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Author(s): Matikainen, Minni; Männistö, Perttu; Fornaciari, Aleks

Title: Fostering transformational teacher agency in Finnish teacher education

Year: 2018

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Matikainen, M., Männistö, P., & Fornaciari, A. (2018). Fostering transformational teacher agency in Finnish teacher education. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 7(1), Article 4.
<https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2018.v7.1.004>

Special issue: *Social Pedagogy in the Nordic countries*

Article

Fostering transformational teacher agency in Finnish teacher education

Minni Matikainen ^{1,*} , Perttu Männistö ^{2,†} , Alekski Fornaciari ³ 

¹ Department of Teacher Education, University of Jyväskylä, Iltarannantie 3A 3, 40520 Jyväskylä, Finland

² Department of Teacher Education, University of Jyväskylä, Aatoksenkatu 8D 73, 40720 Jyväskylä, Finland; Perttu.mannisto@jyu.fi

³ Department of Teacher Education, University of Jyväskylä, Viljapellontie 9, 33820 Tampere, Finland; Alekski.fornaciari@jyu.fi

* Correspondence: minni.s.matikainen@student.jyu.fi

† Matikainen and Männistö have contributed equally to the creation of this article.

How to Cite: Matikainen, M., Männistö, P., & Fornaciari, A. (2018). Fostering transformational teacher agency in Finnish teacher education. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 7(1): 4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2018.v7.1.004>.

Submission date: 28 May 2018; Acceptance date: 31 August 2018; Publication date: 28 September 2018

Peer review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open access:

International Journal of Social Pedagogy is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Abstract

In this article, we studied how well teacher education in Finland is able to answer the changing needs of the contemporary world. More precisely, we focussed on the question of how well an alternative teacher education model guides teacher students' agency towards a transformational view of the teaching profession, making it possible for schools to enable social change. This question was studied in the framework of critical social pedagogy. The data for this article was collected ethnographically by observing meetings in the Critical Integrative Teacher Education (CITE) programme at the University of Jyväskylä in 2015–2017.

The analysis is based on a theoretical background in which we outline two different discourses on the concept of teachers' agency. The first promotes schools' role in conservation; teachers are expected to educate obedient and uncritical citizens to maintain steady economic growth. The second discourse is defined as critical and emancipatory, where the education pursues transformation in students' underlying attitudes and a deeper understanding of education and society.

The results showed that the CITE model fosters teacher students' critical self-reflection and understanding of group phenomena considering education. The students' ability to understand schools in a social context also develops. However, CITE seems to struggle in transforming the students' thinking and understanding into actions. According to the data, feelings of inability, cynicism and a lacklustre ability to understand concretely how teachers can have an impact on society through their profession prevent a more complete transformation in the students' everyday modes of action. A stronger community perspective, collaboration with institutions outside teacher education, the enabling of group-oriented action and the provision of real-life experiences regarding the transformation could better help to develop future teachers' agency towards transformational views.

Keywords: teacher education; critical social pedagogy; critical integrative teacher education model; social change; Finnish teacher education

Introduction

Currently, in Finland, as in so many other western societies (see e.g. [Biesta, 2010](#); [Giroux, 1997](#); [Raiker and Rautiainen, 2017](#)), diverse, ever-growing and contradictory demands are made of public schools and teacher education, for example by the government, economic lobbyists and parents (see e.g. [Council of State, 2017](#); [Pyykkönen, 2014](#); [Seppänen et al., 2015](#)). These contradictory demands mean that teachers are expected to educate students who, on the one hand, can develop the nation's global market competitiveness and who, on the other hand, understand their responsibility to build an ecologically and humanely sustainable future. As these different demands include many aspects which are, in opposition to each other, at least to some degree, this poses a challenge for teacher education when considering what are seen as the core skills and knowledge of teachers of today and of the future.

In this article, we study how well an alternative teacher education model in Finland is able to answer the changing needs of the contemporary world. Our interest in the research arose because many researchers have noticed that formal Finnish education still, in large part, represents traditional and conservative educational ideologies ([Fornaciari and Männistö, 2017](#); [Lindén, 2010](#); [Rantala, 2010](#); [Simola, 2015](#)). But today, a new more critical stance towards teaching and teachers' professional agency has surfaced (see [Aittola and Suoranta, 2001](#)). As a result, one can recognise two differentiating and to some extent contradictory discourses in teacher education, considering contemporary teachers' professional agency (see, e.g. [Suoranta, 2008](#); [Fornaciari and Männistö, 2017](#)).

The first educational discourse, which we call the 'traditional', emphasises schools and their teachers' role in conservation – keeping up the current status quo (see [Gramsci, 2005](#); [Solhaug, 2018](#)). In contemporary Finland, this means providing the nation-state with reliable, diligent, innovative labourers as quickly as possible, thus ensuring the country's global competitiveness (see [Council of State, 2017](#); [Pyykkönen, 2014](#)). The problem with conservative educational ideology is that it is not open to change, even if the society or the global world require it. And for the most part, this type of discourse also denies the students' right to have an impact on education. (see [Biesta, 2010](#); [Solhaug, 2018](#)). The other type of discourse, which we call the 'transformative', highlights teachers' ethical and ecological responsibility towards the society and the students (e.g. [Biesta, 2006](#); [Freire, 1970/2018](#); [Mezirow, 1991](#)). The term 'transformational' refers to the process where an individual engages in evaluation and, if needed, a reshaping of his or her own modes of thought and action. Transformational education refers to the idea that schools should be able to educate students who have the skills, knowledge and attitudes which will enable to them to transform the society into a place which is better for everyone to live in. This requires that schools are seen as places where information and values are not transferred to the students without scrutiny but are critically evaluated and created together with them. ([Biesta, 2013](#); [Freire, 1970/2018](#); [Giroux, 1997](#)).

In our analysis, we use ideas of critical social pedagogy, a research orientation methodologically defined by socioculturality, critical ethnography and heuristic analysis ([Ryynänen, 2011](#); [Carreras, 1997](#)). Studying education in the framework of critical social pedagogy means understanding that education and its contents are defined by the needs of contemporary society. These needs, on the other hand, are a result of political struggles. ([Biesta, 2010](#); [Giroux and McLaren, 2001](#)). A critical attitude towards educational research originates from South American class struggles and North American civil rights struggles as well as from the labour movement and feminism ([Fornaciari and Nikkola, 2018](#); [Freire, 1970/2018](#)). Thus, we see that the transformation of individuals' agency refers to a larger emancipation process in the society, where harmful power relationships and traditions are being challenged.

The data for the article was collected at Jyväskylä University from a programme called Critical Integrative Teacher Education (CITE). CITE is a programme in teacher education which includes many aspects representing transformative ideas about being a teacher ([Nikkola et al., 2013](#)). In the article, our focus will be on the question of how well CITE fosters students' transformational thinking and doing. We also aim to illustrate how this information can be used to better foster change in students' conceptualisation of teacher agency.

Finnish teacher education and teachers' profession

Teacher education in Finland is divided into two educational paths, that of the subject teacher and that of primary school teacher. Subject teachers, who specialise in teaching a specific subject, for example mathematics or chemistry, are usually located in secondary or high schools. Subject teachers' education consists of studying a specific subject as their major and then supplementing their education with pedagogical studies. The other educational path leads to the career of a primary school teacher. Primary schools in Finland consist of classes from one to six. This means that children go to primary school from the age 6–7 until the age of 12–13. The teacher students major in 'primary school education'. In this article, when we speak about teacher education, we refer to primary school teacher education. Primary school teacher education (taught in six universities) as a five-year master-level programme is a unique concept in the world.

There have been many different kinds of developmental stages in developing the professional abilities of primary school teachers. Depending on the time period, for example, the focus of teacher education has been on didactic competence, psychological phenomena, group control and motivation as well as on understanding individual learners (see e.g. [Simola, 2015](#); [Sitomaniemi-San, 2015](#)). Currently, entrepreneurship education, understanding of the psychological learning processes, dialogue skills and digital competences, are strongly emphasised in teacher education (see e.g. [Ministry of Education and Culture \[MEC\], 2018](#); [Husu and Toom, 2016](#)). However, at all times, teacher education has leaned more heavily towards didactics, meaning techniques used to effectively control the classroom and the students, rather than towards an understanding of the theoretical or political aspects of education (see [Raiker and Rautiainen, 2017](#); [Simola, 2015](#); [Sitomaniemi-San, 2015](#)). Teacher education has also been based largely on obligatory contact teaching, having a strong focus on information transfer and didactic techniques as well as on teacher practice in training schools ([Kinos et al., 2015](#); [Simola, 2008](#)).

According to many researchers, the inability to provide up-to-date, ethically viable and diverse abilities to future school teachers is considered the biggest challenge of Finnish teacher education today ([Fornaciari and Männistö, 2017](#); [Kinos et al., 2015](#); [Raiker and Rautiainen, 2017](#)). The central issue concerns the question of how to create and provide know-how for teacher students to understand and respond to the diverse, dynamic challenges which arise in an unpredictable society ([Husu and Toom, 2016](#); [Opetushallitus, 2016](#)). Different teacher training units have had varying ideas about how to develop their degree programmes to tackle these challenges. In Jyväskylä, the requirements set by the rapidly changing society are taken into account by putting freshmen into smaller study sections called 'home-study groups'. The education in different home-study groups revolves around distinct pressure points of teaching and aspects connected to it, which are emphasised in the study group ([Jyväskylä University, 2018](#)). The Critical Integrative Teacher Education (CITE) programme, in which the emphasis is given to psychodynamic group and learning processes, is conducted as one of these Jyväskylä University home groups, and it is the research subject of this article.

When looking for content which refers to critical social pedagogical ideas in Finnish education, these can currently be found particularly in official educational documents, e.g. the national curriculum (see National Curriculum, 2004). Yet Finnish primary education has been constantly criticised for a lack of critical thinking and flexibility and for not having more practices which allow negotiation and the creation of non-discrimination as well as equality in classroom practices (see e.g. [Husu and Toom, 2010](#); [Männistö et al., 2017](#)). This implies, as pointed out by critical educational research, that there is a conflict between the ideals and everyday school reality (see [Simola, 2015](#)). This arguably also refers to the question of what kind of teacher agency Finnish teacher education promotes.

Transformational teacher agency and critical social pedagogy

In this article, with the concept of professional agency, we refer to the idea of how a teacher understands her/his professional role in relationship with her/his social surroundings and the society. This kind of idea about agency also includes, if required, the need to expand the boundaries of the profession (see [Eteläpelto et al., 2014](#)). Thus, broadly put, professional agency refers to the question of what kind of society the teachers build through their profession (see [Hargreaves, 1994](#)).

The traditional view about Finnish teachers' role in education, strongly defined by Uno Cygnaeus (1810–1888), is currently still emphasised in teacher education (e.g. [Fornaciari and Männistö, 2017](#); [Lindén, 2010](#); [Sitomaniemi-San, 2015](#)). According to Cygnaeus, teachers are supposed to be hardworking, diligent, well-behaved and seemingly neutral towards politics, as they are expected to pass on to the students values, views and knowledge which are, arguably, mutually accepted (hegemonic) (see [Ojakangas, 1997](#); [Rantala, 2010](#)). However, as previously mentioned, this view has been challenged today by more critical and transformative views about teaching. These views include concepts about socioconstructive learning, ideals about teachers as researchers and a demand for teachers who are critical and conscious of societal phenomena (see [Nikkola et al., 2013](#); [Sitomaniemi-San, 2015](#); [Fornaciari and Männistö, 2017](#)).

The transformative ideas about being a teacher are studied in this article within the framework of critical social pedagogy. In this framework, being a teacher is seen as including a critical and political orientation towards knowledge and as built upon open-mindedness towards diversity ([Freire, 1970/2018](#); [Hämäläinen, 2012](#); [Nivala and Ryyänen, 2013](#)). In critical social pedagogy, the core of the action forms around dialogue and within an endeavour to implement together theory and practical action, which includes contextualisation and cooperation. Teachers who use views stemming from critical social pedagogy are seen to be empathetic and understanding towards the diversity of the students. They see education as a holistic, emancipatory process, which has no clearly defined goals or outlines (see [Freire, 1970/2018](#); [Huttunen, 2009](#); [Hämäläinen, 2012](#)). Critical social pedagogy emphasises that it is important to learn to understand the sociocultural and political aspects of society in schools. The ideals of critical social pedagogy underline the fact that these aspects are as much pedagogical issues as they are societal. Thus, in critical social pedagogy, the relationship between power and citizenship is considered an important part of education (e.g. [Biesta, 2006](#); [Ford, 2017](#); [Giroux and McLaren, 2001](#); [Nivala and Ryyänen, 2013](#)). The goal of a critical and emancipatory educational approach is to educate social agents who are willing and able to collectively and in solidarity develop their own community as well as, these days, the whole world, towards being more equal and ecologically sustainable (e.g. [Biesta, 2006](#); [Husu and Toom, 2016](#)).

To understand the educational needs in today's world, (young) people need to be able to assimilate into their everyday lives perspectives which address issues such as multiculturalism, refugee movement, climate change, nationalism and populism ([Löfström et al., 2017](#); [Raiker and Rautiainen, 2017](#)). One cannot understand how cultural, political and economic questions develop by taking only a nation-state-centred perspective. Considering education for social change, this means that teachers need to address both local and global issues. Schools should be seen as places where all individuals learn to consider, as their right and responsibility, the active development of their local communities and the society. This means developing young people's skills of argumentation and dialogue, their autonomic knowledge seeking, solidarity and empathy, and their ability to evaluate information and different perspectives which people can adopt as well as the ability to understand how social structures and politics affect individuals' everyday lives. ([Biesta, 2006, 2010](#); [Giroux and McLaren, 2001](#); [Löfström et al., 2017](#)). This means emphasising skills and positive attitudes towards collaborative action, as it is quite hard for singular individuals to have an impact on society (see e.g. [Biesta, 2010](#); [Hämäläinen, 2012](#)).

Formal education plays an important role in considering the development of transformational agency, as these kinds of competences, attitudes and values need to be explicitly developed in every individual ([Giroux and McLaren, 2001](#); [Biesta, 2006, 2013](#); [Männistö et al., 2017](#); [Raiker and Rautiainen, 2017](#)). This is important, as studies have shown that in Finland, individuals usually acquire the above-mentioned competences mostly at home rather than in schools ([Elo, 2012](#)). For the professional agency of the teachers, this means that teachers need to be able understand how society and politics work and how they affect the everyday reality of education. Most importantly, though, teachers need to see education as something which provides the students with the ability to actively participate in building a socially and ecologically sustainable future ([Mezirow, 2009](#)). This kind of orientation towards teacher agency, as we have argued, means constant dialogue with students but also with other teachers and actors involved in education. It also means seeing society as ever-developing, thus producing a need to constantly critically evaluate and reflect upon what is being taught in schools and on why and how it is being taught. ([Brookfield, 2005](#)).

Critical integrative teacher education

Teacher education is often seen as a way to answer the problems which arise in society, and hence, teacher education is often developed in relation to the demands of society (Mikkola, 2002). However, the goals in developing teacher education have often remained only organisational, and changes have not necessarily happened on the level of educational content (Nikkola et al., 2013). In Finland, one of the most long-term pursuits in developing teacher education on the level of its content is the Critical Integrative Teacher Education (CITE) programme at the University of Jyväskylä. CITE has striven since 2003 to develop the knowledge of students in relation to self and social communities. It is a part of teacher education in Jyväskylä, and teacher students must apply to the programme before they begin their bachelor's studies. A group consisting of 13 students starts biannually and engages in the studies during the first two years of their teacher education, where they study most of their courses (approx. 70–80 ECTS points) in CITE. The rest of their studies are done together with teacher students from the other home-study groups. After the initial two years, it is possible to continue studies in CITE, and many students decide to do their bachelor's and master's thesis within the programme (Nikkola et al., 2013). For this reason, CITE can be seen as a broader home-study group programme than others (within which the studies in a home-study group end after the second year), which is why we call CITE an alternative teacher education model.

CITE was originally established to unify fragmented teacher education by reflecting and asking the relevant and underlying questions considering (formal) education. From the beginning, the idea has been that CITE is being constantly developed, since education in CITE is understood as a dynamic and constantly developing process. The name of the model refers not only to the critical and exploratory approach to teaching and learning but also to a strong subject integration. The underlying thought is that since the world is not divided into subjects, nor should school or teacher education be (Nikkola et al., 2013). Thus, by this reasoning, both CITE and social pedagogical ideals have critical, exploratory approach and a strong subject integration approach; school is not seen as separate from the rest of the society or its events (see Hämäläinen, 2012; Kornbeck and Jensen, 2009).

CITE is built upon psychodynamic theories (see e.g. Bion, 1961; Britzman, 1986, 2003, 2009). For example, group phenomena and teaching as a profession are viewed by focusing on the invisible, the unconscious and sometimes even the irrational aspects of education, which often stay in the shadow of the mainstream educational discourse. The core idea is that it is more important for teachers to *understand* the educational processes of a class or group than to *control* those groups through didactic techniques. The aim is to encounter the phenomena of learning and teaching on an everyday basis. This means that the content of the studies in CITE does not come from imagined situations of school life, but rather, it stems from the everyday situations and experiences of the home-study group. (Nikkola et al., 2013; Riihämä et al., 2017).

The study contents in CITE are viewed from two perspectives: (1) the general preconditions (e.g. the role of emotions and group dynamics in learning) and (2) the particular preconditions (e.g. the defining characters of different subjects, which direct the learning processes) of education. These preconditions of learning are then studied in an investigative manner. Then these perspectives are studied by forming a research community between the teacher students and their teachers. The aim is to create a collegial relationship between the members of the study group in order to dispel the traditional teacher-student roles. In the research community, the students are encouraged to participate in the planning of the education and in its evaluative processes (Nikkola et al., 2013).

Data and method

In this article, we analyse the principles and practices in the Critical Integrative Teacher Education programme in relation to the critical social pedagogical viewpoint. The purpose of education in CITE is to problematise what is being studied in teacher education and why and how it is being studied. By analysing CITE through a critical social pedagogical framework, we aim to answer the following questions:

How could teacher education be developed so that it prepares the future teachers to act as a force for social change?

- a Which elements of transformational agency has CITE supported in teacher students?
- b Are there elements of transformational agency which CITE has not been able to support in teacher students?

The studied group consisted of people who participated in CITE in 2015–2017. The group consisted of eleven teacher students and six teacher educators. The students were aged from 19 to 25, and the group included both men and women. Some students had had earlier studies, while others came to university straight from high school.

The data was collected ethnographically by one of the researchers (Matikainen), who observed all the CITE meetings (95) in 2015–2016 and half of the meetings (28) in 2016–2017. The data collection was realised through the observer-as-a-participant method (see [Metsämuuronen, 2005](#)), where the researcher was located in the same space as the study group during their meetings but did not interact with any member of the group. The data, which consists of a field diary, a research diary, students' study reports, self-evaluations and a few writings which were commissioned for the research, are part of broader research in which the learning processes and outcomes of CITE are in focus. The field diary is the largest and most important piece of the data, including over 300 pages of material. In this article, we will only use the data collected in the field diary. By analysing the data within a critical social pedagogical framework, we seek to reflect what kind of teacher agency is manifested in CITE. Finally, based on the results, we discuss how teacher education could be developed so that it would better support teachers' professional agency towards transformative ideals.

The analysis was realised as a data-driven content analysis conducted in two parts ([Hsieh and Shannon, 2005](#)). In the first part, the initial analysis, we sought out recurring themes related to how the students understood their societal role as teachers. The themes found during the initial analysis stem mostly from data gathered during the first year of observation. After the initial analysis, we thematised the data more precisely and analysed these themes in the framework of critical social pedagogy. Then the topics in the analysis were structured based on the recurring themes found when thematising the data. In the main analysis of the empirical data, we use the idea of transformational teacher agency, as formed in the context of critical social pedagogy, to interpret observations from the data. Through the analysis, we have aimed to understand how CITE's goals and educational methods foster transformational teacher agency.

CITE fostering transformational teacher agency

Next, we will focus on the empirical data and the analysis. The analysis is sectioned into subtitles referring to the themes found when thematising the data. With the themes, we illustrate the different phenomena linked to fostering transformational agency. The quotations used here are from the field diary. The students' names are pseudonymised, and teachers of the group are marked as Teacher 1, 2, 3 etc.

Critical self-reflection

Considering the educational content of CITE, a lot of room is given to the reflection upon one's own subjectivity. Critical self-reflection is an important ability concerning transformational teacher agency. Contrary to having transformational agency, the traditional role of teachers in Finland has been connected with conserving the status quo in the society (see [Lindén, 2010](#); also [Rantala, 2010](#)). Because of this, the traditional role does not include a critical attitude towards the teacher's profession or the contents of education ([Simola, 2015](#); [Gramsci, 2005](#)). But if the goal is to educate teachers who have a more critical and emancipatory stance towards education, the teachers must have the ability to understand and critically evaluate the social and societal dimensions of education and their own relationship with them. Critical self-reflection opens the possibility of seeing one's own values and ideologies better. This also opens up the possibility for one to take into consideration others' viewpoints, which again makes it easier for different individuals to collaborate: 'Should we (try to) move past the self-centred viewpoint and strive to understand that what is insignificant to me can be important for someone else' (Vesa 6 October 2015).

[Mezirow \(1990, 2009\)](#) sees that the critical reflection of subjective meaning-making, during which an individual's deeper modes of thinking and possibly ways of doing develop, is a consequential part of transformative learning. According to Mezirow, these important personal frames of reference give shape to

individual experiences and direct one's actions in the world. Then critical reflection may produce renewed frames of reference, which are more permissive, flexible and open to other people's experiences (Mezirow, 1990, 2009). The results of the analysis seem to imply that these kinds of goals are achieved during CITE, as the students' thinking could be seen shifting toward a more diversified stance: 'We are really privileged. We are accumulating human capital while becoming teachers. We need to grow as human beings to be able to raise other human beings' (Tytti 19 October 2015). The students often experienced these changes as very important for themselves and saw critical reflection drilling deep into their humanity. They often described the way CITE was not only about learning to become a better teacher but also about learning what it means to be a human.

The transformation

In Finnish teacher education, the social viewpoint has traditionally remained in the shadow of the (individual) psychological viewpoint (Simola, 2008, 2015; Sitomaniemi-San, 2015). In this regard, the group-oriented and communal standing points of CITE can create a new disposition by which to perceive education, as the students are explicitly guided to study the phenomena in relation to groups and communities.

Teacher 6 talks about school: 'There is a constant rush and no time to ponder. Also, people usually work (only) in small groups. The important question is how to weld the whole group together at least to some degree. These modes of operation are not properly reflected upon, and we should focus on changing this in teacher education'.

Teacher 4: [...] 'We talk about learning communities nowadays, where also the adults educate each other. Here you can practise it. Here you have the possibility to get hold of the dynamics'. (7 December 2015)

Even though CITE seems to have managed to develop a communal approach towards education, understanding social aspects of education does not remove the challenge caused by the difficult feelings of being a part of a group or society: 'It has been difficult [...] to experience and to understand at the same time. I understand the processes pretty well already, but I still feel... irritation for example' (Aila 24 April 2017). It seems that even though students' thinking transforms during CITE towards a more critical teacher agency, there is still the underlying fact that the students' diverse emotions, thoughts and modes of action cannot be separated from the learning process. These different modes of being challenge the individuals' and the group's learning, which brings uncertainty considering the transformation (see Biesta, 2013).

Hence, when evaluating CITE, it is important to ask on what level the transformation occurs. True transformation on the level of feelings and on everyday doing and being can take a significant amount of time, even though one's theoretical understanding and views about being a teacher may have changed. Deep emotional factors stemming from past experiences can also stand in the way of real change, even if the individual has the will, the knowledge and the need to change (see e.g. Klarner et al., 2011; Lanas and Kiilakoski, 2013; Taylor, 2017).

Teacher agency can also be viewed through an action-oriented perspective (cf. Goller and Harteis, 2017). In such a perspective, the focus is on the choices the people make as well as on their involvement and their active participation towards (social) change. In this respect, the effects of CITE have not been as clear. Although CITE has been able to evoke interested and (self-) reflective proficiency with respect to educational dispositions, it does not necessarily manifest itself in the actions of the students or the group. Heaney and Horton (1990) have also noted that transformative learning and the possibly notable changes it produces in an individual's thinking do not always show in everyday actions as clearly as one might assume: 'Aila describes how the practical being and doing has been poor [...], but the learning process has been rewarding' (7 December 2016). This was also observed in the research group, as the transformation was less visible amongst the concrete modes of action compared to the changes in the modes of thought. The students themselves also noted and reflected on this. They felt, for example, that

sometimes the critical attitude and the reflections in CITE turned into negativity, which does not in help solving actual everyday problems: ‘Tytti highlighting that the critical attitude has turned into negativity. “We see everything in a negative light. If there is a problem, we tend to dwell on it”’ (7 December 2016). Sometimes, on the other hand, for example during the period in the practice school, the students noticed that the norms of the school had tied their hands on several occasions: ‘During the practice period, I have thought about how this could be done differently and if I have the guts do so’ (Siru 23 November 2015).

Aila: ‘We criticise here, but [at the end of the day], it is on the shoulders of the individual to come up with a solution. There is no real place and time during the CITE education for us to bring out into the open if something bothers me and here is how it could be dealt with’. (7 December 2016)

The social perspective

The social aspects of education have received surprising little attention in Finnish teacher education. In CITE, though, the relation between the school and the society is an important subject of study. Studying these sorts of questions opens the possibility of constructing new ideas about being a teacher, which would include traits which connect with changing the society. In contrast, if schools are perceived to be demarcated from the rest of the society, it is impossible to see the reciprocal relation which exists between the two. If the society and the school are seen as inherently separate, it is understandable that with respect to teachers’ agency, there is no need to instil views about social change. As a result, there is a high likelihood that teachers in schools also reiterate and uphold harmful and exclusive norms of the society (see e.g. [Fornaciari and Männistö, 2017](#); [Löfström et al., 2017](#)).

Teacher 3: ‘Is it school’s job to adapt to or to change society? School also has a cultural goal, not only a mission to produce a labour force for society’s needs. Is the contemporary societal situation desirable? Is it working for everybody? There has consistently been an argument that social classes do not exist in Finland, but this seems not to be the case anymore. Do we want to teach that everybody does not have the same possibilities? These are major ideological questions, from which the teacher education often closes its eyes. Our choices have reasons and consequences’. (1 December 2015)

Assumptions about the social reality of schools and their teachers are easily taken for granted in teacher education, but in CITE, they are constantly being questioned. CITE’s critical-emancipatory approach fits well with the aims of transformational teacher agency as critical, and an emancipatory attitude towards the harmful practices of society is important when striving to educate teachers to work for social change ([Biesta, 2006](#); [Hämäläinen, 2012](#); [Nivala and Ryyänen, 2013](#)). In line with this, several students described how they had, for the first time in their lives, questioned the structures and practices of the society as well as the meaning of school with respect to these phenomena.

Vesa: ‘It is interesting to see what kind of pressure the school will get, when the labour life changes and schools must still educate for labouring’.

Mikko: ‘Maybe it is good that schools will not give a chance to live in a tube’.

Teacher 3: ‘These are key questions considering what are we teaching the children in schools. Nobody knows the future. The teacher’s profession has for long been like, ‘Well, there is religion, maths, reading and singing’. The teacher’s profession is in transformation. It raises the question about the meaning of school’s existence’. (26 January 2016)

Although, during the observation period, there was also content which leaned towards the more traditional view of the profession (focussing for example on didactics), the CITE students explained that their take on these contents was different from those in the other home-study groups. As a result, the more traditional views had decreased among the students during their time in CITE, and they started to see education as more clearly related with society. Sometimes, though, the transformation in the thinking of the students occurred so gradually that they themselves did not even realise it had happened. One student

(Varpu), who had wished in the beginning of her education for techniques to teach art ‘properly’, had in less than six months ended up with an almost completely different way of thinking. She noticed this when, in other courses which were not part of CITE, she wished for more freedom regarding her teaching and was unhappy with the more traditional approach and strictly bound rules. The other students in CITE made Varpu notice these changes.

Vilja and Aila ask whether Varpu’s thinking had changed from autumn, when she had wished for a more traditional teaching?

Varpu: ‘Yes, maybe, I didn’t even think about that’.

Teacher 3: ‘The purpose is to notice that they [the ideals of what is considered proper education] are based on completely different assumptions, and they also produce a different kind of understanding of what is possible to do in the teacher’s profession’. (9 February 2016)

As we have described, the critical-emancipatory orientation in CITE produced changes in teacher students’ thinking and in how the students viewed the relationship between school and the society. The results show that the CITE model fosters students’ critical self-reflection and understanding of groups regarding education. The students’ ability to understand schools in a social context also develops. The described changes in students’ thinking can be interpreted as a reforming and a creation of responsibility towards the teachers’ profession. However, CITE seems to struggle with transforming the students’ thinking and understanding into action. According to the data, feelings of inability, cynicism and a lacklustre ability to understand concretely how teachers can have an impact on society through their profession prevent a more complete transformation of the students’ everyday modes of action. In the final chapter, based on the data, we discuss how teacher education could better support the development of transformational teacher agency.

Discussion

In the context of Finnish teacher education, a critical social pedagogical orientation has had a minor role (e.g. [Rautiainen and Rähkä, 2012](#); [Simola, 2015](#)). One possibility for building a more critically and socially oriented teacher education may be to bring forth a stronger community perspective ([Hämäläinen, 2012](#)). Such a perspective emphasises the role of schools and their teachers in building the surrounding society. During teacher education, this would mean more cooperation with local organisations and communities, since being able to see how one’s own action can change one’s surroundings could promote social participation and emancipation ([Hämäläinen, 2012](#)). This kind of approach might also support action-oriented transformation by providing the possibility of trying out newly established ideas in reality. This could also help teachers understand and reflect more realistically upon the inertia in social relationships, which in turn might prevent the development of cynicism and feelings of inability. All in all, moving out of the ordinary educational context would encourage the recognition that the teaching profession is a societal one which does not occur only within the walls of the school. According to the analysis, these kinds of new ideas need to be established, since in its current form, CITE seems able to enable transformation with respect to self-reflection and group-dynamic processes, but it is not able to produce critical social pedagogical action-orientedness on the same level. More concrete, social pedagogically oriented goals could thus give the teacher students the proper tools to enable true transformation regarding their professional agency. This seems relevant, as in its current state, CITE struggles to guide the students’ transformation towards a new, more established disposition, which leaves the students baffled regarding what kind of professional agency could be developed in place of the traditional orientation. In conclusion, it seems that the transformational process needs to include concrete examples of how to act in a different manner and to demonstrate the results of these actions, which ideally stem from the students’ own experiences with everyday life (see [Brookfield, 2005](#); [Lanas and Kiilakoski, 2013](#)).

If the objective is to educate teachers who comprehend their role in the creation of a more sustainable and equal society, it is fundamental to acquire a deeper understanding of how to generate

and establish transformative views about the teacher's profession in the students. But it is hard to tell how critical thinking, learned during CITE, is actualised when the students move on to the working field (Nikkola et al., 2013). The cynical comments evidenced by the informants might indicate that CITE education has not properly accomplished its mission to develop thinking which includes a realistic but hopeful attitude towards influencing and changing the surrounding society through the teaching profession. If, at the end of the day, the transformation is not complete or is viewed as too hard or useless, the agency of the students might revert back to the traditional form when they enter working life.

Some of the students said that even though the goal in CITE is to foster group-oriented action, they thought that there was too much pressure on individuals to realise their ideas. And although there was a pursuit of equality between students and teachers in CITE, this process met with some unexpected problems. The goal of more equality frequently met resistance, as the students were not ready or willing to take an active and responsible role regarding their studies. This challenge most likely springs from the students' earlier experiences which had indicated that there was a clear distinction between students and teachers; this made the students easily retreat back to the role of obedient learners (Mäensivu, 2012; Rautiainen et al., 2018). One should also notice that giving more responsibility to the students does not remove the power relationship between students and teachers in the educational context but instead produces softer – but no less coercive – forms of power (Harni and Nikkola, 2015; also Brookfield, 2005).

As Teacher 3 stated, distinct approaches towards teachers' work directly impact what we see as possible in the teaching profession. If a teacher is seen as someone who merely transfers ideologies and content without any scrutiny, there is no real possibility of affecting the unwanted aspects of society through education. However, if education is seen as a means by which to build a more ecologically and socially sustainable future, the aim of teacher education should be to educate teachers who are professionally emancipated and who see that they have a real chance to have an impact on the society. As CITE is obviously able to foster the latter disposition at the intellectual level, then the next aim of the programme – and, we argue, of teacher education – should be to ask how to more permanently cultivate the transformation in future teachers' modes of action. As the earlier experiences from CITE and from the data of this research suggest, the action-oriented transformation is still currently met with resistance. Thus, the challenges brought up in this research should be taken seriously, and ways of doing things should be developed whereby the reasons behind the resistance are answered. This would mean that teacher education would see its goal as being the fostering of teacher agency, which would enable the teachers to work as educators for a social transformation.

List of abbreviations

CITE Critical Integrative Teacher Education

Funding

Jenny and Antti Wihuri foundation grant number 00160276 has made it possible for Männistö to work on this article.

Declarations and conflict of interests

Authorship statement

Matikainen:

1st author together with Männistö

-collected the data and made substantial contribution to the conception and design of the work; interpretation of data. Gave the major contribution towards the analysis of the article.

-drafted the work and revised it critically for important intellectual content.

-made final approval of the version to be published and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Männistö:

1st author together with Matikainen

- made substantial contribution to the conception and design of the work, interpretation of the analysis and towards the theoretical framework of the article.
- drafted the work or revised it critically for important intellectual content.
- made final approval of the version to be published and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Fornaciari:

3rd author

- made substantial contribution to the conception and design of the work and in developing the theoretical framework.
- made approval of the version to be published and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interests that relate to the submitted manuscript.

Ethics approval

The research complies in accordance to the Declaration of Helsinki. No separate ethics review was needed for the research according to the directions of Ethical Committee of Jyväskylä University.

Consent for publication

Signed and dated informed consent to publication has been collected from the research participants before data collection. Any relevant informed consent to publication and declaration forms are freely made available to the Editor(s) upon request.

All authors have given consent for publication and their contributions to the article.

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