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EXPERIENTIAL PEDAGOGY FOR DEVELOPING EMPATHY IN FUTURE TEACHERS

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Abstract

This article presents an innovative experiential learning model developed for prospective teachers within a university course on supporting children with chronic illnesses and their families. The model incorporates rhythmic group synchronisation exercises, emotionally resonant storytelling, real-life video testimonies, student-created theatrical performances, and a guided closed-eye visualisation—one of the most impactful elements. These practices are designed to foster empathy, emotional literacy, and inclusive pedagogical competence. During the course, students metaphorically represent illness through original stories, deliberately avoiding diagnostic labels to reduce stigma. These narratives are subsequently transformed into short theatrical performances, enabling participants to embody both physically and emotionally the lived experiences of children with chronic conditions. A mixed-methods evaluation was conducted, incorporating a structured classroom observation tool to assess students' engagement, emotional responses, initiative, and collaboration. A post-course Likert-scale questionnaire measured students' self-assessed development of empathy and their readiness for inclusive pedagogical

practice. The results indicated strong alignment between observed behaviours and participants' self-assessments. Grounded in the theories of experiential learning (Dewey, Kolb), social constructivism (Vygotsky), narrative pedagogy (Freire), multiple intelligences (Gardner), and socio-emotional learning (CASEL), the model provides a replicable and emotionally engaging approach to preparing future teachers for work in inclusive educational contexts.

Keywords:

Empathy, Experiential Learning, Teacher Training, Inclusive Pedagogy, Chronic Illness, Narrative Theatre

1. Introduction

In an era of rapidly advancing technologies and the growing integration of artificial intelligence into everyday life, education is challenged not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate key human competencies such as empathy, compassion, and emotional intelligence. In a world where an increasing number of decisions are delegated to algorithms, the teacher's role acquires a new dimension: not merely transmitting content but facilitating meaningful learning and personal growth.

The need for innovative approaches in the preparation of future teachers is particularly evident. Students who will work with vulnerable groups, including children with chronic illnesses, must develop not only professional skills but also pedagogical sensitivity. Traditional lecture-based methods often prove insufficient to achieve these aims. Recent studies also emphasise that teacher empathy is strongly linked to student wellbeing and mental health outcomes (Ampofo et al., 2025), which underscores the importance of pedagogical methods that cultivate both professional competence and emotional sensitivity.

In recent years, pedagogical research within GRDS Publishing has emphasised the link between teacher self-efficacy and formative assessment practices (Panagiotidou, 2025). This emphasis reinforces the need for approaches that not only transmit content but also build teachers' beliefs in their capacity to facilitate meaningful learning.

This study presents an innovative pedagogical model grounded in experiential learning, rhythm, storytelling, and theatrical activity. The methodology was implemented in the course Pedagogical Support for Children with Chronic Illnesses and Their Families, delivered to bachelor's and master's students in the field of Pedagogy. The aim was to create a learning environment in which students encounter situations requiring understanding, empathy, and emotional engagement.

The aim of this study is to answer the question: to what extent does experiential learning foster empathy and pedagogical sensitivity in students preparing to work with vulnerable groups? This was investigated through a combined approach involving a questionnaire survey and observation of behaviour in the learning environment.

The model integrates a series of interactive, experiential, and creative methods that operate in harmony to achieve emotional impact and professional understanding. It is structured into several interconnected stages:

1. Rhythmic Introduction (Group Synchronization):

Each lesson begins with a short rhythmic exercise in which the lecturer sets the rhythm by clapping, tapping, or using percussion instruments (e.g. drums, maracas). Students may choose to repeat the rhythm or create their own, but once they join in, they continue without interruption. This exercise functions simultaneously as a tool for concentration, physical presence, and symbolic ‘tuning’ of the group. It engages bodily-kinesthetic and musical intelligences and serves as an indicator of the students’ readiness to begin the learning process.

2. Narrative Introduction (Fairy Tale, Story, Video):

The rhythmic exercise is followed by the telling of a story or fairy tale, along with a video testimony from the real life of a family with a chronically ill child. The stories are chosen for their metaphorical or emotional depth, designed to resonate with students and evoke an empathetic response. The technique of emotional presence, supported by voice modulation and pauses, is employed to facilitate the transfer of experience.

3. Guided Visualisation Exercise with Closed Eyes:

Midway through the course, following the presentation of the videos, students participate in a lecturer-led visualisation exercise with their eyes closed. The teacher uses verbal imagery to immerse participants in an emotionally charged situation from the perspective of a parent of a child with a chronic illness, with associated worries, fears, fatigue, and hopes. The exercise is supported by bodily cues (e.g. breathing guidance, awareness of pulse, bodily tension) and has a strong emotional impact. Students are given the option to decline participation in advance, ensuring their psychological safety.

The guided visualisation exercise allowed students to embody the lived experiences of parents of children with chronic illnesses. This type of simulation-based pedagogy has been shown to be effective in cultivating empathy and awareness of diversity (Vallera, 2023), reinforcing the potential of experiential learning as a tool for social and emotional growth.

4. Reflection and Dialogue:

The stories evoke emotions that are channelled into group discussion. Through guided questioning, the teacher supports students in making sense of the experience, identifying emotions, social mechanisms, and pedagogical dilemmas. This stage directly reflects Freire’s concept of dialogue and the development of critical awareness.

5. Creating Original Fairy Tales:

After several sessions, students are tasked with composing an original fairy tale that represents the experiences of a child with a chronic illness, without explicitly naming the diagnosis. This exercise in empathic imagination requires adopting another's perspective while simultaneously developing narrative skills and social sensitivity.

6. Theatrical Adaptation and Performance:

Selected fairy tales are adapted into short performances. Students assign roles, prepare props, and stage their productions for their peers. The theatrical activity completes the experiential cycle, enabling the physical and emotional embodiment of the theme. This represents the culmination of the model, where all educational aims—empathy, dialogue, creativity, and social engagement—are integrated.

2. Theoretical Framework

John Dewey was among the first thinkers to emphasise the importance of connecting learning with personal experience. His principle of “learning by doing” highlights the active participation of learners in discovery and meaningful comprehension. In the course under consideration, the inclusion of rhythm, storytelling, and theatrical forms corresponds directly to this philosophy, as students do not passively absorb knowledge but experience it through bodily, emotional, and social engagement. This is achieved through the rhythmic introduction, emotionally resonant stories, and theatrical activity.

David Kolb built on Dewey's ideas with his model of experiential learning, which comprises four interconnected stages: concrete experience, reflection on the experience, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. The methodology employed in the course follows this cycle. Students first encounter emotionally charged situations, then discuss them in groups, derive meaningful insights, and ultimately apply these understandings in original stories and theatrical productions.

Lev Vygotsky, through his concept of the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), emphasised that knowledge emerges in a social context, specifically through collaboration with a more competent other (teacher or peer). A key element of the methodology is precisely this social interaction: through collaborative storytelling, role-play in group activities, and theatrical embodiment of images, students attain a deeper understanding of social and emotional issues

related to children with chronic illnesses. This is particularly evident in group work on stories and scenes, where shared meaning is co-constructed.

GRDS's own journal PUPIL has recently published work on community engagement in technopedagogy, noting how active participation in professional communities can strengthen pedagogical innovation and teacher collaboration (Housni et al., 2025). This supports the idea that experiential, interactive pedagogical models are well-placed within broader ecological systems of teacher development.

In this context, guided visualisation with closed eyes, designed to promote emotional immersion in the world of a parent of a chronically ill child, can be viewed as a culturally mediated means of internalising a situation that students have not directly experienced. With the support of the teacher, this form of empathic imagination expands learners' opportunities to acquire knowledge through intersubjectivity and the social co-construction of meaning.

Howard Gardner, through his theory of multiple intelligences, broadened the understanding of learning as a process that should engage diverse cognitive channels, not merely linguistic-logical ones. The methodology deliberately incorporates practices that activate bodily-kinesthetic, musical, and interpersonal intelligences through rhythm, movement, teamwork, and stage performance—all of which are central elements of the model.

The CASEL framework identifies five core domains of social-emotional learning (SEL): self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Contemporary research further confirms the value of school-based SEL programmes in activating social empathy and fostering sustainable interpersonal skills (Silke et al., 2024).

The closed-eye exercise, in which students imagine the daily life of a parent of a chronically ill child, is particularly effective in fostering self-awareness, empathy, and bodily awareness. It generates deep inner engagement that serves as the foundation for emotionally integrated knowledge and heightened sensitivity to real social situations.

Paulo Freire, a leading figure in critical pedagogy, regarded education as a process of dialogical understanding of the world. He argued that genuine transformation occurs when students develop critical awareness—namely, the ability to recognise social injustices, analyse them, and commit to change. In this course, dialogue is not merely a method but a value framework. Students do not simply absorb ready-made concepts; rather, they experience, discuss, and interpret complex

life realities, thereby cultivating sensitivity and social responsibility. This is particularly evident during the stages of discussion and storytelling, where critical awareness emerges organically.

Augusto Boal and Dorothy Heathcote, through their theatrical-pedagogical approaches, positioned drama as a tool for awareness, empathy, and social transformation. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and Heathcote's Drama in Education are indirectly applied in the course through the creation of original tales and their stage adaptation. In this process, students not only narrate but also embody different perspectives physically, which fosters profound emotional and pedagogical awareness, fully aligned with the spirit of both authors.

In conclusion, the model under consideration integrates leading pedagogical concepts and applies them within an innovative learning environment that stimulates personal engagement, emotional experience, and the development of key social and professional skills. The following section presents the methodology of the empirical study, designed to assess the impact of this approach on students.

3. Methodology

The study aimed to assess the impact of the interactive pedagogical model on the development of empathy, socio-emotional skills, and pedagogical sensitivity in future teachers. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using two main tools: a Likert-scale questionnaire and an observation protocol completed by the teacher during the exercises. The use of these complementary methods enabled triangulation of results and provided a deeper understanding of the training's effects.

Participants

A total of 104 students from various majors in the field of Pedagogy, enrolled in both bachelor's and master's programmes and in full-time as well as part-time study, participated in the research. The students undertook training in different streams but within the same discipline - Pedagogical Support for Children with Chronic Illnesses and Their Families. This diversity enabled a broader analysis and demonstrated the adaptability of the model to different educational contexts.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered at the end of the training and included six statements rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, along with one open-ended question. The statements targeted self-assessment in several areas: the development of empathy and emotional awareness; the ability to empathise with and understand social challenges; confidence in applying inclusive pedagogical approaches; the effectiveness and impact of experiential learning; and readiness to work with children with chronic illnesses.

The open-ended question, “What was the most memorable moment of the course?”, enabled students to share personally significant experiences. This complemented the quantitative results with qualitative content, offering deeper insight into the emotional and pedagogical impact of the course.

Observation Protocol

During the exercises, the teacher completed a structured observation protocol based on five indicators:

Table 1. *Observation Protocol*

Nº	Indicator	Observable manifestations
1.	Engagement	Listening, following the rhythm, participating in discussion, engaging in activities
2.	Emotional reaction	Smiles, tears, excitement, empathy
3.	Initiative and participation	Voluntary speaking, taking on a role, offering ideas
4.	Reaction to content	Response to stories, videos, stories - personal or empathetic comments
5.	Collaboration and Respect	Teamwork skills, respect for others' opinions, active listening

The protocol was applied in three different courses representing a typical profile of the students undergoing the training. Owing to the large number of streams, it was not possible to apply it to all groups; however, the selected observed classes reflected the diversity of learning formats and student profiles.

Validation of the Instruments

The questionnaire was developed specifically for the purposes of this study. The formulation of its statements was based on a literature review concerning the development of empathy, socio-emotional skills, and experiential learning, and was structured on a five-point Likert scale. The observation protocol was an original tool, created by the teacher-researcher on the basis of experience in applying the methodology and observing student reactions during the course. The indicators were selected to capture key behavioural and emotional manifestations related to participant engagement and the impact of the learning activities.

Ethical Considerations and Emotional Content of the Training

All participants were informed about the objectives of the study and participated voluntarily. Prior to the more intensive visualisations and theatre exercises, students were given the opportunity to withdraw without explanation and without negative consequences. This procedure was fully consistent with the principles of ethical pedagogy and the creation of a supportive, emotionally safe environment.

A particularly impactful element of the course was the guided visualisation exercise, conducted after the presentation of videos featuring real stories of families with children suffering from chronic illnesses. Students were invited to close their eyes and immerse themselves in a sequence of images and situations that recreated the daily life of a parent of a chronically ill child—for example, coping with the child’s night-time seizures, experiencing social isolation, and managing financial and emotional challenges. The instructor’s voice guided participants through this imagined experience, emphasising bodily and emotional responses (e.g. rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, anxiety), thereby fostering deep empathic immersion.

Students who did not wish to participate were free either to withdraw or to remain with their eyes open. This approach combined empathetic pedagogy, personal autonomy, and ethical sensitivity—values that underpin the training model presented here.

4. Analysis of the Results

Research Hypotheses

The study was guided by the following hypotheses:

1. Experiential learning enhances students' confidence in working with vulnerable groups.
2. The methodology fosters empathy and compassion for children with chronic illnesses and their families.
3. The experiential learning model promotes deeper emotional engagement and a stronger understanding of the pedagogical role.
4. Students perceive the methodology as effective and wish it to be incorporated into additional university courses.

Quantitative Analysis - Survey Results

The survey was completed by 104 bachelor's and master's students across various majors: Social Pedagogy (first- and second-year, part-time and full-time), Special Pedagogy (first- and second-year, part-time and full-time), Primary School Pedagogy with a Foreign Language (first-, second-, and third-year, full-time), Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy (first-, second-, and third-year, part-time and full-time), Pedagogy of Information Technology Education (second- and third-year, full-time), Preschool Pedagogy (second-year, part-time), and Special Pedagogy – Speech Therapy module (second to fourth semester, master's). The instrument comprised six statements rated on a five-point Likert scale, along with one open-ended question regarding the most memorable moment of the course.

The results indicated high levels of agreement across all statements. Mean values ranged between 4.45 and 4.78 out of 5, reflecting a highly positive perception of experiential learning:

- The highest-rated statement was: “The teaching methods helped me to put myself in the shoes of a child with a chronic illness” ($M = 4.78$), directly confirming the hypothesis regarding the development of empathy (see Fig. 1).

- Another highly rated statement was: “I feel more confident in my future role as a teacher working with vulnerable groups” ($M = 4.61$), confirming the second hypothesis (see Fig. 1).

- More than 85% of participants fully agreed that the proposed methodology—experiential learning—is effective and that it should be incorporated into additional courses.

Figure 2: *Word Cloud of Keywords from Students' Open-Ended Responses*

Qualitative Analysis - Observation Protocols

Observation protocols were completed by the teacher during classes in three programmes: Social Pedagogy (part-time), Special Pedagogy (part-time), and Primary School Pedagogy with a Foreign Language (full-time). These were the most recent cohorts trained in this discipline and included larger numbers of participants, allowing for more reliable observation. The observations confirmed the trends identified in the survey:

- **Engagement:** Students actively participated in all activities (rhythm, discussions, theatre), with very few passive participants.
- **Emotional response:** Tears, excitement, and empathy were observed, particularly during the videos and the closed-eyes exercise, which elicited a strong emotional reaction.
- **Initiative:** Students voluntarily engaged in creating fairy tales and theatrical performances, sharing personal experiences and ideas.
- **Cooperation and respect:** Teamwork was characterised by mutual support and respect, particularly during joint stage performances.

The end-of-course feedback was striking: students described the experience as emotional, useful, and impactful, frequently using the expression “we learned without learning”. This confirmed the power of the method to foster both engagement and transformation.

The qualitative and quantitative data collected clearly demonstrated the transformative potential of the experiential learning model. The emotional involvement, personal significance, and social awareness fostered through the methodology confirmed the validity of the hypotheses and objectives of the training.

Table 2. *Summary of Research Hypotheses and Supporting Evidence*

Hypothesis	Evidence (Survey & Observations)	Status
H1. Experiential learning enhances students' confidence in working with vulnerable groups.	Survey mean 4.61; >85% agreement; voluntary initiative in activities.	Confirmed
H2. The methodology fosters empathy and compassion for children with chronic illnesses.	Survey mean 4.78; keywords "closed eyes", "tears"; strong emotional responses.	Strongly confirmed
H3. The model promotes deeper emotional engagement and understanding of pedagogical role.	Qualitative feedback: "I learned without learning"; theatre performance participation.	Confirmed
H4. Students perceive experiential methodology as effective and want it in more courses.	>85% agreement; end-of-course feedback.	Confirmed

5. Interpretation of the Results

The findings of the study clearly indicated that the experiential learning model had a profound impact on students. Through emotionally engaging methods such as rhythm, storytelling, visualisation, and theatre, students not only acquired knowledge but also developed personal and professional sensitivity to issues related to children with chronic illnesses. This is consistent with recent research demonstrating that pre-service teachers' empathy is a significant predictor of their attitudes toward inclusive education (Jiang et al., 2025), highlighting the broader relevance of the model for teacher preparation.

The exceptionally high scores for statements related to empathy and confidence in working with vulnerable groups confirmed that the experience not only built understanding but also activated intrinsic motivation and readiness for pedagogical action. This aligns with the theoretical framework, which emphasises that emotional experience is a key component of transformative learning (Kolb, Freire).

The intensive closed-eyes exercise emerged as a culminating moment in the training. Both student responses and classroom observations testified to its capacity to evoke authentic emotions and identification with another's perspective. This practice may be understood as a form of body-based empathy, through which learners move from rational understanding to deep empathetic engagement.

Qualitative observational data highlighted the importance of the collective dimension. Students were not isolated participants but members of a meaning-making group. This corresponds to Vygotsky's understanding of learning as a social process and underscores the role of the teacher as a facilitator of an authentic pedagogical environment. While many studies focus on cognitive or assessment aspects of teacher training, research published in PUPIL draws attention to the relational dimension of technopedagogy and teacher community engagement (Housni et al., 2025). Our experiential model complements these findings by adding an emotional and embodied layer to pedagogical innovation.

In conclusion, the experiential learning model does not simply teach empathy but cultivates it through experience, identification, creativity, and group dynamics. It represents a valuable contribution to the preparation of sensitive, socially responsible, and reflective future teachers.

6. Conclusion

The pedagogical model presented here demonstrates the effectiveness of experiential learning as a means of developing empathy, social awareness, and professional engagement in future teachers. The combination of rhythmic practices, emotionally impactful stories, guided visualisations, and theatrical interpretation engages students' cognitive, emotional, and bodily resources. This multidimensional engagement fosters internal transformation and the construction of a professional identity grounded in empathy.

Empirical data collected through a questionnaire survey and observational protocols confirmed the validity and impact of the model, both from the perspective of self-assessment and through external observation. Experiential learning, with its emotional and social depth, extends beyond traditional forms of teaching by creating sustainable, engaging knowledge grounded in empathy and active participation. Students not only acquire skills for working with vulnerable groups but also develop attitudes based on understanding, respect, and responsibility.

The proposed methodology is applicable and adaptable to a wide range of pedagogical and social disciplines, particularly in the fields of inclusive education, social work, and emotional literacy. It represents not only a pedagogical tool but also a contribution to the conceptual understanding of learning as a humane, integrative, and transformative process.

The model successfully integrates theoretical foundations from experiential learning, social constructivism, and critical pedagogy, and translates them into practically applicable training activities. In this way, it bridges theory and practice in the preparation of future teachers to work with vulnerable groups.

The findings of the study demonstrate that such an approach is a particularly effective means of cultivating the professional sensitivity required when working with vulnerable children and their families. This aligns with emerging evidence that embodied experiential learning strengthens empathy in teacher education (Moreno, 2025) and that inclusive, empathetic practices are essential even in hybrid or digitally mediated learning environments (Menzies, 2024).

7. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the instruments used (survey and observation protocol) were applied within a limited number of classes and groups. The absence of a control group restricted the possibility of providing more rigorous evidence of the method's effectiveness. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduced the risk of social desirability bias.

Future Research Could:

- track the long-term impact of the training through follow-up studies;
- include comparative analyses with traditional teaching methods;
- employ additional qualitative approaches, such as interviews and focus groups;
- examine the impact of the model on other target groups, for example medical or social work students.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

1. The teaching methods in this course helped me to put myself in the shoes of a child with a chronic illness and his/her family.
2. Through the stories and theatre tasks, I developed empathy for the experiences of children and their families.
3. The exercises and discussions made me think about tolerance and inclusion in a school environment.
4. I feel more confident in my future role as a teacher working with vulnerable groups.
5. Experiential learning (e.g. video, theatre, stories) was effective and engaging.
6. I believe that this type of methodology should be included in more university courses.
7. Open question: What would you share as the most memorable moment of the course?