviewed students demonstrated diverse and multi-layered understandings of what constitutes a community and what community engagement entails. The term 'Community' was conceptualized in both spatial and relational terms. Some students emphasized geographical communities, such as neighborhoods, schools, or city districts, while others defined community as a network of shared interests, experiences, or emotional support. Community is often understood as a peer-based network centered around shared and collective interests. Community engagement is frequently discussed as referring to active efforts to improve and expand experiences in communities. In this context, community engagement was primarily perceived as active, dialogical participation aimed at contributing to societal betterment.

"People collaboratively work together... to improve the well-being of that community."

Some students emphasized that engagement requires commitment, collaboration, and the ability to navigate diverse social expectations. The discussions

were not limited to formal volunteering or service; instead, they encompassed building relationships, creating mutual understanding, and learning through practical involvement.

This broad conceptualization was reflected in the range of projects students undertook. For example, projects focusing on holiday activities with children or youth mentoring exemplify place-based engagement. At the same time, initiatives such as diversity-responsive learning platforms or international volunteering reflected relational and interest-based notions of community.

Most interviewed students also recognized that community engagement is context-sensitive: the form and goals of engagement must adapt to the needs, expectations, and structures of the specific communities involved. This perspective aligns with situated learning theory, emphasizing that meaningful learning occurs through participation in authentic social practices.

4.2. General Experiences with Project Work

The interviews show that managing projects, often in collaboration with community organizations or public institutions, required students to plan activities, coordinate teams, resolve conflicts, and respond to unforeseen challenges. These practical experiences were often discussed as directly relevant to future teaching roles, such as managing diverse classrooms, communicating across different age groups, and handling bureaucratic requirements within educational settings. A central theme emerging from the students' narratives was the significant development of professional and personal skills through engagement activities. Students reported growth in leadership capacities, organizational skills, teamwork, communication, and adaptability. In this context, particularly noteworthy was the development of teamwork skills.

"We really worked as a team... to make the difference."

Several projects, including organizing youth camps and coordinating intercultural workshops, involved close collaboration with peers and community partners. Students reported that they learned to negotiate different working styles, distribute responsibilities, and build consensus. Furthermore, students reflected that participating in community projects enhanced their confidence, resilience, and ability to take on responsibility. For some, it represented their first experience of leading a project

or initiating a partnership with an external organization, thus bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world professional challenges.

4.3. Experiences with Diversity

Many students discussed the processes of engaging with diverse community members and how this exposed them to a range of cultural, linguistic, generational, and socio-economic differences. Students working with refugee populations, disadvantaged youth, or culturally diverse school communities reported that engagement made abstract concepts of diversity and inclusion tangible. They encountered linguistic barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and social inequalities firsthand, prompting them to reflect on their own assumptions and biases critically. Many participants acknowledged that diversity played a significant role in their community engagement experiences, as individuals had different perspectives and backgrounds.

“We were really different people. (...) We had different ways of thinking, different ways of talking about things, different ways of expressing ourselves.”

Some students report that these encounters fostered diversity-responsiveness, empathy, and a deeper understanding of educational inequalities. Students discussed how they recognized that inclusive educational practice requires more than theoretical knowledge. Some students reflected on how engagement demands the ability to listen actively, adapt pedagogical approaches, and create welcoming learning environments.

In projects involving international dimensions, such as projects in Uganda or Malaysia, students confronted questions of power, privilege, and ethical responsibility. Some students reported that this broadened their perspectives on global and historical interdependencies, as well as the ethical dimensions of educational work across cultural contexts.

4.4. Community Engagement and Future Professional Work

Community engagement experiences had a profound impact on many students' reflections about their future professional roles. Often, students discussed that community engagement either strengthened their motivation to pursue a teaching career or led to a reconsideration of their professional aspirations.

“After the experience with the kids... I chose to apply for teacher study.”

Some students reported how they began to conceptualize teaching not merely as knowledge transmission but as a relational, socially embedded, and community-oriented practice. During the discussions, students acknowledged that being an educator involves collaborating with families, communities, and social institutions to support learners' holistic development. In this context, some participants emphasized that these abilities would be particularly relevant when working with future colleagues and students, as they had learned to balance listening to others while also holding their individual views.

“... it taught me many skills how to collaborate with people, how to accept their opinion, and at the same time, (...), stick to mine.”

Students also reflected on the educational environments they wish to create: spaces characterized by participation, inclusivity, respect, and critical inquiry. Engagement experiences inspired many to adopt participatory and student-centered pedagogical philosophies, emphasizing collaboration, experiential learning, and responsiveness to learners' backgrounds and needs. Some students expressed a heightened awareness of the systemic challenges facing education, including resource inequalities, bureaucratic barriers, and social marginalization. These insights reinforced a commitment to advocacy and innovation within educational practice.

4.5. Recommendations for Strengthening Community Networking

Many students shared concrete suggestions for how HEIs could improve the integration and sustainability of community engagement within (teacher) education. A frequently mentioned theme was the need for more flexibility and autonomy in project design. Some students noted that institutional restrictions limited their ability to engage meaningfully with communities. They advocated for less rigid frameworks and more freedom to develop student-led initiatives.

“There are too many rules sometimes. We couldn't really follow our own ideas.”

Students also emphasized the value of interactive formats, such as workshops, clubs, or “learning festivals,” to facilitate connections between university students and local communities. These events were seen as accessible, motivating, and capable of bringing diverse groups together. In some cases, students referred to specific activities that had successfully

encouraged engagement or created positive visibility for the University's involvement in community issues.

“More things like a learning festival would be great, bringing kids to the university.”

A further concern expressed by several students was the limited visibility of existing engagement opportunities. They reported not being aware of initiatives or finding it difficult to access information. Suggestions ranged from improved advertising to dedicated engagement days and even small incentives to attract interest.

Additionally, several students stressed the importance of sustainable and long-term structures. They reported that community engagement often ended when the course concluded, limiting deeper involvement or follow-up. To address this, they recommended developing ongoing partnerships with local organizations, offering pathways for continued participation beyond the academic semester. Some also suggested connecting students with external mentors or guest speakers to provide outside academic insights and showcase real-world engagement models.

In sum, students strongly desired institutional support that facilitates flexible, visible, and enduring community engagement. Their suggestions underscore the importance of structural changes to ensure that engagement is not a one-time activity but a sustained and integral part of teacher education.

Based on their experiences, students identified several concrete strategic directions:

(a) Local, Place-Based Initiatives

Students emphasized the importance of maintaining strong connections with local communities. They recommended that HEIs should facilitate partnerships with local schools, cultural organizations, youth centers, and social service agencies to provide accessible, contextually relevant engagement opportunities. Place-based projects, students argued, can make abstract educational theories concrete and highlight the role of educators as community builders. Several projects, such as school-based holiday programs and youth mentoring initiatives, demonstrated the effectiveness of local engagement in fostering practical skills and community connectedness.

(b) Digital Networking

Students recognized the potential of digital platforms to support engagement, particularly in coordinating projects, maintaining communication

across dispersed teams, and reaching marginalized groups. They suggested that HEIs could integrate digital civic engagement more systematically, using online tools to expand access and innovation in community engagement activities.

“We organized a lot of online meetings so that all of the students could participate.”

Although digital engagement was primarily employed as a supplementary strategy rather than a central mode of involvement, students recognized its increasing significance in both educational and community contexts. Moreover, digital tools were discussed as valuable means for facilitating international engagement, inclusive and equitable participation opportunities and incorporating transnational perspectives.

(c) International Engagement

Students with international community engagement experiences highlighted the transformative impact of engagement in culturally diverse contexts on their professional and personal development. They recommended that HEIs foster more global partnerships, including virtual exchange programs, international service learning, and collaborations with educational institutions abroad.

“I want to continue engaging in different communities internationally.”

(d) International engagement projects emerged as meaningful opportunities for critically navigating diversity, reflecting on global inequities, and cultivating competencies essential for working in globalized settings. Institutional Support Structures

Students stressed the need for stronger institutional support structures to enable sustainable and effective community engagement. Recommendations included clearer frameworks for project development, more systematic integration of community engagement into curricula, recognition of engagement within academic programs, and better logistical support for partnership building. Students also emphasized the importance of reflective spaces — such as seminars, workshops, or mentoring — to facilitate critical engagement with the complexities of community work.

5. Synthesis

The findings of this study indicate the potential of systematically embedding community engagement into (teacher) education curricula to foster the development of professional competencies, diversity responsiveness, and reflective practice. Community

engagement can provide (teacher) education students with opportunities to connect theoretical content to real-world challenges.

(1) In place-based projects, students build relational skills and awareness of social inequalities. Local activities such as youth mentoring or holiday programs can ground future educators in their communities and may promote adaptability, leadership, and critical reflection.

(2) Digitally networked forms of engagement, while less central, offer additional opportunities for collaboration and inclusive participation. Digital tools were often described as supporting communication and coordination across student teams or between institutions and community partners. While frequently supplementary, digital engagement is increasingly recognized as a relevant dimension of both education and community work (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

(3) International engagement experiences can further contribute to the development of diversity-responsive and globally aware perspectives. Such experiences have been shown to foster critical reflection and deepen awareness of power relations and ethical responsibility in education (Walters & Nwagwu, 2020). Exposure to diverse educational settings can enable future teachers to approach their environments with renewed perspective and sensitivity. Importantly, these initiatives must be designed to promote reciprocity and avoid the reproduction of dominant knowledge hierarchies (Barnes & Marlatt, 2020).

The empirical findings suggest that community engagement can promote not only skill development but also transformation in how students view their professional roles. Students began to see teaching as a relational and socially embedded profession, a shift aligned with theories of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Reflection, particularly when supported by structured pedagogical formats, enabled participants to re-examine their assumptions and engage more deeply with the societal dimensions of education. Furthermore, community-related projects allowed students to engage with diversity in concrete, context-specific ways. Rather than remaining at the level of abstract discussion, community engagement created opportunities for active listening, adaptation, and responsiveness. These aspects are essential to fostering educational practices that value difference and aim to reduce systemic inequities (Gay, 2010). In this context, results from the study also align with research emphasizing the importance of sustained

civic engagement, local place attachment, and critical reflection on social responsibility (Hannibal & Robertson, 2023): Participants expressed a stronger awareness of their social positioning and a commitment to act upon their insights, resonating with the idea of civic-mindedness. Given the complex and globally interconnected possibilities and dimensions of international experiences, it is imperative to incorporate perspectives from decolonial studies into reflective practices. Developing critical consciousness through reflection can contribute to establishing standards that are bias-conscious and foster decolonial practices, thereby promoting authentic, asset-oriented, and reciprocal relationships (Mitchell & Chavous, 2021). International engagement projects themselves have to be grounded in reflective practices, demonstrating sensitivity to global and colonial inequalities and aiming to foster social change. HEIs, by systematically and reflexively institutionalizing community engagement, can play a crucial role in promoting not only pedagogical proficiency but also civic commitment and global responsibility among future educators.

Against this backdrop, the students' experiences align with and lend support to key ideas from experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), reflective practice (Schön, 1983), and authentic pedagogy (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995), indicating connections between their engagement experiences and these theoretical frameworks. Moreover, the results illustrate that strategically combining local, digital, and international engagement opportunities within (teacher) education can help future teachers navigate the diverse, complex, and dynamic realities of contemporary educational practice.

Despite these promising potentials, the study also points to challenges. For digital formats to serve as effective complements to embodied engagement, they must be pedagogically integrated and avoid reducing community interaction to logistical coordination. International projects must emphasize ethical collaboration, perspectives of decolonization, sustainability, and mutual benefit, as reciprocity remains a cornerstone of community engagement (Walters & Nwagwu, 2020). Participants also highlighted structural gaps at the institutional level, suggesting that clearer curricular frameworks, increased recognition of engagement within academic credit systems, and logistical support for sustainable partnerships would be beneficial. These insights confirm existing findings that institutional structures

must be intentionally designed to support meaningful community engagement in (teacher) education (Barnes & Marlatt, 2020).

In sum, the results indicate that community engagement, when integrated thoughtfully into (teacher) education, can support a form of professionalization that is collaborative, reflexive, and socially responsible. By bridging academic learning with societal engagement, it can help prepare future educators to address the complexities of contemporary education systems and negotiate and tolerate ambiguities. Institutions of higher education thus hold both the opportunity and the responsibility to foster critically reflective and contextually situated engagement practices.

6. Conclusions

Rather than adding a discrete set of competencies, connecting with diverse communities can create conditions in which prospective educators encounter diverse lifeworlds, engage with social complexity, and reflect on the relational and contextual dimensions of their future professional roles.

A key insight is that the value of community engagement does not lie solely in the diversity of its formats—local, digital, and international—but in how these contexts enable reflective encounters. Students developed new perspectives not by acquiring predefined skills but through navigating ambiguity, negotiating competing expectations, and participating in community-based collaboration. These experiences supported a re-evaluation of professional identity and heightened awareness of structural inequalities and educational diversity.

The study also points to the institutional responsibility of HEIs to move beyond fragmented or additive approaches to holistic concepts of community engagement. Sustainable and reflective engagement requires long-term partnerships, ethical reciprocity, and curricular structures that position engagement as integral to professional learning. Rather than treating community engagement as an enhancement, institutions should consider how their educational priorities align with the values, tensions, and forms of knowledge emerging from community-based work. This also requires stakeholders in HEIs to engage in self-critical reflection and positioning regarding institutional structures and power dynamics between themselves and the communities they engage with.

Against this background, the findings raise critical questions for future development:

- How can engagement be designed to ensure that reflection on difference and complexity is integral to the experience rather than incidental?
- What forms of pedagogical guidance support meaningful engagement with unfamiliar social realities?
- And how might digital or international components be structured to promote not only access and reach but ethically grounded collaboration and recognition of diverse knowledge systems?

Looking ahead, further research is needed to explore how different models of community engagement shape professional dispositions over time and how encounters with diverse communities translate into sustained commitments in educators' practice. Attention should also be paid to how students are supported in navigating relational tensions, ethical dilemmas, and situated forms of collaboration—elements central to learning through encounter.

In an increasingly diverse educational landscape, the future of community engagement may lie less in bridging theory and practice and more in disrupting dominant narratives and stereotypes within pre-service teachers. Engagement with communities invites prospective teachers to confront contradictions, reflect critically on their positionality, and cultivate a more situated and responsive understanding of educational practice.

Acknowledgments

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors note:

Christoph Knoblauch is a Professor of Teacher Education and Religious Education at the University of Education Ludwigsburg. His work focuses on culturally and religiously responsive education in both

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