

# RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS IN SAHARA REFUGEE CAMPS: AN ACTION- RESEARCH PROJECT

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**Abstract:** Inequalities and socio-educational disadvantages are a persistent feature of today's society (Vigo-Arrazola, 2024). Education systems are usually geared towards memorising content and results, and priority is given to performative production (Ball, 2003). Accordingly, critical pedagogy advocates for pedagogical practices focused on challenging the socio-political conditions that reproduce oppression and inequality (Giroux, 2025). Likewise, education must listen to the voices and legitimise the experiences and culture of minority groups (Freire, 1970), moving away from a Eurocentric and exclusionary view of northern countries (Stein, 2018). In this context, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the transformation of educational practices through the lens of critical pedagogy.

In particular, this article shares the outcome of a project that aimed to encourage school teachers in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria to reflect on and reconstruct their educational practices and move towards more participative, democratic and reflexive practices that empower and recognise all students (Pearce and Wood, 2019). The Chair of Solidarity and Global Citizenship at the University of Zaragoza provided training to teachers in the camps to include social justice and equity in school projects. To further this objective, the Chair collaborates with different stakeholders, such as the 'Studies in Peace' association of Spain. In order to enhance the quality of education in the camps, the association requested the assistance of researchers from the Chair. Together, the Chair, the Sahrawi Education Ministry and Sahrawi teachers initiated participatory action-research (Wood and Smith, 2018) with the aim of

encouraging school teachers in the camps to reflect on and reconstruct their educational practices, so as to break with cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 2006).

Using a qualitative approach, the participatory action-research involved experts from the Ministry of Education, primary school teachers, counsellors and researchers from the university travelling to the camps twice a year and maintaining contact with the other participants via WhatsApp. Together, they reflected on teaching practices to propose and implement a training plan focused on developing students' needs and interests (Jeffrey, 2006). While this reflection was ongoing, the teachers put their newly acquired teaching skills into practice, and the researchers carried out further training and provided tools for joint reflection.

In this way, the educational administration in the camps has committed itself to introducing inclusive methodologies into teacher training to transform educational practices, thereby promoting critical thinking and autonomy among students, while fostering the development of their sociocultural identity within global society (Gramsci, 2006). In doing so, this research is helping educational policymakers to rethink their policies. Furthermore, the camp's administration intends to share these reflections in its work with other educators in the continent of Africa.

**Key words:** Global Citizenship Education; Participatory Action-Research; Social Justice; Refugee Education; Transformative Education.

## **Introduction**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2025: 7) recommends 'making clear plans to improve learning' as a strategy for African countries to improve learning levels in the first years of education. Through its 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), the United Nations also acknowledges the importance of education as a vehicle for the development of people and societies. To this end, it is necessary to promote strategies and training plans that improve the teaching abilities of primary school teachers and bring about a shift towards a pedagogical approach that is more centred on educational inclusion and social justice and leaves no one behind (Ibid.). In this context, the

purpose of this article is to contribute to the transformation of educational practices through the lens of critical pedagogy. In particular, this article shares the outcomes of a project that aimed to encourage school teachers in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria to reflect on and reconstruct their educational practices and move towards more participative, democratic and reflexive practices that empower and recognise all students (Pearce and Wood, 2019). These practices promote the participation of all the students, giving voice to everyone and taking into account students' own experiences of life (Jeffrey, 2006) and reflecting on their social reality (Giroux and Paul, 2023). A participative and collaborative project was delivered in partnership with teachers in the schools to promote further processes of change and innovation from a perspective of education for social transformation. The research is part of the *Transformational Schools Project* funded by the Zaragoza Provincial Council, through what was originally the Cooperation Chair and is now the Solidarity and Global Citizenship Chair at the University of Zaragoza.

### **Context to the research: education in the Sahrawi refugee camps**

The Sahrawis were nomadic tribes who lived in Bidan, who are most prominent in Mauritania and Western Sahara, in north-west Africa. The borders of the colony known as Spanish Sahara were not established until the arrival of the Spanish colonial power in 1884 (Barreñada, 2022). Spanish colonial rule continued until the Tripartite Treaty of Madrid of 14 November 1975 (United Nations, 1975) and the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara, as a result of which the Sahrawi people were obliged to seek exile in the Hamada desert, in the province of Tindouf in southern Algeria. This led to the creation of the Sahrawi refugee camps, where today more than 200,000 people live, surviving on the basis of humanitarian aid (Hassena-Ahreyem, Pérez-Chávez and Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2023). Currently, the Spanish state's relationship with the authorities of the Sahrawi camps is marked by two opposing sides. On the one hand, Spain is not supporting the autonomy of the Sahrawi people, and, on the other hand, it supports the camps through priority areas of cooperation (MFAEUC, 2024), which include aid to the Sahrawi refugee camps. After fifty years of exile, the Sahrawi refugee camps have developed a level of social and political organisation that makes life slightly easier for the people that live there. The health and education systems stand out among other institutions and structures (Vinagrero

Ávila, 2020). One of the institutional priorities is education, with almost 100 percent enrolment in primary education. However, as Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011) points out, there is a paradox in the camps: education is seen as a tool for empowerment, but at the same time there is a feeling of frustration among young people due to the limited possibilities of returning to their country of origin in conditions of freedom and democracy.

The school system is organised into three levels: early childhood education from 3 to 6 years-old; primary education, from 6 to 11 years old; and compulsory secondary education, from 12 to 16 years old. Primary education, which is taught in schools known as *madradas*, is compulsory. In this way, the educational administration in the camps has managed to ensure that practically everyone can read and write. Most of the teachers are women, as happens in many different parts of the world due to the feminisation of the teaching and care professions. Initially, until the 2019-20 academic year, pre-service teacher education was carried out in the *Escuela Nacional 27 de febrero*, a school located in a complex some distance away from the *wilayas* (settlements), which made it very difficult for young women to do their teacher training there. As a result, many teachers do not have even the initial level of pedagogical training, and more, properly trained teachers are required. To address this issue, a teacher training college was established in the 2020-21 academic year in each *wilaya* to ensure that there is a supply of teachers with the necessary teaching skills.

In most schools in the camps, the teaching methodology revolves around the memorisation of curricular content without taking into account the context or the everyday experiences of the students. Some of the teaching materials come from Algeria, and therefore unrelated to the context of the camps. Despite efforts made by the authorities, the schools have almost no teaching materials or digital connections. The limited resources available to them make educational innovation difficult and have a considerably negative effect on learning and teaching processes (Sidahmed Mohamed-Fadel, 2025). The teachers receive advice from advisers or inspectors, who carry out supervisory functions, particularly guidance and support. In recent years, one of the main concerns of the educational authorities and of teachers themselves is the poor performance of the children at both primary

and secondary education and the increase in absenteeism, especially in the later stages of compulsory secondary education.

In this scenario, the teachers at the camps often wonder how they can improve their teaching to provide high-quality education for their wide diversity of students, with a broad range of abilities (Azorin and Ainscow, 2017). To achieve this goal, educational actions for social transformation are required, which must be based on participation, democracy and social justice. Education of this kind will promote critical, analytical and creative thought (Blasco-Serrano, Dieste, and Coma, 2019) in a context in which it is necessary to maintain critical positions and hope for a better future, looking towards a horizon in which the Sahrawis can return to their homeland, with decent jobs and better living conditions.

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework applied in this research sought to understand education as a critical and transformative practice, which is capable of questioning the structures of inequality and of promoting processes of reflection and action that strengthen teacher training and the construction of committed global citizens, especially in contexts of vulnerability and resistance.

#### ***Transformative education by taking a critical pedagogy approach***

Social and educational inequalities and disadvantages remain a persistent feature of society today (Vigo-Arrazola, 2024). The prevailing globalised neo-liberal society (Torres-Santomé, 2019) has created an educational system that is aimed purely at achieving individual success and enhancing productivity (Ball, 2003), but without questioning and reflecting one's own educational practice (Giroux and Paul, 2023). As a result, educational systems are geared towards the memorisation of content and priority given to performativity. The objective of these performative teaching practices is to achieve goals related exclusively to academic performance, improving the students' future possibilities and maintaining a privileged status quo. Therefore, to transform their educational practices it is crucial to encourage teachers to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their students as part of their professional transformation (Ball, 2003).

With this in mind, our project sought to promote transformative education through dialogue and interaction, setting aside traditional, more hierarchical teaching methods (Freire, 1970). In this way, horizontal relationships were established within schools to create a joint, shared vision of the school in which the participation of all is a fundamental principle. The reciprocal exchange of ideas allowed us to discover new perspectives and knowledge while providing value to challenge the socio-political conditions that maintain oppression and inequality among populations (Giroux, 2025).

Within this framework, education is an ideal tool for promoting emancipatory social transformation (Giroux, 2024) and supporting processes that are committed to beliefs, values and teacher identity which take priority over performative output (Ball, 2003). From this perspective, teachers can work together with students to raise awareness of situations of oppression by promoting practices of social transformation and contributing to an emancipatory project (Giroux, 2022). Teachers should go beyond a neutral transmission of knowledge to promote critical awareness and motivate students to face unfairness. In this way, teachers can encourage their students to become agents of change and activists in the fight for equality, fairness and democratic participation in the classroom and wider society (Freire, 1970). Therefore, in primary education, children can learn through projects where they reflect on how to care for the environment or how to restore their own culture.

Similarly, from a critical and citizenship approach, education should teach students to have awareness about how local and global conditions influence their lives, to learn about their history and their day-to-day experiences. Therefore, it is important to take into account the history and culture of the students, placing challenges in the context and experiences of the real world (Bourn, 2021). In this way, knowledge empowers students to recognise uncertainty and questioning as part of lifelong learning and can give them the courage to fight against despair. Cultivated hope, therefore, allows learners to analyse social and economic structures and think of alternatives for a better future (Dolan, 2025). In the context of the refugee camps, a pedagogy of hope not only provides the opportunity to collaborate in social change, but as McMonagle (2017) points out, if Western Sahara regained its territory with autonomy, young people would have

the skills and qualifications to build a free and democratic country. To that end, transformative education must engage students through research, reflection and questioning with enquiries and problems related to situations in the local and global reality of the students. (Jeffrey, 2006; Bourn, 2021; Giroux and Paul, 2023).

### ***Student participation and voices from a decolonial perspective***

Education must listen to the voices and legitimise the experiences and culture of minority groups (Freire, 1970), moving away from the Eurocentric, exclusive vision of countries in the global North (Stein, 2018). Teaching practices that take into account the voices of students and the dialogue between them are regarded as powerful tools for transforming the way they view reality and the world (Freire, 1970). When students' voices are present, an atmosphere of respect and trust is created and schools become more relevant for students' lives (Pearce and Wood, 2019). Along these lines, it is important that teachers are open to incorporating student participation and valuing students' voices when listening to them. This requires a variety of participatory activities, as well as establishing a dialogue between teachers and students (Messiou et al., 2024). This dialogue should take place within non-hierarchical spaces that minimise resistance and are enriched by diverse voices and perspectives, because student voices are highly sensitive to their local contexts (Pearce and Wood, 2019). In this sense, student voice initiatives aim to empower all students, with the broader purpose of fostering social change that will transform education (Ibid; Messiou et al., 2024).

Moreover, it is important to note that early career teachers often experience feelings of insecurity and uncertainty when initially engaging with student voices. However, these feelings tend to diminish over time as the process encourages reflection on practice, fostering collaboration and dialogue between teachers and students (Ibid). In summary, student participation is not just symbolic; it is genuinely empowering, as students develop their own sense of agency, enabling them to contribute actively to the pursuit of a better future (Bourn, 2021), and enabling the student to feel capable of bringing about change (Menzie-Ballantyne and Ham, 2023). From this perspective, it is necessary to consider children's participation rights in order to recognise and validate their cultural identities (Blanchet-Cohen, Cooper and Doel-Mackaway, 2023). This suggests that decolonial research requires scholars in the global North to examine

their own positionality when conducting research on the global South. The aim is to challenge the colonial structures that perpetuate Northern supremacy and affirm that colonised populations are not inferior and can contribute to the democratisation of scientific knowledge (Eriksen, 2022).

In this project, it was essential to analyse our own cultural conceptions about the teaching practices and the social context in which it was taking place, so as not to impose a Eurocentric, reductionist vision of the social and educational reality of the camps. Hence, the importance of carrying out joint research processes with local teachers, within which participatory action-research emerged as an adequate tool for social transformation.

### ***Participatory action-research as a tool for professional development***

Collaboration and commitment between professional researchers and agents from the local organisations, territory or community are inherent parts of participative action-research (Greenwood, 2000). This meant that the goal of the research was not so much to generate information and knowledge for other academics, but to promote change that is rational, fair (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2015), democratic and sustainable for the Sahrawi teachers and the educational community in which they work (Ibid.). This means that participatory action-research is a political, socially engaged, democratic action, based on horizontal relations, with real participation, avoiding the traditional hierarchies between investigators and those being investigated (Eikeland, 2012). Decisions and responsibilities are negotiated and organised to meet the needs and safeguard the interests of the community, although the work of the professional researchers centres on research strategies and methodologies, while the researchers from the community focus more on local pedagogical knowledge.

As Greenwood (2000) explains, the action research process is valid when it is accepted and shared by local participants. If these participants take ownership of the results and trust their value and usefulness, the research is valid although the social, economic and political context significantly influences research decision-making. Therefore, research is a social act involving both individual and social action and is constructed within a social and historical context. In this case,

the context is complex: a refugee camp with an ongoing armed conflict and political abandonment by the country that once colonised it.

### **Research process**

The participatory action-research process began with a request in 2020 from the Asociación ‘Estudios en Paz’ (Studies in Peace), an association whose objective is to host Sahrawi children in families in the Spanish region of Aragón to enable the children to study there. Working together with the Sahrawi delegate of this association, an assessment was made of the needs of Sahrawi teachers in terms of pedagogical training. As part of this assessment process, written and audiovisual information about the situation of the Sahrawi people was reviewed (Bowen, 2009) particularly the educational system in the camps. After making a shared diagnosis with the Sahrawi educational community, a trip was made to the camps. During this ten-day visit, a representative of the camps’ Ministry of Education was interviewed and three focus groups were organised, involving 18 civil servants from the Ministry, school headteachers and counsellors / inspectors.

Visits were also made to different early-childhood, primary and secondary schools in which informal conversations were held with numerous teachers, who shared their experiences, beliefs, values and opinions about education in the camps. During this trip, we assessed the teachers’ training needs in terms of pupil-centred methodologies and didactics, school organisation and tutoring. Initially, situations of mistrust and even resistance arose from the part of the Sahrawi teachers towards the Spanish researchers. A process of dialogue and collaboration was therefore necessary between all participants, as well as a demonstration of humility and long-term commitment to the Sahrawi population. After identifying and understanding the particular problems and context, the next stage was to plan the teacher-training action. This involved five researchers from the university, the president of the Asociación Madrasa (the association that promotes the scheme by which Sahrawi children can study secondary education in Spain), the Sahrawi delegate of the ‘Studies in Peace’ association and three members of the Sahrawi educational community.

After negotiating various options and strategies, it was decided that the best plan was to begin the training programme in the *wilaya* of Smara, the largest

*wilaya* with the most complex administrative and training structures. The Sahrawi participants believed that if the project worked in Smara, it could work in any *wilaya*. It was therefore decided to offer training and advice sessions to the teachers from a primary school in the *wilaya* of Smara, in which both the school counsellor and head teacher were involved in the action-research project, and also to the head teachers and counsellors from the other schools in this *wilaya*. A sense of belonging was built around efforts to improve the education system as a means of fostering better relationships between stakeholders (Bradbury, 2025), which was reinforced with each trip.

A training programme was set up to teach primary school teachers about participative teaching methods and strategies that were both pupil and creativity centred (Jeffrey, 2006). The aim was to enable these teachers to reflect on their educational actions and reconstruct their educational practices. For the local participants, it was vital that the methodologies should focus on learning life skills and be adapted to the specific context of the camps, in such a way as to reflect the Sahrawi identity (Kemmis, 1993; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011; Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2015). Similarly, as regards the activities and resources proposed, the local teachers stressed the importance of learning to create teaching materials and resources with simple, recycled materials available in the camps, so as to ensure that they could be used by the Sahrawi teachers so that both the learning and the development of the practices could be economically sustainable over time. For this reason, the teaching materials and proposals were designed in accordance with the needs and demands of their specific context (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011), with for example the use of recycled cardboard and items such as plastic bottles and bottle tops.

During the project, the researchers from Zaragoza University travelled to the camps twice a year in Spring and Autumn. On these field trips, training was offered to teachers at the camps and they were given support with the application of the new methodologies they learnt in classroom and school settings. In order to immerse themselves in Sahrawi culture and education, the researchers stayed with the teachers' families in their homes. Over the rest of the year, the process continued with occasional training sessions and continuous interaction through digital media such as WhatsApp or YouTube. The planning of these training

sessions and meetings was flexible and dynamic to be able to adapt to the decisions taken by the participants and the needs identified on the ground (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2015).

Some students from the education faculty of the University of Zaragoza were also involved in project delivery. Students specialising in educational counselling on the Master's Degree in Secondary Teacher Training and those taking the subject of 'Education in the Knowledge Society' as part of the primary education degree took part in the creation of teaching materials and resources in line with the requests and needs of the teachers from the camps. During the entire participatory action-research process, from 2021 to the present, a field diary was recorded and questionnaires were used to gather feedback from participating teachers. This allowed the information to be analysed throughout the process of implementation of the training in order to improve the teaching practices and evaluate the participatory action-research process itself.

## **Results and discussion**

The analysis of the data gathered in the field has enabled us to reflect on the process of improving teaching skills and to redirect the training activities, so as to adapt them to the needs and interests of the participants, considering their context and identity (Bourn, 2021). The culture, opinions and interest of the local teachers were a key factor in the development of this action-research process (Blanchet-Cohen, Cooper and Doel-Mackaway, 2023). After taking into account the reflections of all participants, the research highlighted how teachers were rethinking teaching practices and developing a critical pedagogy for educational transformation.

### ***Perception of the usefulness of action research by Sahrawi teachers***

The results indicate that in general, although some teachers were sceptical and even distrustful of the researchers at the beginning, by considering and respecting their culture and context, a climate of trust and respect was achieved between the teachers and researchers, allowing for reflection on teaching practices (Messiou et al., 2024, Greenwood, 2000). As a result, all the participants jointly created and helped to develop the objectives of the action research for educational change. All of this, involved processes of reflection, joint deconstruction and construction of

knowledge, which encouraged teachers to ask questions about their professional practice and how it connected with the framework of critical pedagogy. As one teacher puts it: 'it has been more like a peer-to-peer relationship; we have all been like students' (Teacher 5, reflection session, December 2025).

By enabling teachers to reflect on their practice the action research enhanced control over their development, improved their teaching skills, and raised their awareness of the theories on which their teaching practice was based, and of the limitations and opportunities inherent in it (Hernández and Álvarez, 2018). The participating teachers considered that the training they received had helped them improve their professional work as teachers and encourage reflection and questioning among students (Giroux and Paul, 2023). So, in the discussion sessions, they were asked if they would like to continue training and experimenting new methodologies, to which many responded that 'they would like to continue training because the materials work very well for them' (Field diary, February 2023). One teacher similarly stated after one of the training sessions: 'this training session has been very useful to help me change the children's routine and acquire comprehension and thinking skills' (Teacher 6, questionnaire, February 2023). Another teacher emphasised that the way she taught her classes was changing: 'For me, it has been helpful for explaining [syllabus contents] and for improving my teaching abilities' (Teacher 12, questionnaire, February 2023). In this sense, it was observed that in the training and reflection sessions, most of the teachers wished to continue with the project, so, the Sahrawi teachers perceive the action research process as useful and have validated it (Greenwood, 2000).

In order to involve more teachers in the teacher training, the Sahrawi educational authorities have proposed training lead teams in each of the *wilayas*, so that all the teachers can receive the training and pedagogical transformation can be carried out at a general level in all the schools in the camps (Reflection session, February 2025). The aim is to continue working on the project with the rest of the *wilayas* using face-to-face training and working groups during the visits to the camps by researchers from the University of Zaragoza, and online sessions during the rest of the year. There is, therefore, an ongoing process of transformation in the pedagogical values and culture of the educational

community (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003) through participative action-research in which the priorities are reflection and joint creation of pedagogical knowledge (Greenwood, 2000). Moreover, as a result of our work with the teachers and their institutions, the educational authorities have proposed sharing these reflections with other educators in African states. This is a clear sign that they value the changes in the structure and form of the educational system in the Sahrawi camps

### ***Rethinking teaching practice***

Throughout this process, the teachers have been questioning and rethinking their teaching practice. As one teacher put it: ‘this training programme does various positive things. It has helped me in the way I explain things and in making the class simpler for my students and also for rethinking the way I use teaching materials and how to make them’ (Teacher 5, February 2023). Along similar lines, a teacher explained during a work session: ‘applying the proposed methodologies will help me develop my creative and explanatory capacities and help me pass on the knowledge in a straightforward, comfortable way’ (Teacher 1, February 2023). Another teacher said:

“I have to follow the steps that I have been learning during this training programme so as to enhance the creativity of the students and improve the transmission of knowledge by making it easier, so that the students understand better” (Teacher 4, February 2023).

Following their engagement with the action research, the teachers have highlighted the importance of putting the focus on students, on their interests and their needs and not so much on the content set out in the textbooks, so as to move away to some extent from performative outputs (Ball, 2003). This was explained by a counsellor in a focus group session: ‘we must focus on their interests, their experiences, so as to discover each child’s personality and find out individual differences between them’ (Reflection session, February 2024).

Furthermore, during the group discussion sessions with the teachers, it was observed how after using the proposed teaching materials, they thought about and developed their use by proposing other possible pedagogical uses for the same

materials (Field diary, February 2024). For example, in the case of one of the teaching materials presented for working on fractions, the teachers proposed using it for recognising angles and even for identifying students' emotional state. In another example, one of the teachers designed her own games on the basis of ideas worked on in the training sessions: 'starting with a board game in which the children had to make mathematical calculations to pass the tests, the teacher designed other versions of the game to include other types of calculations or problem-solving based on their culture and day-to-day experiences' (Field diary, November 2023). The teachers similarly took a fresh look at how to motivate their students, what to do to reach them, working towards an effective learning process for all the children (Jeffrey, 2006) and ensuring that they identify with the school (Gramsci, 2006; Pearce and Wood, 2019). These ideas were recorded in the field diary after a discussion session in February 2024 with teachers and counsellors.

Another concern frequently raised by the teachers was their wish to attend effectively to all the students in the class, given their different learning and skills levels: 'they asked to learn how to work with different knowledge levels' (Reflection session, February 2024). In this way, the teachers were carrying out processes of reflection, deconstruction and construction of knowledge in a continuous ongoing way and through dialogue, so carrying out a strict examination of 'the self', which to some extent enabled them to identify and question local and global structures of inequality, as well as think of alternatives for a better future (Dolan, 2025). This encouraged teachers to start asking questions about their own professional practices, to move towards a more inclusive approach that is more committed to the transformation of their educational and social context (Freire, 1970). Moreover, a secondary school head, who also attended the work session with the primary school teachers stated that 'we need the same for secondary education' (Secondary school head teacher, March 2023). On the basis of all the different opinions put forward, it seemed that the teachers became aware of the need for reflection about their teaching practices (Andreotti, 2006; Giroux, 2025), so coming closer to a desired educational transformation which would enable their pupils to learn skills that will build a better future and support the reconstruction of their country if they are allowed to return home (McMonagle, 2017).

### ***Developing teaching practice for educational transformation***

Teaching practice is advancing towards greater interaction with the students, placing more trust in the boys and girls. Despite living in a very hierarchical society and school system, the teachers are turning towards a more horizontal relationship between students and teachers (Freire, 1970) and in this way are facilitating the empowerment of their students through decision-making and participation activities (Tarusarira, 2017; Pearce and Wood, 2019). Over the course of this process, which has now lasted several years, the teachers have been incrementally applying different pedagogical ideas at different times and situations in the classroom, trying to make small changes in their professional *modus operandi* towards teaching practices that are more centred on students' interests and involve greater interaction with them (Vigo-Arazola, 2024). The teachers have broadened their knowledge and begun shifting towards the desired transformation in their teaching practice, creating new activities and resources addressing their practices towards an approach more focused on intergenerational interaction and dialogue, without hierarchies (Pearce and Wood, 2019).

Teachers sent us videos via WhatsApp which illustrated the way they were using what they had learnt in the classroom and how they were going one step further by creating their own materials. Another positive outcome was that the teachers proposed creating libraries of interactive resources in each school in order to share resources to promote reflection, critical thinking, and motivation in their students (Jeffrey, 2006). This proposal has also been welcomed and accepted by the educational authorities given the empowerment of the teachers particularly in designing their own resources and bringing about a pedagogical transformation in the schools (Giroux, 2022). These resources are being designed and created jointly amongst all the teachers with recycled materials and in accordance with their Sahrawi and African identity. As one teacher told us: 'we can suggest our own teaching materials or projects, because the textbook is not very useful to us, as it does not include our animals or our culture' (Teacher, pedagogic session, December 2025). Therefore, the action-research project has helped to avoid the adoption of a Eurocentric, westernised approach to education (Stein 2018; Gaynor, 2023) that tends to dominate some training and research projects.

All of the teachers and educational institutions engaged in the project have started to promote more student-centred pedagogical methods and greater interaction with the students (Vigo-Arrazola, 2024), although performative goals can still be detected in these practices, in the system and in the teachers (Ball, 2003). The pedagogical culture of the camps has a hierarchical structure based on the reproduction and memorisation of content. As a secondary school teacher explained: 'I have revised for the exam we have coming up soon with games in which I include questions similar to those in the exam and this helps the children with revision and learning' (Field diary, secondary school, March 2023). Similarly, some teachers insisted on learning techniques and strategies to improve memorisation (Field diary, March 2023). Although teaching practices had changed and were more based on students' interests, they maintained practices modelled on individual and competitive school performance and good grades.

This action-research proposal could therefore be considered to have achieved its objective of encouraging teachers at the camps to reflect on and redesign their teaching practices and also to go further, promoting more profound and sustainable changes that empower their students (Pearce and Wood, 2019) inside and outside the sphere of action. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go and we must continue to work hand in hand, researchers and teachers together.

## **Conclusion**

In view of all the above, it would seem that reflecting on professional teaching practice can help teachers control their own progress, improve their teaching skills, increase their knowledge and discover the limitations and opportunities of their teaching practices (Hernández and Álvarez, 2018). Likewise, from this perspective, teachers working together with students can draw attention to situations of oppression, promoting practices of social transformation and contributing to an emancipatory project (Giroux, 2022). The work carried out in this action-research helped to visualise the start of an educational transformation as the teachers are taking the lead in this project, to the extent of organising, by themselves, on-the-job training for other fellow teachers. This suggests that these practices could go beyond critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2022; 2024), becoming increasingly more like emancipatory practices (Celorio, 2020). However, a long

journey still lies ahead before this goal can be fully achieved and this will require the right structural conditions to facilitate the process.

From a development education perspective, collaborating with refugees operating on the margins of society in the global South, is both a vindication and exemplar of the sector's radical pedagogical process. Development education is designed to empower educators and learners, particularly in situations of oppression and dispossession. There has been very little engagement by the development education sector with refugees in the kind of context set out in this article. This project may indicate to researchers and educators in the development education sector how the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' can be effectively implemented to enhance education provision to and the social transformation of refugees.

In addition, by adopting an action-research approach, it is important to remember the complexity of the social system at the refugee camps, with consequent limitations in terms of the opportunities for teachers to interact with other contexts, given the difficulty of leaving the settlements and the poor digital links. This means that this particular context is very different from other contexts that might be explored in action-research projects (Kemmis, 1993). Looking towards the future, it is hoped that the research project and the enhanced pedagogical skills which it has generated within the camps will enable the Sahrawis to escape their refugee status, so ensuring they have access to all of their social and economic rights. Within this framework, transformative education can help educate future generations who are critical of their situation to allow them to reflect on power structures that perpetuate inequality, to enable the Sahrawi community to bring about social and educational transformation. Moreover, from a critical and transformative perspective (Rodríguez-Izquierdo and García-Bayón, 2024) and as a future line of research, it would also be interesting to assess the impact of the action-research project on the participating university students, when they collaborate in the creation of teaching materials and resources for the teachers from the camps.

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