

School as a site of transformative adult learning: parents' experiences of Polish democratic schools

Katarzyna Gawlicz

To cite this article: Katarzyna Gawlicz (2021): School as a site of transformative adult learning: parents' experiences of Polish democratic schools, *Critical Studies in Education*, DOI: [10.1080/17508487.2021.1957964](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2021.1957964)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2021.1957964>



Published online: 09 Aug 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



School as a site of transformative adult learning: parents' experiences of Polish democratic schools

Katarzyna Gawlicz 

Department of Education, University of Lower Silesia, Wrocław, Poland

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore transformative learning processes of parents involved in informal, parent-established democratic schools, which are novel educational initiatives in Poland. The author argues that the distinctive educational ideology and the practice of such schools expose parents to new understandings of education, the child and the parent, which prompts their transformative learning. Drawing on the conceptual framework of transformative learning and practice-based learning theories, the author analyses interviews with parents to identify the trajectory of parental learning, the scope of their transformation and the factors that enhance or hinder it. Primarily concerning the respondents' personal identities and part-identities as parents, the transformation entails changes in their value systems, definitions of a good life, perceptions of the child and parenting practices. While its potential to instigate broader social change currently appears limited, parental transformative learning exemplifies significant emancipatory biographical praxis.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 June 2020

Accepted 15 July 2021

Keywords

transformative learning;
democratic schools; parental
development; parental
engagement in education

Introduction

Parenthood has been widely recognised to entail learning. 'If we were to look at the whole of contemporary culture in the West as a kind of school, and consider adult roles as the courses in which we are *enrolled*, most adults have a full and demanding schedule,' Kegan (2018, p. 33) observes, listing parenting as one of such courses. Parents become subject to pedagogicalisation practices (Popkewitz, 2003), and parental identities are those of life-long and lifewide learners (Mendel, 2016). With the family considered a learning environment both for children and for parents (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011), parental learning happens across multiple settings, such as home and various public spaces (Aarsand, 2014), and involves numerous experts, therein the popular media offering parent-coaching shows (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014). From the governmentality perspective, parenting is a field where technologies of power shape the model parent dedicated to continuous self-improvement and self-regulation (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014; Mendel, 2018). Adults', therein parents', learning is also studied in conjunction with (cognitive and self-) development, especially

when learning happens informally as adults endeavour to meaningfully relate their life experiences to their social roles, tasks and transitions (Merriam & Clark, 2006).

The school attended by their children is a specific setting that fosters parents' learning. Some alternative schooling approaches, e.g., Waldorf, explicitly highlight the school's role in teaching parents how to parent (Fox, 2015). Though offering families both formal and informal learning opportunities, Polish mainstream schools frequently squander their potential to be sites of complex, possibly empowering learning (Mendel, 2016, 2018) since their principle of 'educating the uneducated' makes them patronisingly pedagogical parents (Mendel, 2016, pp. 159–160). In terms of the school–family partnership, parental learning in school settings is treated rather instrumentally, as improving parents' skills is prompted by their role in enhancing children's educational success (Epstein, 2010; Janssen & Vandebroek, 2018). Such partnerships may become tools for moulding parents, especially those allegedly deficient (e.g., immigrant, low-educated or socioeconomically disadvantaged ones), into desirable subjects that meet the standards of the 'good parent' properly supportive of their children (Dahlstedt, 2009; Janssen & Vandebroek, 2018; Popkewitz, 2003). However, learning initiated by the school's governing practices has also been interpreted as empowering parents and strengthening their identities since parents have been found to 'govern being governed and . . . conduct being conducted' (Mendel, 2018, p. 108). Finally, parental engagement in roles such as leaders of free schools (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017) or school founders and managers through formal bodies (Peterson, 1993) can be argued to open up possibilities of meaningful, development-promoting learning.

This paper contributes to scholarship on parents' learning in and through interactions with the school by examining the experiences of parents involved in so-called *democratic schools*, alternative education initiatives recently launched in Poland. Since the educational ideology and resultant practices of democratic schools remarkably differ from those of conventional schooling institutions, individuals who become involved with the former encounter new understandings of education, the child and the parent. I argue that the parents' specific experiences with democratic education trigger learning processes that instigate the parents' transformation. I explore these experiences within the framework of transformative learning theory, which is rarely used to study parental learning in the context of their children's – rather than their own – schooling. Having outlined my methodological and theoretical framework in the following section, I proceed to depict the parents' transformative learning trajectory in democratic-school settings, whereby I identify the factors that enhance or inhibit this process and reflect on the characteristics and scope of parental transformation.

Researching Polish democratic schools: the methodological and theoretical framework

Democratic schools are a recent educational development in Poland. The first four schools opened in 2013, and their number has risen to approximately thirty since then. Founded by parents who, dissatisfied with the mainstream education system, take their children out of school and establish alternative educational collectives, democratic schools represent a practical application of parentocracy (Brown, 1994). They are usually not accredited as schools, do not receive state funding and are entirely fee-based. Their

students are registered in formal schools as receiving out-of-school education and take annual examinations to prove that they have achieved the learning outcomes stipulated by the national curriculum.

The educational ideology of democratic schools draws on progressivism and child-centred approaches to education, with their tenets of readiness, choice, needs, play and discovery (Burman, 2017, p. 252). They are inspired by the frameworks of unschooling (Hartkamp, 2016; Holt, 2004; Stern, 2013) and radical free schooling (Hope, 2019), exemplified by Summerhill, Sudbury Valley and Sands Schools. While some of them do not adopt the ‘democratic’ label, they tend to endorse the principles and values formulated by the European Democratic Education Community (of which some are official members): equality, shared responsibility, respect, self-directed learning and collective decision-making (EUDEC, n.d.).

As parent-founded and managed, democratic schools are characterised by a considerable parental involvement (Kłosińska, 2019; Wiatr, 2020). The parents typically exhibit thoughtful and engaged parenthood (Kłosińska, 2019; Pomianowska & Stańczyk, 2017), with their parental identities fashioned as reflexive projects characteristic of high modernity (Giddens, 1991). The conceptual frameworks they cite as formative of their understanding of their role foreground attachment and unconditional parenting (Kohn, 2006), nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2003) and respect and dignity in the child-parent relationship (Juil, 2011).

This paper builds on the data generated in a research project which studied eight democratic schools between 2015 and 2019. The fieldwork was driven by questions about the genesis of the schools, their everyday operations and their position and role in the Polish education system. Participant observation, interviews and the analysis of school documentation and media coverage were used as methods to create data for a multi-faceted depiction of the settings and practices observed and the identification of meanings ascribed to them by the school members (Flick, 2007).

My argument is based on interviews with forty respondents involved with democratic schools in various capacities – as members of start-up groups, parents of students and/or staff members.¹ The self-recruited respondents were predominantly women, reflecting a typical pattern of parental involvement in Polish educational institutions (therein democratic schools), and were in their thirties and forties. They represented a range of occupations (educators, entrepreneurs, personal development services providers, IT specialists, art and creative industry professionals and company employees), and their financial statuses varied, but they all enjoyed economic stability and fell within the lower-to-upper middle class.

The individual or occasional small group interviews were carried out by one or two researchers and took from forty-five minutes to two hours. Since the objective of the interviews was to capture the parents’ views on the formation and functioning of democratic schools and their motivation to embrace this educational approach, the semi-structured interview protocol included a limited number of open-ended questions that enabled the participants to act as the co-constructors of data. The participants were invited to reflect on their own educational biographies and their children’s educational experiences prior to and after joining a democratic school and to discuss their perceptions of and their roles in the schools. Given the novelty of democratic schools and the parents’ assumed superior experiential knowledge of them, the interviewers were open to

new themes brought in by the participants. The parents' development through democratic education was one of such themes. Questions about parental learning were not part of the original protocol; rather, these issues were spontaneously raised by the participants.

The first cycle of inductive analysis highlighted that parental learning and development in the school context was emphasised in 36 out of 45 parent narratives. This observation called for modifying the research procedure, that is, for a new theoretical framework to grasp and conceptualise the themes. Because the interviewees repeatedly spoke about 'change,' 'development,' 'learning,' 'being in a process' or 'becoming a new person,' I applied transformative learning theories – as proposed by Mezirow (1978, 1991, 2012) and developed by Mälkki (2011) and Illeris (2014) – as a lens to conceptualise their experiences. Mezirow (1978, 1991, 2012) defines transformative learning as a process in which reflection on one's assumptions effects change in one's problematic frames of reference (or meaning perspectives), making them more inclusive, discriminating and self-reflective. This helps individuals 'gain greater control over [their] lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers' (Mezirow, 2012, p. 76). In Mezirow's formulation, transformation unfolds in phases: a disorienting dilemma triggers a critical examination of the assumptions behind one's meaning perspectives, which is followed by exploring possibilities of new roles, trying them out, gradually growing competent in them and eventually arriving at a changed self-concept (Mezirow, 1991). Building on Mezirow's theory, Mälkki's (2011) theoretical perspective accounts for the emotional dimension of critical reflection on the assumptions underpinning meaning perspectives. Illeris (2014) extends Mezirow's theory by linking transformative learning to 'change in the identity of the learner' (p. 40) across its dimensions: cognitive, emotional, social and societal. Comprehensively understood, identity denotes both the central or personal identity, which depicts the individual as a whole, and part-identities, including the family identity, which is particularly relevant to my study.

Given the importance of the democratic school *community* as the site of parental learning, I additionally build on Wenger's (1998) conceptualisation of learning as situated in communities of practice.² Wenger views learning as an inherently social and experiential endeavour concomitant with an individual's participation in multiple practices. Thus-conceived, learning entails the acquisition of skills and, more fundamentally, the transformation of the practitioner's identity.

These learning theories informed my new research questions addressing the core meanings constructed by participants: How does the encounter with educational practice in democratic schools facilitate parents' transformative learning?, and What are the specificities and outcomes of parents' transformative learning process? The interview transcripts went through a cycle of analysis to recognise further themes constructed and shared by the participants (e.g., the nature of the changes the parents experienced, the content of their learning and the challenges encountered therein). Through such process, the trajectory of parental transformative learning was mapped, complete with its typical features and the factors that enhanced or hindered it. Crucially, the parents themselves did not report their experiences as instances of transformative learning. This conceptualisation stemmed from the theoretically underpinned analytical-inductive procedure.

The trajectory of parental transformative learning in democratic schools

‘Process,’ ‘change’ and ‘development’ are terms that stand out in the parents’ narratives about their experience of democratic schools. ‘We are in a process’ is commonly repeated by the adults, who recognise that ‘if you choose a school like this, changes are one thing that you choose . . . People go through very deep processes here’ (P26). While the exact ways in which these processes unfold differ depending on the parents’ individual experiences, a typical learning trajectory is inferable from the analysis of the interview transcripts.

Before entering the school: preparing the ground for change

In Mezirow’s (1978, 1991, 2012) account, perspective transformation is triggered by a ‘disorienting dilemma’ which may result from any event that challenges one’s established presuppositions and produces an incremental or abrupt change. For the democratic-school parents, such events may precede joining the school and are related to their parenting practices. Two distinct trajectories can be distinguished in this respect. For most participants, parenting initiates a personal development process that fosters the decision to join a democratic school:

It all started with a baby wrap sling. I met groups of mums carrying their children in slings, I got interested in environmental issues and stuff like that, and at some point I joined an online sling forum. And there . . . discussions started about various alternative educational methods, about home schooling, and then there were posts about democratic education, and a piece of news popped up [saying] that a whole school was being established. (P/E2)

Finding out about alternative lifestyles, including child-rearing practices, spurs the parents to engage in a learning process fuelling their cognitive and self-development (Merriam & Clark, 2006). As they realise that, in order to develop well, children need space for autonomous activity, decision-making, risk-taking and making mistakes, the parents feel they must reconsider their views on what proper parenting is and change their practices. They either go through this process on an individual basis, using online resources, books and workshops, or join in collective pursuits, such as face-to-face or online support and study groups. As a result, they realise that ‘given our values . . . the regular school doesn’t match them at all’ (P1) and start exploring alternative options. Finally, they either enrol at an existing democratic school or team up with other like-minded people to establish an educational setting that embodies their educational ideals. Mezirow (2012) highlights the importance of cultural orientations that are integrated in one’s frames of reference and shape the possibility for transformative learning. Such cultural orientations crucially include modern parenting practices influenced by the ideologies that make parents feel responsible for their children’s future wellbeing and urge them to take their parenting seriously.³

Other parents follow a path that takes them through a conventional educational institution, where their children struggle with difficulties (loss of passions, boredom, bullying, etc.). Rather than having ideological reasons for choosing a democratic school, these parents see it as ‘the last resort’ (P6):

We decided: this is my child, he can’t be unhappy. All this happened by chance . . . I had nothing to do with the idea of the democratic school; I didn’t know at all what it was, why it existed and so on. . . . I wanted the peace of mind, I wanted him to be at ease. (P6)

Dissatisfaction with the (pre)schools of their offspring and concern about their wellbeing prompt these parents to look for more beneficial alternatives. At this point, they do not necessarily rethink and modify their beliefs and practices beyond having already learned to take their parental roles and responsibilities seriously. Nonetheless, the experience of the child's difficulties at a regular school and the decision to join a democratic school can in retrospect be regarded as catalysts of the parents' transformative learning, which is all the more intense for coming unanticipated.

Constant learning and unlearning in confrontation with the democratic-education reality

The parents' transformative learning intensifies on joining the school. Rather than a linear progression, it entails going through loops as new disorienting dilemmas emerge and threaten to unsettle the parents' meaning perspectives. These are experienced both by the parents who considered the democratic school 'the last resort' and by those who made a principled decision. As the parents become aware of the specificity of democratic education and, against this backdrop, of their own values, attitudes and habitual responses, they feel compelled to reconsider their identities as parents and individuals.

Whether the parents are part of the start-up group or join an already existing school, they must develop an experiential knowledge of democratic education. They usually have some understanding of what it is and what it entails for children and adults, but this does not preclude discrepancies between their ideas and the lived reality:

So we met with [an educator], and she told us about the school, so we had some image of it. But that image was completely different from what the reality was. . . . And it was shocking. . . . We theoretically knew what self-esteem, responsibility, inner-directedness and decision-making meant, but this was the first time that we'd eventually encountered them first-hand. (P3)

Some parents find it challenging to accept that what counts as their child's progress in the democratic school would not be recognised as such at a mainstream educational facility. One parent's words clearly imply the trajectory of change she is experiencing:

I am in the phase of coming to accept that I say: I'm Dawid's mum. Dawid is eight, and he can't read and write. And this is difficult for us. (P13)

Such processes are particularly taxing for parents whose children first attended a conventional school and, having entered a democratic school, go through a period labelled as 'detox' or 'freedom shock' (Hecht, 2012; see also Hope, 2019). When an 'unproblematic child suddenly starts to cause problems' (E17), the parents not only have to face up to the practical application of democratic-education principles but also find their sense of parental competency undermined. With a rebelling child at home, the stability of their family life where values and positions were clearly established is shaken. The parents' meaning perspectives on what being a good mother/father entails fail to help them make sense of the situation that changed as their child's behaviour changed.

The challenges besetting the parents are bound up with their experience of what they call 'the system.' In Polish democratic-school discourse, 'the system' denotes the state-mandated and supervised system of education, which is viewed as an instrument for socialising and shaping children into future citizens, whereby they are deprived of

autonomy, voice and influence. As they engage in democratic education, the parents become aware how far they themselves are products of ‘the system’ through their own family and school experiences. They may consciously resolve to reject it (as evidenced in having their child enrolled at a democratic school), but it continues to inform their thinking. Consistently with Mezirow’s (1978) original concept of transformative learning, the parents realise ‘how [they] are caught in [their] own history and are reliving it’ (p. 101) or, as one mother puts it, how ‘these old things sometimes come up, because I’ve got it [“the system”] on my shoulders, I carry it around’ (P28). Consequently, once in a democratic school, they are tormented by contradictory feelings, as aptly summarised by a leader:

I’d like my child to be happy, to be able to choose, to be free. But I’m not really able to give her this freedom, because I’d have to give up on some rules, and let her go free and trust her. (P/L2)

The parents gradually develop a critical awareness of their assumptions and start revising the meaning perspectives that inform their understanding of school, learning, parental responsibility and children’s wellbeing (Mezirow, 1978). One mother succinctly describes this process, often dubbed ‘unlearning,’ ‘letting go’ or ‘putting things straight’:

We have to keep unlearning . . . we all have to unlearn the system kind of thinking, because we’re all children of systemic schools. . . . If we’ve decided on this kind of education, we’ve got to turn the system kind of thinking off, and this is very difficult, because we’re all children of the system. (P12)

While the need to unlearn is most pressing in the wake of joining a democratic school, it re-emerges at critical moments, such as children transitioning from one educational level to another and becoming more independent with age. Simultaneously, the parents’ reflection on their children’s experience of democratic education facilitates their own unlearning process. Children’s increased happiness, enthusiasm and commitment to studying issues of their interest, improved social skills and/or successfully passed exams gradually nurture the parents’ trust in the democratic schooling model and alleviate their anxiety of failing as supportive parents.

Transforming individual and parental identities: confronting the past, discovering one’s real self and developing trust in the child

To demonstrate the transformative character of the respondents’ learning, I focus on how they themselves identify the changing dimensions of their identities. The parents’ narratives recount a dual transformation. First, transformation is a distinct achievement (the parents discern and report how they have changed as a result of their involvement in democratic education); second, transformation is an open-ended project in which the parents continuously engage, consistently with the concept of the development of the postmodern self (Merriam & Clark, 2006) and the understanding of identity as ‘a constant becoming’ (Wenger, 1998, pp. 153–154) in practice-based learning theories.

Illeris’s (2014) conceptualisation of transformative learning as productive of learners’ identities helps distinguish two interrelated aspects of parents’ transformation: of their central identities as individuals and of their part-identities as parents. Reflecting back on their democratic-school experience, some parents describe it as a process that profoundly

transformed their self-perceptions. For some, the first step in this process entailed reconsidering their own educational biographies and becoming aware of the damage their own schooling had caused: '[The democratic school] made me realise how deeply traumatised I'd got by my own school' (P8), one mother observes. Another respondent, whose musical talents went unnoticed at school, ponders: 'I don't know where I'd be if I'd been given a chance to learn differently' (P23). When the parents see what democratic education is and how it affects their children, they recognise the previously hidden dimensions of their own personal identities and begin to wonder how their schooling impacted them and who they could have been had it been different.

Further, the parents, especially those who are educators at democratic schools, feel compelled to ask themselves who they really are and what their value system is. Close and intense interactions with children, who push them to face unwanted aspects of themselves, prompt the parents to reflect on and redefine their identities:

I think that this is a place where we really confront ourselves. Our pettiness, our dark sides ... It's difficult sometimes, or I'd even say that it's quite often difficult, but it's incredible that it happens. I'm definitely not the same person I used to be a year or a year and a half ago. (P/E5)

I've changed so much because of the school. ... Briefly, I've dissolved a kind of skeleton I had for years without being aware of it. Well, I was very much a system person, and I'll probably remain so till the end of my days, because you can't change everything. But I've started to see so much. Under [the school's] influence I've become a kind of inner rebel, which I really missed. And it's helped me, for instance, with my relationships at work [outside the school]. ... And I've defined myself anew, so to speak. (P/E1)

As the narratives suggest, the parents identify their personal development with becoming more authentic through dropping constraints that have prevented them from facing the truth about themselves. This enables them to redefine their identities and become new people. As the second excerpt indicates, the school experience may impact the individuals' involvement in other practices and thus various aspects of their identities.

In the narratives of the respondents who experience the school primarily as parents, the focus is on the transformation of their family identities and the way they engage in parenting practices. The principles of democratic education, including self-directed learning, may disrupt the convictions and behaviour patterns of individuals who take their parental identity seriously. One father describes the experience as follows:

I understood ... that if the child was to be self-directed, that is, to have a sense of self-worth, they needed to be involved in a process where we intervened as little as possible, so here is the rule of not interfering with the child's development. And this was really difficult for us to accept, because our parental interventionism comes from our purest love. We do it in the child's best interest. (P3)

Democratic education makes parents question such beliefs, especially as they discover that their children are unique, distinct and ultimately unknowable to them. The same father continues:

For me, it was difficult to accept that my child was not myself. ... And I've no knowledge, no competence, no skills to offer anything to her, because, as a matter of fact, I've no idea what it could be. (P3)

As a result of the parents' critical reflection on the meaning perspectives that have guided their understanding of their role, they begin to search for alternative expressions of their 'purest love' for their children. They claim to have ultimately moved from being controlling parents to being parents who accompany and support children without orchestrating their lives in detail. This entails relinquishing the urge to provide children with opportunities commonly believed to promote their future educational and professional success. Stepping back in this way proves particularly challenging to some well-educated parents:

No more private English lessons, because I don't even know if he'd at all like to learn, or not. Oh my God, he doesn't learn at all, or maybe he does, but who knows what he does there. Does he even read anything? Grammar, spelling, multiplication tables . . . It took me half a year before I was able to let go of it. (P1)

Related to this is the inevitable surrender of the sense of comfort which, as another mother observes, stems from the certainty that one has arranged plenty of opportunities for one's child and will not be accused of failure to promote their development. Furthermore, the parents learn to be open to and supportive of any (career) choices their children (will) independently make, instead of planning or even imagining a future for them. 'I'm okay with her doing whatever she wants to, as long as she's happy' (P/E7) is a common answer to questions about the parents' ideas of their children's future lives. This approval is associated with another trait of the transformed parental identity, i.e. a profound trust in the child's responsibility, competency and ability to make good decisions. The parents stop fearing that, unless closely watched and directed, their children will not learn anything and come to appreciate their children for who they are. One mother describes her son as 'really so intelligent . . . such a great person [who is] so wonderful to be around,' from whom she can 'learn so much' (P1). Another admits that she had 'trust in the idea, in the person [managing the school], but I didn't fully trust my child. . . . And now I've passed the baton to my child. And this is what the change was about' (P10). As the parents learn to see their children as smart and dependable, while simultaneously unknowable and distinct, they relinquish their position of an ultimate authority and redefine their parental responsibility for their children's wellbeing.

The characteristics of parental transformative learning

Parental transformative learning, whose trajectory was discussed above, has several distinctive features which correspond to the general characteristics of transformative learning but reflect its embedment in democratic-education (and school) communities. They fall into three categories: transformative learning as an emotionally charged, collective and therapy-like process.

The emotional charge

Transformative learning theorists emphasise that transformative learning can be 'an intensely threatening emotional experience' (Mezirow, 2012, p. 75). Given the novelty of democratic education in Poland, its utter difference from the conventional schooling system and the parents' sense of responsibility for their children's future, the families who enter democratic schools must cope with considerable uncertainty and anxiety. The

vocabulary the parents use to describe the process – such as confrontation (with dark sides), difficulty, pain or sickness – conveys its perplexing character. Their narratives repeatedly evoke fears, doubts and questions that haunt them particularly if the decision to join the school was not thoroughly thought-out, or if parents cherish the principles of traditional schooling. The parents' beliefs about what constitutes educational success that result from their socialisation within 'the system' (e.g., passing exams, continuing education in reputed schools and having a work career in later life) prove incompatible with the newly entered educational model. Breeding a disorienting dilemma in the parents, this dissonance triggers distress, which can be exacerbated by the disapproval of relatives or acquaintances, by criticism of children's development from authority figures (such as speech therapists or psychologists) or by what some respondents interpret as the school's failure to create conditions for their children to thrive. This stirs apprehensions about the approach of democratic schools to learning and teaching and makes parents anxious that they do their children more harm than good.

Mälkki (2011) formulates the concept of edge emotions to convey 'unpleasant feelings that emerge . . . when our meaning perspectives become questioned' (p. 30) People tend to avoid such feelings by reinterpreting new situations so as to retain their current meaning perspectives intact. Consequently, people remain within their comfort zones, which provide them with balance and safety. However, if they decide to embrace edge emotions as a signal that their perspectives have become problematic and need revision, they stand a chance of learning and transforming (Mälkki, 2011). A parent-educator vividly describes this process:

So, the process of shells falling off . . . I'm reading the Elmer the Elephant story to the kids now. And there's this Elmer the Elephant whom a snake had smeared in mud, and he was sick, he pretended to be sick. And then the mud fell off his skin, and he was healthy again, because he was all colourful, right. So this is the case with me. When the mud fell off, I regained colours. . . . But it was painful because it was, you know, the death of the old shell.
(P/E1)

The parents' transformation becomes possible if and when they face edge emotions, instead of avoiding them. If not handled effectively, edge emotions may hamper the parents' development. Rather than prompting them to critically reconsider their meaning perspectives and to interrogate the foundations of the conventional education system, their anxiety may translate into pressuring their children all the more to succeed in out-of-schooling, i.e. to pass yearly examinations, thus averting the danger of a return to 'the system.' In extreme cases, the gulf between the principles of democratic education and the parents' perspectives may appear so vast that it eventually leads them to reject the new educational approach and leave the school.

Parental learning in communities of practice

As the novelty and uncertainty intrinsic to democratic schools call for a sustained effort to reassure oneself about the rightness of shifting from conventional to alternative schooling, immersion in a community of like-minded people is critically important. Social by nature (Mezirow, 1991), transformative learning in the democratic-education environment is based on the parents' involvement in various communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Before joining the school, they engage in parenting as a large-scale

practice (see Hodge, 2014) shaped by modern parenting ideologies and join virtual and physical communities of (predominantly) mothers learning and testing new practices. Subsequently, democratic education is another large-scale practice, with individual schools as its specific sites. Learning is intrinsic to participation in any community of practice, and, as I suggest, it has a transformative quality in democratic schools. This may explain the sense of the inevitability of learning and transformation expressed by several interviewees:

And so, everyone has to . . . if they are in the community, they must develop. . . . As if the community . . . required everyone to develop. . . . It can be seen in so many people that it's just crazy. . . . It's a bit magical. (P/E3)

This magic of inevitable development materialises in specific practices that make the democratic-education community – from intra-school groups to global networks – complete machinery that promotes parental transformative learning. The community supports parents as they embark on the transformative path, which helps them realise that others have gone through similar processes and eases the emotional burdens discussed above. It also furnishes them with models of transformed parenting practices, skills and knowledge to act on their reflexive insights (Mezirow, 1991). Specifically, schools organise support and study groups, invite experts and hold seminars and workshops. They encourage ‘inter-family support,’ which enables the parents to seek each other’s assistance. A mother involved in this practice explains: ‘I always say: Listen, if there’s something you don’t know, you are afraid of, you fear or worry about, just call me. It’s individual support’ (P1). National and international gatherings of the democratic education community offer a platform for meeting individuals who cherish similar values, attitudes, perceptions and lifestyles. The community in its various forms creates a supportive space in which to safely try out and acquire confidence in new parenting models and to eventually reconstruct one’s central and parental identities. Given the dedication of democratic schools to developing emotional intelligence (requisite for transformative learning, according to Mezirow, 2012) and their proclivity for experimenting with new ideas, they indeed provide ‘a good context to explore radically new insights’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 214), which further invigorates the parents’ transformative learning.

While Mezirow (2012) underscores ‘the crucial role of supportive relationships and a supportive environment’ (p. 88) in transformative learning, there are also potential risks to communities such as democratic schools. Mälkki (2011, see also Hoggan et al., 2017) proposes that collective comfort zones, where the shared lines of thinking emerge and are normalised, strengthen group unity but may simultaneously prevent questioning group assumptions. With the insistence on personal development and the revision of the ‘system’ mindset as necessary for integration within the democratic school community, the community may become an instrument of ideological formation, instilling specific perceptions of education and child-adult relationships in the participants, rather than a site of perspective transformation. However, the characteristics of the schools as *communities of practice* – e.g., a regular influx of new participants, who bring in ‘a wisdom of peripherality’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 216), and interactions with other practices – appear to prevent their visions from being petrified and rigidly imposed on the participants. Indeed, this is evinced by the reflexive and critical edge in the parents’ discussion

of their learning experiences. However, the potential tension between perspective transformation and the adoption of ready-made perspectives in settings based on principled visions, such as democratic schools, should be further explored.

The therapy-like quality of transformative learning

The parents' narratives suggest that their transformation process resembles psychotherapy. The link between transformative learning and psychotherapy is articulated by Mezirow (2012), who includes feelings and interpersonal relations among the objects of subjective reframing through which transformative learning occurs, and claims that transformative learning differs from therapy in 'its focus . . . on an infinitely wider range of concepts' (p. 87). Mälkki and Green (2014) state that the difference between the two lies 'in degrees rather than in kind' (p. 20), and Edwards and Walker (2019) list similarities between transformative learning and narrative therapy and argue for the usefulness of the latter in sparking critical reflection.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009, pp. 8–9) observe the wide dissemination of 'therapeutic orthodoxies,' which presume that everybody is affected by emotional childhood experiences but can reconnect with their 'real' self and enhance their self-awareness through professional help. As a result, a 'therapeutic ethos' – i.e. 'the use of therapeutic techniques in areas of life that were once seen as private' (Ecclestone, 2004, p. 119) – permeates the education system today. Whether or not this assessment is endorsed (see Hyland, 2009, for a critique), the therapeutic ethos undeniably pervades the practice of democratic schools and the parents' narratives. A school leader explicitly describes her institution as 'a therapeutic place of sorts' (L2), and another attributes the emergence of democratic schools to the 'normativity of therapy' (P/L1). One of the initiators of Polish democratic education claims that 'when our goal is to support children's development, we should develop ourselves' (Pomianowska & Stańczyk, 2017, p. 341). A parent-leader concurs: 'for us to be able to do this [work at and run democratic schools], we should first go through a serious therapy to heal our various wounds and only then join the project,' and observes that 'parents and the staff are well trained in personal development and self-therapies' (P/L5). Indeed, several staff members and parents mentioned individual or family psychotherapy, self-development workshops or interpersonal skills training they had done, while some mothers themselves worked as psychologists and psychotherapists. All schools implemented various forms of therapeutic work with children and adults, including systematic counselling by a Gestalt therapist. At the same time, both the staff and parents were expected to 'have worked through a lot of personal issues' (P/L2) outside the school and 'stand firmly on their feet, instead of using the school to solve their problems' (P/L7). As a parent puts it,

Part of your role as a parent is to take care of yourself and make yourself a person who is happy, fulfilled, sincere, honest to yourself, because this is the best example for your child.
(P2)

The parents address their personal development process and its outcomes in therapeutic terms, such as reassessing their life experiences, being in a process, confronting themselves, acquiring self-awareness, maturing or healing. The commonly shared belief in the expediency of working through personality issues, regular staff supervision by a psychologist

and the provision of psychological assistance to parents suggest that therapeutic measures are pervasive in democratic schools as an intrinsic dimension of their *modus operandi*. My empirical data do not warrant a more thorough exploration, which the relationship between transformative learning and therapy in democratic schools certainly deserves.

Conclusion

The children's transformation as a result of schooling tends to be taken for granted. What I have sought to show in this paper is that parents also change through the experience of their children's schooling. On encountering an educational approach that veers from dominant parenting ideologies and socialisation-inculcated beliefs about the child, education and parental roles, parents are pushed to confront, critically reappraise and modify their assumptions and to eventually transform their personal and parental identities and practices. The fact that it is in democratic schools that such transformations take place showcases the potential of these settings for recasting the lives not only of students but also of adults variously associated with them.

The factors that appear to facilitate the transformative learning process primarily include embedment in the community of practice, be it the extended democratic education community or communities of individual schools. Secondly, the parents whose children join democratic schools often come prepared for, or even already experienced in, emotional self-work. The prior experience of psychotherapy or of parental support and study groups makes them receptive to the idea of personal transformation, although their narratives suggest that its intensity and scope exceeded their anticipations. Furthermore, the parental profile appears to promote or hinder such a transformation, as prior parenting experiences intersect with the parents' class position and related educational styles. A mother may change her parenting practices and stop pushing her son to study English, but she will travel abroad with him and support him when he develops his YouTube channel documenting the journey. Parents may find it easier to entrust children with control over their own learning if their development is promoted by the favourable conditions at school and in family. The abdication of parental authority appears less likely, though, when access to formal and informal educational resources is limited while education is considered a gateway to social advancement. Parental identity transformation and the related models of child-rearing may therefore be contingent on individuals' social and class background (see Lareau, 2011).

This begs the question about the extent of parental transformation. Mezirow (2012) argues for both individual and social implications of transformative learning, which he considers instrumental in promoting participatory democracy, and Kloubert (2020) asserts in her analysis of transformative learning in post-totalitarian societies that 'perspective transformation on an individual level can . . . foster social change' (p. 10). From this point of view, the parents' evident individual transformation may also be construed as potentially furthering broader change. The parents contest the standardisation- and accountability-based neoliberal model of schooling and reject the notion that the good life is premised on what is deemed good education (graduating with good grades from a prestigious school) and a well-paid job (in a corporation, some of them would add). This advances critical debates on schooling models. By rebuffing their role as authority figures coercing children to pursue such achievements, they contribute to the remodelling of parenting practices, whereby age-

based power relations are redrawn, and the middle-class version of helicopter parenting with its ambition to sculpt children's lives is challenged (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011; Lareau, 2011). While the parents' interviews exude hope that changes promoted by democratic education (both in children and in adults) will augment societal renewal, the possible connection between parents' individual perspective transformation and broader social change calls for further systematic research. At this point, parents' transformative learning instigated by their experience of democratic schools merits being recognised as a form of what Hoggan et al. (2017) call emancipatory biographical praxis. The authors distinguish it from praxis breeding institutional and social change, but they underscore its contribution to freedom and human thriving and its heightened importance in late modernity. Even if the parents' desire to, as they phrase it, 'be the change we would like to see in the world' can only effect limited broader changes, their personal transformation resulting from their learning process in the democratic-education (and school) community should not be underrated.

Notes

1. These roles are reflected in the respondent codes: 'P' indicates parents, 'E' – educators (staff members), 'L' – leaders, 'P/E' – parents who are staff members and 'P/L' – parents who are leaders. In total, eighty adults were interviewed. This article relies on the interviews which most prominently featured the themes of parental development and learning.
2. For a discussion of the benefits of utilising transformative learning and practice-based learning theories as complementary, see Hodge (2014). While he interprets transformative learning as an 'inter-practice' phenomenon, my data indicate that it can also emerge within a practice as a response to the changing circumstances and lead to a consequent transformation of the practice itself.
3. For a critical review of 'parental determinism,' see Furedi (2002). Importantly, though rejecting several principles of this ideology and opting for approaches that posit children as competent (e.g., Juul, 2011), the democratic-school parents are believers in the salience of proper parenting.

Notes on contributors

Katarzyna Gawlicz is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Education, University of Lower Silesia (Wrocław, Poland). Her academic interests include democratic education, children's rights in education, transformative learning, and teacher training.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland [project number: 2014/13/D/HS6/01896].

Notes on contributor

Katarzyna Gawlicz is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Education, University of Lower Silesia (Wrocław, Poland). Her academic interests include democratic education, children's rights in education, transformative learning, and teacher training.

ORCID

Katarzyna Gawlicz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1668-5393>

References

- Aarsand, L. (2014). Parental self-work: Governing enactments in family life. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 5(1), 67–80. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela9025>
- Assarsson, L., & Aarsand, P. (2011). 'How to be good': Media representations of parenting. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 43(1), 78–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2011.11661605>
- Brown, P. (1994). Education and the ideology of parentocracy. In M. J. Halstead (Ed.), *Parental choice and education: Principles, policy and practice* (pp. 51–67). Kogan Page.
- Burman, E. (2017). *Deconstructing developmental psychology* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Dahlstedt, M. (2009). Parental governmentality: Involving 'immigrant parents' in Swedish schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(2), 193–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690802700289>
- Dahlstedt, M., & Fejes, A. (2014). Family makeover: Coaching, confession and parental responsabilisation. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 22(2), 169–188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2013.812136>
- Ecclestone, K. (2004). Learning or therapy? The demoralisation of education. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 52(2), 112–137. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2004.00258.x>
- Ecclestone, K., & Hayes, D. (2009). *The dangerous rise of therapeutic education: How teaching is becoming therapy*. Routledge.
- Edwards, T. M., & Walker, M. (2019). Enhancing transformation: The value of applying narrative therapy techniques when engaging in critical reflection. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 17(4), 337–352. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344619847142>
- Epstein, J. L. (2010). School/family/community/partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Kappan*, 92(3), 81–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171009200326>
- EUDEC. (n.d.). *What is democratic education?* Retrieved June 28, 2021, <https://eudec.org/democratic-education/what-is-democratic-education/>
- Flick, U. (2007). *Managing quality in qualitative research*. Sage.
- Fox, L. (2015). *How Waldorf early educators teach parents to parent their children during the first seven years*. California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Furedi, F. (2002). *Paranoid parenting: Why ignoring the experts may be best for your child*. Chicago Review Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.
- Hartkamp, P. (2016). *Beyond coercive education: A plea for the realisation of the rights of the child in education*. Quantum Company.
- Hecht, Y. (2012). *Democratic education: A beginning of a story*. AERO.
- Hodge, S. (2014). Transformative learning as an 'inter-practice' phenomenon. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 64(2), 165–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713613520405>
- Hoggan, C., Mälkki, K., & Finnegan, F. (2017). Developing the theory of perspective transformation: Continuity, intersubjectivity, and emancipatory praxis. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 67(1), 48–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713616674076>
- Holt, J. C. (2004). *Instead of education: Ways to help people do things better*. Sentient Publications.

- Hope, M. (2019). *Reclaiming freedom in education: Theories and practices of radical free school education*. Routledge.
- Hyland, T. (2009). Mindfulness and the therapeutic function of education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 43(1), 119–131. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2008.00668.x>
- Illeris, K. (2014). *Transformative learning and identity*. Routledge.
- Janssen, J., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2018). (De)constructing parental involvement in early childhood curricular frameworks. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26(6), 813–832. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1533703>
- Juul, J. (2011). *Your competent child: Toward a new paradigm in parenting and education*. Balboa Press.
- Kegan, R. (2018). What ‘form’ transforms? A constructive-developmental approach to transformative learning. In K. Illeris (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists ... in their own words* (pp. 29–45). Routledge.
- Kłosińska, M. (2019). Edukacja demokratyczna i unschooling [Democratic education and unschooling]. In M. Żylińska (Ed.), *Nurty edukacji alternatywnej w świetle wiedzy o procesach uczenia się* [Currents in alternative education in the perspective of learning] (pp. 251–288). Edukatorium.
- Kloubert, T. (2020). Promoting perspective transformation in post-totalitarian societies. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 18(1), 8–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344619876274>
- Kohn, A. (2006). *Unconditional parenting: Moving from rewards and punishments to love and reason*. Atria Books.
- Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. University of California Press.
- Mälkki, K. (2011). *Theorizing the nature of reflection*. University of Helsinki.
- Mälkki, K., & Green, L. (2014). Navigational aids: The phenomenology of transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 12(1), 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614541171>
- Mendel, M. (2016). Parental identity, lifelong learning and school. *Malta Review of Educational Research*, 10(1), 145–168. <https://www.mreronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/MRERv10n1-9-Parental-Identity.pdf>
- Mendel, M. (2018). Parental identity, governmentality and retroactive empowerment: Towards a democratic school space. *International Journal about Parents in Education*, 10(1), 103–110.
- Merriam, S., & Clark, C. (2006). Learning and development: The connection in adulthood. In C. Hoare (Ed.), *Handbook of adult development and learning* (pp. 27–51). Oxford University Press.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28(2), 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202>
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2012). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 73–96). John Wiley & Sons.
- Olmedo, A., & Wilkins, A. (2017). Governing through parents: A genealogical enquiry of education policy and the construction of neoliberal subjectivities in England. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 38(4), 573–589. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2015.1130026>
- Peterson, R. (1993). Creating a school that honors the traditions of a culturally diverse student body: La Escuela Fratney. In G. A. Smith (Ed.), *Public schools that work: Creating community* (pp. 45–67). Routledge.
- Pomianowska, M., & Stańczyk, M. (2017). Unschooling to stan umysłu – Rozmowa z Marianną Kłosińską [Unschooling is a state of mind: A conversation with Marianna Kłosińska]. In M. Pomianowska & M. Stańczyk (Eds.), *O szkole od nowa. Rozmowy o edukacji* [On school anew. Talks about education] (pp. 325–341). Wolters Kluwer.
- Popkewitz, T. (2003). Governing the child and the pedagogicalization of the parent. In M. Bloch, K. Holmlund, I. Moqvist, & T. Popkewitz (Eds.), *Governing children, families, and education* (pp. 35–61). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rosenberg, M. B. (2003). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life* (2nd ed.). PuddleDancer.
- Stern, A. (2013). *Und ich war nie in der Schule: Geschichte eines glücklichen Kindes*. Herder.

- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wiatr, M. (2020). The ambiguous meanings of parental engagement in the reflexive modernization era: Parental educational initiatives in Poland. *International Journal about Parents in Education*, 12(1), 1–12.