Developing a transformative, cooperative living-educational-theory with children and youth in the EDS (Education for Development and Sustainability) community of practice in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The new generation is key to reaching the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. But to solve complex, global challenges and create sustainable development requires changes in the education system toward new ways of learning and knowing, as well as developing capabilities to act. In 2005, we (Md Hafizur Rahman, Md Alamin, and Trine Lund) therefore established a community of practice in Bangladesh called Education for Development and Sustainability (EDS), where we mentor vulnerable children and youth to become change agents, teachers, and leaders who, in turn, mentor younger children and youth. In this article, we explore the questions, 'How can we mentor for transformative learning?' and 'How can we explain the related inner change?' Finally, we discuss the transformative, cooperative living-educational-theory we developed in the process. We do this by following the transformative journey of the EDS teacher Abdullah bin Mujib bin Abdul Khalid, and by reflecting on the values behind our mentoring and how this research has influenced us as action researchers. In this way, we aim to contribute to Living Educational Theory Research. During our process as action researchers, Erling Krogh and Sigrid Gjøtterud contributed substantially to our professional reflections and to the development of our living-educational-theory research.

Keywords: Transformative learning; Living-educational-theory; Inner change; Values; Cooperative action research

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Introduction

The United Nations (2018) stresses that the new generation is the key to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals. Nearly one-third of the Bangladeshi population are children and youth (World Population Review, 2019), but according to estimates from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2017), 10 million of them were out of school in 2017. There are complex socio-economic and environmental reasons for these large school-dropout rates. As we create a picture here of the challenging situation many Bangladeshi children and youth encounter, we focus on how they are viewed and treated by adults (own family, school, and society) and the related negative effects of that. The dominant view in Bangladesh is that children need to be controlled by physical and humiliating punishment, and that learning equals rote learning through which children are obedient, quiet, and submissive and they continuously study and do not play (Acred Foundation, 2018; Akhter, 2018; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS] & the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2019; Chowdhury, Sarkar, Mojumder, & Roshid, 2018; Hasnat, 2017; Huda, 2019).

This negative, controlling environment has led children and youth to develop negative assumptions about themselves, their ability to learn, and their value in the family and society, which in turn has led to low self-confidence, depression, frustration, and the feeling that there is no hope for the future (Hasnat, 2017). This has resulted in passiveness, negative behavior, and eventually, school dropouts. While these children and youth who have experienced extreme control, child abuse, and dropping out of school are prevented from enjoying their children's rights, Bangladesh—and indeed the world—is missing out on the possible contribution of these young, potential change agents toward sustainable development and a more human world. These negative impacts on children and youth living in challenging conditions, is generalizable across the world. Hence, to prepare the new generation to solve complex, global challenges and create sustainable development, there is a need for change in the education system toward new ways of learning and knowing, as well as developing capabilities to act (Lotz-Sisitka, Wals, Kronlid, & McGarry, 2015).

Therefore, Hafizur Rahman (Hafiz) created a community of practice for children and youth in Khulna, Bangladesh, in 1988, which in 2005, we (Hafiz Rahman, Md Alamin, and Trine Lund) turned into the Education for Development and Sustainability (formerly Education for Deprived Students, EDS) community of practice. Since then, we have worked with 1000 children and youth (aged 6–20), their parents, and the community, to develop new ways of learning and knowing. We have conducted cooperative action research (Heron & Reason, 2001, 2008) on how to mentor the development of children's and youth's capabilities to solve local challenges and contribute to sustainable development. We see sustainable development as a holistic, social, economic, and environmental development that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their needs', in line with the Brundtland Report to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987, p. 16). In our understanding, sustainable development starts with what Freire (1972) calls conscientization—becoming conscious about your own situation within the circumstances of the society and environment in which you live. Based on conscientization, processes of individual and social

empowerment can enable persons and groups to become compassionate and reflexive actors for local and global sustainable development. As we explain our educational influences in our own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which our practice is located, we are generating our living-educational-theory cooperatively.

As a result of our mentoring in the EDS program, we witnessed children/youth - who had been labeled as 'troublemakers' by their society and family - develop new, empowering identities. When those children/youth realized that they could impact their environment, they took the initiative to mentor other children/youth for empowerment and together advocated for children's rights toward authorities, educational institutions, and parents. They also ensured that vulnerable children/youth had access to education and a safe environment, and reduced levels of child labour, child abuse and child marriage, and bring back youth who are on the brink of a life of crime.

On our EDS Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/EDS2005) the EDS children/youth share their transformational stories and how they work in the EDS program. The EDS teacher, Abdullah bin Mujib bin Abdul Khalid (Abdullah), is one of these youths who transformed from nearly dropping out of school and being called a troublemaker to becoming an agent of change. In this paper, we will follow his transformative journey when we explore 'How can we mentor for transformative learning?' and 'How can we explain the related inner change?' In the process of mentoring Abdullah, we have experienced ourselves as living contradictions (Whitehead, 1989) and, like Laidlaw (1996), we identified our values as living standards of judgment. We have continuously asked ourselves, "How can I/we develop my/our practice?" and based on that, we have developed our living-educational-theory cooperatively (Gjøtterud & Krogh, 2012; Whitehead, 1989). We have explored how this research has influenced us as educational practitioner researchers, with the intention of contributing to Living Educational Theory Research (Whitehead, 2008).

Background and Context of EDS

To provide the reader with a context for our study, we will explain why and how we developed the EDS program and our research standpoint. Please see Rahman, Lund, Alamin, Krogh and Gjøtterud (2021) for further information.

As a child growing up in Bangladesh, I (Hafiz) experienced physical punishment and humiliation from adults to the extent that I was about to drop out of school. I was told I was stupid, not able to learn, and that I better quit school and start working. Education was based on rote learning, but I struggled to memorize facts that had no meaning to me. When I tried to get help, I was told that adults must beat and threaten children to make them learn. Nobody tried to understand why I struggled to learn. I felt adults were controlling my life and did not trust me. They decided what I should do and when, and they did not ask for my opinion, but punished me when I did not obey their rules or when I wanted to play. They also did not show in any way that they realized how their punishment and humiliation negatively impacted me.

I observed that other children faced the same treatment as I did from adults, and I did not agree to this system. I dreamed of an environment where adults, especially teachers,

were friends with children, where teachers explained the subjects in easy ways, related the theory to practical examples so it became meaningful and interesting, and where children felt free and safe to ask questions and felt they were able to learn—an environment where children would be trusted to make decisions, feel valued, and have free time to play and enjoy life. Looking back at my childhood, I see that through my practice, I developed and expressed the values of social justice, democracy, love, and freedom. To me, social justice is expressed as equality, including gender equality, to enjoy children's rights, such as child-friendly education, safety, play, and free time.

Freedom is, to me, expressed through emancipation, the ability to decide over one's own life and be free from negative socio-cultural control. I see democracy as being seen, heard, and included in decision-making. Love is expressed as empathy, cooperation, community, and in seeking to fully understand the other person as who she or he sees her or himself, and to trust and value others. Looking back now, I see that I wanted children to be able to live fully and free according to these life-enhancing and life-affirming values and develop their full potential, while my social formations (family, school, community) were expressing the opposite values. I have therefore chosen to term my experience as a 'living contradiction'. I am aware that I use the term in a new way here, and I do it to highlight my struggle of 'living amidst and through contradiction', as David Wright beautifully expressed it (personal comment on the second draft of September 10, 2021). Like Crompton (2010), I find that the values mentioned above give purpose and life to what I do and motivate me to engage myself in the struggle of others, together with them, to create a more humane world.

When I was around 13 years old, I realized that education was the key to my dream, so I started motivating out-of-school children who were a bit younger than me to go back to school, and I taught them in the afternoons. As adults did not listen to me, I created a community of practice (Wenger, 1999) with my children, our own social formation, based on the values and beliefs I dreamed that our society would practice. I call them 'my' children, as I loved and cared for them as if they were my family. I behaved in a friendly manner with my children, used practical examples from their everyday lives to explain the school subjects, created rhymes and songs to make the memorization of facts enjoyable and easy, and let my children decide which games and activities we should do together. However, I was a child and had unconsciously assimilated habits from my environment, so once I slapped one of my children, but when she cried and I saw her teary eyes, I felt the pain from when my teacher used to beat me. I therefore apologized and promised not to do it again. I did not want any child to experience the pain I had been through, so my aim was to enable my children to enjoy, smile, laugh, and feel that they were able to learn. Looking back, I now see that joy and empowerment became some of my living standards of judgment (Laidlaw, 1996). Hence, when I reflected on my children's reaction to my actions, I developed empathy and the will to improve my practice. When my actions contradicted my values, as in the example of the girl I slapped, I felt bad because I experienced myself as a 'living contradiction', as Whitehead (1989) uses the term. Hence, I reflected on and improved my actions. In this way, I learned about my children's psychology, about what made them feel joy, stressed, empowered, sad, and frustrated. I learned to mentor in ways that made it more likely that

my children felt learning was meaningful, manageable, and comprehensible (Antonovsky, 1987).

I tried to make my little community of practice a safe space where children could feel free from pressure, negative comments, and punishment, and could risk trying new, empowering roles by teaching each other and leading activities. When I went to Norway for my studies in 2005, I motivated Alamin, the oldest of the children I mentored, to lead the group and teach and mentor the younger children. When my classmate Trine heard about my educational initiative and realized that it corresponded to her values, beliefs, and dreams, she was interested in joining. In 2005, Alamin, Trine, and I therefore established the EDS program.

In EDS, we /Hafiz, Trine and Alamin) welcome, and actively gather vulnerable children/youth. Around 70% of the EDS participants are girls. By 'vulnerable' we mean that our EDS children/youth have often experienced extreme control, poverty, child abuse, have dropped out of school, risked child marriage, are orphans, have been working as child labor or engaged in youth groups where they were used by adults to commit petty crime related to drugs and violence. The latter is a documented challenge on the rise in Bangladesh (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2015). EDS has taken several youths back from the brink of a life of crime. Common for many EDS children/youth is that their family and community tell them they have problems to learn, they cause trouble, they have no value and will never become anything in life. So, we seek to motivate children/youth to believe they are able learners, they are valuable as persons, they can be trusted, and they are resources for our society. Hence, we show them empathy. We trust them by giving them the responsibility to run activities in EDS. When the children/youth get help from EDS to get education, increased self-confidence, and self-efficacy, they often want to pay it forward by mentoring, teaching and helping other children/youth achieve education and a better life. Hence, the EDS children/youth volunteer up to eight hours a day, six days a week.

The way we (Hafiz, Alamin, and Trine) encounter and mentor our EDS children/youth is based on values and methods developed by me (Hafiz) since my childhood, and resembles Buber's (1937) I–Thou relation, in which we fully involve ourselves and treat the other with empathy, love, openness, care, and trust. We (Hafiz, Alamin, and Trine) hope that the way we use the word 'mentor' will become increasingly clear throughout this article. We feel inspired by Levinas' (1969) notion of responsibility, to meet the children/youth's needs by treating them 'as they ought to be', to help them 'become what they are capable of becoming' (Ginott, 1965, p. 15). For this reason, we encourage them to take initiatives and the responsibility to 'come into presence' (Biesta, 2005, p. 62) by letting them plan and run EDS activities. Hence, they teach and mentor in total 300 children/youth before and after school time, including approximately 100 boys living in the in the Shishu Palli governmental orphanage. They also cultivate a garden, practice entrepreneurship with spices and chicken farming, and use all these arenas for practical teaching. They create a safe community for children/youth by collaborating with parents, educational institutions, police, local authorities, and leaders.

To create friendly relations between the EDS teachers and students, they arrange social activities, picnics, and play. We mentor the children/youth in reflection–action cycles through weekly group meetings and additional individual meetings. Alamin is running the

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EDS community of practice full-time in Khulna, Bangladesh. This includes teaching school subjects and mentoring EDS children/youth to run all the EDS activities mentioned above. Hafiz and Trine volunteer in the EDS program in addition to holding down their full-time jobs in Norway. Due to Hafiz's experience as a child and his wish to give every child a good childhood, he has since 2005 saved money from his salary in Norway and used it for EDS. He has bought a house, where the EDS children/youth run EDS activities, and equipped it with school benches, tables, and equipment for free-time activities. He has also supported EDS children/youth with educational expenses, school fees and books as well as contributed with food to assure their good health.

Our aim is to work in 'communion' with our children/youth as one family, based on libertarian education and humanization where we create a reality through shared reflection and action (Freire, 1972). This may be reached through transformation, where one becomes conscious of limiting beliefs and behavior and realizes how one can be an agent of positive change for self and the communrty (Mezirow, 2003). Hafiz's transformation from a child who did not attend school regularly and was about to drop out into becoming a Ph.D. holder, action researcher, and senior teacher in Norway shows that everything *is* possible when we work from our heart and believe in our calling and potential destination. This faith in the potential of every child and youth is a core value in the EDS program. In the following section, we will therefore elaborate on the theoretical framework of our living-educational-theory.

The Theoretical Framework of Our Transformative, Cooperative living-educational-theory

Transformative learning, as described by Mezirow (2003), is a process of self-examination through which the learner examines, questions, and revises assumptions, beliefs, and values assimilated uncritically from their own culture and community, and discovers their own values, purpose, and meanings. The transformation is, according to Mezirow (2000), triggered by a disorienting dilemma, an event or accumulation of experiences that may lead to taking on new roles and actions and a change in identity (Illeris, 2014). In discussing what can promote transformative learning processes, Gjøtterud, Krogh, Dyngeland, and Mwakasumba (2015) identified access and skills to utilize resources for change, the ability to share knowledge and skills, realizing one's own ability to take action for change, and the analytical capacity to identify problems, plan, implement, and evaluate actions. In a subsequent study, Gjøtterud and Krogh (2017) stressed how transformative learning processes rely on a sense of belonging through emotional connection, positive interdependence, empathy, and compassion. In a similar way, we see transformative learning as a holistic process, including relational and emotional ways of knowing (Taylor & Snyder, 2012), driven by the core human capacities of connecting, intending, and transcending (Jolly & Krogh, 2021). By engaging these capacities, the learner can develop feelings/emotions, willpower, and new ways of thinking, which can be refined to empathy, character, and intuition with training (Jolly & Krogh, 2021).

Willpower has several qualities, such as energy, mastery, concentration, determination, persistence, endurance and patience, and initiative and organization (Assagioli, 1974). When training our will and developing endurance, persistence, and

patience, we build character. By character, we mean a solid core and a sustainable self that is true to its values and is guided by a sense of purpose, commitment, and trustfulness (Sennett, 1998). This inner change-process and development of values can lead to self-confidence, self-efficacy, engagement, critical reflection, and the ability to transcend old patterns and solutions, which are skills needed for creating sustainable development (Jolly & Krogh, 2021).

We believe that intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) releases and stimulates such transformative processes. Our willpower and what gives us emotional meaning are driving forces behind our decisions and transformations (Jolly & Krogh, 2021). According to Antonovsky (1987), human beings obtain a sense of coherence through experiencing situations characterized by emotional meaningfulness, manageability, and comprehensibility. A sense of coherence is a key to managing stresses and changes and can therefore contribute to opening up to transformative processes. However, cultural and socially constructed perceptions influence the meaning we give to our experiences. Therefore, transformative processes often require what Freire (1972) calls conscientization—a process of conscious changes through social communication.

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2007) bioecological systems theory, children's development is impacted by their environment, such as their family, school, community, cultural values, customs, and laws. We agree with this perspective, and we therefore work holistically with the EDS children/youth and their environment. We aim to influence their environment to support positive child development, and also to create a physical and psychologically safe space in the EDS community where the children/youth can feel free from the pressure of their everyday environment and express themselves freely, test empowering roles, and learn from experience and reflection without feeling afraid of being judged or of making mistakes. As Huxtable and Whitehead (2016) point out with their notion of i~we~i, the individual also influences the community. We agree with Taylor (2012) that individual and social transformations are interlinked.

When professors Sigrid Gjøtterud and Erling Krogh at the Department of Educational Science in the Norwegian University of Life Sciences introduced us (Hafiz, Trine, and Alamin) to action research, Living Educational Theory Research, and cooperative ways of researching, we acquired professional terms to describe our research. Our research draws on pragmatic action research (Elliott, 1991; Stenhouse, 1975) and cooperative action research (Heron & Reason, 2001, 2008). We have conducted action research without external funding since 2005 (Eskelund, 2009; Eskelund & Lund, 2010; Hageskal, 2011; Løvdal, 2016; Miji, 2008) by asking and researching our questions, 'How do I/we improve my/our practice?'. In the process, we have developed a 'common' living-educational-theory (we use the term 'living theory' for short), which we see as the theory we continuously develop through practice; hence, our explanation for why we do what we do, and our practice itself.

By seeking to be conscious of how we practice our living values, we aim to be role models for our EDS children/youth, as we, in line with Bandura (1977), are conscious that our children/youth learn from our behavior and lived values. Hence, our research is in line with the aim of Living Educational Theory Research: to positively impact self, others, and our social formations (Whitehead, 2018). We reflect on each other's guiding practice to improve it and develop a common practice and educational knowledge (Gjøtterud & Krogh, 2012).

This process connects with ongoing discussions and self-introspection on the ways in which we facilitate and communicate with others (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

In this article, we try cooperatively to make our transformative living-educational-theory visible and conscious by documenting and reflecting upon the development of our practice and driving values (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002), and by investigating contradictions between our espoused and practiced values through critical research (Carr & Kemmis, 2005).

We will now explain the methodology we used.

Methodology

We generated data through qualitative methods, and noted progress and our critical reflections on our research in our research journals. Data sources were reflection logs, children's descriptions, pictures and videos from class, observation in person in Bangladesh and through Skype. Facebook stories and comments, emails, newspaper articles, TV discussions/documentaries about the EDS community such as recordings on www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ29hpeBnDI and www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PlzgCxqwSQ were also used, as well as comments from international and national visitors. We used this data as a base for reflection among us and with the EDS children/youth by phone, Skype, Facebook, email, and in person.

In interpreting our data, we used Winter's (1989) six principles for conducting action research as a base: collaborative resources, dialectical critique, reflexive critique, plural structure, risk, and theory-practice transformation. We aim to show all this in practice in this article. We aim to show collaborative resource when we consider each other's ideas to be equally important and hence we are all influenced by ideas from our co-researchers. Risk, in our view, is when we are vulnerable and open for critique from EDS children/youth and co-researchers, and also when we risk giving honest feedback to each other. We aim to allow for plural structure by having the voices and perspectives of several EDS children/youth heard in addition to the voices of us co-researchers who have a diverse background.

We used process and dialectic analyses to identify characteristics of situations indicating changes in the children/youth and in our guiding practice over time, what influenced situations to change, what we learned from each other, and ideas generated by our discussions (Eneroth, 1984). In line with Huxtable (2012), who draws on Habermas (1976), we have aimed to strengthen the validity of our research by striving to make the context and our educational values clear, present our story in a way that is understandable and believable and shows why we do what we do, critically judge our practice, and provide evidence for our claims to knowledge by making the voices of the people in this research heard. We (Hafiz, Alamin, and Trine) have asked all persons mentioned in this article and shown in pictures whether they would allow us to use their picture and name. All gave their consent and expressed a wish for this article to contribute to greater consciousness about educational practices between adults and children and improved practices in this field. The head of the Shishu Palli governmental orphanage gave his consent to use the pictures of the children residing in the orphanage. All consents were given orally.

To research how we mentor for transformative learning and explain the related inner change in us and the EDS children/youth, we will first explore the EDS teacher Abdullah's transformation as a case, and this will make explicit the transformative, cooperative, living-educational-theory we developed in this process.

Abdullah Connects to the EDS program and Develops a New Identity

We start by providing the reader with the context that Abdullah lived in when we started mentoring him. At 16, Abdullah and his family moved from an international environment in Saudi Arabia to Bangladesh. Abdullah was enrolled in an English-medium school, and his parents wanted him to use his free time to study at home alone. They were not interested in letting Abdullah join the EDS program and said he would not learn anything there, as in the EDS community of practice, children were teaching children and wasting time on play. Abdullah was also not interested in joining the EDS program either, as he said he preferred to be with friends who had more money to do what he considered fun activities. Looking back at his situation, Abdullah said:

> I was not interested in people in Bangladesh or EDS because I felt they were boring and did not understand me as they did not have the same experiences as me. Out of frustration, I did many bad things and did not listen to anyone, so nobody managed to control me. In Bangladesh, we lived with my extended family, so everyone started telling me what I should do, frequently criticized me, and talked negatively about me. I felt everything I did was wrong. When people saw me in the streets, they used to go away and say that problems are coming, because I used to cause trouble. (Abdullah, response to initial draft of December 12, 2020)

Abdullah nearly dropped out of school and started demanding money from his parents to party with friends, who tried to influence him to ask his father for more money so he could start a business, get rich, and quit school. This created tension between Abdullah and his parents, who felt they were no longer able to motivate him regarding his education, so they asked the EDS program for help. We first aimed to ignite Abdullah's interest in connecting with us so we could build an empathic and trustful relationship. Thus, we intended to encounter him with love, like in an I–Thou relation (Buber, 1937), which we saw as understanding him, his needs, situation, and wishes. We sought to meet him where he was (Kierkegaard, 1994), to acknowledge his competencies and values, and to be available and show that we cared about him. Abdullah shared with us:

> My parents always assume I'm responsible for mistakes, punish me without listening, and do not try to find why I struggle in school, but complain that I'm lazy because I do not get as good grades as my brothers. (Zoom meeting with Hafiz, Alamin, Trine, and Abdullah, July 20, 2017)

This indicates that Abdullah started to build a trusting relationship with us, and that he felt a need to be understood and seen for who he was.

We then sought to ignite Abdullah's interest in connecting with the EDS community of practice by inviting him to play, picnics, and social events, and to show him that we

needed his competence by asking him for help to translate for international visitors, to be a technician during EDS events, and to share his ideas on how to develop the EDS community (Image 1).

Image 1. Abdullah assisted with the technical equipment and translation when visitors came to learn about the volunteer activities of the EDS children/youth.

In image 1 you can see, from left to right: Kamrul Islam, former Additional Deputy Commissioner at the Khulna Metropolitan Police, Md Alamin, Leader of EDS, Emi Hayabuchi, Human Resource Generalist and Assistant Manager at the Sojitz Corporation, Dubai, and Abdullah.

However, Abdullah constantly criticized the EDS community and Bangladesh. This created tension between him and the EDS teachers, so we asked him, 'If you worked in an organization and outsiders started criticizing how you were working, how would you feel?' He answered: 'Not good' (Skype meeting with Hafiz, Alamin, Trine, and Abdullah, September 30, 2017). We then had a dialogue inn which Abdullah started seeing his behavior from the perspective of the EDS teachers and began to be more appreciative. We invited him to visit the EDS children/youth's homes and the Shishu Palli government orphanage. After the visits, Abdullah took the initiative to start a football team with the EDS children/youth in the Shishu Palli government orphanage to meet their needs for free-time activities (Image 2), and he said:

> The EDS children lacked many things, and many did not have family. When I saw how these children live, I became motivated to do something for them. (Skype meeting with Hafiz, Alamin, Trine, and Abdullah, August 15, 2017)

This indicates that he saw their perspective, developed empathy, and directed his will toward using his skills to meet their needs.

Image 2. Abdullah with the football team he coached from the Shishu Palli government orphanage.

When we had observed that Abdullah had formed an emotional relation to EDS children/youth, we asked if he would like to teach them English. Abdullah said he could not teach because his Bangla was not good, he did not regularly attend school, and he did not have good grades. We therefore tried to help him redefine the role of 'teacher' to change his limiting beliefs so he could come to recognize that he possessed the qualities of a good teacher. We explained that important teacher skills were the ability to create a good teacher–student relationship (Hattie, 2009) and enable the children to feel that they had mastered and enjoyed English by practicing it. We pointed out to him that he would do that well as he was confident in talking English, good at communication, and able to connect to and engage children with his energy, his passion for the language, and his sense of fun. In line with Freire's ideas of libertarian education (1972), we also mentioned that Abdullah's own struggle for education would be a strength that could enable him to better understand his students' struggle and engage with it.

We stressed that we did not expect him to be a professional teacher, and we would not consider anything a "failure" as long as he learned from his experience and improved. Abdullah's later comment on this situation indicates that he developed the thinking that we could learn from any experience and should not fear 'failures':

> In EDS I felt valued and that I belonged. When I was given a task and messed it up, people always helped me. They also explained to me why I should not do the wrong things that I was doing. (Abdullah, response to the initial draft of December 12, 2020)

Abdullah agreed to teach and asked his fellow EDS teachers, Methue and Riaz, when he needed help with translations.

When he later saw that his students lacked ICT skills, he responded to their needs by teaching them ICT. This indicates that he began to master the role of a teacher, which also increased his self-efficacy and expectations of mastery in other areas (Bandura, 1986) (Image 3 and 4).

Images 3 & 4. Abdullah teaching ICT to EDS students (left) and teachers (right).

In the EDS space, Abdullah was energetic and engaged with the children/youth, but he was frequently absent. He would not explain the reason, but blamed others, and did not show any willingness to take responsibility for his own actions. Finally, he opened up:

> My parents always say negative things about me and complain to others about me. They blame me even if my brothers do something wrong. They do not believe me or like me. When I talk with you (Hafiz, Alamin, and Trine), I get the energy to work, but when I go home or outside, I start to think negatively and lose hope. When I have the "feeling", I can do a lot! But when I lack the 'feeling', I lack the energy to do anything. (Skype Meeting with Alamin, Hafiz, Trine, and Abdullah, January 20, 2018)

Abdullah was experiencing being a living contradiction in the sense that he was living amid and through contradiction. He expressed that he enjoyed the acknowledgment from the EDS community of his new identity as a teacher, but his EDS activities were not seen as valuable by his family and the community outside the EDS environment, as he volunteered and did not get paid. This made Abdullah doubt the value of his EDS activities. His comment above also indicated that he started realizing how other people impacted his feelings, will, actions, and ability to achieve his purpose, and this opened up the possibility for him to realize that he had the freedom to decide what impact he would let those other people have.

The stress Abdullah expressed is described by Illeris (2014) when he mentions that the motivation for a change in identity must be deeply rooted in the learner to justify the effort needed for transformation. For this reason, we observed some of Abdullah's classes and reflected with him about his pedagogy skills (Image 5). We also reminded him how much his students enjoyed being with him (Image 6). They asked about him if he was absent and made direct comments to Abdullah, such as, 'We do not have time for dinner— we want to continue the class' (class observed by Hafiz and Trine through Zoom, September 10, 2018). Abdullah showed that his students' feedback evoked his compassion for, and the will to teach, them and see them happy, and that the emotional connection between them was mutual:

> I always feel happy when I teach them (students). They have a difficult past, so I really feel for them and always smile and try to make them feel happy. I try to see each student as an individual and help them in the best way, so my students now feel confident to tell me directly whether they understand what I teach or not. When I spent more time with them, I

started to think of them as my brothers. That's why I invited them to my home to eat, enjoy time together, and so they could feel they had a family. (Trine, reflective journal, September 10, 2018)

Images 5 & 6. Left: Hafiz and Trine observing, through Skype, Abdullah teaching EDS students. Right: Abdullah with some of his students.

This shows, in line with Taylor (2015), how emotions can be catalysts for actions, critical reflection, and a transformation in perspective. This indicates that Abdullah started to become aware of and use transformative tools, such as an emergent empowering perspective on himself and the redefinition of concepts related to teaching. He began to feel he belonged in the EDS community. This contributed to empathic connections to - and changed his perspective regarding - his EDS students. This prompted him to take more responsibility by using his resources to improve their lives. It also indicates the need for continuous supportive relations when trying out a new role.

Our inner change influences Abdullah's inner change

Abdullah did not attend school regularly, and one day he told us the reason:

The school says they teach in English, but all teachers speak Bangla, so I do not understand, and I feel bored. They give us a lot of information, and when I ask for an explanation or share my ideas, they get irritated, and some teachers tell me to go to a coaching center if I cannot understand the class. It makes me feel bad. (Skype meeting with Hafiz, Alamin, Trine, and Abdullah, February 3, 2018)

We asked Abdullah what he would like, and when he proposed studying at home and only going to school for the final exams, we agreed and supported him to develop a study plan with regular follow-up meetings with us. He followed our plan for some months, but then he stopped attending our meetings without notice. I (Trine) interpreted that as Abdullah not being interested in being mentored by us. To get other perspectives on the situation, I asked Hafiz and Alamin, who asked me in return whether I thought I was flexible enough in my encounters with Abdullah. My immediate reaction was to explain to them how flexible I was. Instead, I reflected and realized I had taken their question as a criticism and was about to defend myself.

In my experience, Hafiz, Alamin, and I always intended to support each other when we self-examined so that we would become conscious of and improve our practice. When I realized this situation could be an opportunity to gain a new perspective on my practice, I asked Hafiz and Alamin to elaborate on what they meant by being flexible and how they thought I might improve. Hafiz explained that I had grown up in an environment where I learned to keep promises and be responsible, while Abdullah lived in an environment where people often broke promises and did not take responsibility for their own behavior. He had unconsciously assimilated those values. In my eagerness to see Abdullah as I thought he ought to be, I had overlooked how he currently was and the impact from his environment. Hence, there was a discrepancy between my espoused and practiced value of understanding and meeting the other where he was. I was a living contradiction. This led to a dialectic reflection among Hafiz, Alamin, and me about ways better to understand the other as he/she sees himself/herself and not how we assume he/she is. We realized this was a way to express the value of love.

To improve our living-educational-theory research cooperatively in the manner mentioned above required that we risk being vulnerable—me being open to criticism and Hafiz and Alamin taking the risk to share their honest criticisms. This was possible because we had developed a culture of open inquiry with dialectical and reflexive critique. We shared a safe space based on trust, empathy, and love, where we acknowledged that we were living contradictions who, like Laidlaw (1996) noted, were striving to develop our values as living standards of judgment and to use them to improve our practice.

We decided to try to better understand Abdullah and mentor him from where he was, but soon after this decision, we learned that he had been sleeping on several occasions when he had told us he had been studying. When Abdullah denied this, we felt we could not trust him; hence, it would be very demanding to mentor him for self-examination.

During the time we had mentored Abdullah, he had frequently created mistrust between himself and the EDS teachers. This demanded a lot of our time and energy to solve, so we had considered stopping mentoring Abdullah several times. However, each time we reminded each other of our purpose, values, and faith that transformation *is* possible. Alamin said:

> We created EDS to help those children who really need us to get an education, develop themselves, and get a good future. Abdullah really needs us now, so if we leave him, what is then the use of EDS? I also made many mistakes and was about to drop out of school, but you never left me, and now I am the leader of EDS and have a good education. If I can change, Abdullah can also change. (Skype meeting with Alamin, Hafiz, and Trine, May 20, 2018)

To strengthen our feeling of mastery and faith that transformation is possible, we reminded ourselves of the signs of transformative learning that Abdullah had shown and of our contribution to that. This increased our will, energy, and determination to continue mentoring him. By staying committed to our purpose, values, and principles, we saw challenges as opportunities to practice patience, persistence, and endurance, to develop character and sustainable selves. We also gained increased clarity on how to practice the value of humility, which we understand as putting our ego aside and focusing on the needs

of the other. Practicing humility enabled us to not take Abdullah's challenging behavior personally, but to observe the situation from a meta level so we could better understand him from his perspective and focus on solutions.

At the same time, we wanted to enable Abdullah to develop increased empathy and realize how his negative behavior impacted us. We therefore told him that we (Hafiz and Trine) were running the EDS scheme beside our full-time jobs, but strived to be available when he needed us, even at night, and that sometimes we had canceled other appointments to give him time. We asked him how he thought we felt when he broke his promises and did not show up. We also told him that we wanted to focus on those children who wanted to develop; hence, we would not continue to follow him up as closely as we had done. When Abdullah later reflected on this situation, he said:

> At first, I did not care, but after some weeks I started missing talking with you (Hafiz, Alamin, and Trine). I realized that when I did bad things in the past, people gave me up, but you never left me despite the bad things I had done in EDS. This made me realize that you really cared about me, and that I had to change my behavior because I wanted your support. (Abdullah, response to the initial draft, December 12, 2020)

After some weeks, Abdullah started showing more responsible behavior, which, backed by the statement above, indicated that his motivation to reflect, learn, and act was based on his feelings and his wish to maintain good relationships with people who cared about him. When Abdullah had shown continuous positive development for three months, we trusted his commitment and started following him up like before with the aim of better understanding and mentoring him from where he was. Abdullah had - on several occasions - expressed how he felt oppressed and misunderstood by his family, school, and society, so we aimed to enable him to realize how *he* could take responsibility for *his* development in the way *he* wanted. We explained that our intention was to mentor him for self-evaluation and development, not to judge him, so the more honest he could be, the more he would help himself. We asked him what qualities and values *he* wanted to acquire, to describe what they looked like to him, and to tell us where he was and where he wanted to be on a scale ranging from 1–10:

> **Abdullah**: I want to be responsible.
> **Trine**: How will it look like when you are responsible?
> **Abdullah**: I come timely to the EDS classes I teach, and to meetings with EDS teachers.
> Trine: On a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is perfect, where will you place your actions today related to coming timely?
> **Abdullah**: I give it a 10.
> **Trine**: Why?
> **Abdullah**: Because I came 5 minutes before the class and was prepared.
> (Skype meeting with Hafiz, Alamin, Trine, and Abdullah, November 10, 2018)

The dialogue indicates that Abdullah started developing values of human flourishing as living standards of judgment. Abdullah and Trine agreed that Abdullah would evaluate himself daily for a week, send the evaluation to Trine, and they would have a reflection meeting on Skype. However, Abdullah did not send Trine any evaluations or show up for the meeting. So, when he came to Skype, an hour later than agreed, Trine's normal reaction

would be to ask him why he had not kept his promise, with the intention of enabling him to reflect on his responsibilities. But, remembering Hafiz' and Alamin's advice to mentor from where Abdullah was by practicing humility, Trine managed to shift her perspective and decided to redirect her intention from fulfilling her need for information to what she assumed was Abdullah's need to feel heard and understood. Hence, she acknowledged Abdullah for attending the meeting and invited him to share whatever he had on his heart and mind.

Abdullah had been on his way to a party on the back of a friend's motorbike, but suddenly asked his friend to bring him home for the meeting with Trine because, as he said, 'I have done so much the last week that I want to share with you' (Skype meeting with Trine and Abdullah, November 17, 2018). He had written in his diary daily about what had happened, how he felt, and what he had learned, and he asked excitedly if Trine wanted to hear it:

> Today was a good day. I went to EDS for teaching. I came in time for class. Trine would ask me to evaluate myself, and I gave myself 10 on coming timely. Trine would ask me, 'Why?' I decided to change from 10 to an 8 because I was going to meet Riaz in a shop to buy seeds for EDS and I came five minutes too late. It was entirely my fault, so I told Riaz, 'I am sorry'.

When Trine followed up by asking where Abdullah wanted to be on a scale from 1–10, he replied 10, so Trine continued by asking him how he thought he could get there. Abdullah suggested that he could leave his home in time, and if he met friends on the way, he could tell them that he would talk with them after EDS. Trine continued asking critical questions to enable Abdullah to explore his behavior. She then listened and acknowledged his reflections. Abdullah radiated energy through his words, voice, and body language when he explained his newly gained insights and said:

> Trine, I see a huge change in me after I started with the diary. I also feel I can express myself and my ideas clearly. It feels so powerful.

Abdullah's expressed increased self-confidence and mastery influenced Trine to also feel mastery and increased certainty that Abdullah would be able to transform his limiting beliefs about self and others through reflection and translate this into more empowering behavior. Abdullah's expressed energy and joy from his new insights transmitted this to Trine, who decided to allow these life-enriching and life-enhancing values to unfold, as she assumed that this shared experience may strengthen the connection between her and Abdullah and strengthen his will to continue self-examination. Their conversation lasted five hours into the night.

In line with Vygotsky (1978), Abdullah had started to internalize Trine's voice when asking himself, 'Trine would ask me 'why'?' This inner voice served Abdullah as an intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) for self-examination, and indicates that Trine's questions became an emotionally meaningful and manageable transformative tool. Abdullah's decision to join the evaluation meeting also indicates that he expected to feel acknowledged, which is in line with Bandura (1986) saying that our expectations motivate our actions. Abdullah's actions and reflections also indicated that he had become increasingly conscious that he

could decide to direct his will and act in accordance with his life-affirming and life-enhancing values, purpose, and identity.

During the meeting, Abdullah risked being vulnerable and showing himself as a living contradiction, when, for the first time, he told us that he had not lived up to his promise, as he was late for the meeting with Riaz. This indicates that we had created an empathic and trusting environment where Abdullah felt safe.

This process shows how through developing our living-educational-theory research cooperatively we realized the discrepancy between our espoused and our practiced values. We also realized that when we improved our practice, it enabled Abdullah to have a similar process of inner change and transformation. Thus, the discussion among us co-researchers and between us and Abdullah contributed to the cooperative development of our transformative, living-educational-theory research.

Abdullah Acting in Line With His New identity in a New Setting

Abdullah did not go to school regularly, but when he realized that everyone in the EDS program and his friends in Saudi Arabia were getting educated and preparing for their future, he started to question what his future would be if he did not continue his education. He asked us for help. We had been waiting to see his intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) for education, and when we agreed to support him, he said:

> I did not take the school exams because if I failed again my parents would be disappointed and punish me. (Skype meeting with Hafiz, Abdullah, Alamin, and Trine, April 10, 2019).

Thus, what had seemed like lack of interest in education had been fear of failure. We had reasons to believe that if Abdullah could be in an environment away from the negative pressure that he was then currently experiencing from family, society, and school, and in a school where they used English and taught ICT, he would enjoy it and thrive. We decided to find a learning environment where we hoped Abdullah would experience mastery, and we assisted him in applying for the Lovely Professional University (LPU) in India. When he got admission there due to his volunteer social work in the EDS program, his father was very happy and thanked EDS. Nobody at the LPU knew Abdullah, so he presented himself as he wanted to be seen, as a change agent. After some weeks, he told us:

> I wanted to help others like we did in EDS, so I joined the social group at LPU, told them about EDS, and proposed that we use the EDS method to help children living near the campus get an education. After that, a professor arranged a lecture where I shared my ideas with many students and professors. They were so happy to hear about my ideas and experience. I felt really powerful. In EDS, I had observed how you (Hafiz, Alamin, and Trine) motivated children and youth for change, so I wanted to acquire those same skills. Many of my classmates were not confident in talking in class, so I created a group where I helped them practice their presentation skills and gain confidence in giving their opinions. When I saw that a fellow student looked sad and depressed, I spent time motivating him to think positively about himself. He was very shy, but finally he did a presentation in front of our school and felt proud about it. Then I thought that I'm a real change agent because I can change the way people think. I also made a teacher change his behavior. The teacher used to criticize our work. One day, I told him how his criticism reduced the students' confidence. I

said that as a teacher, he was responsible for encouraging us, so I requested that he be more empathic and positive. From the next class and onwards, that teacher behaved so friendly. (Skype meeting with Hafiz, Alamin, Trine, and Abdullah, September 30, 2019).

This indicated that Abdullah had developed confidence, will, and intrinsic motivation to apply the transformative tools he had acquired in the EDS space, such as by sharing his views in ways that meant his fellow students and teachers were interested in listening to him and engaging in a dialogue, and assisting him to mentor people around him for positive change. He found it emotionally meaningful to act as a change agent and practice the values of love and social justice, which he had observed us practicing in the EDS program. Abdullah said he enjoyed the drawing classes, and his team won an award for creative and innovative work at the One World event at LPU (Images 7, 8 and 9). In his first exams at LPU, Abdullah gained very good grades in all subjects. This supports our assumption that if he were to be in an environment where he felt free, where he could learn what interested him (ICT and creative work) in a way that was comprehensible (in English) and where he would feel empowered to impact his own situation positively, he would be able to learn school subjects well and also to experience transformative learning.

Images 7, 8 & 9. Hafiz and Abdullah by the Indian border; Abdullah in the art class; Abdullah with the award from the One World event at LPU

Abdullah's story shows how he transformed from feeling he had no value and nearly dropping out of school to gaining an education and becoming a change agent and teacher who mentored others for education and increased self-confidence. When reflecting on his journey in the EDS, he said, 'I learned that growing alone is not fun - growing together is fun' (Abdullah, response to the initial draft, December 12, 2020). This indicates the value he placed on the EDS community of practice and the relationships he developed during his transformative learning process.

Developing our Transformative, living-educational-theory research Cooperatively

Through the case of Abdullah, we have attempted to explore how we mentor children / youth for transformative learning and the related inner change that arise in us and them due to our interconnectedness. In this process, we have, together with our EDS children/youth, developed our transformative living-educational-theory research cooperatively, which we will explain here.

We have continuously sought to improve our practice by asking, 'How can I / we improve my / our practice?' Through self-examination, we have realized that we are living contradictions - contradicting our own values - and we have developed our values as standards of judgment to improve our practice. We have been open to critique from the children/youth we mentor and our co-researchers in order to serve as role models (Bandura, 1977), and we have encouraged the children / youth to have the same openness toward us and each other. Through this process, our interconnectedness becomes visible, and this can encourage the development of empathy. Our diverse backgrounds and multiple perspectives have enabled us to become more flexible in our practice. It has made us curious to learn the reasons behind each other's behavior and to explore our common values. This has enabled us to become more open to see the children/youth in what Buber (1937) calls an I-Thou relation and to practice love, compassion, empathy, curiosity, and humility.

When we gain a better understanding of the reasons behind our own actions and the drivers of our own transformative process, we feel we can better understand the reasons behind the children / youth's actions and mentor them for transformation. We use play to ignite the interest of children/youth in connecting and building friendly relations based on trust, as well as to create joy and energy, which may translate into confidence in learning, focus, attention, cooperation, creativity, and hence the ability to find solutions. When we feel the environment is relaxed, joyful, and friendly, we may become more open to constructive critique.

We give the child / youth the responsibility for their transformative process by enabling them to become conscious of their current situation, decide and visualize their future self in terms of values, purpose, and actions, and let them evaluate their own progress to help them create their intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) for transformation. The children / youth often experience themselves as living contradictions in the sense that they are living amid and through contradictions. This means that taking the risk of practicing a new role and identity requires supportive relations and a supportive environment. This can be available in a community of practice, resembling that described by Wenger (1999), based on shared purposes, principles, and values, where children / youth can feel safe to take initiatives, learn from experience and reflection, and develop from novice to master in similar ways.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) describe these steps as the five stages of the acquisition of skills. When children / youth engage themselves in real-life situations, encounter and connect to children / youth facing challenges that require action, their senses, body, and mind (Grendstad, 2008) become activated. They develop empathic relations and emotions and the will to act, so the process of developing a new role and identity becomes personally

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engaging and meaningful. The children / youth express their values and principles in practice and develop insight through self-examination. This, we believe, gives a feeling of mastery and being able to change oneself, increased self-confidence, self-efficacy, and the expectation of further mastery. Hence, a transformative learning process is initiated and driven by the connection of the children / youth's internal capacities with the external world. And the situated learning creates a sense of belonging, so the children / youth feel responsible for solving the challenges they encounter. Their intrinsic motivation we have seen encourages them to take increasingly more responsibility and expand their action area from the community of practice to their home community - and even to the global community.

We are all a part of a bioecological system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) where there is mutual influence between us and our social formations (Huxtable & Whitehead, 2016). Hence, through collaborative action-reflection cycles with co-researchers and children / youth, we co-create our reality. A basis for our community of practice is the belief that as humans we are situated, but are also free to reflect, learn, and make different decisions to those we made in the past. Hence, we base our practice on Freire's (1972) libertarian education and humanization and have faith that transformative learning is possible.

Mentoring children / youth for transformation requires will, expressed in patience, commitment, and endurance. To keep the faith in transformative learning being possible, we acknowledged each other's and our children's progress and reminded each other of our purpose, values, and principles. In this process, we further developed the values of love, humility, trust, social justice, joy, democracy, and freedom. These values and our emotionally meaningful relations to our children / youth develop intrinsic motivation in us to involve ourselves in their struggle for social justice and children's rights together with them. This has motivated them to engage in the struggle of their students and peers. In this way, the children /youth we have worked with have learned that they are valuable, that they can have a positive influence on self, others, and their local and global community, and that we can co-create a more human world, and in the process move together towards attaining the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusion

We hope we have been able to show how we, through reflection and engaging in Living Educational Theory Research cooperatively, developed new ways of thinking, which improved our practice and led to new ways of thinking and acting in the children / youth we mentor. We have become even more conscious of how we live as contradictions, and we have also expanded the term to describe the situation of living amid and through contradiction. We feel inspired to continue our inquiry into our common practice and our guiding values and to inspire children / youth to do the same.

In continuing our inquiry cooperatively, we recognize the originality of our contribution to Living Educational Theory Research. In particular we recognize the importance of extending the influence of developing our living-educational-theory research in living the values of cooperation as fully as possible. This could include extending our

community of practice with others who are researching co-operative identity, values and principles to build an international cooperative alliance (ICA, 2021) of Living Educational Theory Researchers.

Acknowledgments

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