Growing pains: a teacher becoming a transformative agent

Abstract

This paper asks how a teacher transforms from constrained and controlled to an independent yet dialogical agent. We analyse and describe the transformation of a teacher in the Finnish rural north in one school semester from a conforming teacher to a transformative teacher, examining the narrative of her personal journal and ethnographic researcher’s journal. By analysing the transformation process of one individual teacher, we identify the contexts that an individual teacher may need to consider when transforming. This paper finds that the pedagogical transformation process did not focus on learning new teaching methods and applying them in class; instead, the pedagogic transformation occurred after the teacher reflected personally and professionally and carried out small, concrete changes. The pedagogical transformation culminated in two turning points and was enabled by professional support, personal support, space, and personal emotional resources. A three year survey reveals that such a transformation had permanent consequences.

KEYWORDS: teachers, transformation, pedagogy, rural education, school, teacher identity, ethnography
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Introduction

Finnish educational policy respects the autonomy of teachers: primary school is decentralised, no teacher evaluation exists, and the national curriculum offers teachers remarkable freedom. It has been argued that Finnish teachers have more autonomy than do most teachers around the world (Sahlberg 2011). Yet Finnish teachers commonly feel constrained in their work and research shows that teachers do not use the freedom they have. As national policy in Finland explicitly encourages pedagogical freedom, teachers cannot use policies as reason not to pursue their own pedagogical thinking. This context—of a broadly encouraging national policy—provides an opportunity to analyse what actually constrains many educators from realising the pedagogical transformation they seek.

The authors of this paper contend that pedagogical transformation is not about moving from one static, fixed form of agency to other such forms of agency; rather, pedagogical transformation involves bringing equity to pedagogical practices, which implies—in turn—a dynamic perspective of the world. This paper asks, ‘How does such a painful pedagogical transformation towards dynamicity take place?’ or in other words, ‘How does one transform oneself from a constrained, controlled teacher into an independent yet dialogical agent?’

To answer that question, we analyse and describe the transformation of one individual from a *conforming* teacher to a *transformative* teacher, as narrated by that individual in her personal journal and observed and narrated by a researcher in a research journal. The change in question occurred during the autumn term of 2008 and coincided with ethnographic fieldwork that ‘author A’ conducted in the school at the time. That ethnography was a part of a larger research project carried out between 2006 and 2010 in two northern Finnish villages.

Mapping an individual teacher’s process of pedagogical transformation is a significant act. An individual teacher exists in an individualised teaching culture; ‘Educational change depends on
what teachers do and think—it is as simple and complex as that,’ states Fullan (2007, 129). Understanding the process of educational change requires therefore an examination of the experiences of an individual teacher. In focusing on one individual, we do not wish to elevate her; rather, to identify the contexts that an individual teacher may have to consider when transforming so that we can gain insight into the complex nature of educational transformation.

When discussing pedagogical transformation, one must place that discussion in a specific educational context. This paper’s specific context, in which the need for transformation arises and is carried out, is the rural north of Finland. The process of transformation presented itself as a negotiation between the self, a community of teachers, and a local village, within national discourses.

We find that the pedagogical transformation in question was prompted by several converging factors, and that the transformation of the teacher culminated in two turning points, a personal and a professional turning point. Transformation was enabled by the availability of the necessary space, support, and personal emotional resources for personal and professional reflection and small, concrete changes in the surrounding environment.

**On Transformation and Self**

Change is a major theme in current educational policy and is often linked to ideas such as development, progress, or evolution. However, actual change in schools will often consist merely of minor rearrangements, not profound changes in educational practice (Nyroos 2007). In this paper, we use the idea of transformation as our main conceptual tool. By it, we mean an epochal transformation involving dramatic or major changes on both a subjective level, of experienced identity and pedagogical thinking, and an objective level, of changes in the teaching process (Mezirow 2009, 23). We view transformation as having social, cultural, and affective dimensions that might remain unidentified from an exclusively task-oriented perspective (Menter 2008, 66). Following Jack Mezirow, we understand transformation as a process in which one’s fundamental beliefs are critically reconsidered and reconceptualised:
‘Transformation refers to a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives...We transform frames of reference—our own and those of others—by becoming critically reflective of their assumptions and aware of their context—the source, nature, and consequences of taken-for-granted beliefs’ (Mezirow 2000, 18).

Thereby, in this paper, we do not focus on the context specific practical pedagogical changes that took place. Instead, we focus on the personal, emotional and dialogical processes that took place and enabled the pedagogical changes.

Achieving such a transformation in pedagogical thinking and practice may require thorough and deep changes in oneself. In this paper we regard the self as subject to negotiation and as dynamic by nature. Theoretical traditions have characterised that dynamicity in different ways. Philosopher Stanley Cavell (2004) states that the reconstitution of self does not have an end point. Bakhtin and Holquist see self not as a possession, but as a relation (Holquist 1990, 19–21). Deleuze (1994) argues that one should understand individual identity on the basis of difference, which is the condition for seeing identity as distinct in the first place, rather than on the basis of the internal essence determining the relation of an individual to other entities. Mead’s social psychology, in turn, sees an individual’s sense of self as arising within a social process. Mead contends that the generalised other of an organised community or social group gives the self its unity (1934/1992, 155-156). When one negotiates one’s identity or self, the stories of the group limit the stories available to the individual (Gronow 2011, 41-42, see also Bruner 1991, 1986). Similarly, the stories of an individual affect the stories available to a group. For example, when a teacher pursues a transformation that deviates from the local norm, he or she brings the entire norm into question, causing a momentary conflict that must be solved by adopting a new form of collective identity or by excluding the deviant part.

This study will analyse what permits a person to ‘challenge presuppositions, explore alternative perspectives, transform old ways of understanding, and act on new perspectives’ (Mezirow 1990, 18) in a dialogue with the generalised other. Several authors in various fields recognise in various ways the pain involved in such a transformation. Gert Biesta (2006, 71) discusses the difficulty and painfulness of coming into the world, of taking the responsibility that awaits us and exposing ourselves to that which is other and different. Zembylas (2010)—drawing from

Analysing transformation requires situating a teacher in personal, local, national, global, and cultural settings. We aim to respond to particularities, individualities, oddities, discontinuities, and contrasts in order to analyse the connectedness of the transformative agent to her surroundings and environment, a connectedness that is not free of change but is nonetheless real (Geerz 2000, 224).

**Research method**

This paper draws from data gathered in a research project conducted from 2006 to 2010 in two northern Finnish villages above the Arctic Circle. The aim of the project was to gain new knowledge of the relationship between education and northern villages in Finland. The research group carried out fifty narrative interviews with teachers and villagers and several short ethnographic-fieldwork visits to the local school, each one or two weeks in length. The main school ethnography was completed over an autumn semester—lasting four months—in one village during the project’s third year. The school in question was a small village school and the village a reindeer-herding village in Finnish Lapland with roughly one hundred and thirty inhabitants. The researcher spent approximately five hours every day at the school, observing the participants and speaking with a teacher and students. Ethnographers usually see ‘data’ as consisting of an entire fieldwork and including all relationships in the field, relationships that cannot—and should not—be isolated from each other for research purposes. We focus on the data created in cooperation between the researcher and teacher, data we see as part of the network of field relationships and which in concrete terms comprises two journals, a teacher’s journal and a researcher’s journal.

Knowledge was constructed in a dialogue between the participants and the researcher; for that reason, we assume that knowledge is unique. The knowledge construction process of this study is dialogical, to the extent that it would be impossible to fully track down the researcher’s influence on the situation. The authors of this paper regard knowledge not as static but as dialogic, a
composition, a plurality of narratives continuously reconstructed socially and psychologically in a process of social interaction (Heikkinen 2002). Numerous realities are built continuously in people’s minds through social interactions with each other (Heikkinen 2002; Clandinin and Rosiek 2007; Steedman 1991; see also Holquist 1990). In other words, no one meaning exists to strive for and no complete answer to pursue (Kuntz 2010). Another researcher would elicit different voices in the participants, ask different questions, and reach different conclusions. No ethnographic study is repeatable (Davies 1999) and narrative researchers often speak of ‘resonance,’ not generalisability (Conle 1996). Ethnographic research cannot in other words be generalised for use in other contexts, but may resonate with experiences elsewhere. Similarly, ethnographic research tends to use the term ‘trustworthiness,’ not ‘validity.’ The trustworthiness of this research was ensured via member checks (Rallis and Rossman 2010) and by presenting ideas to the teacher and the villagers during the research process and having the teacher read and comment on this paper before submission.

Context for pedagogical change

The transformation of an individual occurs in a specific context. A teacher engaging in a transformative process is influenced by national policies and by a specific local context. We will describe the policies and context in question, delineating the pedagogical transformation called for by the situation.

Educational policy and pedagogical freedom in Finland

Finnish teachers have remarkable pedagogical freedom; researchers have estimated that Finnish teachers are the ‘freest’ in the world (Simola & Rinne 2010). Authorities specify a framework and no strict orders; no national evaluation examines what schools in Finland actually do. While the Finnish National Board of Education provides a National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, that curriculum touches only on objectives and content, leaving methods, much of the content, and evaluation to a local level. Similarly, the local curriculum is a general outline offering a framework only for classrooms. Ultimately, teachers in Finland make the bulk of the
decisions. Educational policy uses therefore a ‘means of inspirational material or friendly guidelines without normative power’ (Simola et al. 2009, 174). The national educational policy stresses development, not control, and a long tradition exists in Finland of aiming for the highest possible pedagogical autonomy. Therefore, while on one level, the teacher studied in this research changed from a conformist practitioner to a transformational practitioner, in doing so that teacher realised the core values of Finnish educational politics.

However, even if national policy does not control the teachers in Finland, Finnish teacher culture has strong expectations of the ‘character’ of a teacher, expectations that do exert control over a teacher’s thoughts and actions. A shared social identity exists among teachers in Finland, with strong social norms about how a teacher should behave. Teachers often believe that their mission is to be model citizens and transmitters of knowledge (Simola, 2005) and parents and the public tend to regard teachers highly (see for example Sahlberg 2011). Studies of Finnish classrooms indicate that Finnish school traditions have been relatively conservative and that individualised teaching practices are rare (Carlgren al. 2006, 312-316; Simola, 2005). Strong expectations also exist concerning the cultural and social positions of teachers, the nature of teachers’ relationships with local communities, and the cultural capital of a teacher. In this study, the specific setting for those expectations is the Finnish north.

Northern rural Finland as a context for pedagogical decisions

Schooling in northern rural Finland occurs in a particular context. Northern Finland is—to some extent—colonialised in nationally popular representations that serve to meet the hegemonic needs of the south (Ridanpää 2007). The rural north is commonly seen as dying, and those living in the area as socially excluded or at risk of becoming socially excluded (Lanas, Rautio, and Syrjala 2012). The same has been noted in Sweden, where northerners tend to be portrayed as ‘more stupid’ or the ‘inner other’ (Eriksson 2010). As a result, young people wishing to label themselves ‘successful’ in societal terms must first locate outside a northern rural area, just as an

1 ‘Othering’ refers to a process that identifies those different from oneself or the perceived mainstream, potentially reinforcing and reproducing positions of domination and subordination (Johnson et al., 2004).
inner city youth must find ‘success’ outside an inner city area (Ollila 2008). Education tends to direct children away from the rural north (Lanas 2008), a phenomenon also recognised in other marginalised communities in which ‘the purpose of community participation is to assist the school in helping students escape the community’ (Schutz 2006; Fine 1989; Corbett 2007). As a consequence, northern rural children experience being ‘othered’ in school, find the school experience strenuous, and do not succeed as well in school and as often as their southern peers (Ahonen 2010; Lanas, Rautio, and Syrjala 2012; Lanas et al. 2008).

In this research, such ‘othering’ was evident, for instance, in how the local educators tended to speak of the village:

‘The modernity in this village is just on the surface, it’s the 1800s only with snow mobiles’
(a visiting municipal teacher)

‘The lifestyle in that particular village is feudal. They still carry on with the old ways of living’ (an education official)

‘It’s like the Wild West! It’s commonly known and referred to as such in the municipality.’
(teachers’ interviews, autumn)

For years, the villagers had unsuccessfully demanded more say in how their children were educated², a right granted to them in the national core curriculum. Teacher interviews recorded teachers’ responses to those demands³:

‘Of course they’d [the villagers] like to tell us how school should be, but we have our own frames. School’s a unit and home’s a separate unit. [...] We’ve made it clear that we do not accept instructions from anyone outside school [ the students or the parents]’ (teacher interviews, spring)

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² Concerning mainly the role or reindeer herding and punishing practices in school
³ Notably, some of these quotes have been extracted from interviews with the teacher whose transformation process we map in this article.
‘We haven’t given them any space; we form a strong barrier […] School doesn’t change: it’s always the same. So maybe attitudes at home should be checked and school shouldn’t be seen as some kind of monster’ (teacher interviews, group interview, spring)

As is visible in the quotes, the teachers in the research tended also to speak of themselves as a plural entity in phrases such as ‘we form a barrier,’ or ‘we will not take instructions from outside,’ with the villagers representing ‘the outside.’ The teachers, seemingly unaware, were speaking directly against the national educational policy. Why does such ‘othering’ of the local occur despite that the national policy and curriculum explicitly encourage local empowerment? One answer lies in research conducted in other contexts (see for example Bekerman and Zembylas 2010). Teachers tend to direct their work according to implicit national narratives rather than explicit policy statements. The ‘othering’ of the local connects teachers to long-standing, broader national narratives that emphasise ‘unifying the nation,’ and to global educational tendencies that increasingly emphasise standardisation and urbanisation. Instead of using the possibility to conduct education that would empower and support local communities—granted and encouraged explicitly by the decentralised curricula—local educational officials submit to implicit national narratives and do the very opposite, unifying students towards the south, towards standardisation and urbanisation. In other words, the broader national narratives influence the individual teacher’s agency through the community of other teachers. It is not that teachers seek to prevent educational transformation; rather, implicit broader national narratives become visible in the agency of a group of teachers.

Although not recognised explicitly in the school, the local need for a change in the school was evident: the interviews and ethnographical observations show that student wellbeing was low; in addition to skipping school and arguing with the teachers, students were physically ill, suffering headaches and stomach aches; one student even vomited during the most difficult days. The parents were frustrated and helpless and often complained to the school and to municipal officials. Until the semester in question, the teachers had dealt with the need for change by changing schools, by fleeing to the south. It is significant therefore that this teacher chose to stay in the village school although she knew the challenges and had other options. Her willingness to stay was a fragile beginning and—at the same time—crucial in the transformation process. She
was present, a sign of commitment. When asked, she replied that she stayed because she felt that there was something she could do here.

**Analysis and findings**

No one explanation exists for what finally prompted the transformation in the local school; rather, it resulted from the convergence of many factors. The transformation occurred during an autumn semester; the village school had less than ten students at the time. The new head teacher was, for the first time, the only teacher in the school. She had specifically requested to work in the school, for which reason she had the support of the villagers, one of whom stated, ‘We finally have a teacher who wants to be here.’ An ‘outsider’ researcher was also present in the school and the village.

In the last section of this paper, we analyse the transformation process in the two journals written during the school semester, identifying how the transformation was constructed and what enabled it. The teacher’s journal was not intended originally for research use; in it, she describes and constructs events and her emotions through the act of narration. She planned future actions and worked actively to understand as many perspectives as possible. Reading the journal, it is clear that the teacher used writing to help cope with and provide relief in a challenging situation. At the end of the fieldwork, a copy of the journal was given to the researcher. During the same autumn semester, the researcher kept a field journal in which she described, reflected on, and constructed her perceptions of the events, her emotions, and the perspectives of students and parents as revealed to her. For this paper, the parts of researcher’s journal that speak directly or indirectly about the teacher have been analysed. As the researcher and the teacher held in-depth discussions daily, those discussions were reflected on in both journals, with more detail in the researcher’s journal. It is worth mentioning that both the researcher and the teacher were women. Gender did not present itself as a central theme in the transformation⁴; therefore, it has not been treated as a central theme in the analysis. The focus of the analysis has been on the teacher’s journal, and the researcher’s journal is seen as supporting data.

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⁴ Gender was relevant in many other ways, but not in analysing the transformation.
To identify how the transformation was possible and how it was constructed, the authors of this paper have analysed the content of the two journals in three steps. One, examining the two journals, we identify the ‘narrative turning points’ at which the diaries report a significant experienced change, finding two such turning points. Two, after identifying those turning points, we ask, ‘How were those turning points constructed in the entries that preceded them?’ Three, we ask, ‘Why did the transformation take place?’ The teacher identified three ‘preconditions’ for her transformation; we analyse those preconditions.

1. **The two turning points: personal and professional**

Two moments stand out as turning points in both journals. The first moment occurred at the end of the first month and the second less than three weeks after it; a personal turning point was followed by a professional turning point. The teacher writes about the personal turning point in her journal on the evening it occurred:

> ‘I understand that last year I received a sense of security from the work community and ‘we are right’ attitude. Now I no longer have the work community to support me. I am alone and I have to change. I must ‘submit’ myself to becoming a servant of the community and to seeking support from the parents. Actually, I find peace in this thought. In the fact that there is no other way but to face the parents, be present with them, listen and understand, and support educational work at home. I realise that I cannot expect others to grow unless I am ready to grow too.

Growing requires space and I feel I haven’t had the space before to grow professionally because of the social pressure of my work community. Now I have the chance. My own pain is involved because it takes courage to face the embarrassment and guilt and admit to having been wrong. Accepting and forgiving oneself requires love; therefore the chance to grow requires love also. I have found this to be the case [from the universe]. Growing requires nutrients too, food, and I feel that I get those with [the researcher] in the form of reciprocity, feedback, and theories. Moreover, I realised that there is actually no need for growing. I’ll just leave my exterior and let my innermost come out’ (teacher journal 25.8. 2008; arrows and notes in the margin have been replaced with words and incorporated in the text).
The professional turning point occurred two and half weeks after the personal turning point described above. The teacher spoke about it to the researcher the next day:

‘Yesterday the teacher had some sort of a turning in her thinking. She described it as ‘wait a minute.’ She had suddenly, in the middle of cooking, stopped to think about where her own educational values came from. She said that the question circling in her head was “What is my direction? What do I think?” She’d then gone back to her study notes from ten years ago about child centred education. She said that back then she had felt connected to it. Now she’s wondering what happened. Where, along the way, did she lose her perspective? She said she feels brainwashed. Yesterday she understood that this is a foundational question and that she had ‘dug up’ her own professional values. I asked what they were and she replied, ‘Humanistic values, individual needs, freedom, being listened to and heard, positive approach—things cannot be presented or taught through negative approaches.’ She said she has now found the bedrock on which she stands’ (researcher’s journal 12.9).

‘Now I am clear on my educational values. I see that there is a difference between my approach and that of [the previous head and a municipal teacher]. Their approach is authoritative and mine is child-centred’ (teacher’s journal, 14.9; this entry was followed by a table with two columns in which the approaches were described in the context of the village school).

The pedagogical transformation of the semester culminated in these two turning points. In the first turning point, the teacher took responsibility for the change instead of placing the responsibility on the parents or the students. In the second turning point, she found her own professional identity to be distinct from the collective identity of the teachers’ community.

2. Building turning points through reflection and concrete changes
The journals show that the two turning points did not occur ‘out of nowhere’ but were preceded by personal and professional reflection and by a series of small concrete changes with encouraging results. The turning points were built in reflection and action.

Before the personal turning point, the teacher talked increasingly of her family, her own background, her daughter growing up in the north, and her northern spouse, and remembered her personal reasons for becoming a teacher. Fear of failure detracts from a willingness to engage in the transformation process, which is uncertain in nature. A fear of failure cannot be overcome if one sees one’s work within a ‘success/failure’ dichotomy. The teacher moved out of that dichotomy and overcame her fear of failure just before the personal turning point.

‘[The teacher] said that what I’d said on Friday (22.8.) was relieving. I’d said that she shouldn’t be so afraid of failing (she is very afraid of failing), because just the fact that she tries to find a common way is success. There’s no readily mapped right or wrong. If something doesn’t work, she tries something else and that, in my eyes, is success. She said that now she sees herself as kind of a researcher’ (researcher’s journal 25.8).

At the same time, the teacher began transforming small practical things in the school. She began building individual relationships with the children and to focus explicitly on listening instead of telling. She used the parental meetings to find common goals instead of telling the parents about the school’s goals, as had previously been customary. Dialogues she began with students and parents in school were continued in her journal, where it seems she recorded what students and parents said, not criticising or analysing, but simply ‘hearing.’ The teacher allowed wrestling in the gym for one recess a day; village students had been wrestling secretly for generations. She began allowing expressions of negative emotion while finding ways to navigate them in positive ways. The small practical changes took place very subtly; however, the positive consequences were noted by the researcher and by parents. Student frustration decreased visibly. A parent reported (10.9.) that her child’s regular headaches had disappeared almost entirely.

3. Prerequisites for the transformation

According to the teacher’s own narration of her personal turning point, the personal and professional reflection and the small concrete changes were enabled by three conditions: one,
space from social pressure, two, support from the researcher, and three, personal emotional resources for admitting the need for change and enduring the pain involved.

*Space from the social pressure of the work community*

When the school year began, the situation at the village school had progressed to a point at which every statement and action had come to represent choosing a side. Holding particular views had become a sign of identity, solidarity, and loyalty (see also Parekh 2006, 300). In the teacher community there were implicit practices ensuring that teachers did not deviate from the ‘strong barrier.’ Even small breaks from the barrier were punished, for example:

‘Last year, the teacher had sided with the villagers in the ‘empty plates demand’ (a long debated issue between the villagers and the teachers). The other teachers had not commented on this directly, but they had talked quietly amongst themselves for two days, becoming silent at her approach. Later, the head teacher had reproached the teacher in front of students for leaving some food on her plate’ (researcher’s journal 16.9).

Space away from this pressure was significant to the ability to transform. As the teacher had the space to introduce small changes and to reflect on her own professional and personal views, she noted for the first time—or ‘admitted,’ the word she uses in her journal—that two crucial differences of opinion existed between herself and the broader, municipal community of teachers: one, she opposed the closing of the school, and two, she felt that the local reindeer herding culture should not be forced to accommodate itself to the majority culture. Although both issues may seem small to an outside observer, they were significant in a local context, signifying a stepping away from the ‘barrier’ of the teachers towards the perspective of the villagers.

Breaking away from the teachers’ safe ‘barrier’ had emotional consequences that both journals describe. Along with a sense of success the teacher gleaned from the villagers came a feeling of failed trust, guilt, and an ambivalent fear of failure from the teachers’ community. Whereas the teacher felt that she received support for failing in the village, once she started succeeding, she felt that the support was withdrawn. This, her feeling of a loss of support from the community of
teachers, was the most challenging experience of the semester, culminating in a lengthy, extremely strongly worded narration in which the teacher described her exhaustion or almost ‘burn out.’ Over several pages, she spoke of wanting to give up (13.10.).

‘[...] the hardships don’t wear me down but the peer criticism does—most of all, the not being accepted as I am, as me, not as [the previous head teacher], or [a male teacher in another school], or anyone else’ (teacher’s journal 13.10).

‘The teacher describes feeling guilty. What do the other teachers in the municipality think of her now? What is the visiting teacher saying to them about her? Will the other teachers be prejudiced against her? Will she be ‘That teacher from that village?’ This is her worry’ (researcher’s journal 10.9).

Combined with the researcher’s support and personal emotional resources, the space was—despite the challenges described—large enough for personal reflection and small practical changes, leading to the transformation.

Professional and personal support
The teacher wrote in her journal entry of receiving ‘nutrients’ from the researcher ‘in the form of theories, reciprocity, and feedback.’ She refers to the knowledge and theories that the researcher introduced, knowledge and theories that had not previously been part of the work in the village. In the daily discussions the teacher expressed interest towards these themes, so the researcher found some theoretical articles for her to read. When it became apparent that the teacher had neither the time nor energy to read articles in the evenings, the researcher wrote compact summaries of specific theories for her to skim though in the evenings, and the next day they talked about those summaries. The theories summarised were chosen based on daily discussion and on the researcher’s observations of relevant material that might provide new perspectives for thinking\(^5\). After about two weeks, the teacher began constructing new knowledge of her working environment.

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\(^5\) The summaries comprised variations of critical pedagogy and new sociologies of education (e.g. Giroux 2001, Willis 1977), child-centred approaches, and the new sociology of childhood (James and Prout 1990, Qvortrup 1994). They also included place-sensitive education (Gruenewald 2008; Smith 2002, 2007), some post-colonist and
The ‘reciprocity and feedback’ mentioned by the teacher in the quote concerning the first turning point referred mainly to the researcher’s own perspectives, which the researcher brought into the discussions. This was originally suggested by the teacher, who at the beginning of the research relationship said that the researcher was welcome to sit in on her classes as long as she expressed her thoughts openly: ‘Right now I do not need the extra pressure brought on by someone sitting silently at the back of my classroom, making notes but not giving any suggestions.’ This reciprocity can be seen more broadly as enabling the communication between the villagers and the teacher. Since the researcher lived in the village with her family and was friends with many villagers, she functioned as something of a mediator between the villagers and the teachers. However, rather than mediating messages, the teacher mediated trust; both the teacher and the villagers trusted the researcher and the presence of someone they both trusted facilitated the building of mutual trust between them.6

Personal emotional resources

The teacher identified the final prerequisite as what she entitled ‘love.’ To admit previous mistakes, to face the pain of embarrassment and guilt, and to forgive herself, she stated that she needed ‘love.’ When explaining this need to the researcher, she said, laughing, ‘It’s a kind of cosmic love.’ This emotional resource enabled the transformation and the emancipation from the old ways. The teacher’s definition of love is similar to that of bell hooks: she sees love as an emancipatory emotion and a form of action (hooks 2000, 165). The teacher turned this love into a form of action during the transformation process. During the semester she avoided forming new ‘Us-Them’ divides by extending her love to include the villagers as well as to the community of teachers.

Not long after the personal turning point, the teacher mentioned ‘approaching the villagers with love.’ While exactly what she meant by this remains unclear, her approach towards the villagers became less normative.6

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6 As has been described in other contexts (Lanas 2011), the researcher took extensive measures to be worthy of this trust while recognising that her responsibility ended at that point. The trust built by the teacher and the villagers was not created by the researcher but by those parties themselves. The researcher’s presence was simply appropriated in the process.
‘The problems here should be solved with what we have, not by pining over what we don’t have’ (Teacher’s journal 13.10, about a discussion with a municipal teacher, referring to what the students are like).

Towards the end of the semester, the teacher spoke once of “extending her love to ‘the barrier’.” So far, the teacher’s community (i.e. ‘the barrier’) had been associated not with love but with emotions of pressure, worry, fear, and guilt, and the teacher tended to write and speak of her own thoughts in a defensive way. However, with the introduction of the concept of love to the relationship, the tone of her journal entries as well as speech changed not only towards the community of teachers but also towards her own thoughts. ‘The barrier’ seemed no longer to portray a threat to her in her journal or speech. She was no longer defensive of her thoughts, trusting them.

**Conclusion**

This paper has provided a concrete example of what a pedagogical transformation may look like – and feel like - in the day to day practice. Pedagogical transformation, in this research, presented itself as a personal, emotional, situational, dialogical, unique and dynamic process that is impossible to dictate or predict.

The transformation process that occurred during the school semester seems permanent and it became more than simply minor rearrangements of educational practices (Nyroos 2007). The teacher still (three years later) works in the same school, with many of the same parents and largely the same community of teachers. The teacher and a parent responded as follows to the researcher’s enquiries three years after the semester in question.

‘I’m very happy here. My own pedagogical perspectives have clarified. There are some new teachers with whom we discuss and develop our pedagogies. I now feel I receive the support I need’ (the teacher)

‘Thank you for asking! The spirit in the school is incredibly good! I think about it often, when I remember what it was like earlier, during the ‘insensitive period.’ At the
same time I also feel sad that my two older children didn't have such a warm and student centred beginning to their school career as our third one. We have also worked together successfully to keep a third grade in the school. The future feels good, since municipality seems to have given us peace now’ (a mother of three whose eldest child attended the school during the early period of the research, whose second child attended during the ethnographic field work and whose third during the writing of this paper).

While a need for transformation had existed for years, during which time the teacher had worked in the village, and while the national educational policy encouraged transformation explicitly, the teacher was only able to transform once several factors came together. In particular, she needed the space and support for personal and professional reflection and also for making small concrete changes in her environment. After accomplishing those changes, and with strong personal emotional resources in place, she reached her personal and professional turning points. The authors of this paper believe that the permanence and depth of the transformation derives from two facts.

One, the transformation did not take place ‘from the outside in’ but rather ‘from the inside out.’ The teacher stated that, whereas she had previously seen school as separate from herself, she now realised a need for her to apply the same values she lived by elsewhere, such as with her family. Instead of moving from one static set of practices to another, the turning points of the transformation occurred within the self of the teacher. She invested herself in the transformation by accepting and enduring the very difficult emotions that came with it. Ultimately, she felt that the process was not even a transformation as she had previously understood the term. She writes the following in a journal entry: ‘I realised that, actually, there is no need for growing. I’ll just leave my exterior and let my innermost come out.’ This suggests that the transformation itself is a ‘change’ only on the outside; for the teacher personally, it is, in the end, quite possibly a harmonising experience.

Two, the transformation did not rely on a drawing of untenable lines between ‘Us’ and ‘Them,’ but instead extended ‘Us’ to concern all parties involved. This is significant. The teacher did not find satisfaction in making the community of teachers a new ‘bad guy’ instead of the villagers.
Instead, she found the emotional resources needed to be constructive in every direction. Any lines she might have drawn at that stage would just be in her way later.

It is also significant that when transformation was not possible, the teacher did not recognise the need for it. In her earlier interviews, nothing the teacher said indicated that she would be at odds with the perspectives of the community of teachers, a point illustrated by her experience of reading her own old interviews:

‘The teacher tells me that she was a little depressed, sad, after reading her old interview. She says that luckily she didn’t understand her own situation back then. Now she’s happy that she has a new chance, one she never knew to miss.’

(Researcher’s journal)

This means that a teacher may not recognise an obvious need for transformation—even when his or her wellbeing and the wellbeing of his or her students depends on that transformation—if that teacher does not have the space, support, and emotional resources necessary for the transformation.
References


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