Revolutionary love at work in an arctic school with conflicts

Abstract:
This paper explores how ‘revolutionary love’ may be a viable response in a teacher’s pedagogical practices. To do so, we present an in-depth case study of one teacher in a reindeer herding village in Finnish rural north. The paper asks: what does revolutionary love mean in teaching practice and what distinguishes loving from non-loving teaching practices? What are the implications for the prospects of personal and community transformation? The findings from this study show the manifestations of transformative loving responses in teaching practice and the opportunities that are created for learning and growth. The study has important implications for educational change in small communities and makes a contribution to considering love-as-revolutionary-praxis in teaching.
KEYWORDS: love, education, transformation, school,
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Introduction

A school that is located in a community, it is not often of the community. Employees are rarely neighborhood residents, many do not share the culture of their students, graduates seldom hold expectations of returning to productive neighborhood citizenship. Discussion of these communities in education and elsewhere generally deal with their deficits. With few exceptions, the implicit and often explicit question is not how to connect with “community,” but how to keep the community at arm’s length (Schutz 2006, 691).

"We've had teachers who are against Northern Finland as such - really - they thought us uncivilised and came here to civilize us... so that it all really depends largely on what kind of attitudes teachers take toward their pupils”.

[What sort of a teacher would you see as one not civilizing you?]

"Well of course the kind that would want to understand how we live here and how it is different from bigger places, although, of course, we cannot demand that of anyone, but at least they should not be trying to change us, or like, to try to change the pupils". (Saku & Oona, interview)

The setting for the research presented in this paper—a reindeer herding village in Finnish rural north—is one in which the perspectives of the educators and the receivers of education did not match. Educators and parents differed in their perception of upbringing, children and childhood, and in their perspectives of the goals of education, including what comprises successful life. These different perceptions often created conflicts between parents and teachers, leading to a lot of anger and resentment on both sides. While there are relatively few studies on education in Lappish reindeer herding villages, there is research on similar phenomena globally in a wide variety of settings: fishing communities in Canada (Corbett 2007), in which students and families resist education that directs youth away from the villages; inner city contexts (Fine 1989; Schutz 2006), in which education is offered as “the only way out”; working class communities (Willis 1977), where education functions to limit the possible futures of working class youth; Roma/Gypsy/Traveller peoples in Europe and elsewhere in which there are conflicts between these communities and western cultural values.
(Miscovic, 2013); and Indigenous Australian peoples whose formal education has often become a process of enculturation in western ways of living (Ahluwalia et al., 2012). In these school contexts there is an implicit approach in which the ‘receivers’ of education are seen as somehow deficit, dangerous or in need of improvement. While much of this research explores various social and political consequences of this approach, one aspect remains understudied: how can teachers overcome the “cycles of indignation” (Other and Author2 2010) in their encounters with students and parents and form transformative loving responses in their teaching practices?

The idea of love as being transformative may sound like an ‘odd’ response, especially in an era in which psychological, political and social forces work against ‘revolutionary love’ (Chabot, 2008). As Chabot argues, both small-scale and large scale settings in contemporary societies favor competition over relationality, conflict over peace. In school contexts such as this Lappish reindeer herding village or urban inner city schools, local communities may be excluded from the discussions regarding their own education and are often ‘othered’ (Author1, Other & Other 2012). Even community-based approaches in these contexts often emphasize the importance of controlling participation (Schutz 2006, 707). The lack of constructive dialogue and the lack of power to influence education may produce anger in the receivers of education. Similarly, teachers in this context may not be able to understand the locals’ responses, and may also respond with anger to the locals’ efforts to influence education. A loving response on behalf of teachers, then, may seem strange or naively romantic in today’s competitive world, yet it has revolutionary implications, not only for our personal relationships, but also for large-scale transformations (Chabot, 2008).

This paper takes on the task of developing a deeper understanding of how revolutionary love may be a viable response in a teacher’s pedagogical practices. We suggest that instead of naturalizing anger and perpetuating the cycle of indignation, there is a real possibility of breaking that cycle by responding with revolutionary love. But, what does revolutionary love mean in teaching practice and what distinguishes loving from non-loving teaching practices? What are the implications for the prospects of personal and community transformation? To respond to these questions, we present an in-depth case study of one teacher in a reindeer herding village in Finnish rural north. This case study is part of a larger ethnographic research project carried out between 2006 and 2010 in two northern Finnish villages. The findings from this study have important implications in research on small communities and the different educational approaches between local communities and teachers. Especially, this study makes a contribution to analyzing revolutionary love in teaching practices, suggesting that teachers might benefit from our interpretations of love-as-revolutionary.
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**Theorizing revolutionary love**

Other and Author2 (2010) argue that the cycle of indignation is perpetuated by dominant anger discourses. They question the role of anger as integral to the dominant model of political activity, often characterized in terms of the sequence: suffering-anger-revolt. The authors argue that communities of conflict are often stuck in anger through a fusion of reification with re-iteration and that this re-iteration of angry claims and denials between communities in conflict gradually reifies anger as something natural to the prevailing affective economy of conflict. Other and Author2 bring attention to the historical constitution of angry claims and denials among conflicting communities and emphasize that to perceive anger as naturalized is to assume that there is no way out of it. In that way, the cycle of indignation is perpetuated (Other and Author2 2010, 28-29).

To break this cycle, it has been argued that love has an important role to play and in fact it has ‘revolutionary power’ (Chabot, 2008). Recently, we have also made the case for love as a powerful force for ‘transforming power’ in our institutions and everyday lives, and proposed that ‘revolutionary love’ serves as a moral and strategic compass for concrete individual and collective actions in critical education (Author1 & Author2, in press). We argue that revolutionary love entails six perspectives: it is an emotion, a choice, and a response, and it is simultaneously relational, political and praxis.

Firstly, we assert that love is an *emotion*. Engaging with revolutionary love entails vulnerability and a risk: If I invest my Self, if I respond in loving ways to the other, do loving acts, and if the other does not respond in a loving way, I hurt. Love is not a safe-haven, the choosing of which would alleviate suffering. Rather than viewing love as a way to avoid or overcome despair, it is a way to respond to it (Chabot 2008, 816). Responding with love does not mean repressing other emotional responses to alienation like fear, shame, anger, hatred, or despair. When we choose to love we choose to move against fear, against alienation and separation (hooks 2000, 93). Commitment to love requires courage and commitment at the face of inevitable feelings of hatred, anger, fear and despair (Chabot 2008, 813).

Secondly, love is a *choice* we make voluntarily. Like any emotion, is not just “there”, it does not simply exist but it is brought into existence by ‘doing’ it, by performing it (Ahmed 2004, Author2 2007). Love is not something which is handed to us from the outside nor is it something that exists inherently inside us. It is an attitude that we willingly cultivate toward others (Oliver 2001). Even when we choose to love, it is a decision that must be constantly reaffirmed (Oliver 2001, 220-221).
Love is not something we choose once and for all but something that requires a re-choosing every time we direct a response to the surroundings. It is a relationship that is not static and given, but it is constituted moment to moment by the responses we give.

Thirdly, love is a response. As we respond to others in various contexts, we also limit and open up possible subjectivities and possible selves for those others. If we accept and act upon the responsibility for our responses that play part in the ‘coming into being’ of others, then we are giving loving responses. When seen as a chosen response in this way, love is not understood as an emotion reserved to those close to us or as an abstract and ahistorical metaphor pursuing a false connection, but “the ethical agency that motivates a move toward others, across differences (Hinsdale 2012, 39, Oliver 2001).

Fourthly, love is essentially relational (Berlant 2011, 684; Morrison, Johnston and Longhurst 2012, 10; Jackson, 1993; Irigaray & Martin, 1996, Sedwick, 1999). It is not a subjective experience or a personal ambition, but a ‘loving dialogue and relationships with other people, other communities, other parts of the world, and other living creatures’ (Chabot 2008, 820). Love as relational means that it transcends the Self and means non-sovereignty. It is something potentially transformational that manifests differently between different individuals and socio-material surroundings, within different socio-political-historical-cultural-spatial contexts (Morrison et al 2012, 8).

Fifthly, love, like any emotion, is political, influenced by social, historical, and cultural contexts (Author2 2007), significant in the formation and maintenance of political and social identities, and in collective behavior. Love, argues Ahmed (2004), moves us ‘towards’ something and sticks people together; in the same manner, if love is seen as an attachment for one’s own kind, it may lead to hatred for others. Thereby it is crucial to acknowledge love as political while still striving towards a conceptualization that is not immediately associated with attachment and to a forming of an ‘us’. A politics of love entails the possibility of love as a site for collective becoming (Berlant & Hardt, 2011).

Finally, love is praxis. Love is as love does. It is both an intention and an action (hooks 2000, 4-5; Nash, 2013; Oliver 2001). While love cannot be reduced to any specific acts, Chabot (2008, 813) names some of the acts that characterize love: voluntary acts of care, responsibility, respect, knowledge. In addition, loving acts are characterized by the will to give. Giving is a productive act that enhances the joy, insight, and ability of the giver as well as the receiver (Chabot 2008, 812). The relational nature of love means that what constitute ‘loving acts’ depends on the other and the context.
We suggest that the intention to explicitly develop worldviews and practices of revolutionary love in schools and change practical ways of life contributes to revolutionary love. According to Chabot (2008, 813) developing this intention requires: discipline in the reflections and actions concerning loving relationships; concentration by slowing down and giving time and space to build meaningful ties; patience and rejecting the current obsession with immediate results and personal gratification; and, concern to develop loving ties. Developing the intention to love requires an analysis of why love thrives in some contexts and not others as well as exploring those teaching practices that develop one’s emotional power-to (Heaney, 2011) love. The present study, then, is an effort to show empirically the manifestation of revolutionary love in a teacher’s practices.

The context of the study

The reindeer herding village school that is the focus of this research was initially not a context in which love thrived. This was due to at least three overlapping challenging conditions. Firstly, there were powerful representations of north as the ‘internal other’ and of education as the savior - rural villages as dying, unsuccessful, un-progressed and socially excluded, villagers as uneducated, wild, uncivilized – which were hurtful to the villagers (Author1, Author1 & Author1 2012). Secondly, there were school micropolitics that contributed to maintaining the existing hierarchies between teachers and villagers, teachers and students, south-originated teachers and north-originated teachers (Author & Author 2012, Author1 2008, Author1 in review). Thirdly, there had been several human tragedies and social challenges in the village, such as untimely deaths, financial challenges1, substance abuse and suspected domestic violence (Author1 2011, Author1 2011). None of these issues were acknowledged in school, nor were the emotions related to them seen as a part of school. Since they were not acknowledged, they could not be responded to - not to mention there being a space in which loving responses could have been developed. At the same time, all these issues were brought into and performed in the school; and unacknowledged they contributed to the cycle of indignation.

There is a broader national context to the local representations of the village as the ‘inner other’. The lifestyle in Lappish rural villages, especially reindeer herding villages, is very different from Finnish urban cities. Often the differences in lifestyles are represented in ways that make the villagers seem stupid (Erikson 2010), laughable (Ridanpää 2007), unsuccessful (Ollila 2008) or socially excluded (Author1 2011). The teachers employed by the municipality tended to educate the village students towards southern cities’ idea of successful life: education, steady employment, infrastructure – and
thus, possibly unintentionally, away from the village and many villagers’ perception of good life: landfullness, community, nature bound livelihoods. The village school thus formed a kind of an “urban city” -bubble at the center of the village, and in the bubble there were different rules of conduct, different idea of success, and a different understanding of childhood and growing up (Author1 2008, Author1, in review). In other words, when students went to school they stepped from the center of their own lives to the margin of someone else’s’ lives. Students and parents opposed and resisted this kind of marginalization in their own village, but their arguments did not make sense within the national, the municipal and the school’s discourse (Author1, Other & Other2012). Since there is no ‘marker’ for the difference, Lappish villagers were seen as mainstream Finns, just not as ‘good’ ones, and this was the position from which the villagers tried to defend their rights.

The discourse was oppositional and conflictual. Parents and students shared many stories about how unfairly the children had been treated in school. In their interviews, teachers represented themselves as experts and professionals, the villagers as overly aggressive and non-educated feudal people:

*The lifestyle in that particular village is feudal. They still carry on with the old ways of living. (Education official)*

*It’s like the Wild West! It’s commonly known and referred to as such in the municipality. (Teacher interview, autumn)*

*We haven’t given them [villagers] 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 interview, group interview, spring)*

Among the teachers’ community there were indirect social punishments that ensured all teachers stayed in line. For example, there was a school rule that forbade students from leaving food on their plates. A teacher once questioned this rule among the teachers, being consequently excluded from the teachers’ chats for a couple of days, and receiving a public reprimand for leaving food on her own plate (Author1&Other2012).

In addition, in the recent decade the village had experienced human tragedies, a murder and a suicide, and there was some substance abuse and suspected family violence. There is no reason to assume that there were any more social problems in the village than anywhere else in Finland, but in a tight knit community where everyone knows everyone for several generations, each tragedy involves most
villagers one way or the other, and the entire village, including the school, is involved in overcoming the tragedies.

When the ethnographic field work began at the beginning of new semester the cycle of indignation was inflamed. All teachers and teachers’ assistants had left except for one teacher. The teachers had left partly due to the decline in the number of students, partly due to “wanting out of the village”. The number of students had dropped below 10. Some students had left in order to attend to a school in the next municipality, 50km away, or the next school in the same municipality, 80km away. Also, there was a temporary dip in the amount of school-aged children in the village. In the preliminary interviews and in the meetings with parents, students or the teacher, everyone expressed a similar anger for past things, fear for what would happen and frustrated powerlessness to influence it. The teacher was constantly afraid of the reactions of the villagers to everything she did, and the villagers were afraid that the teacher would harm their children. At the same time, everyone expressed their wish that everything would go well and their lack of trust in this happening.

The method: reflective and reflexive ethnography and case study

This article presents a case study that is a part of a larger project. As a part of this larger project Author1 conducted reflective and reflexive school ethnography in an elementary school above the Arctic Circle for 4 ½ months during one autumn semester. During this time the researcher, her partner and two children lived in the village. Reflectivity, here, refers to a form of research that fully acknowledges and utilizes a researcher’s subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research (Beach 2001, Davies 1999, Denzin & Lincoln 1998, Lumsden 2009, Mosselson 2010). Reflexivity, in turn, refers to critical reflection on the broader theoretical, cultural, political, ideological, and narrative contexts of the interaction with what is being researched (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009, 269).

The main data analysed for this article are Author1’s field journal and the teacher’s personal reflective journal1. The researcher’s field journal reports observatory, analytical, theoretical, reflective and reflexive notes of participant observation in the school for about 3-5 hours a day, and of 1-2 hours of discussions with the teacher daily. The teacher’s journal comprises two and half handwritten notebooks that were not originally intended for anyone else to read. This is immediately apparent in

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1 For readability, the excerpts have been edited without changing the meaning.
the extremely personal tone of the journal. The journal consists of reports of significant events, feelings, confessions, mindmaps, analysis of the situations and her plans for navigating the situations, including the researcher’s comments. To ensure ethical treatment of the personal journal, this article has been participant checked by the teacher. Author1 and the teacher worked so closely together during the semester that occasionally the journals overlap, describing the same emotions and thoughts. The frame for analysis is thus the relationship between the teacher and the researcher rather than either as an independent agent (Davies 1999, Duncombe & Jessop 2002). The teacher wished to remain anonymous.

As complementary data, the researcher’s field journal also has excessive notes of visiting all the students’ homes, of meeting all the parents at least twice (at the beginning and the end of the field work) and of producing in-depth data with the students and village children (reported elsewhere: Author1 2011a, 2011b, Author1 & Other 2011). In addition, the ethnographical data was complemented by a preliminary data that had been produced by the research group prior to the field work. The preliminary data consisted of shorter ethnographic visits, open and narrative interviews and group discussions with all members of school staff, narrative biographical interviews of some villagers, and small group discussions with students. The preliminary data was used to direct the researcher’s gaze to locally significant issues in the field.

The research questions for this article arose from the data and from theorizations of love. Specifically, both journals reported an intensive transformational process within the school that took place during the semester. This transformation was coupled with recurring notes about ‘love’ in the teacher’s journal. The teacher identified love as significant in the process in which she was engaging. For this article, both journals were analysed with the theory of revolutionary love in mind in order to understand the role of love in the transformation. To operationalize the concept of revolutionary love and trace in our data set the different manifestations of love, we distinguished between:

(a) explicit mentions of the teacher’s loving acts and responses; and

(b) implicit manifestations of love, evident in the unfolding of the encounters with children, parents, and colleagues.

Explicit mentions of love were the most easily traceable forms of love and involved manifestations of the teacher’s loving acts and responses at the lexical level. Also, as it is often the case with emotions, the teacher’s loving responses were more often manifested in her encounters with others in
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implicit manners such as facial expressions, body language, movement of hands, and other non-verbal sounds.

The focus questions that drive this paper, therefore, are: How was 'love' done in this teacher’s practices? What makes love 'revolutionary' in this case? In order to answer the first question, we ask from the data: In this particular relation, what were the loving responses and acts, and the reaffirming choices that were made in order to develop loving intentions in the context? We analyse both journals to identify these choices, responses and acts. For the second question “What makes love 'revolutionary' in this case?” we seek for correlations between the teacher’s process and theory of revolutionary love. We also assess the consequences of revolutionary love in this school and community by identifying changes in the village school towards loving intentions.

Findings

1. How was 'love' done in this teacher’s practices?

In this particular context and relation, the transforming loving acts and responses, and the reaffirming choices that the journals present, revolve around: voluntarily and visibly choosing to commit; accepting non-sovereignty; learning to listen in multiple ways; being constantly alert to respond in a loving way; providing positive feedback; and, accepting pain. With these, the teacher managed gradually to transform the local school culture of silencing locals, maintaining power hierarchies and unfaced pain towards a culture of loving responses.

Firstly, the teacher chose to stay voluntarily, knowing and having experienced the difficulties, and even though she was offered other positions as well. This choice, in the relationship with the villagers, counted as commitment, and as the first loving act to which the parents responded with love:

“We finally have a teacher who wants to be here. She chose us. She knows us and she’s with us. We appreciate that here” (interview with a father, 4.9.)

“Now we just need to make sure that she does not get tired. She’ll be alone. We’ll need to support her” (interview with a mother, 5.8.)
The lack of trust was still apparent. For example, when Author1 told the teacher the positive things the villagers are saying about her, she found it hard to believe. Within the existing lack of trust, fear and in the cycle of anger, the loving choice had to be constantly reaffirmed by further loving acts.

Secondly, the teacher accepted non-sovereignty as the basis of her relationship with the local community. She had a change of thinking that she called a ‘revelation’:

*I understand that last year I received a sense of security from the work community and ‘we are right’ attitude. [...] 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.* (Teacher’s journal, 25.8.)

Non-sovereignty as such does not entail love, but engaging with love requires accepting non-sovereignty. Especially in a context such as this school in which unequal power hierarchies had been maintained precisely by presenting school as a sovereign, giving this sovereignty up and submitting oneself to become a servant was a loving act. It signified transcending the self, moving towards the other and willingness to give.

Thirdly, in a context where the students and parents had been deprived a voice for several years, a powerful loving act was *listening*. The journals report the teacher’s painstaking effort in developing her skill to listen in multiple ways. For example, she took extra time to chat with and listen to each student privately to hear what they had to say. This was done during school time, for at least one hour per student. Also, when she met the parents, she focused on giving positive feedback and listening to their perspectives instead of telling them constantly what needs improvement in their children (as had been done previously). She wrote their words down in her journal, and what she did not understand she discussed with the researcher and wrote notes to advance her understanding. Furthermore, she translated listening into visible acts by making countless small changes: for example, she permitted students to play in the gym; she supported students in making a village newspaper; she asked the students for advice on her car (sincerely); she allowed students to choose where they work; she introduced new, more student centered pedagogies; she allowed the students to decorate and paint their own desks; she supported the parents in their struggle to keep the school open. When developing her skills to listen, she also focused on hearing things that were not immediately apparent:

*The teacher was watching as the students were preparing to go out for the recess. She was thinking aloud: “I wonder if I should come out too”. Students began shouting “no!*
no! no! You just stay in and drink your coffee!” The teacher thought for a while and decided to stay in. When we were having coffee and the students were out, she explained to me that she had not interpreted the shouting as a rejection or as students telling her not to do her work but that they ask her to trust them. In the previous years the teachers had only gone out if the students had done something bad, so teachers’ going out was, in the context, a sign of distrust. She said: “Now that things are better they didn’t want to feel untrusted anymore. They were really saying ‘Trust us!’ so I decided to express trust in a way that the ask.” (Researcher’s journal 1.10.)

All these small acts of listening were essentially implicit manifestations of loving responses that showed how she cared for her students and that she was willing to accommodate their needs accordingly.

Fourthly, thereby, the teacher was constantly alert to responding in loving ways. This was especially significant during moments in which the cycle of indignation was already inscribed in the situation. For example, this was evident in the teacher’s response to the so called “potato dispute”. Years ago, a previous teacher had forbidden the smashing of potatoes with fork (instead of cutting them with the fork and knife) during lunch in order to teach the students’ table manners. Students had refused to obey, and the situation had escalated and eventually most parents and the municipal official were involved. Still, the dispute was not resolved, teachers continuing to demand that potatoes not be smashed and students continuing to smash their potatoes. The potatoes became a symbol of resistance to strict authoritarian attitudes by teachers, and even students who had previously cut their potatoes were now smashing them, and teachers who previously had not cared were now forbidding them. The first day of school in the new study year, every child smashed their potatoes with their eyes on the teacher. The teacher explained later that she had felt that she should stop them, but she understood what they were defending and decided to let it be. Ignoring the potato smashing, despite its seeming passivity, was an alert and loving response precisely because it freed everyone from the battle that had been inscribed in mundane everyday act of smashing potatoes. After only three days the act of potato-smashing was deflated of its symbolic meaning – for the rest of the semester only one student continued smashing his potatoes, and he had done so since kindergarten.

Fifthly, since the teachers had seen and reflected the students in such a negative light for years, another successful loving act was giving positive feedback and valuing village children rather than seeing their locality as deficit. Whereas giving sincere positive feedback in any context can be considered to be a kind act, in this specific context it is considered to be loving because it responds
to an acute need experienced by the villagers. The teacher was not just giving positive feedback to students as a teacher, but she was giving positive feedback as response to a need she had identified by listening carefully. The students and parents had experienced years of put-downs, and in order for the relationship to heal, they now needed sincere valuing. In this way, the teacher invested in giving the villagers what they, in that particular relationship had signaled they needed. Some long journal entries focused explicitly on writing down good things about each student, to narrate them in a positive light. Also, she called parents whose children had received much negative feedback explicitly to give positive feedback. Concretely, for example, she took note and appreciated the students’ various practical skills and knowledge of their surroundings; she found ways to accommodate with the needs of reindeer herding; she began finding ways to incorporate local culture with the teaching methods and contents in school.

Finally, giving loving responses and constantly affirming the loving choices in this specific environment required accepting and enduring pain. As Chabot (2008, 813) argues, revolutionary love requires courage and commitment at the face of inevitable feelings of hatred, anger, fear and despair. Pain took place at least on three levels: firstly, the teacher had to inspect her own practices critically, which was, in her own words, “painful”, because she had to acknowledge her failures and inadequacies and the resulting shame. Much of her journal focuses on finding loving responses to the anger she experienced around herself and within herself. Secondly, the pain experienced by students could not be excluded from the school but the teacher had to develop ways to recognize, acknowledge and respond to it in loving ways. For example, the murder was still a tender topic in the village, and the children of those involved in the trauma were now in school, which lead to occasional break-outs that seemed absurd unless one knew the history. Instead of pursuing to prevent the breakouts and excluding the pain from school, the teacher developed response strategies to the pain: The teacher gave the students tasks that relaxed them (such as concretely useful handy work), acknowledging the heavy emotional strain under which they were. When needed, she invited the students one by one to her office to discuss and express emotions in a safe environment. She was not a psychologist nor did she pursue to behave as one, but she acknowledged the need for pain to be recognized - providing a safe space was the better alternative to pain breaking out uncontrollably. She also developed responses to each parent that were respectful and sensitive to their worries.

The third level on which pain had to be endured was the other teachers’ responses: as the teacher started changing the practices in the school and succeeding with the students, some other teachers in the municipality were hurtful towards her. This could be seen, for example, in random comments at
times disguised as jokes, for example a comment she heard in a teachers’ meeting: “[the teacher] will take care of the village, lonely bachelors and all”. In this particular school she was supported in failing but not in succeeding. The pain was experienced personally. Half way through the semester she wrote in her journal, with no apparent single trigger, after a lot of cumulating pain:

I am done. Tired. Something is gone. I’m frustrated, angry, sad, strengthless. I do not want to fight anymore. I want to quit. I don’t care anymore, whether I’m not good enough as I am. Why would anything mean anything? It has all been for nothing. It’s sad. All the work, the effort, the dreams of better things to come. It’s useless. Why even try? [...] I am sorry. Forgive me. I wasn’t up for this. I let everyone down. I’m sorry I couldn’t do it. Believe me I wanted to try. I wanted to make it. I wanted us to make it together. It’s just too difficult. I see before me nothing that would change anything. No road, just fog. [...] Love didn’t help, after all. (teacher’s journal 13.10.)

Thereby, when ‘doing’ love in education, the difficult emotions that had to be endured could be as fundamental as the despair of questioning of the entire process and the value of love itself. One aspect of ‘doing’ love in the teacher’s practices was, thereby, enduring disheartening moments, lack of faith in the process and lack of knowledge about the outcomes.

2. What makes love ’revolutionary’ in this case?

The teacher’s effort to develop practices that were in her students’ interest was ‘revolutionary’ within her context. The ‘revolution’ being pursued in this case was a grassroots-level revolution, and was carried out by enacting revolutionary love. What made the teacher’s love revolutionary in this case was: she was ‘feeling revolutionary’; she intentionally engaged in efforts of changing practical ways of life; and, she assumed her power-to love. Whereas the practices were not ‘revolutionary’ as such (by themselves)—indeed one could argue that they could be considered as good, professional practice—in this particular context they were revolutionary precisely because of their previous lack. In other words, there was a marked change in how things were conducted at this school and there were obvious consequences especially at the level of relationships, influencing constructively many other micro- and macro-level issues.

Firstly, the teacher was “feeling revolutionary” (Muñoz and Duggan, 2009) at the face of the challenges:

feeling that our current situation is not enough, that something is indeed missing and we cannot live without it. Feeling revolutionary opens up the space to imagine a collective
escape, an exodus, a ‘going-off script’ together… Practicing educated hope is the enactment of a critique function. It is not about announcing the ways things *ought* to be, but, instead, imagining what things *could* be. (p. 278)

The teacher was engaged in the transformation and this, in itself, was revolutionary in the context which perceived transformation as well as equality with suspicion. Early in their relationship, Author1 asked the teacher why she chose to remain in the village if it was so difficult there. The teacher responded: “*because there is also good. The hard is just a part of it. I feel that I can do something here*”. The teacher was not talking about ‘something to do’ in salvationist or romantic terms of ‘helping’, but more literally. The feeling that there is something one can *do*, willingness to engage in a process of realizing this potential is one form of feeling revolutionary. Feeling revolutionary may be as simple as choosing to stay in a tough situation and *do* something about it. In her journal the teacher focused on reflecting on her own actions and thinking rather than those of others. She was “doing something about it” by actively transforming herself and her own practices. There are a handful of brief comments in the margins of her journal that express a sense of responsibility for the actions of fellow teachers as well: “*They do not know what they are doing. How do I disarm them?*” (teacher’s journal, 1.9.). The spear of her revolutionary feeling was, however, directed at her own thinking and actions.

Secondly, the teacher intentionally engaged in a process of changing practical ways of life. She began to acknowledge the context-specific culture of the place in which she was teaching, and incorporated this acknowledgement into her teaching, for example, by beginning to find locally sensible methods and contents. Her work presents many of the requirements listed by Chabot (2008, 813). The teacher had and developed *concern* to grow loving ties. The teacher’s journal itself represented a *disciplined* effort to reflect and plan actions concerning loving relationships. She had begun to write a journal just for this purpose: to have a personal forum for developing her work. The teacher *concentrated* by explicitly making time and space to build meaningful ties. When a crisis occurred, she often re-planned lessons on the spot to be able to address them directly and immediately. Similarly, when the teacher felt that students were developing loving ties, she ensured that they have the time and space for it. From the Author1’s journal:

*When I arrived to school today, on my birthday, the students had planned a surprise for me. They tied my eyes, sat me down in the middle of the class, sang to me (they sang!) and gave me presents that they had made and prepared themselves, and a card they had done together. (The card was huge!) The teacher told me that the students had initiated*
and executed the idea without any help from her. Once she had seen how engaged they were, she had decided to cancel all lessons from the day to give them the space to do it. She had never seen them work so hard at giving something to someone, so she had decided that they need to be granted the space for it. (Researcher’s journal 11.9.)

These kinds of loving acts, that are necessary for love to thrive, are only possible if they are given space and time in the everyday. In addition, developing the loving intention required patience. At times the teacher talked about worrying that she will not be able to make it. Author1 worried too:

The teacher is in such turmoil and I feel she puts so much effort in changing it all now, and so much trust in my being here and helping her through it….What if the teacher gets tired of the change she is trying to make in the school culture, and turns back to the old ways of the school, with the threats, put downs, arrests, and talking down to parents and children? (5.10.)

Thirdly, all these link to assuming one’s emotional power—to love. As the above quotes and examples show, the local situation was difficult on many levels, and the teacher was at times disheartened. At the same time, despite the challenges, the teacher managed to assume and hold on to her power—to love. At the end of the previous section we provide a quote that describes the most difficult moment in the semester. The quote continues:

([…] Love didn’t help, after all.)

Is this really what I think? I don’t know. That’s how I feel. But maybe I could rationalize it and wobble on. If nothing matters, doesn’t that exactly liberate me to act as I see best?

She finds a way to “wobble on”, and to work with the disheartenedness by deciding that if nothing matters, then she can just as well continue to do what she sees best. That is power-to love which cannot be taken away from one who assumes it.

**The consequences of revolutionary love in this school**

The above excerpts from two diaries show how, assuming her own power-to love, the teacher transformed the school from a context in which love did not thrive into a context in which love was given space. In sum, she focused on developing the relationships with the villagers by listening to their needs and by giving what was needed, and she endured the pain that had to be endured. In this context these acts were both loving and transformative. They opened up spaces in the school in which
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love could thrive. When the students pursued to open up similar spaces the teacher respected these spaces, for example when showing trust in a way the students asked, by taking time out from regular schedules to allow students to surprise Author1 in a loving way or by laughing at the jokes they told to cheer her up. As the semester proceeded, the loving spaces increased and the environment was slowly turning into one in which love could thrive. The students had the idea, planned and prepared an activity day for the kindergarteners; they tried to communicate with the visiting teacher in positive ways; the violent break-outs lessened considerably, there were less and less student actions that took the meaning of opposition or resistance (because there was less to oppose). Instead, there was listening and positive actions, and the change in atmosphere was felt by everyone on school:

‘The teacher told me that the school’s cook had said to her that she was happy that there is no more shouting. We were both surprised the cook usually does not comment. The cook had commented that it used to be that someone was always shouting to the children, and that she would really like it if this warmth would continue’. (researcher’s journal, 15.10.)

The change seemed to be enduring. Author 1 inquired of the teacher and the parents how the situation developed after the semester:

‘I am still here in [research village] and Happier than ever before. [...] The collaboration with parents works and the children play well together, of course there are the normal rows but nothing special. [...] the future looks good. (the teacher, e-mail 12.1.2012)

‘[...] 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’ (e-mail 14.3.2012, a mother of three).

Although the macro-level and micro-level issues present in the village school were still equally painful and could not be “solved” or even fully understood, they could be lived with and responded to in ways that were loving rather than angry and that contributed to a real transformation rather than maintaining the problems. Taking a post-structuralist perspective to the society, society is not ‘out there’ but it is in the everyday of societal institutions, in what different actors do. Thereby, although the teacher could not change the history of oppression or the national discourses that legitimized it, or banish the difficult emotions, she could respond to these issues and emotions with love in her particular context. This is what revolutionary love is about: transforming power. The relationship
between the school and the villagers changed and became warmer. Although there are always challenges, the situation is no longer so inflamed and acutely unbearable.

**Discussions and implications**

The aim of this study was to show how revolutionary love was a viable response in a teacher’s pedagogical practices. In particular, it was suggested that love successfully replaced anger as the foundation of a teacher’s responses and acts in community encounters and that the teacher became ‘revolutionary’ by assuming her power-to love. This led to positive local outcomes: loving intentions became more pronounced and angry intentions less present not only in the teacher’s own actions but also in the relationship between the school staff and the community. Whereas the existing surrounding challenges did not change, the responses to the challenges became more loving. The teacher intentionally engaged in efforts of changing practical ways of life by developing a loving intention. In this particular temporal spatial location, loving intentions were developed by explicit voluntary commitment, accepting non-sovereignty, working towards listening, constant alertness to loving responses, positive feedback, accepting pain.

In light of these findings, an important question that concerns the implications of this study is the following: what can a teacher do to ‘learn’ about (revolutionary) love in order to initiate transformation in her own teaching practices and the community at large? We want to provide two suggestions that also make a modest contribution towards initiating a more serious discussion about the potential of revolutionary love in teaching.

First, we agree with Chabot (2008) that revolutionary love is much more than personal feelings; it requires active, labor-intensive relationships with ourselves and other people. There is often a misconception that the adjective ‘revolutionary’ necessarily implies explicit and radical acts of change such as bold activist interventions. Yet, what the present study shows, confirming Chabot’s analysis and others’ theories (e.g. Berlant & Hardt, 2011; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2000; Kincheloe, 2008), is that loving ideas and practices are motivated by simple, often explicit, acts of giving, caring, responsibility, patience, concern, and discipline. Creating revolutionary love in teaching, then, is not something exotic or romanticized but a long-term and painstaking effort. Revolutions do not always mean violent interventions; besides, love and violence are incompatible (Chabot, 2008, hooks, 2000).
Therefore, revolutionary love is not a utopian vision in teaching practice but a real challenge and commitment to the process of change, always in relation with others.

In light of the present case study, for example, developing revolutionary love required simultaneous dependence on the others, and independence of the others’ reactions. This implies that one has to commit wholeheartedly without any guarantee that the others will commit too, and one has to be able to maintain such commitment even when one cannot interpret similar commitment from the other, until there is enough basis for mutual dialogue. The idea of revolutionary love, then, has fundamental consequences for teaching practices because it dramatically changes the worldview of one’s teaching practices. For example, any struggle to overcome the cycle of indignation will have meaning if all of one’s acts in teaching apply revolutionary love in response to anger, resentment and frustration, both in the realm of personal and that of public sphere. The challenge is how to systematically translate anger and despair into love—not an easy task by any means.

The second suggestion we want to offer has to do with the implications of Chabot’s (2008) idea that we need to rethink our approach to power. In order to focus on the transforming power, and not on taking power, we draw from the observation that the power of emotion in schools does not only come from the exercise of ‘power-over’ in face-to-face relations (see Heaney 2011). Rather, the emotional force of practices is formed by the capacity for ‘power-to’, that is, the capability of technologies of power to foster certain emotional cultures as well as dispositions to act. Therefore, it is important to focus on the exploration of how emotions such as anger are implicated in everyday practices, speech and grassroots-level encounters. For example, in the present case study it is shown that anger is strongly present in community-school relations; when this teacher begins to replace discourses and practices of anger with those of love, a noticeable change happens. Revolutionary love then, evolves when this teacher learns to relate and work together with children and parents, while respecting their values, without imposing her will on them. This implies that the emphasis should be on transforming relations with others rather than imposing our values on them.

In our attempts to understand revolutionary love in teaching, it is important to remember being open about the different possibilities of enacting love. Intellectuals and revolutionary figures like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who have spoken about the power of love, urge us to constantly reflect on our human condition (Chabot, 2008) and contribute with modest everyday acts in changing the world. Eventually, it is teachers themselves who will give meaning to the idea of revolutionary love in teaching—by developing new relations that fight exclusion and all kinds of oppression.
REFERENCES


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1 We prefer not to use the term ‘poverty’ here, because the villagers would not say they are poor. They would say they experience occasional challenges in making ends meet. Poverty would define them, whereas ‘financial challenges’ describe their circumstances.