Research Article

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Our transformative journey to become action researchers

<https://doi.org/10.2478/ijtr-2021-0002>

received 1 August, 2021; accepted 15 October, 2021

Abstract: During my (Hafiz) childhood in Bangladesh, I experienced the negative impact of the educational system. My experiences initiated a process of conscientization leading to values-driven activism through the establishment of Education for Development and Sustainability (EDS), a child-friendly community of practice, with Trine and Alamin. In encounters with Erling and Sigrid, we became aware that our activities were in accordance with action research based on cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2008). From that point of departure, we developed our own collaborative living theory.

In this paper, we explore the research question “How did we become action researchers and what is our driving force?” by using Stoller’s (1989) autobiographical narrative method to analyse selected, lived experiences. Sharing lived experiences and engaging in activism with each other and the EDS children became the base for our conscientization, radical empiricism and contemplating involvement in EDS. Value based activism can create empathic relations and emotions through shared engagement for social justice and the realization that we create a shared reality. Hence, conducting action research with children/youth is in our experience a key to sustainable development. However, to increase the transparency and validity of our research, we needed to explore how our experiences and actions have influenced our values, emotions and decisions to conduct research, our research topic and the research in itself. Therefore, we have engaged co-researchers and participants to critically question the research practice and made it open for

discussion and comments in order to see alternative ways of interpreting situations and processes.

Keywords: Conscientization; Radical empiricism; Libertarian education; Value driven activism; Action research based on cooperative inquiry

1 Introduction

In my (Hafizur Rahman, called Hafiz) childhood, I experienced social injustice towards children (myself and others) and economically poor people. This initiated my journey of conscientization (Freire, 1970) and value driven activism. Later, I invited Md Alamin and Trine Lund to my initiative, and mentored them to mentor children and young people to become agents of change through conscientization and action-reflection cycles. In 2005, we established the Education for Development and Sustainability (EDS: www.facebook.com/EDS2005/) in Khulna, Bangladesh, and since then we have conducted research on our practice. When encountering the professors Erling Krogh and Sigrid Marie Gjøtterud, we became aware that our research was in accordance with action research based on cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2008) where we developed our cooperative living theory (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; Gjøtterud & Krogh, 2012). This perspective enabled us to describe our research professionally, and further develop our conscientization and practice.

According to Krogh (2017), there is a need to increase the legitimacy of action research by documenting how action researchers’ preferences, beliefs and values influence the standpoint for their research. Krogh (2017) proposes to do this by enhancing the consciousness and transparency about three basic premises of action research. Firstly, lived experiences and related realizations generate emotions, which serve as a driving force and motivation for action. Hence, we become conscious of, and make visible, our standpoint for the research by exploring our own lived experiences that have influenced our values, emotions and decisions to conduct research and the research topic. Secondly, our decisions and con-

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sequent actions are situated, and the body is the selective and acting subject in a social, historical, cultural, structural and physical context. We can therefore enhance our consciousness by becoming aware of own and others' lived experiences, and the structural and cultural conditions underlying lived experiences in line with radical empiricism and conscientization (Freire 1970; Jackson 1989) and by contemplating involvement including all human senses (Krogh 2017), where researchers participate in the everyday activities in the research field and interact with the participants. This may enhance shared experiences, emotional understanding and mutual respect which may promote the socially shared understanding that we can decide, undertake and evaluate actions (Krogh, 2017). Thirdly, the action researcher is involved with the body, will, feelings and thoughts in the research field, and ought to document and be transparent about own role, including underlying reasons for decisions, in the research process.

In this paper, we aim to increase the transparency of our action research by exploring 'How did we become action researchers and what is our driving force?'. Inspired by Krogh (2017), we use Stoller's (1989) autobiographical narrative method to explore selected, lived experiences to make the feelings, values, meanings and related decisions generated from these experiences visible, and identify how this shaped the standpoint and direction of our action research. We make analytical generalizations (Yin, 2014) by using our story as a case from which we generate theory on the development of our action research and scientific standpoint.

2 Hafiz starts questioning the system

When I (Hafiz) started school in the mid-80s in Bangladesh, my education was based on rote learning, where we had to memorize and recite information the teachers wrote on the blackboard. Freire (1970) termed this system banking education, where students are oppressed and treated as objects to be disciplined and filled with information they have no relation to. This is still a feature of the contemporary education system in Bangladesh (Prodhan, 2016), as in other post-colonial educational systems like Tanzania (Ahmad, Krogh & Gjøtterud, 2014), hence there is a need for what Freire (1970) called libertarian education. This is based on critical reflection where the learners question their experienced reality, realize that they can create knowledge and use it as agents of change. When I later read Paulo Freire's (1970) book *Pedagogy of the*

Oppressed, I came to view that the purpose of education is to develop knowledge, skills and values to create a more human world, and learning becomes an ongoing, never-ending process.

The effect of the banking education for me was that I struggled to learn theory without context and meaning, so when the teachers frequently told me to answer questions in front of the class and I could not answer, they beat me, sometimes until I was bleeding, and motivated the class to laugh. The teachers said I only had cow dung in my head and was unable to learn, so I better quit school and start driving a rickshaw. I was so afraid that I sometimes peed my pants, and had nightmares of a teacher killing me. When I asked my family for help, they said that teachers must beat children to make them learn, and my family beat me for the same reason. I lived in a large, extended family where the older family members monitored to find when I did something wrong and then they either punished me or told my parents to punish me. Once I got angry at an older family member and told him to stop beating me. As a consequence, he got angry, asked if I thought I could argue with him who was older than me, and then he beat me so I fell to the ground and attempted to kick me like a football. Luckily for me I escaped, but his foot hit another person in the head, so she fell unconscious. Due to such experiences, I became afraid that if I would become angry or argue against adults, they would beat me more, so I kept the frustration and stress to myself. Nobody tried to understand the immense mental and physical pain and fear I felt due to adults' punishment, harassment and negative comments, and how it destroyed me inside and prevented me from learning. Therefore, my aim became to reduce the chances of getting punished and to seek environments where I would feel good. I got beaten at school and at home, so to reduce the beating I decided to quit school. I thought that as long as my family did not know, I would be safe. My younger friends told their parents they went to school, but instead they went to the Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET). I decided to join them. I felt so happy and free in the good environment at KUET where the students enjoyed free time to play football and Carrom board, decided themselves when to study and nobody beat them. This made me question the authoritarian system I encountered at school and at home, asking myself why we could not enjoy learning and playing in school too.

My other strategy to reduce the beating was to spend as much time as possible away from home. Since my childhood I enjoyed being with children, so I spent my time playing with my friends in the streets. I also invented stories and jokes, and the children laughed, said I was

fun to be with and good at telling stories and asked me to continue telling more stories. In my stories, children were heroes who reached their goals despite challenges and got acknowledged by their family. I realize now that I told about what I dreamed to experience myself. I was older than the children I played with, so I became their leader and they respected and looked up to me. Adults used to look for my faults and punish me, but my younger friends showed through words and actions that they acknowledged, listened to and liked me. With my friends I felt safe and I felt good that someone valued and needed me. This contributed towards fulfilling my needs of being seen, heard and valued as a person, and showed, in line with Maslow (1970), that our needs are driving forces for action. So, based on these experiences, I started visioning a child-friendly environment where children felt heard, seen and understood, were free to take own decisions on when to study and enjoyed learning and play.

Since my childhood I have been observing and reflecting, trying to find meaning and understand situations. I do not have a clear answer as to why I did that, but maybe it became my strategy to comprehend and make the situation I endured meaningful and manageable and find ways to improve it. I wished that adults would listen to me and respect my opinions. When I observed that adults listened to and respected my family members who studied at university, I made the link that if I got education, adults would also listen to me. My observations at KUET, where the students took their own decisions and nobody beat them, supported my theory. The freedom the KUET students had really appealed to me.

I realized that education was the key to my dream, so when I heard the highest education was a PhD, I told a teacher I would get that degree. But he beat me, as he thought I made fun of him. However, a thirst for education grew in me, so I convinced my father to let me shift school as I thought with teachers who did not harass and punish me, I may be able to learn. Due to my bad grades, my father thought I would not become anything in this life, so he admitted me to a madrasa where I would learn Religion and Arabic and hence get a better life after death, as he thought. The teachers in the madrasa were also beating me, but I did get the third place in my first exam. The education system in Bangladesh is extremely competitive, so when children get third place or better, their parents believe their children will become engineers or medical doctors and fulfil the dreams of their parents. My parents thought the same, so they felt proud, talked positively about me to others and started acknowledging me. I also felt proud and enjoyed my parents' positive attention, so I did not tell them we were three students

in class. However, this made me realize that I could get positive attention from my parents if I did well in school, so I started going more regularly. Most people thought I would never complete grade 5, but on the grade 5 board exam I got such good grades that I received an educational scholarship. That was a turning point where I realized that I could manage to get a good education.

I continued facing challenges to get education throughout my life, and I nearly had to stop my education when a teacher did not allow me to take the Secondary School Certificate (grade 10 final exam), but I persuaded my father to convince the headmaster to let me sit for the exam. Again, my results were so good that I gained a scholarship for further studies. Hence, I learned from my own experience to believe in myself and never give up. Looking back, I see that, without knowing anything about action research, I used cycles of acting and reflecting about actions and situations to look for achievable solutions, saw challenges as learning opportunities and never gave up, so now I have a PhD. I have, as I will mention later in this article, used my story to inspire children/youth to believe that anything is possible, because as humans we have possibilities to choose although we are situated (Crossley, 2001). In our encounters with the world, we experience and seek meaning. Our perception of what gives us meaning influences our decisions and related actions (Merleau-Ponty, 1994). We are also influenced by our lived experience, our socio-cultural background, capital, power and status, but we are not determined (Jackson, 1989; Crossley, 2001). Hence, our situated freedom to choose, decide and act is one standpoint of my practice.

3 Implementing the vision of a child-friendly community

I had many, younger friends living in economically poor conditions, and due to my realization that education was the key to a better life, I tried to motivate them to go to school, but they were not interested. Due to my interest in football, I created a team with my young friends, and we won local matches. One day, for reasons I do not know, I asked my friends: "Who has been to school today?" I only allowed those who had been to school to continue playing, but when the rest were about to leave, I said they had to stay and watch the game if they wanted to continue being on our team. They stayed, and when I played deliberately bad, they became eager to play to ensure the victory of our team, and finally said: "Hafiz, if we can play

today, we promise that we will go to school tomorrow". I agreed, and they started going to school. I realized how my decisions could influence the children's emotions and direct their will towards education by using play as a carrot. Hence, I initially used a form of external motivation, but as I became increasingly engaged in the children's lives and more conscious of humanistic values, as described below, I started mentoring for inner motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

My economically poor friends faced discrimination and humiliation, as many people assumed them to be valueless, dirty and thieves, but I respected, trusted and treated my friends and their families as equals. As we experience the world through our body and senses (Merleau-Ponty, 1994), we may understand others' lived experiences better when we gain similar experiences ourselves (Krogh, 2017). Thus, sharing my friends' lived experiences of discrimination and struggle for education and basic needs by living in their home, helping them prepare for exams, participating in their everyday activities, including meals, and feeling that they considered me as family, I developed empathy, humanism and a will to engage myself in their struggle (Freire, 1970). Hence, I took action for social justice and child rights by starting to teach and mentor 20 children, Alamin being one of them. This way of sharing lived experiences and engage in activism became the base for our conscientization, radical empiricism and contemplating involvement (Krogh, 2017) in EDS.

When implementing my vision of a child-friendly community, I did not want any child to suffer the way I did, but, on the contrary, I wanted them to feel valued, seen, heard and to enjoy learning and playing. Hence, I spent a lot of time with them and let them decide our activities. Therefore, I developed emphatic relations with them and learned about their psychology, needs and interests. They put makeup on me. We danced and played games and theatre. The parents of the children considered play as a waste of time and wanted their children to study continuously. In this way, the children's time with me became their space free from the pressure at home and school. As I had felt the pain of adults' misbehaviour myself, I felt so happy when I made my children laugh and smile.

I wanted the children to feel how learning could be enjoyable, meaningful, comprehensible and manageable (Antonovsky, 2012), and decided to base my practice on insights I had generated from own, situated experience, in line with action research based on cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2008). When I had struggled to learn from my teachers, I asked older friends to teach me. When the teacher was a friend, I experienced that the learning environment felt safe. I felt free to ask questions. Learn-

ing became enjoyable and manageable (Antonovsky, 2012). My children did not believe they were able learners, because their families and their schoolteachers had told them so. In order to make them emotionally and mentally ready to learn, I created a psychologically safe (Garvett, 2004) environment where I played with them, told jokes and stories so they laughed, and their body and mind became relaxed. Then, when I had their focus, I started teaching.

However, despite of my determination to practice love and empathy, I had assimilated negative behaviour from my culture (Mezirow, 2003). Sometimes, I got irritated and slapped my students. When they cried, I felt the pain I used to feel when someone beat me. Therefore, I apologized. This increased my consciousness of the discrepancy between my espoused and practiced values, and that I was a living contradiction (Whitehead, 2013), so I decided to improve my practice.

I had also experienced that I learned best when I made the theory meaningful and comprehensible by connecting it to my lived experiences (Antonovsky, 2012). Hence, I used practical examples from the children's everyday lives and created rhymes and songs to make the information meaningful, fun and easy to remember. My students started getting good grades in school and when I saw how they felt mastering, increased self-confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), as described by my former student Md Mohon Mia (see below), I also felt mastery and gained confidence in that I could mentor for transformative learning. So, when my parents wanted me to stop teaching and focus on my own studies, I decided to teach in secret on our rooftop, and when my father came home from work, my students climbed down the palm tree at the back of our house and ran home.

One of the young people with whom I worked was Md Mohon Mia. As a child he worked in the jute mills. His parents could not afford to pay for extra tuition, which is needed to pass exams in Bangladesh, and asked me for help. When Mohon's father lost his job and moved back to the village, I offered Mohon to stay in my home. That time I studied day and night, so I was happy to have company and someone to play with during my breaks. Mohon and I went around in our village to collect Mohon's friends and brought them to my home. I taught Mohon and he taught his friends. In the beginning, Mohon expressed that he did not believe he would be able to learn and get education and he was worried about his future. Now Mohon has MBA and a good job in Australia. To read Mohon's account about my influence on his education and life, please go to (<https://www.facebook.com/EDS2005/posts/633843190011479>).

Figure 1: Alamin and me after a football match with EDS children. The picture shows our close bond and our happiness in playing with the children.

4 Children teaching children

I experienced that most adults did not listen to nor trust their children to take decisions, but controlled them by giving orders, physical punishment, humiliation and criticism. Hence, many children were afraid of adults in general, and of their teachers in particular. The children felt valueless, like a burden to their family and society; they experienced a lack of control over their own lives, and an inability to improve the situation, which created stress. I could relate to this. But, I had also experienced that I could take decisions and act to improve my situation, so I decided to mentor children for empowerment by giving them responsibility to teach and mentor other children. I therefore asked Alamin (who was 14 years old) to teach and mentor the younger children in our group when I went to study at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) in 2005.

I (Alamin) had been learning from Hafiz's way of mentoring children for many years, and he was like a caring father who helped me to get education and protected me from punishment and criticism from others. When he

asked me to teach and mentor children, I did not find it meaningful, as I believed nobody would learn from me, but I agreed to try because of everything he had done for me. Hafiz called me on average three hours daily from Norway to mentor me in action-reflection cycles, help me plan to teach, play with and mentor the children, motivated me to feel confident to implement the plan, reflect, improve and try again. Hafiz mentored me to use the methods he had developed to create a friendly teacher-student relation, mentally prepare the children for learning and explain the theory with practical examples. The children enjoyed so much being with me that they started coming in at 6am, one hour ahead of class, and increasingly more children came.

I did not see myself as a teacher and felt I was just playing with the children, but when they got among the top grades in the school exams, and prior to coming to me they used to fail or get low grades, I felt mastery, increased self-confidence and self-efficacy. By teaching and mentoring children I came into presence (Biesta, 2005) and developed identity as a teacher (Illeris, 2014), hence teaching and mentoring became meaningful, comprehensible and manageable (Antonovsky, 2012).

I faced a lot of pressure, criticism and even death threats, from people trying to stop me from teaching, but when I lost confidence and motivation, Hafiz always helped me to regain it and continue. He was available day and night, listened and helped me find solutions.

I developed emphatic relations with my students and learned about their challenging lives. So, when I saw them waiting for me to teach them, and realized they depended on me for education and a better life, I felt responsible (Levinas, 1991) to teach the best way I could so they would experience joy and mastery of learning. I put on a smile, became present, and forgot my own challenges. I worked holistically (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) with my students to find what impacted their learning and how I could reduce the negative influences which made the children lose confidence, interest in school and eventually risk dropping out. For this reason, I visited my students' homes to make their parents aware of the negative consequences of physical and psychological punishment, as well as the importance of supporting their children for education, create a friendly relation with them and a good learning environment. I learned from Hafiz to use metaphors and storytelling, share my story and other local examples to relate the information to the parents' reality and create understanding and meaning (Krogh, 2017). Many parents realized the value of education, so now their children, who would formerly have been used for child

labour, were now studying at university, or working and economically supporting their parents.

From my early upbringing I had learned to assimilate the habit to quickly believe and react to what people said without reflecting or checking its validity (Mezirow, 2003), and this had created problematic situations. Hafiz mentored me in self-examination by encouraging me to discuss my experiences with him, to reflect on my own actions and their consequences, as well as on alternative ways to act and think. From this I learned to reflect critically on my own behaviour, to see situations from multiple perspectives, to listen in order to understand the involved people's feelings and opinions, and to try to enable them to find solutions together. When I applied this skill to help my students solve problems they encountered, we got good results, which increased my self-confidence and self-efficacy. Hence, I took on an increasing number of initiatives, and started advocating for child rights with headmasters, schoolteachers, local leaders, police and army to ensure children/youth's safety at home, school and on the way to school. I brought children/youth with me to mentor them in practical advocacy work. Parents started contacting me to get help to solve family problems, and people of different religious and socio-economic backgrounds invited me to religious ceremonies and family celebrations as they respected me and felt I was like their family.

Also newspapers and TV stations were interested to see and learn how we mentored children to teach children and developed change agents in EDS. I also realized that I was a valuable teacher and mentor when journalists and TV stations asked to interview me as a representative of EDS. When the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation sent a journalist to write about EDS (Miji, 2008), Mashranga TV made a documentary about EDS (www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ29hpeBnDI) and I was interviewed by the national Bangladesh TV (www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PlzgCxqwsQ), I realized that what I did in EDS was important and that my volunteer work as a teacher and mentor inspired people nationally and internationally.

5 Trine gets engaged in value driven activism and action research

When I (Trine) learned that Hafiz, my classmate at the NMBU, mentored vulnerable children to teach and mentor children, I was interested to learn more and to become engaged, because I had higher education in the field of international development and humanitarian organiza-

tional work. Hafiz's focus on empowerment, humanity and empathic relations as driving forces for sustainable development, not money, resonated with me, but still, I asked if I could support his initiative economically, as I did not see how I could otherwise provide support. Hafiz politely declined my offer, and asked me to call his children instead, but that did not seem meaningful to me (Antonovsky, 2012) as I did not believe my call would influence the children or bring development. Nor did it feel manageable (Antonovsky, 2012) to call the children, because I did not feel comfortable as I assumed they would not understand my English, and I did not know what to talk to them about. In hindsight, I see that the mainstream idea that money is the main remedy for development unconsciously limited me in thinking what role I could play in development. When Hafiz mentored me in developing a relation to the EDS children, as described below, I experienced conscientization. Through cooperation with Hafiz, Alamin and the EDS children, I realized that a key to sustainable development is mentoring for conscientization and liberating education where we all learn and create a more human world together. And I realized that I could play a role in that process.

After some time, I decided to call one child to show Hafiz that I had faith in his method of children teaching children, as I realized that people in his community in Bangladesh did not believe children could teach, and they criticized Hafiz for mentoring children to teach children. Hence, I called Ibrahim, a grade 5 student who was teaching grade 1 students. I still did not believe my call would have any impact on Ibrahim, but the next day, Ibrahim excitedly told Hafiz about his new friend in Norway (me) and said that although people laughed and said he could not teach as he was a child, Trine said he was a teacher, so it was true. Then I started realizing how my acknowledgement of children as teachers, mentors and resources for their society could increase their self-confidence and self-efficacy, so I called Alamin and other children to see the effect. They did not understand everything I said, but they understood that I gave them time and saw them as resources, which increased their motivation for, and confidence in, completing their education and help other children to do the same. Instead of asking me for money and letting me become a donor, Hafiz mentored me to come into presence (Biesta, 2005) as an action researcher conducting value driven activism by giving me responsibility to mentor children for empowerment.

The more I talked with Alamin and the children, the more they inspired and impressed me. I realized their strength to overcome obstacles, thirst for learning and courage to take initiatives to help others. Hafiz, Alamin

and I established EDS in 2005, and in 2009 I went to Bangladesh to share lived experiences with my EDS children. I spent five weeks with them, visited their homes, took part in their everyday lives, played and enjoyed time with them. None of them ever asked me for money, but asked me to share my knowledge with them. So, when I later studied practical-pedagogical education (PPU) at the NMBU, Alamin asked me to mentor him to become a better teacher so he could help more children/youth to get education. Alamin, the EDS children and I developed empathic relations. They called me to share their successes and challenges, I listened and shared my life with them, so we supported and learned from and with each other.

Our strong rationale for our values-based activism, and the development of EDS, is shown in newspaper and magazine articles published in Norway, China and Bangladesh (Rahman, 2015; Hasan, 2011; Hageskal, 2011; Løvdaal, 2016; Eskelund, 2011; Eskelund & Lund, 2009).

6 EDS community of practice and cooperative action research

From 2005, we (Hafiz, Trine and Alamin) conducted research in EDS. We kept logs, photos, videos and transcribed conversations with Alamin and the EDS children/youth (Rahman et al, 2021). We also arranged focus group discussions with the EDS children/youth and their parents on the effects of EDS. We were aware how our decisions continuously influenced the interactions between us (researchers) and our research field, and how our influence in the field in return influenced us as researchers (Laplantine, 2015; Pine, 2015), so we frequently discussed and documented the transformative processes we had experienced, the EDS children/youth and their parents, and our mutual influence on each other. However, the consciousness that our values-based activism was in line with Freire's (1970) concept of conscientization and libertarian education, and that we conducted action research, evolved later, during encounters with Erling and Sigrid during our PPU studies at the NMBU. In the following sections, we will describe our process of conscientization as action researchers.

We (Hafiz, Alamin and Trine) trusted the EDS children/youth and this trust made us engage in their struggle, in line with Freire's (1970) concept of humanization. Hence, we also viewed empowerment as libertarian education (Freire, 1970) where the EDS children/youth, in partnership with us, realized we created a reality through

common reflection and action. So, together we developed EDS to become a practice community where the EDS children/youth, and ourselves as researchers, conducted research together on own practice to improve it and develop educational knowledge, in line with pragmatic action research (Elliott, 1991; Stenhouse, 1975). Our way of conducting action research resembles the four phase co-operative inquiry by Heron and Reason (2001), with a fifth phase added by Gjøtterud and Krogh (2012).

First, we "explore an agreed area of human activity" (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 170), which for us was "How do I improve my practice?" Secondly, we planned our actions separately and together and focused on how to improve our individual and common practice. Thirdly, we fully immersed and engaged ourselves in the experience (Heron & Reason, 2001) through radical empiricism (Jackson, 1989) and participatory observation. Radical empiricism emphasizes the presence of the researcher and all phenomena in a research situation. Therefore, the research design and methodology should include the researcher's transparent self-inspection, all kinds of human experiences and the impressions from different human senses, not only the visual sense and verbal expressions. Hence, we observed each other, recorded the experience of own and each other's process and outcome and became co-subjects in the research (Heron & Reason, 2001). We (Hafiz and Trine) had weekly meetings with Alamin and the EDS children/youth, where we mentored them through action-reflection cycles to identify needs, plan, act and reflect. We used our observations (through Skype and in person when we visited) of them teaching and mentoring, videos, pictures and their own description of their practice, as starting points for reflection. We mentored them for empowerment through dialogical theory and cultural synthesis (Freire, 1970) by working in "communion" with them, as one family, based on love and understanding, where there was no "us" and "them".

We repeated phase two and three multiple times before entering phase four where we reflected on our initial questions and experiences and analysed the process. We reflected individually, together and with our EDS children/youth on "How can we improve our practice?" and developed our cooperative living theory (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; Gjøtterud & Krogh, 2012). We documented and reflected upon the development of our practice and driving values so our living theory became visible and conscious (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002), and investigated contradictions between our espoused and practiced values in an open and questioning way (Rahman et al, 2021). Thus, we used critical research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; 2005), drawing on Habermas' critical theory, and

action research's emancipating potential and dialectical thinking. By reflecting on each other's guiding practice, we developed a common practice and co-operative action research (Heron & Reason, 2001; 2008).

Finally, we had an ongoing discussion amongst ourselves, with the aim of analysing our process from a meta-perspective. Erling and Sigrid acted as mentors and critical friends in this analysis, asking us questions about our driving forces for our action research: What were the values, beliefs and experiences which had influenced our decision of research topic, methods and our roles in the action research? What had been our driving force to continue our action research, and manage to do it in a collaborative way, despite numerous challenges? Example of challenges are distance, different cultures and language amongst ourselves (Alamin, Hafiz and Trine), and between us and our EDS children, and challenges we faced in Bangladesh and the local community where EDS is located.

We aimed to understand our practice better by theorizing it and by making the theory practical so it will become useful for others conducting co-operative action research for system change with children/youth. An example is our transformative, collaborative living theory, as described in Rahman *et al* (2021), where we attempted to show how our collaborative reflection on our practice led us to change it, and how our change influenced change in behaviour and reflection of the EDS youth we were mentoring.

Throughout the process, we followed Winter's (1989) six principles for conduct of action research as a base for our research into own living theory and data interpretation: reflexive critique, dialectical critique, collaborative resource, risk, plural structure, and theory-practice transformation. We attempted to show this by making the context for our study explicit, critically questioning our practice and taking the risk to make it open for discussion and comments from the EDS children/youth and research colleagues to see alternative ways of interpreting situations and processes.

7 Realizing that we were conducting action research

When I (Trine) studied PPU at the NMBU and saw the resemblance between Erling and Sigrid's research among orphans in Tanzania (Gjølterud *et al*, 2015) and our EDS research, I asked if the professors would like to meet Hafiz to learn about EDS. When Erling and Sigrid heard how we mentored EDS children/youth for transformation, they

excitedly said we were doing action research. We became interested in learning more, so we read action research articles they proposed to us, and the entire curriculum of a PhD action research course Sigrid conducted. When discovering that the articles described concepts and methods we were using in EDS, we gained confidence in that we were conducting action research and that we were action researchers, and felt empowered to be able to use action research vocabulary to describe our research more precisely.

Erling and Sigrid treated us (Hafiz and Trine) like action researchers, which also influenced us to develop that identity. For example, when I (Hafiz) studied PPU at the NMBU, Erling and Sigrid invited me to present EDS as a case of action research twice for the PPU students and allowed the PPU students Hilde Iren Norvalls and Signe Aanby to do teacher training and action research in EDS with Alamin and me as local supervisors. Inspired by being an action researcher, and the need for action research for development in Bangladesh, I presented EDS as a case of action research to professors and students at the Khulna University in Bangladesh.

Since the initiation of EDS, we (Hafiz, Alamin and Trine) conducted research and planned to publish scientific articles. Previously, we (Hafiz and Trine) had published scientific articles. Our former perception was that the researchers should not influence the research nor be present in the article, and the focus should be on results, preferably statistics generated by surveys, validated by similar results from other studies. The first time we told Sigrid and Erling about our EDS research, we focused on results and numbers. Still, our mentors encouraged us to describe our role in the research, the mutual influence between the people involved in the research, and our driving forces for involving each other in the learning processes and organizational activities. They also wanted us to elaborate on how we had managed to run EDS as

Figure 2: Hafiz presenting EDS as a case of action research to PPU students at the NMBU.

a co-operative action research for so many years despite challenges of distance, language and culture.

We tried to follow Erling and Sigrid's suggestions to reflect more deeply on our practice. After several drafts and long discussions over several years, we presented the first draft to Erling and Sigrid. They mentored with love (Gjötterud, 2009), respect and with a focus on empowerment; they had faith in that we would be able to publish action research articles, and they motivated and gave feedback in ways that made us feel confident. They mentored us in their free time, were available when we needed them, and were patient with our learning process. We saw them as role models, and used what we learned from them to improve our mentoring in EDS.

We had several meetings with Erling and Sigrid where their questions and excitement about our research and transformative learning increased our curiosity to explore our practice deeper. Finally, we felt able to explain our living theory (Rahman et al, 2021) and how we had developed it through realizing ourselves as being living contradictions whose feelings and values impact our decisions. We also felt able to express how our shared lived experiences build trust and shared understanding that we can act, evaluate and improve our actions, and how this enables us to co-create a learning community and our society. It was challenging to free us from the way we had assimilated from academia that research should be presented (Mezirow, 2003), but when we used the professional action research concepts and vocabulary to describe our research, the article became more alive, and we gained confidence in being action researchers. We see action research as a way to become conscious of what assimilated thoughts, assumptions and behaviour uphold current systems, so we can take empowered and improved actions and co-create a more just and sustainable commu-

nity through action-reflection cycles. Our action research has shown that vulnerable children/youth can do that. Hence, when this article is published, it will acknowledge the volunteer activity of the EDS children/youth so their community may realize that the EDS children/youth are developing their community through action learning/research.

After reading through the draft of this article, I (Erling) became proud and impressed. When Trine and Hafiz introduced Sigrid and me for the history of EDS, I associated the efforts and outcomes of EDS with well-known Norwegian fairytales about the poor boy who wins the princess and the kingdom without any resources except empathy, intelligence, creativity and perseverance. Their story in this article shows me that Trine, Hafiz and Alamin transfer similar qualities and capacities in the development of their living theories as in their humanistic efforts to improve the living conditions and future possibilities of deprived children in Bangladesh. In addition, I am proud of their use of my book chapter from 2017. To a large degree, I have experienced that the huge and increasing amount of academic publications disregard assumptions about existence of a human soul, and the significance of compassion for creating a more human world and feelings as the core characteristic of human beings. I addressed this challenge related to academic endeavours, amongst them action research (Krogh, 2017). In my opinion, Trine, Hafiz and Alamin have found a scholarly way to elaborate and transform this challenge into a powerful living theory for collaborative action research. In the spirit of humanistic pragmatism (Dewey, 1905), Trine, Hafiz and Alamin have developed a useful living theory based on empathy, compassion and contemplating involvement including all senses. I look forward to further cooperation.

I (Sigrid) am happy to see the transformative educational practice and research to which Trine and Hafiz have dedicated their time and competence, being conveyed for others to learn from. The persistence they show in following their values for social change is an inspiration. Their practice shows how it is possible to struggle towards what Korthagen and Verkuyl (2002) expresses as one of the central aims of education, "to ensure that students of every race, social class, sex and age are aware of, and give shape to, their own inner potential, strength, talents, value, and dignity, whereby others, including teachers, can provide support and guidance" (p. 44). I am grateful that my contribution in supporting Trine and Hafiz's untiring work for the children and youth in EDS has influenced them to research their practice, and I am in turn influenced by the hope they create that each of us can contribute to social change for the common good. An attitude of mutual open-

Figure 3: Zoom meeting with Erling, Sigrid, Hafiz and Trine. We were discussing our action research and development of scientific articles.

ness, curiosity, and gratitude for being able to share time and struggle, learning together and from each other, seem central to transformative learning and research (Gjølterud & Ahmad 2018).

8 Conclusion

Looking back at our shared journey to become action researchers, we recognize driving forces that have enabled us to continue developing our practice in EDS despite challenges. We are driven by a strong sense of social justice, evolved through contemplating involvement, conscientization and radical empiricism through our situated practice in EDS. Our empathic relations to each other and the EDS children/youth based on love and trust, have enabled us to treat each other as resources, mentor each other to look for learning potentials in challenging situations and realize that we co-create a shared reality. Hence, we are all engaged in the struggle to create a more human world. We are driven by the desire to learn in order to improve our practice of mentoring vulnerable children/youth and the economically poor, to realize and fulfil their potential as human beings through libertarian education. So, we conduct self-examination, and do research together with the EDS children for mutual learning and conscientization.

Our standpoint, based on experience, is that as humans we are free to choose, although our choices are situated. This is the core of our strong faith in individual and community transformation, and our belief that everything is possible.

These viewpoints from values-based activism have influenced our research, which is in line with action research based on cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2008) based on our cooperative living theory (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; Gjølterud & Krogh, 2012).

In our experience, action research based on conscientization, contemplating involvement and radical empiricism where researchers act as mentors and conduct research together with vulnerable children/youth is a key to sustainable individual and community development. Value based activism can contribute to action research by encouraging the development of empathic relations and emotions through shared engagement for social justice and a more human world. Through values-based activism, children/youth can develop knowledge, values and skills needed to improve their own and others' livelihood, and learning can become meaningful when they apply their knowledge as agents of change. However, engaging

in values-based activism may challenge the validity and reliability of the action research related to the activism. According to Krogh (2017), social researchers impact their research because their values and emotions influence their decisions to conduct research, their research topic and their role in the research. So, to increase the transparency and validity of action research, researchers may, as we have attempted to do in this paper, explore their own experiences that have influenced their values, emotions and decisions to conduct research and the research topic, and their role in the research. A way to enable a meta-perspective and objective view on the research, is, in line with Winter's (1989) principles of risk, reflexive and dialectical and critique in action research, to engage co-researchers and participants to critically question the research practice and make it open for discussion and comments in order to see alternative ways of interpreting situations and processes.

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