

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Transformative learning in teacher education

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Abstract: In this research I studied transformative learning process in teacher education. Transformative learning describes adult learning where learner's meaning perspectives change through critical reflection. Meaning perspectives are typically uncritically adopted in childhood and society, and once they are set, they guide and frame our thinking, feeling, and acting. Transformative learning is needed in teacher education because future teachers educate the next generations who will face the "wicked problems" of our times such as questions on health, economics, and environment. I collected data from an alternative teacher education model in Finland in 2015-2017. The data consist of research observations and students' writings. Using data-driven analysis I formulated a four-step model of transformative learning in teacher education. The steps were named: starting point, crack, ambivalence, and transformation. The results can be used when developing teacher education towards a transformative education so it can better answer the needs and problems of transformative times.

Paper: We live in a time of changes: questions on health, environment, politics, and economics together form "wicked problems" that are potentially even devastating for humankind. Facing these big questions, it is typical to seek an answer from developing teacher education because teachers are the ones educating the next generations. Educating the future teachers themselves is a good starting point. However, developing teacher education in a way that teachers are educated to tackle these questions is not an easy task. I would argue that it is not new didactic skills that need to be acquired but rather, the teacher students themselves need to change their way of looking at wicked problems.

In Finland, although having one of the most respected teacher educations in the world, there has been real difficulty with the effectiveness of teacher education especially on students' deeply held conceptions, values, and attitudes. Finnish teacher education has done quite well on enhancing the didactic skills of students, but the effect on a more profound level has been weaker. (Laine 2004, Blomberg 2008; Rautopuro et al. 2011.) What is needed in teacher education, both in Finland and elsewhere, can be described as transformative learning. Transformative learning theory, originally formulated by Jack Mezirow (1978; 1990), describes adult learning process by which the learner changes their meaning perspectives through critical (self-) reflection. Meaning perspectives are constituted of assumptions and expectations that frame our thinking, feeling, and acting. They are preconceptions and once they are set, they automatically direct our line of action. In teacher education this sort of "deeper" learning seems to be both rather scarce and acutely needed due to current global situations.

In my doctoral dissertation (completed in 2022) I studied transformative learning process in an alternative teacher education model: Critical Integrative Teacher Education (CITE) at the University of Jyväskylä. CITE is based on an idea of a democratic and dialogic long-term (2y) research group. The aim is to move beyond traditional understanding of teaching and learning and to study educational phenomena in a deeper level, e.g., the unconscious aspects of learning are often reviewed. Studies are not organized by subject matters but as larger integrated study projects. The central idea is that students become interested, reflect, and take responsibility of their own learning and personal meaning perspectives. (Räihä, et al. 2018; 2012; 2011.)

I collected data ethnographically observing one CITE group (N = 11) in 2015–2017. The data consists of field observations, research diary and writings from the students. Using phenomenological-hermeneutic approach (van Manen 1990; Friesen et al. 2012) I analysed how transformative learning happens in CITE. Based on data driven analysis I formulated a four-step model of transformative learning process in teacher education. The steps were named: starting point, crack, ambivalence, and transformation. These steps somewhat overlapped in the studied group, but each could be identified as a separate phase of the process.

The starting point for the transformative learning were the meaning perspectives students had before they entered CITE. These were acquired by socialization in childhood and surrounding culture, and they included e.g. conceptions on institutional learning, relationship between individual and social and the purpose of studying. In the second phase there was a crack to these meaning perspectives because the theoretical background and ways of working in CITE differed from those the students were used to. This commenced an ambivalent phase where the students on the other hand tried to pursue the new meaning perspectives and on the other hand retreated and resisted the change. Both sides were seen needed in this phase since the progressive part kept the process going and the regressive part gave students possibility to rest during psychologically wearing process. Regressive interest also ensured that learning was actually happening, since there would not have been need to retreat if there was no learning occurring. In the last phase the transformations in the meaning perspectives were visible both to the students themselves and for the outsider spectator (researcher).

My results add to the body of knowledge of transformative learning and sheds light especially on transformative learning processes in teacher education. In previous literature the steps 2 and 4 of transformative leaning process are rather well recognised but my study can raise the importance and inevitability of also the steps 1 and 3. The learning process does not start in a vacuum (see also Laros 2017). Something precedes the crack. Also, the transition from the crack to the eventual transformation is not as smooth, conscious, or rational as first thought (see also Elias 1997).

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