Article

"I felt as if I was becoming myself anew": Transformative Learning Through Action Research Projects Carried out by Beginner Teachers

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Abstract
This article explores action research as a tool for promoting transformative learning of prospective teachers. Drawing on two B.A. or M.A. projects carried out at a university in Poland in which teacher-students used action research and the educational ethnography design to examine themselves as teachers and their practice, the article demonstrates the potential of such an approach for the transformation of students' meaning perspectives and, eventually, of their personal and professional identities. The transformation the teacher-students experienced entailed their emancipation from the teaching models imposed on them in their institutions and the development of their personal teaching theories. This was followed by their transition to deliberate action, increased sense of agency, and readiness to assume responsibility for wider social change, consequently bridging the theory-practice divide. The author argues that despite the challenges of action research in the university context, its transformative potential makes it a valuable component of teacher education.

Keywords
transformative learning, personal transformation, experiential education

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This article explores action research as a tool for promoting transformative learning of prospective teachers through encouraging them to explore and improve their practice while working toward their degrees. It draws on research projects carried out by teacher-students as part of their bachelor's and master's programs in Early Childhood Education at the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, Poland. Offering weekend degree programs, the university attracts students who work as teachers or teacher assistants in schools or preschools during the week and attend classes every other weekend. As part of the degree requirements, both B.A. and M.A. students carry out a research project that serves as the basis for their B.A./M.A. theses. While M.A. students are expected to have previous research experience, for the vast majority of B.A. students the final thesis project represents their first encounter with formal research. Limited research training which the students receive and the need to juggle employment with coursework and fieldwork make research for the final thesis quite frustrating for some of them, who see it as yet another requirement to meet, rather than as an experience that will help them become better teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

I served as a B.A. and M.A. thesis supervisor for 5 years and directly experienced this frustration. In response, I sought to develop approaches that would make the work more meaningful for my students. Capitalizing on the fact that my groups included students who already worked as teachers, and inspired by earlier applications of action research and educational ethnography in working with B.A. students (Cervinkova, 2013), I decided to encourage the students who worked as teachers to explore their own practice with a view to understanding it better and possibly changing it. My main objective was to create opportunities for beginner teachers to develop a deeper awareness of the premises and implications of their own practice, to gain more control over it, and to become more autonomous as teachers, rather than uncritically adopting others' values and meanings. Such outcomes have been counted among the goals of adult education as such (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). Additionally, coming from the children's rights and critical education perspective, I wanted to invite teachers to reflect on the possibilities of making room for children's participation and voice, thus contributing to building a more equitable preschool culture and to changing children's experience.

The prevalence of action research in teacher education programs, both those for preservice students and for practitioners, has been recognized (James & Augustin, 2018; Vaughan & Burnaford, 2016), and its utility has been acclaimed. For instance, Price (2001) draws on pre-service teachers' experiences in carrying out action research projects to highlight the generative influence of such projects on students, whom they enabled to develop new visions of their role as teachers, partly running counter to the dominant views on teaching. Among the major benefits of introducing action research into teacher education, Katsarou and Tsafos (2013) identify fostering students' ability to link academic theory to educational practice, increasing their awareness of their tacit theories, and bolstering their attitude of working toward the constant improvement of their teaching. Students' empowerment, their increased sense of having their own voice as teachers (Shockley et al., 2008), and their experience of themselves as change agents (Price & Valli, 2005) have been acknowledged as further merits. Nevertheless, the

presumed positive influence of action research on students in teacher education programs may be more problematic than it seems to be. Darwin and Barahona's (2019) study of two Chilean educational programs with action research as their integral element reveals that the action research experience produced negative pedagogical outcomes, including the graduates' rejection of such research as an instrument for dealing with problems in their teaching practice. The authors attribute this to incongruence between action research in conventional contexts and in teacher education, referencing aspects such as the purpose (generating knowledge to improve current practice vs. prospective practice), incentives (intrinsic professional motivation vs. need to meet the diploma requirements), and the form of inquiry (ongoing vs. incidental). As they claim, crucial epistemological, social and practice dimensions of action research are manifested in students' projects only to a limited degree.

Despite the recognition of the transformative and emancipatory potential of action research methodology, action research and transformative learning perspectives have been relatively infrequently linked in explicit ways (Nicolaides & Dzubinski, 2016). Examples of the studies that do so include explorations of transformative learning processes through action research among tertiary teachers. Brendel and Cornett-Murtada (2019) examine changes in the perspectives and behavior of university professors prompted to integrate mindfulness techniques into their teaching. Drawing on their own effort to enhance their teaching, Napan et al. (2018) reflect on the transformative nature of cooperative inquiry, a kind of action research which they perceive as a useful tool not only for personal and professional transformation, but also for challenging neoliberal academia. More pertinently to the teacher education context, Shockley et al. (2008) discuss the transformative potential of an intentional learning community which they initiated within the framework of a master's program with a focus on teachers' professional and personal transformation. They demonstrate how they used a variety of methods in order to support teachers in the process of discovering their own hidden curricula and transforming their practice.

With a view to contributing to this research field, this article explores the potential that action research has for promoting teachers' transformative learning. It is driven by the following questions: How can action research be implemented in teacher education in ways that are practical, productive, and contributive to students' meaningful transformation? What are the specific dimensions of transformation that students experience as a result of their engagement in action research? What challenges emerge for a teacher educator who introduces action research and how can they be mitigated? Following an overview of the Polish educational context, and the methodological and theoretical framework, these questions are handled in the three further sections of the article.

Fostering and Researching Action Research in the Polish Educational Context

Action Research in the Polish Educational Culture

Teacher research, therein action research, occupies a peculiar place in the Polish educational culture. Elsner and Bednarek (2012) notice "a revolution in the educational

law and theory" (p. 33) in teacher research, but regard practice as lagging behind the theoretical and legal developments. The "revolution" began after the Ministry of Education introduced a new pedagogical supervision model in 2009. The self-evaluation of the school staff, as one of its components, was meant to encourage teachers to explore their work with a view to stimulating their professional development and improving the work of schools. However, lacking methodological knowledge, an appreciation for researching teaching and learning, an autonomy to select topics, and/or mutual trust, teachers frequently approach self-evaluation as a meaningless bureaucratic requirement, rather than as an integral aspect of their professional activity (Elsner & Bednarek, 2012; Kasprzak, 2013). Simultaneously, programs for advancing teacher research have been launched, for example, *Teacher Researcher* training to support schools in planning and carrying out purposeful research (Borek, 2012), and the Learning Schools scheme, run by the Center for Citizenship Education and promoting teacher research to further teachers' collective reflection (sus.ceo.org.pl). Some schools and individual practitioners have implemented educational alternatives through action research (Cervinkova & Gołębniak, 2013). Research training is also included in teacher education curricula. Nonetheless, these factors do not foster an educational culture conducive to teacher research. My attempt to engage students in research that would be relevant to them can be seen as a step toward transforming the status quo.

Action Research in Teacher Education: The Objectives and the Design of the Procedure

The choice of action research resulted from my intention to give my students an opportunity to explore and possibly change their practice, instead of merely learning about the ways to do so (Price & Valli, 2005; Stevenson et al., 1995). As an approach in which practitioners investigate urgent issues that emerge in their immediate contexts, action research has been recognized as a powerful way "to rethink practice, question our own assumptions, and challenge the status quo" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 43). Carr and Kemmis (2004) emphasize the emancipatory character of action research, as it affords the participants an opportunity to overcome "the often unseen constraints of assumptions, habit, precedent, coercion and ideology" (p. 192). My intention was to help the teacher-students realize how their educational practices were shaped by their understandings of a teacher, a child, and a good teaching practice, as well as by external factors, such as the institutional culture of their preschools, their position therein, and/or their colleagues' and principals' expectations of them. Action research challenges the notion of a teacher as the "technician, consumer, receiver, transmitter, and implementer of other people's knowledge" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42), and I hoped that inviting students to embark on this kind of work would create an opportunity for them to become agents aware of and responsible for their own actions.

Gewirtz et al. (2009) observe that for teacher research to be meaningful, it must involve a negotiation of "new roles for academic facilitators; new dimensions of teacher roles; and a viable conception of research that is authentically teacher research"

(p. 580). In the context of a teacher education program, this need is amplified by the specificity of university culture. My collaboration with the students was designed so as to respond to all these factors. While ensuring the teacher-students' ownership of their work was my priority, the formal requirements and the students' scarce research experience had to be taken into consideration. The students' projects were carried out as part of three- and four-semester B.A. and M.A. thesis seminars, respectively, with the actual research and writing spanning two or three semesters. Despite the differences in seminar duration and students' prior research experience, the university standards for B.A. and M.A. theses were relatively similar. Following introductory training in academic writing and action research methodology, the students moved on to conducting observation and taking ethnographic fieldnotes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010). Having decided to focus on their own teaching practice, the students engaged in a typical action research procedure, which involved planning their action based on the identification of a problem, the execution of the plan, and reconnaissance aimed at evaluating the outcome of the action (Lewin, 1946). Such a procedure vastly departed from those typically followed in B.A. and M.A. research projects. Similarly, the students' theses differed from the more usual ones, both in the manner of their development and in their structure.

The writing and researching processes were closely intertwined, with the actual writing being instrumental for the students in gaining insight into and interpreting their practice. This was reflected in the structure of their theses. Their respective opening chapters presented selected fieldnotes and an initial analysis in which the students attempted to capture problems they had identified in their practice, while the second chapters offered a broader theoretical contextualization of the problems identified. From a supervisor's point of view, the objective of these two chapters was to create an opportunity for the students to employ theory as a tool to acquire a deeper under-standing of their practice, and to experience how reflection could be facilitated both by a close analysis of their documented practice and by their newly acquired, or differently applied, knowledge. The final parts provided an overview of alternative methods or approaches which the students intended to utilize, the documentation of their action (through excerpts from their fieldnotes and photos), and the evaluation of the course of the action, its outcomes, and the entire research process.

In terms of Cranton's (2016) conceptualization of the roles adopted by educators who foster transformative learning, mine could be described as a combination of a facilitator, a resource person, and a provocateur. My objective was to create a safe framework within which the students could undertake autonomous, productive, but potentially taxing action. To this end, I left the decision to engage in action research, as opposed to choosing other approaches, to the students, so only those who felt confident about it opted for this framework (a total of 15 students from 2013 to 2018). I ac-companied them in the process by familiarizing them with the research methodology, providing them with resources, and discussing their research with them as it developed, but also by inviting them to engage critically with their own work (by offering al-ternative viewpoints, asking questions, or suggesting inspiring literature). Furthermore, I made sure that their work met formal university demands (e.g., by suggesting a thesis

structure that met the mandatory requirements while accommodating the specificity of an action research report). I made conscious efforts to avoid making the students feel pressured or directed in their actions (e.g., when reading their fieldnotes or discussing their action plans with them, I did not share my ideas until the students expressed theirs, thus making sure that they would tackle issues that genuinely mattered to them and would do so as they saw appropriate). Nevertheless, establishing the position of being supportive, but not (too) authoritative is not straightforward (Gewirtz et al., 2009, p. 577), which I explore more thoroughly in the concluding part.

The Methodological and Theoretical Framework

Like practitioner action research projects reported elsewhere (Price, 2001; Somekh, 2006), those developed by most of my students focused on specific teaching methods or problems in the preschool or school organization, such as changing the meal routines to foster children's autonomy, using elements of art therapy to enhance children's emotional intelligence, or developing an educational-therapeutic program to support a child with Asperger's syndrome. All these projects entailed a great deal of learning for the teachers and brought about significant changes; however, it was the projects in which the student-researchers focused directly *on themselves* and their own practice that revealed the potential of action research to promote emancipatory learning and trigger changes in the researchers' identities, which is considered constitutive of transformative learning (Cranton, 2016; Illeris, 2014). This article focuses on two cases selected for their particular vividness as evidence of such power of action research: Marta, a B.A. student in her early twenties who had been working as a nursery school teacher for half a year at that time, and Ola (a pseudonym), an M.A. student and a preschool teacher in her early thirties, with 5 years of professional experience. The empirical data for my analysis come from their theses, in which they documented and reflected on their experience.[1] These largely autoethnographic works were thematically analyzed, and categories related to learning, action, and transformation were identified. My reading of the theses was unavoidably informed by my contextual knowledge resulting from my function of the supervisor of the students' projects. Yet, since my collaboration with the students had not been originally designed as a research project, it was not documented in a manner that would produce a usable empirical material.

The theoretical framework for my analysis comes from Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Mezirow (1991, 2018) claims that the way people think, feel, and act is structured by cultural and linguistic frames of reference, or meaning per-spectives, which are established in the course of socialization and make it possible to interpret one's experience as meaningful. Integral to adult development is the trans-formation of these frames, a process he defines as:

> Becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative

perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new under-standings (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167).

This happens through transformative learning, whereby individuals develop the ability to "think critically for themselves rather than take assumptions supporting a point of view for granted" (Mezirow, 2018, p. 127), and involves challenging these assumptions in response to situations which cannot be dealt with by using old perspectives.

I argue that the process through which the two teacher-students went in the course of their action research can be interpreted as an instance of transformative learning. They found themselves in a situation in which they realized that they were harming children, rather than supporting their development. Since this realization made them question the legitimacy of the frames of reference they used for understanding themselves and acting as competent teachers, they felt compelled to establish new ones. They experienced this process as difficult—as Mezirow (1991) maintains, challenging existing perspectives can be painful, since it involves "call[ing] into question deeply held personal values and threaten[ing] our very sense of self" (p. 168)—but it helped them transform their understandings of a good teaching practice and a good teacher. Consequently, they were able to alter their professional conduct in ways which they perceived as more respectful of and beneficial to children, and hence as more ethical and just. Importantly, even though the teacher-students wrote and talked extensively about the changes they had undergone when implementing their research projects, they did not perceive them explicitly as a case of transformative learning. Rather, this is an interpretive framework I use in order to better understand the process they experienced.

Students' Transformative Learning in the Action Research Process

Reconnaissance and the Identification of a Disorienting Dilemma

In Mezirow's (1991) theory, perspective transformation is triggered by a disorienting dilemma, when individuals realize that their existing meaning perspectives fail to help them make sense of what they experience. I believed that the teachers first needed to become cognizant of their work practices and behaviors, so I invited them to begin by observing and documenting them, reflecting on them, and eventually identifying a problem to tackle. To document their practice, both teachers decided to videotape their work with children. This was quite unique because video cameras are still rarely used in Poland as a tool to produce and learn from records of everyday practice, and the teachers had not had any prior experience with this technique. The recordings were subsequently transcribed by the teachers, who then analyzed the transcripts, seeking to understand what was happening in the recorded situations.

This proved the most challenging, but also the most critical step in the project for both teachers. Having watched themselves in action and re-read the transcripts, the

teachers realized that there was something wrong with their practice that made them deeply uncomfortable. They had entered the project equipped with specific, biographically informed meaning perspectives, which enabled them to understand their role as teachers and to act on this understanding. On the one hand, their formal university training, which included elements of critical, emancipatory education, made them believe that it was possible to practice education based on respect for children and attentiveness to their needs, interests, and potentials. On the other hand, their experience as both students and practicing teachers taught them otherwise:

> Rules based on disciplining children are so common [in my preschool] … I was convinced that children needed to be tamed, directed, told how to behave. I was subjected to such practices myself when I was at school; I had no other example to follow. (Ola)

They were striving to be good teachers, yet their university training proved insufficient for them to develop a sustainable personal teaching theory that would guide their day-to-day work. Ola found it very difficult to resist the preschool culture, as she felt constantly watched and pressured to act appropriately:

> The main reason why I conformed smoothly to the situation at my institution was my desire to fulfill the expectations of the principal and other teachers. I conformed to the regulations there, and mimicked the others' style of working.

The teachers had developed meaning perspectives that prioritized the dominant understanding of a good teaching practice endorsed by their preschools, rather than their academic knowledge. These perspectives were functional for them in their work settings, as they enabled them to act in ways authorized by their organizations and, therefore, to think of themselves as competent professionals. However, the close observation of their practice forced the teachers to call their premises into question. Their knowledge of emancipatory and democratic education sensitized them to oppressive practices, and they were distressed to discern such practices in their own work. Positioned between the ideal of a teacher they cherished, latent though it might have been in their everyday work, and their own observed practice, Ola and Marta experienced themselves as the kind of teacher they wished not to be. This brought about the emotional response of shame, embarrassment, and self-doubt, which Mezirow (1991) identifies as a typical feature of self-examination in the wake of the disorienting dilemma. Commenting on this experience, Ola said: "This moment—so shocking, yet so revealing—deeply shaped me. … I was ashamed. … The awareness that I was acting against children rather than with them was depressing."

Walker (2017) notices that adult education "often involves courageously confronting one's inadequacies and admitting and revealing a lack of knowledge or competency; it is about facing shame head-on" (p. 368). As she observes, responding to shame "can be either life giving or life draining" (p. 368), and working through shame can be transformational for adult learners. The first response of the two young teachers

to the feeling of shame was a denial of their undesirable practice. Action researchers may be tempted to suppress or ignore some information concerning their practice, as it can threaten their desired perceptions (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 1998). This is precisely what Marta experienced:

> I saw some mistakes I had made, but I always had an explanation why I had done what I had.
> … I was afraid to admit to my mistakes; I defended myself automatically. … If one always tries
> to work as best as one can, it is hard to accept the fact that one makes such severe mistakes.

Mälkki (2011, 2019) interprets unpleasant emotions experienced by individuals when their meaning perspectives are questioned and they are pushed out of their comfort zones as edge-emotions. She perceives them as biological responses to threats that, depending on how they are handled, may either reinforce one's perspective or serve as a gateway to transformative learning and growth. Marta's narrative above recounts an immediate application of solutions facilitating one's return to one's comfort zone, one of typical responses to edge-emotions (Mälkki, 2019). However, in order to learn from their experience and move forward, the teachers needed more productive ways of coping with their edge-emotions of shame and embarrassment. Mälkki (2019) recommends embracing edge-emotions as signals: discerning them, refraining from turning to typical solutions, and exploring one's assumptions in order to alter them. Likewise, rather than explaining themselves, the teachers eventually admitted to their practices which they viewed as undesirable, and accepted that their ideal of a teacher, their self-perceptions, and their actual practices were incongruent. The next step was to develop a deeper and more contextualized understanding of what it was that they were doing.

Interpretation of Practice

Besides realizing how their biographical experience as students and teachers had shaped their understandings of their role, Marta and Ola felt that in order to be able to take action, they needed to better understand the character and consequences of their practices, so they turned to theory. The notion of docile violence proved useful for Marta, as it drew her attention to adults' unintended and often routinized behavior, which undermines children's sense of security and impedes their development (Telka, 2009). It helped her understand that she restricted children's autonomy in their efforts to learn through exploration and to take initiative. A closer examination of the behaviorist approaches to teaching children made Ola realize the extent to which she had adopted rewards and punishments as means of controlling children. Foucault (1995) theory of disciplinary power helped her see that she had positioned her students as incompetent and in need to be molded into obedient, quiet, and well-behaved preschoolers.

Placing their action within a theoretical framework had a double effect for the students. First, it made them understand that their negative experiences were not unique to them, which Mezirow (1991, p. 168) identifies as one of the phases of perspective transformation. Marta admitted to feeling relieved when she had realized that she was not the only

one who "struggle[d] with [an] issue and that other teachers also deal[t] with it." Second, situating their practices in a theoretical context objectified them, and imbued them with gravity: "Verbal violence, taming, docile violence—these concepts were unknown to me, and the fact that they also applied to me terrified me. I was, and still am, ashamed, but without it I wouldn't be where I am now" (Ola). The process of a theory-underpinned interpretation of their work helped the teacher-students develop a wider perspective on their practices and proceed to the next step, that is, designing and taking action.

Action Planning

Mezirow (1991) observes that "[i]t is not enough to understand intellectually the need to change the way one acts; one requires emotional strength and an act of will in order to move forward" (p. 171). While he identifies the moment when a learner should move from insight to action as potentially threatening and therefore demobilizing, the experience of the disorienting dilemma was so powerful for the two teachers that they could not imagine not taking action. "Since I knew what the problem was, I wanted to fix it as soon as possible. I did not want to be stuck in the vicious circle any longer," Ola wrote. Marta made a similar observation: "I could not possibly imagine continuing to work the way I did, knowing how [negatively] it influenced the children."

The action planning stage included searching for inspirations for alternative approaches to working with children and acquiring knowledge and skills necessary to put them into practice. Both teachers found the Reggio Emilia approach[2] helpful in devising ways to increase children's opportunities for taking initiative and directing their own learning. Central to this approach, the principles of the pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2006) sensitized them to children's attempts to communicate their needs and interests, and contributed to their grasp of the notion of a competent child, while the concepts of emergent curriculum and project work espoused by Reggio practitioners (Rinaldi, 1998) provided them with more concrete ideas for planning and carrying out work with children. Ola, who felt that she needed to develop new, respect-based ways of communicating with children, studied the principles of nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2003) and positive discipline (Nelsen, 2006). Subsequently, the teachers proceeded to designing specific steps to take, implementing their plans and documenting the process on video and in fieldnotes for further analysis.

Action Implementation

Since the work that the teachers undertook concerned primarily themselves as teachers, action implementation differed from a straightforward, technical procedure in which, routinely, a problem is identified, and a solution developed, applied, and tested. Instead, it was a complex process in which the teachers, rather than observing changing practices from a distance, constantly challenged themselves and faced questions and dilemmas.

Importantly, because the teachers had to plan and implement action without having any actual experience of alternative models of practice, they relied exclusively on the theoretical knowledge acquired at university and when planning their action. This entailed accepting the insecurity related to entering a new field, as they experimented with elements of the project work inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach or tried out new modes of communicating with children. Although doubtful, the teachers saw the process as a learning opportunity for both the children and themselves: "The project definitely was not ideal, but it gave the children a chance to freely express their views, which I eventually took into consideration" (Ola).

While implementing the new approaches, the teachers faced the ramifications of the old ones, and better understood their influence on the children. Both teachers wanted to position the children as co-directing their learning, but they realized that having become accustomed to following teachers' instructions, the children had difficulties taking initiative and making decisions. This presented the teachers with a dilemma: Should they suggest solutions to the children, or should they let the children struggle on their own and possibly become frustrated and quit the work? But just as the children were used to specific ways of working, so were the teachers: "I tried to follow [the children] and not to interrupt them. The temptation to instruct the children was strong. I had to try hard to keep my knowledge to myself, bite my tongue, and let the children act" (Ola).

The analysis of the teachers' theses reveals two emotional states they experienced at the stage of action implementation. One was satisfaction with the changed practices and their increased self-confidence, resulting from the effects they were achieving, which is a typical phase in the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1991). Their reflections on action implementation abound with expressions of delight in children's creativity, resourcefulness, and engagement, which the teachers interpreted as evidence that they had taken the right direction. Yet their writings also attest to the loneliness and isolation of teachers who embark on the transformative process in a setting characterized by an organizational culture they want to leave behind. While Marta described the technical obstacles she encountered when implementing the action as challenges to overcome, Ola emotionally confessed: "I happened to think a few times: 'What's the point of doing it,' 'Nobody appreciates it anyway.'" This begs the question of the ramifications of including this kind of potentially transformative work in university programs, and of the dilemmas faced by educators who, like myself, decide to do so. Before addressing this issue in the concluding section, I will examine in more detail the nature of the transformation that the two teachers underwent.

The Transformative Potential of the Teachers' Projects

Transformation is at the core of action research. As Carr and Kemmis (2004) argue, practitioners undertake inquiry in order to improve their practices, their understanding of them, and the settings in which they take place. Indeed, transformation is a recurring theme in the two teachers' narratives, as they look back on the changes they underwent as both professionals and individuals (Carr & Kemmis, 2009; Noffke, 2009). As

professionals, they developed their personal theories of teaching and the model of a teacher they wanted to attain, which enabled them to move from a non-reflective, casual repetition of behavior modeled by their colleagues to considered actions which resulted from their own decisions. Carr and Kemmis (2004) refer to the latter as *praxis*, understood—in line with the Greek etymology of the term—as informed, committed, and consciously theorized action. Ola summarized this kind of transformation as follows:

> I have decided on a new direction. This direction means reflection, courage, taking the children's side. … I have finally started treating children like people with different abilities, attitudes, [and] skills, who are unique individuals.

An important dimension of the transformation the student-teachers underwent involved their questioning of the theory-practice divide. The interplay of theory and practice as the factor that triggers reflection is characteristic of action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 41). The two teachers learned to draw on theory as an eye-opener in investigating their behavior. Marta realized: "If I hadn't known what to pay attention to, I probably wouldn't have noticed anything alarming." Theory was also an inspirational push to action, as she observed: "The more I learned about the importance of children's active involvement and the harmful effects of restricting it, the more I was sure I wanted to introduce changes in my ways of working."

In Ola's case, overcoming the divide was tantamount to a radical transformation of her meaning perspective. Commencing her action research project, she believed that there was no correspondence between educational theory and practice, a position she had developed as a response to the clash between her own approach to teaching and the one dominant in her workplace:

> It didn't take me long [after taking up the job as a teacher] to realize what regulations were in place at the preschool and what to do to fit the model. … everything I had learned in my studies disappeared. … I was convinced that this was the right thing to do, that theory was one thing, and practice was another.

It was only when she engaged in theory-underpinned reflection on her practice that she realized how profoundly her understandings had been shaped by her preschool culture and started emancipating herself from the imposed model, one with which she did not identify, as she had come to realize. She experienced this process as personally transformative: "Facing the reality was painful. At the same time, however, I felt as if I was becoming myself anew. … I see how long a path I have walked and how much has changed."

The inseparability of the professional and the personal dimensions of transformation surfaces throughout the two teachers' theses. Marta observed how differently the children in her group behaved after she had decided she "had to change herself," while Ola concluded her thesis with an expression of hope that her further inquiry would lead her to "become a better person and a better teacher." This reflects Illeris's (2014) claim

that the object of transformation in the course of transformative learning is one's identity in its various dimensions, including personal and work identities. As a result of their research, the two practitioners became different people and different teachers, who based their work on a modified set of values and principles.

Last, but not least, (Carr & Kemmis, 2009) argue for the inevitably political character of action research inasmuch as it is embedded in questions of what "good life" and "good society" mean, which Marta and Ola tackled in relation to children. While their attempts to make children's lives better remained individual, they hoped that other teachers would follow suit. Marta's reflection and action ultimately sparked her dream of a broader change and of playing a role in fostering it:

> I started imagining how wonderful it would be if others also desired change. … How many teachers feel that something is wrong? How many would like to replace their current ways of working with new and better ones? … How many teachers do not know how to do it or cannot identify the problem? I would like to know how to help them and the children they care for.

Exploring transformative learning as bound up with various kinds of knowledge, Cranton (2016, p. 14) observes that learning becomes transformative when it is emancipatory, that is, when people acquire knowledge that enables them to change their perspectives on themselves and on the world they inhabit. From this point of view, the two student-teachers experienced emancipatory transformation. Their reflections reveal their new perception of the educational reality—as requiring change and amenable to that change by themselves—and of themselves as agents of change, rather than as uncritical reproducers of socially endorsed patterns of behavior. Moreover, Marta's comment seems to suggest that, albeit still modestly, she is beginning to see herself as both responsible for and capable of supporting others in changing their perceptions and modes of action.

Transformative Learning Through Action Research in the University Context: Challenges Faced by the Teacher Educator

Given its deeply personal character and its potential to radically question the worldviews of those involved in it, transformative work raises ethical issues and dilemmas (Cranton, 2016). In this section, I examine those I encountered, having invited students to engage in transformative work in the context of university degree programs.

The fact that the projects were implemented within B.A. and M.A. thesis research schemes produced specific power relations. The students had to engage in challenging work and to document its course and outcomes in the most important written assignments of their studies, that is, in their theses, which were going to be formally assessed (Darwin & Barahona, 2019; Katsarou & Tsafos, 2013). This begs a number of questions: In such a context, can students genuinely engage in work which is, by its

very nature, risky, unpredictable, intimately personal, and potentially threatening to themselves? What is the position of the university instructor as someone who assesses the students' work, but who should, in line with the principles of action research, act as a critical friend, an adviser, or a research partner (Butler et al., 2011; Somekh, 2006), or, as Mezirow (1997, p. 11) would have it, as a facilitator or a provocateur? How can such standpoints be reconciled? Because Ola and Marta were extraordinarily motivated to explore and improve their practice, because they downplayed grading (while being committed to high academic achievements), and because we established more informal and closer relationships than is typically the case in Polish academia, the imbalance of power was mitigated enough to not prevent the teachers from taking transformative action. I recognize, however, that this was a fortunate coincidence, rather than a systemic solution applicable in less favorable circumstances.

Power dynamics in supervisor-student relationships come to the forefront when the issue of influence is taken into consideration. The teachers identified problems they wanted to tackle and the ways to do so on their own, but in dialogue with me. Moreover, they knew my perspective on working with young children from prior courses. This ties in with another dilemma: To what extent can educators share their views with students and yet maintain a healthy balance between providing them with necessary help and overly influencing their interpretations of their situation and their visions of change? Mezirow (1991) claims that educators "cannot be expected to hide their own ways of seeing and interpreting" (p. 203) and that "[a]dvancing one's own perspective as one of several alternative points of view from which a learner may gain insight is perfectly ethical" (pp. 203–204). When confronted with change efforts which they found unsatisfactory, Price and Valli (2005) responded by negotiating with students, rather than imposing their views on them. While agreeing with Freire's (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 378) claim that there is no such thing as non-directive educational practice, I believe that taking transformative action requires a genuine engagement with the problem to be addressed and the ownership of response to it. Therefore, the issue of guidance versus influence should be carefully considered in individual cases.

Another dilemma I experienced concerned the organization of the coursework. Action research is considered a collaborative endeavor, which can be emulated in the teaching context by dividing students into groups whose members work together (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2013; Price, 2001; Stevenson et al., 1995). My students, however, carried out individual research projects, which culminated in individually written theses. Furthermore, they endured considerable isolation, having little opportunity to be part of a community of professionals who could collectively grapple with significant issues (Black, 2019; Shockley et al., 2008). Since neither their coursemates who had chosen different research frameworks nor their coworkers had any comparable experience, they could not provide them with meaningful support, and our work outside the classroom only partly helped. Being already practicing teachers, the teacher-students did not experience difficulties reported by students who carried out their projects during their practicum at schools and encountered supervisors dismissive of or

hostile to their activities (Darwin & Barahona, 2019). Nevertheless, the former shared the latter's sense of being left to their own devices at times.

Ola's and Marta's experiences attest that including action research projects in a university program produces valuable outcomes, yet the challenges they had to face raise dilemmas about the ethical grounds for doing so. Forgoing action research in teacher education due to the emotional costs it entails would amount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Nevertheless, as a university instructor interested in suggesting this kind of transformative work to her students, I feel urged to consider possible ways of making their action research experience easier. One solution would be to build networks of teacher-students involved in action research that would serve as support groups, even if across different courses, cohorts, or institutions, as proposed by Shockley et al. (2008). While not removing the sense of loneliness which such teachers experience in their workplaces, this would make them realize that they are not the only ones facing such hurdles in exploring their practice. If more permanent, such networks could help sustain the teachers' efforts once they graduate and lose the support of their university supervisors. In an ideal situation, other practitioners from a given student's/teacher's institution could be included in projects to make them more comprehensive, efficient, and collaborative, and to contribute to a larger-scale transformation of educational institutions. However difficult to attain, such a goal should be pursued by teacher educators and other professionals responsible for teacher development.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Marta's thesis has been published (Medyńska, 2016). Ola's thesis is not publically available.
2. The Reggio Emilia approach is an educational philosophy developed after WW2 and still practiced within the network of public nurseries and kindergartens in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia. Based on the values of democratic participation and collaboration, an image of the child as competent learner, citizen and subject of rights, and the constructivist theory of learning, it remains one of the most influential approaches to early childhood education and care worldwide. For an informative overview, see Edwards et al. (1998).

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