

# AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHER EDUCATION: EXAMINATION OF THE EXPERIENTIALITY'S EFFICIENCY IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN AUEB, HGSE AND SGSE

Brinia Vasiliki, Antonopoulou Konstantina and Katsionis Christos

*Teacher Education Program, Department of Informatics, School of Information Sciences and Technology, Athens University of Economics and Business, Greece*  
vbrinia@aueb.gr, ntinaantonopoulou@gmail.com, chr.katsionis@gmail.com

**Abstract**— The current paper aims to analyze how, and in which extend the innovative, extracurricular, and experiential activities help students in Teacher Education Programs (TEPs) in their future personal life and professional career. To examine the efficiency of Athens University of Economics and Business, Harvard Graduate School of Education and Stanford Graduate School of Education TEPs in terms of both academic value as well as the experience that students gain through their participation in each of them, there are used three main factors, which are a) practical classroom experience, b) experientiality through extracurricular activities and c) the interconnection of art, culture and education. These are the three variables used for the needs of data analysis too. The methodology used includes comparative qualitative analysis of the Programs mentioned, taking into consideration participants' testimonials. Some of our main findings indicate, that classroom experience and skills gained from innovative activities help not only teacher-candidates adapt in the demanding school environment, but also expand their horizons in terms of creativity and emotional intelligence. While comparing for the first time TEPs from three different states, our innovative study is of great importance for TEPs as well as school-teachers worldwide.

**Keywords**— Teacher Education Program (TEP), AUEB, HGSE, SGSE, Practical Classroom Experience, Experientiality, Art Education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher education programs (TEPs) give students from all over the world the necessary skills and knowledge, to become teachers in secondary education. Teacher education has been evolved from ordinary schools and colleges to universities [12]. This fact aimed to attract better students, improve the context for research, and develop new and more innovative and creative programs for teacher education. Although, teacher education is sometimes under criticism as it had failed to achieve its purposes. For this reason, it is generally accepted that these programs need some improvement in teaching methods, as such criticisms can affect the quality of them, as seen in [14]. Teacher Education Programs should not only focus on providing skills, strategies, and knowledge, that are necessary in teaching, but also on creating a well-developed student and consequently a well-developed future teacher. That can be achieved, by adding experientiality and extracurricular activities

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in any stage of the programs, help students gain practical classroom experience and promote the interconnection of art and culture with education.

Fieldwork and coursework should be closely connected, allowing beginning teachers to learn from both arenas [20]. Instructional practices to this direction are, among others, classroom observations, interviews and clinical work in the schools [8]. As for extracurricular activities on campus, those range from volunteering, joining the Student Newspaper, a debate, or a sports society to participating in seminar sessions hold by guest speakers about art and psychology in education. Those extracurricular activities should be structured to match to each universities' education program. Another essential tool that should be added to a teacher education program is the interconnection of culture and education, which can be achieved through several activities as well as the arts. This can help numerous future teachers as they may have students from different countries in their classrooms and they will need to know the importance of multiculturalism too, according to study [3]. In a teacher education program, students can gain a lot from such activities and become more creative, effective, efficient, and innovative teachers.

The innovation of our study is, that for the first time TEPs from three different universities, as AUEB, HGSE and SGSE, have been compared, in order to investigate the efficiency and implications of them in terms of both academic value as well as experience that students gain through their participation in each of them, fact that would in any case encourage other universities all over the world to follow those successful practices too.

To sum up, the research questions addressed in this study are:

1. Does work in the public schools as student teaching interns help TEP students to gain practical classroom experience?

2. Is it important in terms of experientiality for TEP students to take part in extracurricular activities?

3. Is the interconnection of art, culture, and education important to be included in a TEP?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. CONNECTING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN REAL TIME**

Adaptability in the complex working environment of schools remain a key-factor for the experience that both teachers and students could gain from the educational process, which could subsequently affect teachers' job satisfaction and students' academic engagement and achievement [5]. Classroom observations at all levels can play a crucial role for trainee teachers to come to terms with children's both external behaviors and emotional states [9]. Besides that, trainee teachers have the chance to observe any reactions that their future colleagues have in a classroom, fact that helps them enhance their classroom management skills and promote student responsibility, according to study [18].

Research has also emphasized on how mentor teachers or supervisors help teacher trainees to reflect on their filed replacement and express their feelings and experience from that, as seen in [19]. Mentors should give feedback to mentees in a comprehensive way, in order to be able to use it and improve themselves, according to study [23]. Mentees who had received clear feedback and advice from their mentors, were more likely to be efficient during their clinical work in schools and able to maintain discipline in the classroom [17]. Consequently, mentors play a variety of roles in teacher professional development, such as giving feedback on candidates' performance, which involves the information provided from the classes that teacher-candidates hold during their clinical work, for which they are formative assessed as well, as in study [11]. This combination of mentor feedback is what makes trainees act immediately on feedback and improve their performance's efficiency.

## **2.2. EXPERIENTIALITY THROUGH EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

First of all, extracurricular activities are additional activities in a teacher education program beyond the courses. The extracurricular activities take part at hours that are out of the academic diary, such as before or after the course, during the weekend, or some days in the week that students do not have classes. Some examples of these extracurricular activities in a teacher education program are visits in museums, galleries or archaeological sites, exploration of the natural environment and participation in activities related to art, sports, culture or the academic life on campus in general, as seen in study [15]. Students in a teacher education program can gain a lot from such activities.

More specifically, any type of student involvement in extracurricular activities affects student learning and development process [1]. Through extracurricular activities, students can interact with other students and create social skills more efficiently. Thus, students learn to negotiate, to communicate and cooperate with, manage conflicts, and lead others. Furthermore, students understand the importance of critical thinking skills and enhance self-confidence, autonomy, and appreciation for others' differences and similarities. Teacher-candidates learn how to practice, while being simultaneously successful and manage their time properly [6]. That can assist them in preparing their lectures as the organizing skills can be proved vital for their future career as students. As we can see there is a strong association between student involvement in extracurricular activities and improved attendance, behavior, and academic performance, as seen in study [22].

Finally, apart from the clinical work at schools, as mentioned in previous subsection, advisory through mentoring takes place also on campus, while graduate students from teacher education programs provide trainees with the necessary advice, they need at the very beginning, in order to adapt to the program's requirements. Hence, mentoring is institutionalized as an extracurricular variety of activities that help teacher candidates and mentors contribute to trainees' professional development and have the role of a supporter, encourager, and a critical friend [13]. It has been argued that factors such as academic and emotional support, open communication, and consistent feedback provided by a mentor or an advisor promote the effectiveness of a mentoring relationship, according to study [13].

## **2.3. INTERCONNECTION OF ART, CULTURE AND EDUCATION**

An additional tool for TEPs is the interconnection of art, culture and education. It is generally accepted that culture is the social heritage of an organized community or society and is a combination of beliefs, customs, religions, and arts [4]. Thus, education can be defined as the socially organized and regulated process of transference of socially significant experience from previous to following generations [21]. Nowadays, in order to receive education, students should take a course of training in the system of educational institutions, according to study [21]. Cultures can potentially have a great impact on education as well as education has also a significant impact on cultures of a society [4].

In a teacher education program, the interconnection of art, culture and education can be achieved through some extracurricular activities. Investigations into learning through arts experiences, help students be observational in their everyday life and improve their critical thinking as they can combine the arts with their everyday life [7]. Furthermore, teacher-candidates can through art express their thoughts and their feelings and thus, feel less stressed and control their anxiety. In addition, they learn about other countries' cultures and as a result understand the importance of the multiculturalism and the advantages of embracing it in a classroom, where students come from different countries, according to study [2]. Art experience in education helps teacher trainees understand the importance of the cooperation and teach this also to their future students [16]. Finally, art can be a great motivation to steer students towards teacher education programs as they improve their creativity, promote active participation in the courses and excite their examination.

The three factors mentioned above, are going to be studied further through the following Data Analysis, in order to investigate whether students in AUEB, HGSE and SGSE Teacher Education Programs confirm these variables as keystones for the efficiency of each Program they participate in.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. METHOD**

The method used in this paper to exit the findings is the comparative qualitative analysis among the Teacher Education Programs of Athens University of Economics and Business, of Harvard Graduate School of Education and Stanford Graduate School of Education.

#### **3.2. SAMPLE**

A sample of 30 TEP students was used for the purpose of this research. More specifically, the sample includes testimonials from 10 students from Athens University of Economics and Business TEP, 10 students from HGSE TEP students and 10 students from SGSE TEP, as found on the official website of each Program. This sampling method has also been used, to balance on purpose as much as possible the demographic characteristics of the sample. The participants were 14 males and 16 females. When the testimonials were stated, participants were at the last year of their undergraduate studies, while at the same time studying at each of the Teacher Education Programs mentioned above. That means that participants are aged between 22 to 25 years old. For anonymity reasons, the participants' names are represented by a random letter of the alphabet for the needs of the presentation of the findings of the present research paper.

#### **3.3. DATA ANALYSIS**

In this paper, the basic variables are a) practical classroom experience, b) experientiality through extracurricular activities and c) the interconnection of art, culture, and education. These variables have an essential role in our research, and through analysis we will investigate how important they are considered from a different range of students from 3 different states, Greece, Massachusetts, and California, which means from 3 different education systems. So, we are going to have clear findings about the experience those students gain from each TEP they participate in.

### **4. FINDINGS**

#### **4.1. PRACTICAL CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE**

Students at Athens University of Economics and Business talked about the importance of their practical classroom experience:

Student A mentioned:

*“The abundance of knowledge, experiences and stimuli, that the Program seeks to offer through the courses and activities incorporated into its curriculum, act and have acted, as helpers for the liberation of creativity and the cultivation of empathy, while at the same time contributing to the discovery of the potential of each participant. The empowerment of the mind to combine information from different sources, to make sense and be able to efficiently deliver it to its audience have been some of the benefits I have gained from my choice to get involved in the Program!”*

Student N added:

*“Besides the innovative experiential approach to teacher education, the international collaborations with top international universities, the training in the world's most innovative teaching methods found in this Program, the Program, above all, cultivates values that are indispensable for teachers that incarnate these values in the eyes of their students, such as consistency in words and deeds, sincere kindness and openness.”*

Student H pointed out:

*“The knowledge I gained is important for my future, and the experiences I gained changed my mind on certain issues. Innovative actions, combined with experiential learning and the practical application of what is being taught in this program, create an integrated experience that is difficult to obtain, in one year”.*

Similarly, HGSE TEP participants expressed their opinions on the importance of the practical classroom experience as following:

Student L stated:

*“They just hung out with kids, told stories, just rich stuff that you can't put in a textbook. At CHSA, you can totally experiment and try out new things. You can make classes that are really cool and that connect with students. You are not limited by anything.”*

Student B noted:

*“I found myself annoyed sitting in classes with students and some professors who would engage in discourse primarily in theory and with lofty concepts. During one small group for a class, I finally told a fellow student who kept prefacing and referring to what the “text” said about something to “put a stake in the ground.” I don't care if your opinions change, and they probably will over your time in education and at HGSE; however, in any given moment, you do know and believe something. Name that. Engage with it. Let people challenge it.”*

Student K mentioned:

*“Always be on the child's side” was Dr. Rubin's favorite phrase in his class on adolescent development. Fittingly, this sentiment was at the heart of the HGSE classes that had the biggest impact on me, like Ethnic Studies and Education with Dr. Villarreal and Building Loving Spaces with Dr. Brion-Meisels. Always be on the child's side, against oppressive institutions, against unjust rules, and even sometimes against yourself.”*

SGSE students' opinions on their experience as trainee teachers is also important and useful for our research.

Student V pointed out:

*“At STEP, we have just 3-4 teacher candidates per supervisor (check out that student: teacher ratio!), so I get to have brilliant teachers and teacher educators pay close attention to my teaching and learning. Not much more than a month into the program, the benefits of such an attentive structure on my learning, reflection, and development as an educator are already becoming clear to me.”*

Student I noted:

*“As result of being immersed in this program, I feel that I have become a more reflective and intentional teacher. Before STEP, I would plan lessons and make decisions without any reasoning or theory to back up what I was doing. Now, I am able to think critically and*

*deeply about every decision I make, from where I want students to sit to how I can authentically assess learning. I plan my lessons like an engineer, constantly building and designing lessons and learning segments that are geared toward a specific group of students in mind.”*

#### **4.2. EXPERIENTIALITY THROUGH EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

TEP AUEB participants found very significant all the extracurricular activities, especially in terms of experientiality.

Student Z mentioned:

*“Through the experiential approach of the structure and character of the Program, I have been trained to manage or become a competent and valuable member of a team, to express, communicate and integrate my ideas with honesty and respect to diversity, to face challenges, to operate under pressure. I had the honor to create true friendships that will accompany me throughout my professional and personal life.”*

Student E added:

*“I received many stimuli through the experiential activities and the teaching approach followed by the teachers of the program. What I am constantly pointing out is that the program has greatly contributed to strengthening my self-confidence and my self-esteem through the activities and the projects which I have always sought to play an active role in. My leadership skills and my communication skills have been totally developed”*

Student X stated:

*“TEP AUEB is a well-structured program that approaches education in an innovative and experiential way based on world-class teaching methods by trained and responsible professionals. Anyone attending the program can expand his/her horizons, cultivates values and skills and mainly discovers new aspects of himself/herself as he/she receives multiple stimuli coming from the various actions and activities of the program that release imagination and creativity.”*

Student Q mentioned that:

*“Experientiality, innovation and responsibility are just some of the components of the success of the Program, which I had the pleasure to experience as part of a whole, which seeks to create new “bright windows” in the field of education in Greece. “The (self)discipline that governs each stage of the Program makes students truly feel free to develop their personalities and to navigate the path of both their academic knowledge and their emotions.”*

The skills, that HGSE students gained from their extracurricular activities make them have only nice words and feelings to express, as those are stated as following:

Student D pointed out:

*“The importance of reflection, both for students in the classroom and for me as an educator. Because of my time at HGSE, I feel confident in my ability to use reflection as a tool to continually push myself to improve my craft and strive to be a life-long learner.”*

Student R noted:

*“The work we do in our classrooms is not easy. But it is sustainable if we have developed a critical understanding of the systems in place as well as methods for challenging and*

*improving them. My goal was to soak up as much theory and wisdom about education as possible before taking it back to my students.”*

Student M added:

*“I could easily go on and on about almost any of the classes and professors I’ve been fortunate to encounter during my time here. As I consider the whole year, I feel particularly impacted by the wonderful professors and TFs who work with TEP students during our summer session. They pushed my thinking across so many dimensions, modeled really strong practice, and helped foster the richest discussions I had during my whole time here.”*

Student G stated:

*“I was looking to complete a program that would equip me with the knowledge, skills and tools to be a successful middle school science teacher. Since my work prior to HGSE involved managing out of school time programs, I thought of it as taking a year to fully transition from the out of school time to the in-school time aspect of serving youth, where I felt I could make a larger and more lasting impact.”*

Stanford TEP participants seem to be also enthusiastic about the opportunities and challenges they met, through extracurricular and experimental activities their Program offered. Students’ opinions are stated below:

Student P mentioned:

*“My teaching has gotten more experimental. There are so many great ideas I’ve gleaned from my classes. We’ve recently been focusing on technology integration in science. Today, I taught a lesson on seed dispersal. Kids designed their own seeds in partners, crafted them in the Maker Studio and then filmed them in motion using a program called Explain Everything. We’re having a gallery share tomorrow, and I can’t wait.”*

Student U added:

*“When I first started STEP, I did not know what to expect; since I had very little experience with classroom management. However, my amazing Cooperating Teachers did an amazing job scaffolding my integration into the classroom culture and developing a set of norms with the students. My classroom management skills have improved greatly to the point where I am considering going into a Kindergarten or 1st grade class for my first year of teaching.”*

Student C stated:

*“I was so impressed by my cohort’s ability to listen and learn from each other and to exhibit vulnerability so readily with a new group of people. In a very short time, I gained concrete leadership skills and felt a strong level of comfort and support within my cohort.”*

Student O mentioned:

*“I have been fortunate to have supporting mentors throughout the different stages of my academic career who have believed in me and inspired me to pursue higher education. Language and Writing Program Coordinator was among the first to help me identify as a scholar, capable of succeeding in academia. She trained me as a writer and educator throughout my undergraduate studies.”*

Student S noted:

*“STEP has been full of learning experiences in settings both expected and unanticipated. Many pieces of this year have been unanticipated: joining the San Francisco Teaching Residency, having the opportunity to teach at an extremely diverse school in the city and taking a diversity of classes from the theoretical to the practical. Taking a full course load and planning classes for two curricula at my placement has made the year extremely full.*

*While this fullness occasionally overwhelms, it is more often a positive aspect of the program.”*

Student W pointed out:

*“As a neophyte to classroom teaching, I knew that I would benefit a lot from receiving focused and individualized mentorship. At STEP, we have just 3-4 teacher candidates per supervisor, so I get to have brilliant teachers and teacher educators pay close attention to my teaching and learning. The benefits of such an attentive structure on my learning, reflection, and development as an educator are already becoming clear to me. In a year’s time, I hope these benefits will be just as clear to my students.”*

#### **4.3. INTERCONNECTION OF ART, CULTURE AND EDUCATION**

Art education and cultural awareness are two main elements that make TEP AUEB a unique program. AUEB students confirmed that by the following statements.

Student F mentioned:

*“The human-centered orientation of this program combined with the art experiences offered, bloomed within me the hopeful feeling that with good will and cooperation we can build a better life for our fellow humans and especially for the children. I am grateful to everyone who was responsible for motivating me in this!!!”*

Student J added:

*“The spherical stimuli provided through its visits, excursions and speakers from different fields, offer generously knowledge, education and guidance. In this program I realized that education can be linked with and come through any field by alternating each time the subject you want to transmit. We saw education transforming into a work of art in our workshop on Diversity in School as well as into a vision of cultural emergence as part of the work for Orchomenus. The program gave us the opportunity to test our strengths and ideas in practice!”*

Student T pointed out:

*“Through the innovative way that the program approaches education experiential and through its’ international collaborations with specialists from foreign universities, students develop skills that are essential to the path of a budding, future teacher. In addition students of the program are also cultivated mentally. In short, the program not only provides the necessary knowledge background for future teachers but change their way of thinking and brings to light elements that students may not have had the opportunity to discover them earlier.”*

Interconnection of art, culture and education seems to play also a special role for Harvard students, whose feelings are expressed in words below.

Student V stated:

*“Education has the power to inform, to inspire, to innovate, and even the power to liberate. Being able to exist beyond the White and Black binary system that is the U.S. education system, is liberating. Being able to identify with both the "blood of the conqueror (Spain) and blood of the conquered" is liberating. Being able to learn in a space that honors these tensions of identity opens up a pathway to radical imagination and critical hope for one's self and one's community.”*

Student I noted:

*“Teaching is a moral and political act and I came up with that by realizing the connection that education could have with art and the society in general. Reflective*

*practice is a critical component of continued growth as a teacher. I will serve my students best by cultivating a deep sense of solidarity with all my students.”*

Student N added:

*“Something I have constantly thought about regarding my own practice and who I want to become as an educator is to solidify a purpose before attempting to reach a goal. I will push myself to continue to ask questions like: What is the purpose of schools? Why do we teach history? Why are students in my class being asked to do this? Hopefully, that attitude of self-reflection will allow me to continue to both solidify my beliefs and grow as an educator.”*

STEP students could not disagree, that investigations into learning through arts experience and cultural awareness, could help future teachers realize the social dimension of education.

Student F mentioned:

*“STEP seeks to prepare and support teacher leaders working with diverse learners to achieve high intellectual, academic, and social standards by creating equitable and successful schools and classrooms. Desired outcomes for graduates include an understanding of teaching as intellectual work and as a caring profession, a depth of content knowledge and a repertoire of powerful pedagogical practices. The content and design of the program are organized to foster a commitment to research, reflection and inquiry in the classroom!”*

Student Q stated that:

*“I also wanted to learn how to more concretely connect teaching in the classroom with social justice. STEP emphasizes that to be an educator, I have to not only be able to teach the subject matter, but also be sensitive to all the other forces acting upon a classroom.”*

## **5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS**

The findings in our study indicate, that the three variables that we have set, a) practical classroom experience, b) experientiality through extracurricular activities and c) the interconnection of art, culture and education, are considered as crucial factors among the students who had expressed their point of view on their experience through testimonials. Students expressed their thoughts and feelings generated from their experiences and even though they come from different countries, have different cultural backgrounds and live under different circumstances, all of them realize the real meaning of education and the opportunities these TEPs offer them to improve their efficiency.

Regarding the importance of clinical work in school, students clarified, that without having this chance, it would be immensely difficult for them to enter this demanding work environment the day after their graduation. Gaining step by step practical experience in teaching increases their adaptability and helps them comprehend their expectations from the engagement with secondary school students [5]. Trainee teachers pointed out, that the clinical work helped them gain a critical understanding of the systems in schools too, while having by their side excellent teacher educators who operated as coaches and contributed to efficient integration of them. Receiving clear feedback and instructions from coaches and mentors is one of the factors that makes trainees believe in themselves and capitalize on the prospective of becoming professional teachers, as seen in study [17].

Experientiality can not only gained through practice experience in schools as described above, but through extracurricular activities as well. Students described, that they have strengthened their self-confidence and self-esteem through the activities and the projects they participated in. That makes their experience in the TEP more holistic, not only in terms of the educational aspect of the process, but also in terms of the skills they acquire [2].

Managing time properly between courses and extracurricular activities makes students engage more with their campus environment and as a result expand their horizons and cultivate their values [6]. Finally, trainee students need not only mentors during their clinical work, but tutors in campus too, which means TEP graduates, could be the connecting link, in order teacher-candidates to be inspired and experience the most from the opportunities they have been offered [13].

The interconnection of art, culture and education can be achieved through extracurricular activities which are recognized by students from all the three TEPs. They state that in this way education becomes more human-centered and they gain skills in appreciating people with different characteristics or background. As a result, they understand the importance of multiculturalism and the advantages of implementing it in a classroom when students have diverse backgrounds, as seen in [2]. Art and all of its kinds seems to be the key factor for many trainee teachers to discover new aspects of themselves from the various actions and activities of each TEP. This will help teachers adjust their teaching techniques to the students they have to engage with, by releasing their imagination and creativity which is necessary in terms of adaptability is necessary [5].

The combination of acquiring high academic, emotional and social standards through the three TEPs compared in this paper, seems to be the competitive advantage that makes more and more students apply for those Programs and change their lives entirely.

## **6. LIMITATIONS OF PRESENT STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In the present study, there have been limitations regarding the size of the sample and the methodology used. More specifically, our comparative qualitative approach has revealed at a fundamental level the main purpose of the study, which is to investigate the efficiency and implications of AUEB, HGSE and SGSE TEPs in terms of both academic value as well as experience that students gain through their participation in each of them. Although, our findings come only from students' testimonials and not from in person interviews with them, which consequently limits at some point the feelings and enthusiasm they could express during a face-to-face interview.

Regarding future researchers, it is suggested to investigate a more extended qualitative research on the impact these three TEPs have on students and graduates, by conducting interviews in person. Besides that, research could not only aim for a qualitative comparison of them, but could also concern each Program separately and assess the opportunities participants in each of them have and simultaneously the skills they have developed, academically and individually, in comparison with other students of the same University.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

To sum up, the results of the present study have shown that Teacher Education Programs can offer a holistic experience to students taking part in them, in order not only to acquire knowledge about teaching methodologies and strategies, but also to cultivate their values and emotional intelligence. The innovation of our paper, by comparing qualitative three different TEPs and people with different backgrounds in them, revealed that by having common keystones, the efficiency of the process that candidate teachers follow is undoubtful. Classroom experience, experientiality, extracurricular activities and interconnection of art and culture in any stage of the educational process play a decisive role in it. As Findings indicate, graduates from AUEB, HGSE and SGSE TEPs had the pleasure to follow this process and their experience is going to lead them in their future personal life and career. Thus, the implication of our study is clear regarding the efficiency those TEPs have both in terms of academic value and impact on participants. Other universities should also be encouraged to adopt such elements and form more efficient and competitive Teacher Education Programs.

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