

can solidarity be taught?

Sarah Fichtner

In this essay I am addressing the question of whether solidarity is something that can be taught. It is based on experiences from my field research on NGOs working on education in the West African Republic of Benin and in Germany. What does it need for someone to become solidary, and what does it take to grasp the politics of solidarity? What happens to solidarity when it is instrumentalized, when solidarity campaigns are transformed into a ‘competition of care’? I understand solidarity to be first and foremost about relating to others, from a certain power position, driven by a common cause, while acknowledging the differences between those who show solidarity, and those they show it for. Solidarity as a relational process is as much about oneself as it is about the other and the relation in between. Inspired by the pedagogy of resonance and ChangeWriters methods for relationship work, I argue that as an educational practice and subject, solidarity needs to be experienced, reflected on, shared, discussed, and thus understood in its personal and political dimensions. For this to happen on a larger scale, we would not only need to let go of an instrumental vision of solidarity, but also of an instrumental vision of education.

Keywords: competition of care, education, instrumentalization, NGOs, pedagogy of resonance, solidarity

It was Aide et Action Benin who decided to launch a movement in this country in order to educate the population to donate, to show solidarity with one another, to enable a child who is lost somehow to have access to school. Because here the white person, excuse me, is still perceived as someone who gives, and the African is always in that position: “Ah if I could only find a white friend...” A priori it’s that: the begging hand. It’s that image that Aide et Action wanted to destroy. It’s true, they are our friends, ok? But we can do more. That’s how the chain of solidarity started. The objective at the moment is not compulsorily to have money. No, no, no! It’s education! (3 February 2007, Parakou, cited in Fichtner, 2012, p. 113).

The quote above was spoken by one of the local coordinators of the international NGO Aide et Action, a Beninese social anthropologist, and is taken from the chapter *The chain of solidarity or chained to solidarity?* in the book *The NGOisation of Education* (Fichtner, 2012). In this chapter I describe how I experienced the (micro) politics of solidarity linked to Aide et Action’s Chain of Solidarity campaign – also called SUDERANA – in the municipality of Nikki in northeastern Benin. The campaign was presented to me as an instrument to raise awareness of the Education for All policy imperative at the national and local levels, i.e., as a tool to promote schooling at a time (2005/06) and in a country (Benin), when net school enrolment rates were considered too low (82.70%). In Nikki, school enrolment rates were particularly low (46.85%), defining the

municipality among other indicators of its ‘state of development’ as a red i.e., ‘problematic’ zone (*zone rouge*) on administrative maps. Aide et Action was one of the NGOs in the region trying to change this situation by ‘sensitising’ the population to the benefits of education. The term ‘sensitisation’ was used in terms of making people sensitive to or aware of the benefit that comes with education, causing them to sense the advantages of having educated their children. It points to the perception of the ‘sensitisers’ that those who need to be ‘sensitised’ do not know what is good for them (Bierschenk, 1988; Rossi, 2006). This social creation of nescience, of an absence of knowledge or awareness, forms the basis for most development (and missionary) interventions (Brehm & Silova, 2010; Lachenmann, 2004).

The Chain of Solidarity was described by an international development actor (Aide et Action) as a movement based on *horizontal* solidarity by Beninese for Beninese. Although the regional coordinator cited above stressed its educational dimension, it entailed more than just sensitising the neighbourhood: it also aimed to collect funds. The logo of the Chain of Solidarity printed on bags and badges that Aide et Action sold throughout the country showed two hands united in a handshake. Below the logo was the phrase: “I show solidarity for education, and you?” (“*Je suis solidaire de l’éducation, et toi?*”).

Frédéric Naquet, president of Aide et Action at that time, referred to this logo at the festive launch of the campaign in April 2005, when he said:

[...] the means that we need in order to realise our ambition of a quality education for All, have to be sought everywhere possible, in accordance with everyone’s capacities, so that the hand which gives is not above the hand which receives. (Aide et Action, 2005, p. 5, translated from French)



In 2006, Aide et Action declared the month of October to be the Month of Solidarity for Education for All and initiated a competitive fundraising campaign at the municipal level that would later lead to a distribution of school materials. The president of the Municipal Education Committee, the mayor’s first deputy, called a meeting and explained to the assembly:

Here in Nikki we know what Aide et Action has done for us. Aide et Action helped us a lot and we did not want to be at the fringe of this activity. Therefore, we invited all the members of the Municipal Education Committee [...] to see at our level [...] how we proceed in order to mobilise the money to send to Aide et Action. (22 November 2006, Nikki centre)

The task was thus approached from an instrumental perspective as a task that had to be accomplished more to prove to Aide et Action the municipality’s goodwill and reputation, rather than for the good of the community or for Beninese children in need. This instrumental form of solidarity reached another level when the members of the Municipal Education Committee agreed

(after heated debates) that they would not sit back and wait for individual donors to approach them, but that they would raise funds directly from the pupils and their parents in the community. One of the pedagogical advisors of Nikki's school district administration pointed out the difficulty of asking the pupils – *the ultimate beneficiaries* of the fundraising campaign – for contributions, especially when asking as representatives of the Municipal Education Committee, i.e., as representatives of an institution headed by a representative of the mayor. However, the advisor was outvoted, and it was decided that 25 CFA Franc (= 0.04€) would be collected from every pupil, as this was seen as the easiest and fastest way to raise money. The solidarity fundraising campaign thus gained a striking similarity to a self-imposed tax collection.

In return for their donation, the pupils received the pink badges shown above with the Chain of Solidarity for Education logo and the phrase: “I show solidarity for education, and you?” The ‘solidary crowd’ was thus easy to distinguish from the ‘unsolidary’ rest and it was just a matter of time until children who felt stigmatized because they were not part of the movement urged their parents to donate, too.

Solidarity campaigns – often portrayed as expressing horizontal, non-hierarchical relations of care for others – and charity events – overtly embodying vertical, hierarchical relations of care for others – both rely on the same public display, collective use, and media coverage of symbols of solidarity (banners, badges, photographic ‘proof’ etc.). These symbols can create a unifying force among those who ‘care’, they can arouse public interest and influence politics, and they are able to visibly nourish the users’ self-perception that they are someone who cares.¹ As the example of the Chain of Solidarity shows, these symbols can also visibly support a ‘competition of care’ and thus divide, stigmatise and thereby make visible and perpetuate inequalities. Aide et Action’s solidarity campaign was successful in stimulating awareness for education and self-help development in Nikki – and thus potentially making people care about these issues. However, its instrumental, competitive implementation – with the goal of raising funds for Aide et Action through a collection among school children – highlighted the community’s structural dependence on the NGO.

Solidarity is first and foremost about relating to others, from a certain power position, driven by a common cause, while acknowledging the differences between those who show solidarity and those, they show it for.

I might have missed the moment in Nikki when school children, their parents and teachers mobilised each other to reflect on their positioning, on development aid, on what it means to be solidary, and on the question of if and how you can show your solidarity to those who have shown their solidarity to you. I cannot say if these discussions have taken place, or if the aim “to educate the population to donate” was ever transformed into discussions about the politics and experiences of solidarity. If solidarity were to be taught, in my view, a space for such discussions would need to be facilitated: a space for discovering and understanding solidarity – and its politics – in practice.

In one of my more recent research and evaluation projects, I had the chance to get an idea of what this could possibly entail. This is not another example of the instrumentalization of solidarity, but an outlook on a different approach to learning solidarity. I conducted an exploratory study on the implementation of the ChangeWriters approach – the German adaptation of the Freedom Writers methods (Gruwell & The Freedom Writers Foundation, 2007) – in schools in Germany (Fichtner & Dzeik, 2019; Fichtner & Schimkat, 2019). The ChangeWriters non-profit association is committed to promoting social competencies and respectful interaction in schools by focusing on relationship

work in teacher training courses offered throughout the country. Through practical exercises, changes of perspective and role reflection, the participants are encouraged to see and reach their pupils differently. By introducing tools such as diary writing, the line game, and cooperative challenges into the classroom, teachers then set the ground for their pupils' experiences of self-reflectivity, empathy, and teamwork (see Fichtner & Dzeik, 2019). This, in turn, allows for the feeling of solidarity as care for others whom you might not know, who are different than you, but whose cause you support, to flourish. To show solidarity with others, you need to relate in a meaningful and care-full manner (Lynch et al., 2007).

I think it is important to differentiate between an educational setting which allows pupils to be solidary and to experience solidarity in a non-instrumental way, and solidarity – and more specifically the politics of solidarity – as a subject to be discussed in schools, as a subject with transformative potential. Setting, experience and subject are, of course, interrelated, especially when seen through the lens of a “pedagogy of resonance” (Endres, 2020; Felski, 2020; Rosa & Endres, 2016) that I see in connection with the ChangeWriters approach.

Resonance is, above all, a relational connection to the world: “experiencing the *world as relation*” in contrast to treating it as a resource (Felski, 2020). It requires an openness to be moved, concerned, affected by something or someone, open to outcome (Rosa & Endres, 2016). The “pedagogy of resonance” stimulates the discovery of new thought patterns (Endres, 2020), of self-reflectivity and new relations towards things and people. It does not mesh well with the focus on reproducing knowledge and hierarchies which still forms the base of our education system today.

There are quite a few projects and initiatives which show how this could possibly change; projects which promote relationship work and political education based on self-reflectivity as being important both as content and practice in school education (see for example the ChangeWriters concept, but also the Lions-Quest programs or Fritz-Schubert's “Happiness” as a school subject). Perhaps it is only logical that these projects are not part of the official curriculum, as we would not only need to let go of an instrumental vision of solidarity, but also of an instrumental vision of education, for solidarity to be experienced, reflected on, shared, discussed, and thus understood in its personal and political dimensions. In this sense, solidarity cannot be taught (theoretically and instrumentally) – but it can be learned.²

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Recommended Citation

- Fichtner, S. (2021). Can solidarity be taught? *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 4(10). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2021.10.7

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1. The association with people wearing self-made mouth-nose protection masks in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic not only as a tool to reduce infection rates but also as a symbol of solidarity with groups at risk, comes to mind. However, it would lead to another subject altogether, especially as these masks are more than symbols. ↴
2. I am aware that my socialization in the Western part of Germany (West Berlin) has shaped my understanding and experience of solidarity. Friends and colleagues of mine who had grown up in Eastern Germany experienced the notion of solidarity differently, especially in school education. This is an interesting topic that can unfortunately not be addressed in this essay but definitely deserves further attention. ↴