

*Maija Lanas*

SMASHING POTATOES  
– CHALLENGING STUDENT  
AGENCY AS UTTERANCES

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*MAIJA LANAS*

**SMASHING POTATOES –  
CHALLENGING STUDENT AGENCY  
AS UTTERANCES**

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Supervised by  
Professor Leena Syrjälä  
Doctor Timo P. Karjalainen

Reviewed by  
Professor Ursula Kelly  
Professor Alan DeYoung

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## **Lanas, Maija, Smashing potatoes – challenging student agency as utterances**

University of Oulu, Faculty of Education, P.O. Box 2000, FI-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

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### *Abstract*

The research investigates how student agency is inscribed as challenging or as misbehaviour in schools. The purpose is to open up and enable alternative ways of interpreting student agency. The empirical part of the research is based on reflexive ethnography and narrative methodology. The data is comprised of narrative and thematic interviews conducted during a period of 3 years (2006–2009), and 4 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the autumn of 2008.

The context for analyzing the meanings inscribed in student agency is a northern Finnish village school. In the villagers' narrations, the research villages were presented as centres of the people's lives, dynamic even in their quietude, and life in the villages was presented as an active choice. These stories challenge the national representations that tend to derive from the discourse of social exclusion. These societal discourses 'other' the life in northern villages and direct children, through education, concretely, socio-culturally, and emotionally away from their villages towards southern cities.

Based on the fieldwork and applying Mihail Bakhtin's dialogism and interactionist approach to emotions, I find that the meanings inscribed in student agency are determined dialogically. The meanings and emotions with which student agency is inscribed in a particular situation is, thereby, not determined by the students but come from the broader social, cultural, and political contexts, and the histories of those involved in the dialogue. Thereby, for instance "bad behaviour" cannot be improved simply by targeting the student or by changing student behaviour. This derives from the fact that any action, for example smashing potatoes, can end up carrying historical, political, social, and cultural meanings, and thus, any action can become inscribed as contesting behaviour.

I conclude that contesting behaviour of a student does not cause as much as it performs challenging emotions that derive from broader societal, sociocultural, and political contexts. Thereby the problem is not that challenging emotions take place in school but the illusion that they should not. If challenging emotions in school are imagined to indicate failure, it is assumed that they must be excluded rather than endured and managed.

*Keywords:* dialogism, emotions, ethnography, participatory research, social exclusion, student agency



## **Lanas, Maija, Perunoita soseuttamassa – oppilaan haastava toiminta ilmauksena**

Oulun yliopisto, Kasvatustieteiden tiedekunta, PL 2000, 90014 Oulun yliopisto

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### ***Tiivistelmä***

Tarkastelen tutkimuksessa, miten oppilaan toiminta saa merkityksen haastavana tai huonona käytöksenä koulussa. Tavoitteenani on avata ja mahdollistaa vaihtoehtoisten merkitysten näkeminen oppilaan toiminnalle. Tutkimuksen empiirinen osa nojautuu refleksiiviseen etnografiseen ja narratiiviseen metodologiaan, ja aineistona on käytetty haastatteluaineistoa 3 vuoden ajalta (2006–2009) sekä hieman yli neljän kuukauden mittaista kouluetnografiaa syksyllä 2008.

Oppilaan toimijuuden tarkastelun kontekstina on pohjoinen pienkylän koulu. Kyläläisten omissa kertomuksissa kylät näyttävät hiljetessäänkin dynaamisina elämän keskuksina, ja eläminen kylissä aktiivisena valintana. Nämä kertomukset haastavat valtakunnalliset representatiot, jotka rakentuvat usein syrjäytymispuheelle. Syrjäytymispuhe toiseuttaa elämää pohjoisissa pienkylissä ja ohjaa koulutuksen kautta lapsia konkreettisesti, kulttuurisesti ja kokemuksellisesti pois kylästä, kohti etelää ja kaupunkeja.

Mihail Bakhtinin dialogismia soveltaen ja kenttätööhön pohjautuen totean, että oppilaan toiminnan saamat merkitykset ja siihen liittyvät tunteet määrittävät dialogisesti. Toiminnan saamat merkitykset ja siihen liitetyt tunteet eivät siis ole oppilaan omassa hallinnassa vaan tulevat laajemmasta sosiaalisesta, poliittisesta, kulttuurisesta ja yhteiskunnallisesta kehiksestä sekä dialogin osapuolten erillisistä ja yhteisestä historiasta. Näin ollen, esimerkiksi ”huonoa käytöstä” ei voida parantaa yksinkertaisesti kohdistamalla toimenpiteitä oppilaaseen tai tämän käytökseen. Tämä johtuu siitä, että lähes mikä hyvänsä toiminta, tutkimuksessa muun muassa perunan soseuttaminen, voi päätyä kantamaan historiallisia, poliittisia, sosiaalisia ja kulttuurisia merkityksiä ja tulla siten merkityksi haastavaksi käytökseksi.

Tutkimuksessa totean, että oppilaan haastava toiminta ei niinkään aiheuta vaan pikemminkin performoi haastavia tunteita, jotka juontuvat laajemmista yhteiskunnallisista, sosiokulttuurisista ja poliittisista konteksteista. Tällöin ongelma ei ole haastavien tunteiden esiintyminen koulussa vaan luulo, että niitä ei pitäisi esiintyä koulussa. Jos haastavat tunteet erehdytään koulussa kuvittelemaan jonkin tai jonkun epäonnistumiseksi, ne yritetään sulkea pois sen sijana että ne kestettäisiin ja käsiteltäisiin.

*Asiasanat:* dialogismi, etnografia, osallistava tutkimus, syrjäytyminen, toimijuus, tunteet





*Minille ja Pampalle  
(Ronjalle ja Rasmukselle)*



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## List of original publications

- I Lanas, M. (2008) Oikeus paikkaan – kuinka koulu ja pohjoinen pienkylä kohtaavat? [The Right to Place - How Do the School and a Small Northern Village Meet?] In Lanas, Maija, Niinistö, Hanna & Suoranta, Juha (Eds.) Kriittisen pedagogiikan kysymyksiä 2. [Questions of Critical Pedagogy 2] Tampere: The Department of Education of the University of Tampere: 51–80.
- II Lanas, Maija (in press). Beyond educating marginal - recognizing life in rural north. Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research.
- III Lanas, Maija & Corbett, Michael (2011). Disaggregating Student Resistances: Analysing What Students Pursue with Challenging Agency. *Young* 19(4): 417–434.
- IV Lanas, Maija (2011): How can non-verbalized emotions in the field be addressed in research? *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 34(2): 131–145.



# Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	
<b>Tiivistelmä</b>	
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>List of original publications</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Contents</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>15</b>
1.1 An overview of the summary and of the articles .....	19
<b>2 Dialogue</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1 As a state of existence .....	23
2.1.1 Other and Othering .....	24
2.1.2 Student actions as dialogical utterances .....	26
2.2 Dialogism and analysing student agency .....	29
2.3 Emotions as the very substance of sharing and interaction .....	30
<b>3 Research context and methods</b>	<b>33</b>
3.1 Researcher's positioning .....	36
<b>4 How rural villagers describe the relations influencing their lives</b>	<b>39</b>
4.1 Analysis .....	39
4.2 Rural north as Othered in the discourse of social exclusion .....	40
4.3 School directing children away from villages .....	43
4.4 What does this mean for students assuming agency in northern rural schools? .....	45
<b>5 Addressing student agency in a rural northern school</b>	<b>47</b>
5.1 Analysis .....	49
5.1.1 Working on the relationship between students and the researcher .....	49
5.1.2 Shared emotions as basis for analysis .....	52
5.2 How does student agency become inscribed as challenging? .....	54
5.2.1 Adaptive agency that happens to challenge the structures .....	55
5.2.2 Performing emotions that are experienced as challenging .....	59
<b>6 Discussion: Disaggregating challenging student agency</b>	<b>61</b>
6.1 Evaluating the research .....	63
<b>References</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Original publications</b>	<b>75</b>





# 1 Introduction

## *Smashing potatoes*

*Students smash their potatoes, with a flourish, with their eyes fixed on the teacher.*

*The teacher doesn't seem to notice the smashing, jovially chatting with the students.*

*Relief.*

*In the past years, there had been what later became known as the “potato dispute” in the school. A previous head teacher had decided that the students should be civilized and that they shouldn't smash their potatoes before eating them. The students had refused to obey. Many of them smashed potatoes in their homes and didn't accept being told not to eat their food the way they liked it. As the teacher hadn't let go of the demand and smashing potatoes had continued to be forbidden, the students had involved their parents. The parents had become upset. The situation had escalated. Municipal officials had been involved. There had been a meeting organized in the school in which many villagers had participated along with the teachers and the municipal officials. The shouting that had taken place in that meeting is still mentioned every once in a while. The potato dispute was never resolved.*

*Until the moment when the teacher continued to chat jovially with the students.*

Many of us remember somewhat similar incidents from our own school days: a student or students challenging the teacher. At times, the teacher knew how to defuse the situation, and at times, she or he did not. In Finland, in the winter of 2009, tabloids were momentarily covered with “the fourth fish finger”, an incident in a school in which a student had taken an extra fish finger during lunch and refused to put it back. The situation had escalated to the point that the teachers had called the police to retrieve the student from the classroom. According to the police, the student had been sitting among other students. The incident of the fourth fish finger and the potato dispute are representational of a problem common to the experiences of both teachers and students in schools: If the teachers do not know how to stop situations from escalating, how can students

know? These situations contribute to the lack of wellbeing experienced in schools by both teachers and students (e.g. Axup & Gersch 2008, van Petegem *et al.* 2007, Van Petegem *et al.* 2008). Carina Henriksson (2004) tells how students in her research, when describing their experiences of school failure, described explicitly their failures to *behave* according to expectations, and their teachers' reactions to the deviant behaviour.

Many often characterize these big or small challenging, emotional instances in terms of student misbehaviour, student resistance, and contesting or challenging student agency. Therefore, when looking into these situations, one is also looking into student agency. However, there is no clear and commonly agreed upon definition or perception of misbehaviour or challenging agency; ultimately, any incident in which communication between staff and student fails may be so presented. Axup and Gersch (2008), for instance, find that behaviours seen as contesting are 'low level', 'verbal', 'work avoidance' and 'out of seat' behaviours.

Even though there has been an incalculable amount of research conducted into managing misbehaviour, a trick bag for these situations has not materialized. In this thesis, I argue that the goal is flawed; these situations cannot be solved by improving student behaviour because student behaviour is not the issue. The situations are critical incidents (Halquist & Musanti 2010) that relate to broader societal and cultural contexts as well as to our personal senses of selves and personal emotional responses. Given the emotional intensity of these situations, it is surprising how little attention emotions tend to receive in the research; emotions tend to be seen as side effects, not as leading role players.

In contrast to the vast literature focusing on how to *control*, *manage*, *handle*, and *improve* behaviour (e.g. Gossen 2007, Kerr & Valenti 2009, Pšunder 2005, Reinke *et al.* 2008, Wagner 1983), or investigating how to *prevent* (Hanko 2003, Lord Elton 1989)<sup>1</sup> student behaviour by addressing the student or the classroom or how to *understand* the psychological causes behind it (see also Axup & Gersch 2008, Greenwood 2002), there are the resistance theories. Whereas the first-mentioned approaches see certain kinds of student agency in schools as problematic and look for ways to change them, resistance theories also see them as problematic for education, but look for ways to embrace the problems. Resistance theories, as the name states, argue that students *resist* structural

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<sup>1</sup> It must be mentioned that even though the Elton report focuses on prevention, it also makes significant openings into listening to students.

domination and their own oppression, which at some level, they understand. The discussion among the theorists tends to be focused on *what* students resist. The best-known account is surely Paul Willis's 'Learning to Labour', published in 1977. Willis finds that working class male students controversially end up reproducing their own hierarchical positions by resisting these very positions. In many such accounts, resistance is understood as a tactical response to structural domination (Certeau 1988, Scott 1985). Others argue that students reject curriculum and pedagogy rather than consciously resist the dominant ideology of society (McFadden 1995, Wright & Weekes 2003). Still other studies see resistance as a reaction to poor teaching (e.g. Alpert 1991). To complement the accounts of identified resistance, there are differentiations made between resistance with transformative potential and pointless contestation (Aronowitz & Bolough 1983, Giroux 2001, Sultana 1989, Wright & Weekes 2003).

The crucial difference between the two orientations (the difference between identifying *student misbehaviour* and *student resistance*) is that the former sees the challenge the agency brings to schools as harmful, while the latter considers its transformative potential. This difference in orientations does not derive from a different perception of *student agency* but rather from a different perception of *society*. Whereas the former, in general, seeks to maintain society, the latter seeks to transform it. It is from the different societal positions that the two orientations interpret student agency as either harmful or with potential. As argued in article III, both orientations provide limited tools for analyzing student agency within schools, despite the accomplishments of theorists, especially those proposing resistance theories in locating student agency in broader societal structures. For example, both orientations are satisfied with identifying certain forms of student agency as challenging simply because the behaviours are so perceived in the existing relations of the school context. Students' own, possibly alternative, purposes gain less attention. This research addresses that gap.

The thesis is an exploratory research (Schutt 2006) into *student agency that contests or challenges the existing structures or norms in schools*, whether it does this with purpose or without, and whether the norms are verbalized or only visible through the act of challenging them. This agency is not viewed as something taking place in the child (as it is when it is characterized as misbehaviour), but rather, as something existing between the child and the child's particular and broader contexts. In other words, the meanings *inscribed* in a child's agency

reflect and construct broader contexts as well as the specific instance<sup>2</sup>. The concept used here, “inscribe”, derives from the framework of Bakhtin’s dialogism as depicted by Holquist, introduced in future chapters. Without going deeper into semiotics, it refers to the idea that meaning does not exist inherently in an utterance, but becomes inscribed into it in the dialogue. This is a central idea in this thesis, and it will recur several times.

This premise, as it applies to children and as it is proposed in this thesis, agrees with the orientation of the swiftly developing area of research called new social studies of childhood or childhood research, as described by Leena Alanen (Alanen 2009), in which children are seen as agents and as political actors. Since the 1970s, and especially during the 80s, among the new social studies of childhood (Holloway *et al.* 2000), there has been an increasing demand to study children “in their own right” (Hardmann 1973). Instead of seeing children as “becoming” - or “in the waiting room” (Alanen & Bardy 1990) - these approaches emphasize that children should be seen as “beings” (Qvortrup 1994), and furthermore, that childhood itself is a social construction (James & Prout 1990). Kirsi Kallio (2006) finds that when considering children’s political agency, instead of assigning new authorities and powers to children, one should first consider how they *already* attend to public affairs. This research defines agency simply and broadly as “having and pursuing one’s own goals”.

This research observes student agency inscribed as challenging in a small rural village school. The context is appropriate for analyzing resistant agency, because in the rural north, contesting national representations and resistance to them have deep historical roots. In Finland, where policy and direction emanates mainly from the south, the people in the rural north experience a lack of power to influence their own affairs and the prevailing representations of their lives (e.g. Erkkilä 2005, Laitinen & Pohjola 2001). Northern rural schools balance themselves between local and global, traditional and postmodern, staying and leaving – a situation that finds global resonance in the fishery communities of coastal Atlantic Canada, for instance (Corbett 2007).

In order to analyze student agency in any context, one must be aware of the context itself. Therefore, this thesis asks two research questions. The first asks about the specific context and relations and the second asks about student agency

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<sup>2</sup> With this said, I will from here on refer to such agency as “student agency inscribed as challenging” just to save space. Elsewhere, the same kind of agency may be referred to as, for instance, misbehavior or student resistance.

in the context. The analysis, accordingly, comprises two phases, albeit chronologically these overlap. The first question is answered in articles I and II.

*How do the northern villagers experience the representation of their lives in school and in other national forums?*

The purpose of this stage is to uncover knowledge about the cultural, societal, narrative, and emotional contexts of the student agency the research proposes to analyze. The focus is on the participating villagers' subjective knowledge of the context and the relations influencing their lives. The second question focuses, in turn, on student agency itself.

*How does student agency become inscribed as challenging?*

I approached the second question 1) by seeking alternative inscriptions for agency seen as challenging, 2) by analysing why these alternative inscriptions did not appear, and 3) by analysing the role of emotions in the process of inscribing meaning.

In this research, school presents itself not only as the context for the actions of groups and individuals, but also as an actor among others, and as such, a non-static entity. On one hand, it is a time- and context-bound concrete place; on the other hand, it is a cross-national institution, the members of which are aware of its role as such. One cannot view school in the research village simply in terms of the agency of the people currently in it. It consists also of the people who have been in it previously and the interest groups near it (e.g. parents, municipal officials). When speaking of school, this thesis refers to a local, temporal instance of a cross-national institution partly, but not entirely, constructed by the people who are and who have been in it or near it.

## **1.1 An overview of the summary and of the articles**

The summary begins by describing the interpretative framework of the thesis: Bakhtin's dialogism as depicted by Holquist (1990) and an interactionist approach to emotions. It continues by addressing the first research question and by articulating the methods used to seek knowledge of the particular school contexts and relations in which the students assume agency and in which their agency is inscribed with meanings. The analysis of the relations focuses on the villagers' perspectives of their own lives and of the relations in which they conduct their lives. Subsequently, the summary moves to the second question, and articulates

the methods used to seek knowledge of the students' agency. Finally, drawing on dialogism, an interactionist approach to emotions, and the knowledge gained about the broader relations influencing this rural village school, I focus on student agency. I provide an analysis of how these agencies have become inscribed as challenging and suggest alternative inscriptions.

The original articles that comprise this thesis were written simultaneously throughout the research process, with the exception of article II, which was published before the ethnographic fieldwork, in 2008. Articles I and II analyse the context, answering the first research question. Article I focuses on the representation of rural villages nationally and Article II focuses on how the participants experience their representations nationally and analyses how school situates itself between two ways of life. Chapter 4 discusses the findings of these articles. Article III is discussed in chapter 5, which analyses the purposes of student agency inscribed as challenging in the specific context, answering the second research question. Article IV reveals the beginnings of recognizing the role of emotions in the dialogue that takes place in school settings.

Article I, "Beyond educating marginals - Recognizing life in northern rural Finland" is the first article addressing the first research question. It describes how our research project became a platform for the participants to contest nationally popular discourses and representations of the rural north, and in doing so, to criticize popular conceptualizations of 'progress' and 'success' and social exclusion.

Article II, *'Oikeus paikkaan, kuinka koulu ja pohjoinen pienkylä kohtaavat?'* [*Right for Place – how do schools and a small northern village meet?.*] is the second article addressing the first research question. I find that Northern villagers depict their place as significant for their wellbeing. The institution of school seems to fail in acknowledging encountering the local life and ends up taking students away from their significant place - concretely for weekdays and by representing a different place within the village, following different cultural codes and values, expecting different habits and behaviours. When a village child enters the school, she or he may move from a central position in her/his own life to a marginal position in someone else's life.

Article III, *Disaggregating student resistances, analyzing what students pursue with challenging agency* investigates student agency that challenges the existing structures, and finds that students assume such agency for a purpose; they are pursuing something - restoration as a mean of self-regulation, relevant

knowledge, trust in their own terms and negotiations - through resistance, and not simply resisting.

Article IV, *How can non-verbalized emotions in the field be addressed in research* analyses emotions as a part of the dialogue taking place in school. During the fieldwork, non-verbalized emotions influenced the events in the field and penetrated the research. The paper argues that research gains from a researcher's emotional involvement. It tracks how emotions in the field move from one context to another and between individuals, and discusses how they change forms in an arctic Finnish village school.





## 2 Dialogue

The conceptualization of ‘dialogism’ presented in this chapter relies on Michael Holquist’s depiction of Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas, namely on what Holquist calls ‘dialogism’ in his book named accordingly (1990). Michael Holquist recapitulates Bakhtin’s work in a way that makes it relevant for this research. In this thesis, a scholarly discussion of various interpretations of Bakhtin’s ideas is not central, as the scope of the current thesis lies within the educational sciences and focuses not on the topic of Bakhtin, but on student agency. Instead, the theoretical discussion focuses on combining dialogism with other relevant theories. Bakhtin’s ideas of dialogue and the conceptualization of utterance provide tools for analysis. They were introduced into the theoretical framework after the fieldwork because they insightfully and felicitously provided the words to describe observations and insights in the field.

Dialogism is not presented in any of the articles; it is the framework for consolidating the ideas presented in the articles. This chapter explains the parts of dialogism (as depicted by Michael Holquist based on Bakhtin’s works) that are relevant to the thesis.

### 2.1 As a state of existence

Dialogism (Holquist 1990) sees dialogue as an epistemology, as a theory of knowledge. This approach to dialogue is crucially different from those better-known approaches that view dialogue as a means to an end. This is the case, for instance, in many accounts of dialogical teaching (Arnott *et al.* 2008, Postholm 2005, Sinha 2010, Skidmore 2006) and dialogical research (Newbury & Hoskins 2008). Viewing dialogue as an epistemology is also different from the approaches that view dialogue as a goal in itself (Hankamäki 2008). Dialogue, as seen in dialogism, is not a goal; it is a state of existence:

*“Existence is addressed to me as a riot of inchoate potential messages. [...] Some of the potential messages come to me in the form of natural language, and some in social codes, or ideologies. So long as I am in existence, I am in a particular place, and must respond to all this stimuli either by ignoring them or in a response that takes the form of making sense, of producing – for it is a form of work – meaning out of such utterances.” (Holquist 1990, 47)*

In other words, dialogue, as dialogism sees it, is not a choice but a necessity in the sense that we cannot choose not to be in it, not only with other human beings, but also with the rest of the world. Dialogism suggests that we are all constantly responding to various utterances from the different worlds we pass through.

*“What we usually call life is not a mysterious vitalistic force, but an activity, the dialogue between events addressed to me in the particular place I occupy in existence, and my expression of a response to such events from that unique place. When I cease to respond, when there are – as we say so accurately in English – no signs of life, I am dead.” (Holquist 1990, 48).*

The statement that equates the cessation of dialogue with death is not a normative or moral statement, advocating the value of dialogue; it is a logical argument. Whether we realize it or not, whether we want it or not, we are always engaged in a dialogue with the Other - and this dialogue is life itself. Monologue, for dialogism, is an illusion.

### **2.1.1 Other and Othering**

Dialogism’s ontological approach to Other as essential to Self is different from the post colonialist concept of ‘Othering’<sup>3</sup>, which describes a social process. Although these two conceptualizations of Otherness derive from different frameworks and operate on different levels, they complement each other.

For dialogism, the Self is not a unitary thing; it consists in the relation between Self and Other (Holquist 1990, 36). The Other, here, does not refer to some prefixed entity, but to a transient, situational Other, one that depends on the context - it refers to that which is not Self. In dialogue (in contrast to monologue), there is always the Other. Whether this Other is human or not, concrete or not, there is something from which various utterances come and to which various responses go. Dialogism asserts that since existence is shared - since existence is the dialogue with the Other - this ‘Other’ is the prerequisite for consciousness. The Other, therefore, is not the opposite of Self but a component of it. Dialogism perceives the Other to be essential to Self:

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<sup>3</sup> There are several alternative conceptualizations of Other that are left out of the discussion presented here, since these are not directly relevant for the research. One of these, Emmanuel Levinas’s (Levinas 1995, Levinas 1996) idea of responsibility for the Other as an ethical, primary duty will be briefly brought into the discussion in the evaluation of the research.

*“In dialogism the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness. This otherness is not merely a dialectical alienation on its way to a sublation that will endow it with a unifying identity in higher consciousness. On the contrary: in dialogism, consciousness is otherness. More accurately, it is the differential relation between a centre and all that is not that centre.”* (Holquist 1990, 18)

Self, as dialogism sees it, is not a possession, but a *relation* (Holquist 1990, 19–21). Sharedness is the nature of fate for us all, for in order to see ourselves, we must appropriate the vision of Others. Restated in its crudest version: *I get myself from the Other* (Holquist 1990, 28). This perception of Self as a relation is not unique. In the field of psychology, Hubert Hermans (Hermans & Kempen 1992) develops a Dialogical Self Theory, partly drawing on Bakhtin’s ideas. Gilles Deleuze’s idea of the primacy of difference is also similar. Deleuze (1994) overturns the established relation between identity and difference by arguing that the identity of an individual should be understood based on the difference that is the very condition for perceiving identity as distinct in the first place, rather than on the internal essence that would determine its relations with other entities.

Seeing Self as a relation is similarly close to, but different from, perceiving Self as a process of becoming. Janne Vanhanen, (2010), in his analysis of Deleuze and Simondon (1992), describes the process of individuation by comparing it to the growth of a crystal, and thus, provides an alternative way of seeing self as equally dynamic. Both approaches, *individual as becoming* and *self as a relation* see the subject as developing in its context and never finishing. Seeing individuals as becoming entails some static aspects (the parts of the crystal that have already formed), and contains the idea that “in order to know the nature of a thing, we must follow its trajectory ‘backwards’ into the syntheses that produced it” (Vanhanen 2010). Seeing Self as a relation, however, makes even less assumptions of the static parts of the Self; it enables seeing it as reconstructed and re-perceived in each encounter with each given Other.

Postcolonial theories provide an entirely different perspective to Otherness. In the postcolonial framework, resigning someone or something to the status of Other is a form of disenfranchising, discounting, or marginalizing that person or process (Bach, 2005). The concept of ‘Othering’ refers to a process that identifies those that are different from oneself or the perceived mainstream, potentially reinforcing and reproducing positions of domination and subordination (Johnson *et al.*, 2004). For example, Edward Said (1979) asserts, famously, that self-

affirmation rather than objective study drives much western study of Islamic civilization and that this is a form of racism and a tool of imperialist domination. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir (1988) argues that women represent, in the society, the Other sex. Stuart Hall (1997, 1999) and Douglas Kellner (1995) identify how otherness is produced by, for instance, ‘racializing’ the other in media. Madeleine Eriksson (2010) analyses how northerners tend to be represented as ‘more stupid’, and as “the inner other” in Swedish media. In these accounts, “Otherness” is treated as a mirror for the more powerful in society to produce a complimenting Self.

In this thesis, Othering is seen as something both participants in the dialogue can do, regardless of their power relations. Which Othering representations become naturalized as facts in a society is a question of power.

Other is an essential part of self, but often perceived by self as external to it. Therefore, whereas distinguishing between Self and Other is the drawing of a line between internal and external, ‘Othering’ can be seen as the freezing of this line, the failure of recognizing the Self in the Other and the Other in the Self. Whereas Other, as seen in dialogism, is a non-static, transient entity, Othering is the appointing of Other to a location outside of Self and freezing it there. It takes place when one claims to have the privilege of the centre.

When “Self is received from the Other”, it is new and surprising in each new encounter with each new Other. Getting the Self from the Other is scarier the stranger the Other is, since the Self in relation to that Other is equally strange. The process of Othering can be seen as a way of controlling the formations of Self; if we endow Other with a static set of meanings, we can conceive Self as static too. However, while Othering is probably an unavoidable phenomenon, it is logically untenable in the same manner as complete monologism: it denies the Self of the Other and the Other of the Self.

### **2.1.2 Student actions as dialogical utterances**

As established above, seeing dialogue as a state of existence means that the world addresses us and that we are compelled to respond - we cannot choose but to give the world an answer: utterances. This compulsion does not relieve us from responsibility; it does not refer to the content of the utterances but to the fact that they take place. One can influence, to a certain degree, the nature of one’s utterances but not the fact that one utters. Indeed, our responses to the world are not just passive responses launched into a space, but *deeds* – active and

productive (Holquist 1990, 63), and for which we are answerable. Two further points apply to these utterances:

1. Dialogue does not rely on verbal language
2. The meanings of our various utterances are not our possessions.

Since many Bakhtin's interpreters have been linguists, definitions of the concepts of language tend to focus on spoken or written language and define 'utterance' accordingly, as something verbalized between humans. However, Holquist's account enables an alternative understanding.

*"dialogue [...] is present in exchanges at all levels – between words in language, people in society, organisms in ecosystems, and even between processes in the natural world." (Holquist 1990, 41).*

Dialogue occurs at various levels (from between processes in the natural world to verbal language) by different means. Although it is powerful, spoken language is only one of several ways that dialogic relations manifest themselves. Dialogue comprises more than human–human dialogue. Relating arguments have been made, for instance, among actor network theorists (Latour 2005), who consider nonhumans as equal partners in the construction and consolidation of networks, which give rise to stable categories, places, and knowledge practices (Johnston 2008), ecosemiotics (Maran 2010), and animal geographers<sup>4</sup>. According to Timo Maran (2010),

*"A dialogue can also take place using utterances in the form of actions. Actions are a part of various communicative relations between humans and animals." <sup>5</sup>*

In the field of education, this idea of dialogue between human and environment is a fresh idea, since a pedagogical relationship is by definition one between humans, as Pauliina Rautio (2010) observes. Within this new framework, student actions become a way of participating in this broader dialogue, as utterances.

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<sup>4</sup> The questions relating to this topic, e.g. who can be considered a subject in a dialogue and who can possess agency are more thoroughly addressed in the context of human-animal relations by, for example, Philo and Wilbert (2000) as well as Wolch and Emel (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Whereas Maran sees the dialogic nature of these situations as conditional (the situations are dialogic if the messages respond to each other and carry some meaning for both participants), dialogism sees them as inherently dialogical: there are always meanings negotiated, even if the means of negotiating do not immediately meet.

Although our utterances are compelled deeds for which we are responsible, we have only a limited effect on the meanings our utterances carry. In at least three ways, the meanings of our utterances are not our possessions:

First, and perhaps most significantly, *the meaning of an utterance is inscribed in the utterance, in the triad of the sender, the perceiver, and their relation*. Utterance is a dialogical construction and this dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two (Holquist 1990). Each of these must be understood in relation to each other, not as independent of each other. The meaning of an utterance, therefore, comes to it from the conscious and unconscious intentions of the sender and the recipient, and their relation, including experiences and the broader cultural context. The intentions of the sender have an influence on the meaning that the message takes but their role is far from decisive.

Second, *our voices are never our own completely but they carry the other voices*:

“The voice of any character – whether that voice is expressed in inner dialogue or external talk – is never his or hers in any possessive, individualistic sense. For Bakhtin, each voice is formed in an ongoing process of anticipation and response to other voices. Each voice always contains the voices of others.” (Frank 2005, 966).

Utterances are multi-voiced (Elbaz-Luwisch 2005). As mentioned above, for Bakhtin, monologue has a different ontological status from dialogue: dialogue is real; monologue is not. At worst, monologue is an illusion, uncritically taken for granted. At best, monologue is a logical construct necessary to understand the workings of dialogue (Holquist 1990). Therefore, no matter how successfully oppressive one becomes, any attempts to achieve a completely monological stance will fail, according to dialogism, because attempts towards monologism are always pursued in dialogue with *the Other*<sup>6</sup>. Be the other oppressed, disregarded, or silenced, the voice of the Other is there, even in the active silencing of it. The very trouble caused by the attempts for monologism is exactly in their logical impossibility: there are always other voices. If there were not, it would not be called oppression.

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<sup>6</sup> In the field of education, resistance theorists such as Henry Giroux (Giroux & McLaren 1989, Giroux 2001) have made similar observations, seeing emancipatory potential in resistant student agency.

Third, *meanings are never fixed*.

“At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue’s later course when it will be given new life. For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival” (Holquist 1990, 39)

Dialogism assumes that, at any given time, in any given place, there is a set of powerful but highly unstable conditions at work that will give a word uttered a meaning that is different from what it would be at other times and in other places (Holquist 1990). Any temporary meaning an utterance takes in the triad is subject to change later. It means, also, that there are no static meanings or final answers to pursue with research.

## **2.2 Dialogism and analysing student agency**

Bringing the idea of dialogism into studying student agency has several advantages. First, it enables us to be sensitive to the effects of various political factors such as culture, gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and the power hierarchies involved in these while, at the same time, not projecting their perspectives on the individual. Drawing from dialogism, a child is answerable in the dialogue that exists for him/her. This means that a child, regardless of the reference groups or politics, is not primarily seen as a person in the margin pursuing a position at the centre as more powerful, or as one in the waiting room looking for a place inside. The child is seen as already at the centre, already inside, as a Self-engaging in various dialogues with various Others.

Second, dialogism enables us to analyse student agency in any given situation as a dialogic utterance in the process of meaning making in the child’s personal existence. Utterance, as a visual image, might be a stone sending ripples in all directions as it hits the water’s surface and descends. As the ripples advance on the surface, they touch various obstacles. For example, while not smashing potatoes may communicate adaptability to the direction of the teacher, it would simultaneously send ripples to other contexts, one of which is home. In that context, it would signal submitting to being ‘civilized’. The more diverse the environment is, the more challenging it is to be aware of all the meanings simultaneously. Multicultural theories often articulate the importance of the ability to cope with this challenge.

Finally, dialogism enables us to see students' actions as utterances, and it enables us to analyse the meanings of these utterances not as given by the child but as inscribed in the triad: the utterer, the recipient, and the specific relation reflecting particular and broader contexts. Seeing meanings as inscribed is different from seeing them as, for instance, interpreted. A meaning that becomes inscribed to an utterance in a specific instance becomes the 'truth', so to speak, in that instance. In other words, as a child conducts an act, for example smashes potatoes, the meaning of the act depends on the context as well as on the teacher, and it can change later. It can become inscribed as "misbehaviour", or as "symbolically resisting power structures", while in a school with a different history, it might be nothing but preparing food to place in the mouth.

### **2.3 Emotions as the very substance of sharing and interaction**

When discussing student agency in any context of societal influences, the analysis must include emotions. Just as there are societal influences behind emotions (Davar 2008, Hopper 2003), there are emotions under societal influences. (Ahmed 2004b, Ahmed 2004a, Apple 1989, Zembylas 2007a)

Article IV presents an interactionist approach to emotions, which challenges the assumption that emotions are either a private matter, coming from within and then moving outwards towards others, or that they are simply socially constructed, coming from without and moving inward; the interactionist approach claims that they are embodied and performative (Ahmed 2004a, Thien 2005, Zembylas 2007b). In other words, emotions do not simply exist; they are also brought into existence by 'doing' them, by performing them.

This means that instead of viewing emotions simply as individual, private experiences or as sociocultural constructions, they are viewed as both individual and social. Moreover, the interactionist approach to emotions moves beyond the both/and conceptual schema because such schema perpetuates assumed boundaries between the individual and the social by affirming their separate territories (Zembylas & Fendler 2007). Instead of drawing boundaries between the individual and the social, the interactionist approach allows one to recognize that it is "difficult to draw fixed boundaries, or, more precisely, there is movement across boundaries; where one begins and the other ends is not clear; there are crossovers between you and me, here and there, inside and outside." (Game, 1997, 394). It is exactly through the movement of emotions that the very distinction



between inside and outside, or the individual and the social, is effected in the first place (Ahmed 2004a, 28). The approach argues that emotions are not only shared and interactive by nature but that they are the very substance of sharing and interaction. Therefore, the interactionist approach to emotions sees the line between the outside and the inside of an individual, between the Self and the Other, as an unclear one, just as dialogism.

Emotions, according to Zembylas, are embodied practices, which reflect societal power relations. They are, to some extent, products of previous experiences, influenced by social, historical, and cultural contexts (Zembylas 2007a). Like habitus (1984, 1990), emotions are embodied history internalized as second nature (Williams 1977, Zembylas 2007a), and so, forgotten as history. Emotions are not only shared by groups of individuals, but also significant in the formation and maintenance of political and social identities, and in collective behaviour. For example, the feelings of hope and despair can be attached to a variety of discourses where they can be utilized (Apple 1989). Apple suggests that the impact of an ideology is achieved through creatively working on existing desires and fears to evoke a reaction, which can be used best to serve specific interests. It is in this way that any personal feeling of dislike towards the Other may be connected to a broader process of consuming<sup>7</sup> a sense of communal unity. The phenomenon of Othering described above can, in fact, be grasped as the psychological defence mechanism of projection (Hall *et al.* 1999) that "protects us from recognizing our own undesirable qualities by assigning them in exaggerated amounts to other people." (Atkinson & Hilgard 1996, 501).

Emotions are often seen as separate from rationality and as separate from our intentional selves, as forces influencing us from outside of ourselves (Zembylas & Fendler 2007). However, a growing body of research and theory approaches emotion as an epistemology, as a form of knowledge (Game 1997, Gray 2008, Hochschild 2003, Holland 2007). As Game (1997) states, we can know only through our emotions and not simply through our cognition and intellect. Emotions are means by which we make sense of, and relate to, our physical, natural, and social world - ways of knowing the world (Game 1997). When we

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<sup>7</sup> I call it consuming instead of producing, informed by Bauman (2002). He argues that a sense of community that is not built on negotiating differences but on denying them is not a community being actively and responsibly produced but a community being consumed it relies on illusions and denials –and on emotion norms.

speaking to each other or hearing each other, we do not speak or hear only rationally but also emotionally:

“in actuality, we never say or hear *words*, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on” (Volosinov 1986, 70)

This applies also in school. Students not only hear educational facts but also feel various kinds of emotional responses attached to various things: what to be proud of, what to be embarrassed about, how to feel empowered by and, given one’s social location, which emotions are to be repressed. School as a powerful Other gives a student various reflections of Self as a part of various groups. Emotions are connected to these reflections.

In this thesis, when analysing student agency in challenging school situations, emotions are seen as the very substance of sharing and interaction. They are seen as reflecting social, historical, and cultural relations and as entering school situations through the individuals and groups performing them. Based on the interactionist approach to emotions, emotions are deeply personal, but at the same time, they connect us to Others. They are acquired from the environment, and at the same time, are deeds for which we are responsible. Combining the interactionist approach to emotions with Bakhtin’s dialogism, emotions become utterances: compelled, deeds, not in our possession, not static, multi-voiced, and most significantly, inscribed with meaning in the triad of the sender, recipient, and their relation. Emotions are inscribed with meaning as utterances are, interactively, within specific relations, and the relations express themselves in the emotions performed.

### 3 Research context and methods

The data for this thesis were compiled between 2006 and 2009 as part of two research projects, PLACEs<sup>8</sup> and LiP<sup>9</sup>. Two research villages, one in eastern Finnish Lapland and the other in western Finnish Lapland, were the focus of the projects and provided the empirical data for this research. Village A had 30 inhabitants and village B had roughly 150 inhabitants. Village B had a school, whereas in village A, children were bussed to the municipal school. This made village B the location for the school ethnography I conducted. From village B, the distance to the municipal centre was 70 kilometres on an unpaved road. In the village, unlike in the majority of the municipality, reindeer herding provided a significant livelihood, influencing the everyday life of the village. There was one school with two classrooms, a day-care with two rooms located in a condominium, and a small grocery store. That autumn, the number of students had gone below ten; for years, the school had been at constant risk of closure. During the time of the ethnography, the students were between 9 and 13 years old.

The research villages were representative of small Lappish villages in the sense that their demographics were common in the area, the schools were closed or at risk of becoming closed, and the students expressed discontent with school (e.g. Ahonen 2010). However, the purpose of this research was not to produce generalizable knowledge, and the villages were not chosen because of their representativeness, but rather because of the new, previously unheard, perspectives they could bring to the discussion of national education in Finland.

As is common in this kind of research, the data construction, data analysis and theoretical insights overlapped during the research process. This research drew from empirical research data constructed in the course of three years (2006–2009). The data comprised three years of dialogue between participants and researchers, roughly 50 narrative interviews and group discussions that were conducted in both research villages with community members and school staff, and school ethnography that I conducted in village B. The ethnographic fieldwork of four months took place from August to December 2008. My spouse and two children accompanied me for the duration of the fieldwork.

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<sup>8</sup> The research is funded by The Thule institute of University of Oulu

<sup>9</sup> The research is funded by Academy of Finland project number 1121109, The aim of these projects was to gain understanding of the relationships between places and people, and of the significance of such relationships to education, identity formation, and the formation of local knowledge.

The data was vast for this kind of qualitative research but it was necessary. Although the specific research questions were answered by analysing specific portions of the data, all of the data were essential in finding and evaluating the research questions themselves. I complemented the data further with alternative perspectives by interviewing municipal officials and school staff (for instance, the visiting teacher and the cook who had been in the same school for decades). These interviews were not analysed for this research as such, but they provided me with perspectives regarding the relevance of my research questions. Mainly, I wanted to see if the perspectives of the staff and municipal officials would contradict the descriptions of the villagers in ways that would bring my research questions into question. They did not; on the contrary, a clear ethos supported the villagers' descriptions. The municipal officials I spoke with clearly saw the village as a place to get away from, as "feudal"; they pressed for the closure of the school and located the goal of education outside the village. In addition, the current teacher described experiencing contradictions among the municipal staff's expectations for what she should do and feel, the villagers' expectations for what she should do, and her own moral sense and expertise.

The exact research questions arose from the research itself. First, during my review of the three years of dialogues and interviews, I discovered that there were certain themes that surfaced repeatedly in most participants' accounts, regardless of their age, gender, or background. In addition, I noted that in both research villages, school was commonly spoken of as somehow problematic. The first research question, thereby, focuses on identifying the themes that repeatedly surfaced in the data and analysing why school was referred to as problematic. Ultimately, the question took form: *How do the northern villagers experience the representations of their lives in school and in other national forums?* In other words, what is the 'Self they get' from school and popular discourse?

Second, I noted that the so-called "behavioural problems" of the students in village B school surfaced repeatedly in the teacher's interviews. Moreover, as I talked with people in the area, it became clear that the school was, for some reason, known for its "out of control" students and "wild west" mentality. The second research question, *How does student agency become inscribed as challenging?* found its form in the intersection of empirical research and the theory upon which the analysis came to be based. It focused on analysing how broader sociocultural issues performed in the inscriptions of meanings in student agency.

The two research questions reflected the two different phases distinguishable in the research process: first, finding out the context and relations, and second, analysing student agency in both. The research questions were intentionally broad, as they directed exploratory research rather than finding a fixed answer. The goal was “to learn 'what is going on here?’ and to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations.” (Schutt 2006, 14). I address both research questions individually below, as also described in Table 1, but. First, I provide the researcher’s positioning for the study.

**Table 1. The process of exploratory, reflexive data analysis.**

	How do the northern villagers experience the representations of their lives in school, and in other national forums?		How does student agency become inscribed as challenging?	
ARTICLE	I	II	III	IV
QUESTION	How do northern villagers participating in the research perceive their representation in popular discourse?	How does school position itself between the conflicting local and national representations?	What could the students be pursuing with their agency that is inscribed as challenging?	What is the role of emotions in the situations?
DATA	Dialogue with research participants: e-mails, informal talks, social exclusion theory	20 Interviews conducted prior to fieldwork	Relationship with students and field journal	Relationship with students and field journal
ANALYSIS	reflective analysis	Thematic analysis of interviews	<p><i>Analysis during the fieldwork:</i></p> working and learning to hear: a) What was uttered to me b) What I uttered in response	<p><i>Analysis of the field journal</i></p> “What is the dominant emotion here?” “How do I feel?” What are the students pursuing with this agency in this particular situation and in the broader context?” What are the emotions performed in the situations?

### **3.1 Researcher's positioning**

The topic for the research - student agency inscribed as contestant - arose from the field as well as from my own interests. During my master level studies, I worked for a year in a North American elementary school with over 40% of the students below the poverty level. During the year, I mainly worked with students who were commonly involved in escalated situations, trying to help them find ways to stay on task or to steer away from problems. In the village B interviews, the "behavioural problems" of the students appealed to me, and I became interested in the process through which children could become so represented. Who are these children? What are they saying so fiercely that they gain such a reputation?

Prior to entering the research school, I familiarized myself with all the teacher interviews and met many of the villagers to listen to their stories about the past years of the school. It became clear that the situation in the school had been difficult for some years. The villagers' and the teachers' accounts of the conflicts were abundant. Children skipped school and simply refused to obey the teachers; parents called the school or came to the school, fiercely expressing anger and the teachers "formed a barrier", "refusing to take orders from outside", as their interviews stated. Teachers, facing burnout, had left the village; the parents were angry, frustrated, and hurt; many children experienced regular headaches or stomach aches during school days; one vomited. In discussions with the villagers, I heard that they were hopeful for that year. Since the teacher was familiar with the school, "she could have gone elsewhere, but she chose us. We finally have a teacher who wants to be here."

Given the current conflict in the village school, open communication in all directions was crucial during research. My presence should not bring any more insecurity to anyone. The participants (the students, the teacher, and the parents) repeatedly told me that they were more comfortable with open communication and active engagement in discussions than with silent note taking; so, I was active in earning my place in the field. In practice, the active engagement mostly meant voicing personal thoughts as the teacher talked about her work, or the parents talked about their experiences. Since the students were the focus of the research, the engagement with them is described more thoroughly below.

The listening, the being present, and the movement between the school and the homes had consequences in the field. The research took the form of action research even though it was not structured as such. During the fieldwork, the

participants expressed that the situation in school became significantly better. This was due to several reasons, one of which was that the teacher, students, and parents used the presence of an outsider with whom they all had a working relationship, to establish trust with each other. The simple act of an outsider being present and listening changed the field<sup>10</sup>.

My positioning in the field regarding the encountered issues was not a one-of task but a constant process that still continues. My primary interest was with the children. The current situation in the school, based on knowledge and perceptions gained prior to the fieldwork, did not do justice to the students. My focus was on hearing what they said with their actions, and ultimately, on finding ways to make school more pleasant for them. This goal was an interest shared by everyone in the field: the children, the parents, and the teachers, as well as the municipal officials; therefore, my initial interest did not inherently collide with the interests of anyone in the field. However, the entire question of what “child’s interest” means is debatable and can be traced back to larger educational debates: to educate for staying or leaving; to a focus on the needs of the individual or the needs of society; to maintain a culture or to transform society; what to maintain, what to transform... and so on.

The parents, the teachers, and the children had been dealing with these issues in their particular context for years, decades, perhaps even for their entire lives. I could not position myself on any “side” regarding these issues, or take a stand on “what was right”. On the contrary, I respected the difficulty of the issues. Consequently, although the tradition in which I conducted research was not objective research and although I was well aware that even as a researcher, I was not liberated from having a relationship with the issues I encountered in the field, I found myself needing, if not an objective position, a multi-perspective position to understand perspectives that, on the surface level, contradicted each other. For example, while I understood why the parents wanted to have a say in who taught their children in their village school, I also understood why teachers wanted to make such decisions, as they best knew the situation inside the school.

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<sup>10</sup> I would like to emphasize that although I supported it, the change in the field was neither my goal nor my accomplishment and my methodological reserve was not prepared for it. I recognized what the participants were doing while I was there, and my role in the process was limited to trying to be aware, and trying not to ruin anything by accidentally working against the meanings with which my presence became inscribed. The change was interesting to observe and it will be discussed in future contexts outside the scope of this thesis.

Positioning myself during the fieldwork kept the children's interests as the focus and located me among various perspectives of it. This research uses the following definition of child's interest:

*Not burdening the child with the difficult emotions deriving from the societal and communal contexts, but helping the child manage them and endure them.*

Thus, I was positioned against the practices and ways of thinking that placed the burden of the emotions on the child without giving the child the means to bear it. One of these practices included dismissing some of children's utterances simply as 'misbehaviour' and disregarding the emotions expressed or the goals pursued.

In practice, in the field, I was open about my thoughts when sharing them was a part of the working relationship, when I was asked about them, or when given other indications that they would be welcome. There were also situations and relationships in which voicing thoughts was not required for various reasons. At times, it would mean remaining silent; at other times, silence in itself would become inscribed with undesirable meanings (for example silent disapproval). In such cases, I took some action such as drawing with someone or making a general comment about a safe topic.



## **4 How rural villagers describe the relations influencing their lives**

In order to construct knowledge of the broader societal and narrative conditions in which northern rural students assume agency and in which their agency becomes inscribed with meanings, I have asked how northern rural villagers experience the representations of their lives nationally and in school.

### **4.1 Analysis**

In order to answer the first research question, “*How do the northern villagers experience the representations of their lives in school and in other national forums?*” I conducted two separate analyses. First, I analysed thematically the dialogue between the villagers and the altogether 10 researchers during the three years of research (2006–2009) in order to identify the themes the participants themselves brought into the discussions. The three-year history of the dialogue was recorded in many forms: e-mail discussions, recorded group discussions, researchers’ journals. The analysis of the dialogue began as the dialogue began in 2006. During the analysis, I talked further with various researchers and participants to hear their perspectives on my interpretations. As described in article I, during the analysis, I noted that the participants’ initiations in the dialogue often had to do with contesting specific representations of their lives. Specifically, they contested the representations of their lives and dwelling place characterized by social exclusion. Although ‘social exclusion’ as such was not once mentioned in the dialogue, the theoretical critique towards the discourse of social exclusion became a “key” for understanding the locals’ perspectives. In a sense, the discourse of social exclusion itself was a specific “narrative environment” (Gubrium & Holstein 2008) that helped in understanding what was, and what was not, put into words.

Second, I analysed narrative interviews conducted with the villagers in order to find out why villagers repeatedly described the relationship with school as challenging. Article II analyzes thematically the 50 open interviews conducted in the research villages. The interviewees were selected with the snowball technique and the interviews were conducted by a wide variety of researchers and local assistants. Based on their content, I selected 20 with the villagers for further analysis of how the villagers described the intersection of village life and

education. As described in article II, I selected all the interviews that described the current way of life in the village, or school, or both, leaving out the ones that focused solely on personal or village history. The selected interviews were with villagers from both research villages, of both genders and various ages and backgrounds. In the analysis, I sought direct comments regarding school and descriptions of the ways of life in the villages and compared these with research on the ideologies in school and education.

## **4.2 Rural north as Othered in the discourse of social exclusion**

As I investigated which themes the participants repeatedly brought up in the dialogue with the researchers, I found that there seemed to be a level of dissonance in research of rural northern wellbeing as *measured from outside* and in research of rural northern wellbeing as *described by rural northerners*. I begin by briefly explaining the discussions used for the analysis, then move on to the findings, connecting them to the theoretical critique on the discourse of social exclusion. I later argue that the social exclusion of the rural north can be seen as discursive and narrative, produced partly by the discourse of social exclusion itself.

In Finnish popular discourse and in several studies, the rural north is often presented as a spatial projection of social exclusion. Parts of Lapland triumph in the lack of wellbeing in the measured statistics (Kainulainen *et al.* 2001). Public services are lessening; alcoholism, unemployment, and suicide rates are high, and boys don't succeed in school. Statistically, there is a constant and increasing outward migration; schools are closed or closing (Gissler M, Orre S, Puhakka T 2004, Karvonen S & Rahkonen O 2004, Karvonen 2000, Laitinen & Pohjola 2001). In general, the student welfare support system is the most lacking in the Lappish schools (Rimpelä *et al.* 2008). At the same time, however, research that asks about rural northerners' experiences of their lives finds that the psychosocial wellbeing of the school-aged children of the north is, in general, better than that of students in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia (Ahonen 2010). According to Ahonen's research, children in Finnish Lapland are, in general, happy in their lives but not happy in school, which they experience as strenuous. Similarly, Laitinen and Pohjola (2001) find that, in general, rural northerners are satisfied with their dwelling places but experience a lack of power to influence the decision making concerning their own lives (see also Erkkilä 2005). To sum, the

external conditions for wellbeing seem to be lacking, yet, many rural northerners describe being well.

This dissonance between measured wellbeing and personal accounts of life satisfaction derives back to different ways of life. Anne Ollila (2008) investigates the existing geographical juxtapositioning of different areas into eligible areas and hopeless areas. She finds that whether these juxtapositions are national or within a single city, there is more to them than simply the actual material chances for living that they provide. Behind the juxtapositions, Ollila identifies the public discussion in which some *ways of life* are framed as eligible and others as hopeless, and accordingly, some areas are framed as ideal for the eligible ways of life and others as impossible. Ollila finds that when youth tell about their futures, they must also take into account the regional and geographical frameworks and the conditions for telling; the stereotypes created in public talk produce images through which not only outsiders but also the local habitants perceive the areas and the lives led in them. In order to describe themselves as successful in their future in society's terms, youth living in Kemijärvi, Kittilä, or eastern Helsinki must first locate themselves outside the area (Ollila 2008). Pauliina Rautio (2010) finds that once the idea of successful life is extended to be sensitive to other ways of life and perceptions of it, the villager's own stories present their lives as tough yet satisfying (Rautio 2010). In other words, the spatial projection of social exclusion in the rural north is partly narrative, narrated by the discourse of social exclusion itself.

In the participants' accounts, the discourse of social exclusion presents itself as a narrative that they contest: the narrative becomes one of the challenges they face instead of an accepted description of their life situation or potential life situation (Article I). In the course of three years, the participants contested this narrative by repeatedly asserting, in various ways, the following three points (expressed as quotes from the participants' speech):

1. "Stop saying 'remote village'. We're not remote." (Woman, 45)
2. "Nobody lives here because they're forced to; people really want to be here." (girl, 16, boy 17, in the first meetings)
3. The village [isn't dying], it's not going anywhere; it changes form, the villagers and their presence changes. (Woman, 50)

As article I depicts, with the first point the villagers claim that their village can be described as remote only if one accepts southern cities as the naturalized point of comparison, as the definition of centre. When refusing remoteness, they do not

deny the geographical fact of being far from southern cities; rather, they refuse the victimizing associated with such a geographical fact. They refuse their narrative deprivation of the status of an insider agent. The customary referring to the rural north as “periphery”, as a “remote district”, or as “back country” encompasses an assumption that there is a naturalized centre or a core of a society and that this centre is dictated by the amount of people and infrastructure. Such a conceptualization of centre, endorsed by the discourse of social exclusion, operates with a dichotomous model of society divided into insiders and outsiders (Daly, 2008; Levitas, 2004). In order to recognize the villagers’ perspectives on their own lives, the concept of centre needs to be open and dynamic. The northern villages must not be seen as existing in margins and as outsiders, but rather as existing at the centre of their own lives, as insiders in them. Moreover, especially with the internet and the media, the centres they live in take many forms.

Second, by emphasising the life in the village as an active choice, the villagers were contesting the national representation in which the people who remain in the small “dying villages” are helplessly immobile and passive. By emphasizing their agency and choices, the participants drew our attention to the fact that rural northerners tend to be represented as deficit objects of remedying actions. For the participants, living in the northern rural areas was not passive; on the contrary, it was very much a choice that needed to be made not only once but again and again as it was constantly challenged from outside.

Third, many of the villagers did not see the village as dying as much as changing form. For them, the amount of life and living in the village could not be measured quantitatively by the number of villagers. While the participants expressed worry about the future of the villages, and at times, about their children’s possibilities of staying in the villages, they avoided connecting these with the depowering concept of hopelessness; rather, they connected them with the empowering concept of northern resilience. Thus, the villagers provide a perspective on life that does not rest on a static perception of the village or on controlling what the village will become; it simply rests on adapting to it.

The participants did not deny the challenges they encountered in life. Quite the contrary, they openly described financial challenges, lack of long-term employment, long distances, fighting for the diminishing services, being excluded from decision-making, even in some cases, substance abuse, but they would not describe themselves as socially excluded or even at the risk of it. Regardless of their life situations, none of the participants voluntarily labelled themselves as socially excluded. In fact, they contested framing their life challenges in terms of

the discourse of social exclusion. The life challenges associated with their geographical location were described as peculiarities of life they were capable of and willing to deal with, whereas social exclusion would label *them*. Social exclusion is not an empowering label but rather one depriving people of agency, seeing them as targets of the actions of others. Tuula Helne makes the same observation, stating that the concept of social exclusion fails to address the cumulative process as it was originally intended, having become, instead, a reference to the end result, referring to a static, unwanted state of social exclusion - a stigma (Helne 2002).

The concept of social exclusion is accused of assuming an underlying normative ideal for everyone partaking in social networks. It is argued that the concept relies on a normative conceptualization of a relatively unproblematic core of society by which mainstream society is falsely homogenized (Daly 2008, Peace 2001, Spicker 1997). The discourse of social exclusion presents society as dichotomously divided into insiders and outsiders (Daly 2008, Levitas 2004), and central societal problems are seen to concern the perceived outside. The solution to social exclusion tends to be seen as the cajoling of these individuals over some perceived hurdle back to the safety of the perceived centre (Levitas 2004). At the same time, the acts of excluding, the reducing of services, the closing down of schools, the reducing of landlines and train services, are not regarded as acts that exclude some from the social realm. The discourse is essentially Othering.

There is no “us” of the socially excluded; it is a label given from above and outside the person or the area. Thereby, it can be seen, like stereotypes, as a label that functions to serve the needs of the assigner rather than the assignee. The participants in this research contested the representations of the rural north as remote, outside, and dying, and characterizations of those remaining in the area as passive and helpless. When doing so, the participants did not deny geographical facts or the challenges they encountered in life, but rather, refused to function as a mirror for those elsewhere to see themselves in a positive light. To sum, when representing the Finnish rural north as socially excluded or at risk of being so, the area and its inhabitants are, in their own experiences, Othered.

#### **4.3 School directing children away from villages**

As described in Article II, the second analysis found that the participants, in general, experienced their way of life Othered in school and in education. In addition, I noted that the way of life the interviewees described was contradicted

in school. In article II, I describe that school directs children away from rural villages concretely, culturally, and emotionally.

First, increased school closures force the village children to spend most of their weekdays concretely outside of their own villages and communities. Second, the school inside the village may represent a different culture to that of the village, having different values, and constructing childhood differently. Whereas school tended to appreciate abstract knowledge, the kind of knowledge needed in the villages was practical and embodied. School saw children as future agents, whereas they were agents from early ages in the villages; for instance, they owned reindeer for which they were responsible. The cultural differences could be seen in practical issues such as riding snowmobiles or mopeds, smashing potatoes, hunting, and skipping school to take part in reindeer roundups to mind the reindeer that they owned. Therefore, success in school may require, at least temporarily, children turning their backs on the villages' way of life.

Third, in order to 'make it' in school, the village children had to endure emotionally the fact that, as they entered school, they moved from the centre of their own lives to the margin of someone else's. This could be seen, for instance, in how "getting far in life" in rural schools tended to be understood concretely, as getting far away geographically and, when speaking of "preparing students for the world", the world was placed outside the rural villages.

Although these findings are based on twenty interviewees in two Lappish villages, they find global resonance, for instance in the work of Michael Corbett (Corbett 2007) in rural Atlantic Canada. Corbett finds that school directs students away from their villages, seeing successful life as something that happens elsewhere and success as "learning to leave" (Corbett 2007). Also, there is a wide variety of research and theory that sees school as a battlefield for different cultures, reproducing the dominant culture and placing students right in the middle of the crossfire among these different cultures (Althusser *et al.* 1984, Bernstein 1977, Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, Payne 1996, Willis 1977).

Based on the analysis, the following theoretical frameworks were initially established as central for the research: place-based education (Gruenewald 2008, Knapp 2005, Smith 2002a, Smith 2002b, Smith 2007), critical pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren 1989, Giroux *et al.* 2001, Giroux 2001, McLaren 1995), resistance theories (Sultana 1989, Willis 1977, Wright & Weekes 2003), and various school ethnographies that recognized the reproductive role of education (Ball 1981, Becker 1952, Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, Bowles & Gintis 1977, Bowles & Gintis 2002, Cicourel & Kitsuse 1963). These frameworks identified power

structures and relations similar to the current research but in other contexts. Although a wide variety of issues to which I was sensitive was, on some level, visible in the data (global forms of youth culture, issues relating to gender and sexual orientations, ethnicity), the issues did not present themselves as relevant to the topic of this research, in this particular village, in this particular year.

As described in article III, the theories mentioned above were abandoned as bases for analysing student agency in later stages of the field research. Although these theories provide tools for recognizing the socio-political contexts of student agency, they are more sensitive to societal contexts than to the micro dynamics of student agency, and they fail to provide adequate tools for analyzing student agency within schools. Dialogism and the interactionist approach to emotions replaced them as bases for the analysis of student agency.

#### **4.4 What does this mean for students assuming agency in northern rural schools?**

The Finnish rural north is sometimes represented through various dichotomies by those outside the rural north as well as by those who consider themselves rural northerners. I argue, based on the above findings, that there is some level of mutual Othering between ‘south’ and ‘north’, and that this Othering ultimately takes place in the small everyday choices that students must make in school.

Whereas rural villages (partly) construct their identity as opposite to urban rushing, insecurity, and lack of community, the urban south (partly) constructs its identity as opposite to the empty, dying, wild north. This mutual Othering is not all-encompassing; quite the contrary, the lines drawn are dynamic and changing. The Othering is performative and narrative. It is narrated in the dichotomies used: south-north, modern-traditional, urban-rural, new-old, bourgeois-feudal, modern-authentic, city-wilderness. It is also narrated in expressions loaded with historical, political, and emotional meanings. The most descriptive expression of the dichotomy is evidenced, perhaps, in Lapland in “the line between Lapland and muck” (“lapin ja lannan raja”). The south leads Finland, and the southern perspective gains the most footing in Finland, becoming naturalized as the ‘truth’ in the spatial projection of social exclusion on the rural north, for instance.

Some influential theories, such as reproduction theories, have stated that when a dominant culture and a subordinate ideology contradict, school tends to reproduce the dominant one. This research confirmed the same. The mutual Othering described above is performed and narrated in school through the goals

presented to students regarding their lives; from an early age, they learn to deal with the ever-present decision, to stay or to leave, and the emotional implications of both. At worst, the mutual Othering produced in the different ways of live in school takes place through the small everyday choices that students are forced to make: whether they smash the potatoes, ride the mopeds to school, skip days to take part in reindeer herding. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with these choices, in the context of these students' lives, they present themselves as impossible choices between two ways of life. The potato-smashing dispute exemplified such meaning in the village school. It became a symbol, loaded with emotions. The small choices with big import that students must make derive from the Othering. On the other hand, they also perform and narrate the Othering; the Othering takes place exactly through the performing of it.

It is in this everyday context that rural northern students assume agency and in which their agency is inscribed with meanings. It is in these specific relations that the smashing of potatoes became inscribed with resistant meaning because it symbolized refusing to be civilized, and thereby, it ultimately became a local, temporary symbol for challenging the entire national unifying process of Finnish national education.



## 5 Addressing student agency in a rural northern school

The second research question, *How does student agency become inscribed as challenging?* is addressed with school ethnography. In order to investigate challenging student agency and challenging situations, I felt it was necessary to be on-site, involved in the “messiness” (Mosselson 2010) of the real life situations and with the students whose agency was under analysis. Otherwise, the research would provide an ivory tower perspective on something best understood by feeling it (Gray 2008, Hochschild 2003, Wilkins 1993). Therefore, reflexive ethnography became the main methodology.

Since the reflexive turn (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), there have been various ways of distinguishing between different reflexive orientations (Foley 2002, Nicholls 2009). In general, reflexive researchers tend to see research ethics as central for trustworthiness in research (e.g. Rallis 2010). In this research, reflexivity refers to two things:

1. A form of research that fully acknowledges and utilizes a researcher’s subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research (Beach 2001, Davies 1999, Denzin & Lincoln 1998, Lumsden 2009, Mosselson 2010). (Article IV).
2. Critical reflection on the broader theoretical, cultural, political, ideological, and narrative contexts of the interaction with what is being researched (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009, 269). (Article I).

During the ethnographic fieldwork, I participated in the school every day, at first for four hours and later for the maximum of seven hours. During those hours, I observed, actively participated in discussions with teachers and students, and took part in everything I was asked to do, except for class management and teaching<sup>11</sup>. I suggested this limitation and the teacher fully agreed. Upon arrival at the school, the teacher was working hard to find ways to overcome the problems and develop working practices. Since my involvement was to end with the end of the semester and she would remain the sole teacher, none of the practices developed could rely on my presence. Support for the teacher, suggestions, and interpretations of situations were provided through our discussions, at her request. The teacher was engaged in the reflexivity, which was rewarding to both of us (see also Gildersleeve 2010 for engaging participants in reflection).

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<sup>11</sup> My M.Ed. education is that of a class teacher

Of the data constructed during that time, the relationships between the students and me were the main data. The relationships between the teachers and me and the parents and me, as well as the meetings with the municipal officials formed the supporting data, as described in chapter 3. The relationship with the teacher in the school was meaningful and significant for the entire research process. Although this relationship was essential for research ethics and for working on the relationship with students, it was not central data for this thesis and it is not discussed in further detail. It produced data of its own, and this will be addressed in forthcoming texts outside the scope of this research.

During the fieldwork, I wrote a journal, describing the events witnessed and the stories I heard. The first version of the journal was in five notebooks, written while the events or the stories took place. These were transcribed to the computer, augmented to complete sentences, and complemented with descriptions of personal emotions and reflections. I distinguished between five types of notes: reflective, observatory, methodological, analytic, and theoretical (informed by Emerson *et al.* 1995, Schatzman & Strauss 1973). Of these, the reflective notes required the most pages, since usually I was involved in the field. Observatory notes were mainly limited to the stories I heard or to the situations in which I played an observing role. Methodological notes continuously directed my course as a researcher, and theoretical notes represented the first efforts in combining the fieldwork with existing theory or research. Analytical notes, in turn, recorded the first steps in analysis. The note categories overlapped.

The analysis has taken place in various stages. The first stage always took place in the momentary situation in the field, between the participants and me, and it was “reported” in the relationship itself, in my immediate reactions or responses (utterances) to the participants or the situation. In the field journal, I wrote the first interpretations. Although I tried to write up everything, irrelevant details were omitted, and I must assume that there were things I failed to notice. At the end of the fieldwork, there were 170 journal pages. Subsequently, based on this “base journal”, several different narratives have evolved in the course of further analysis, making connections among events, emotions, experiences, and stories. Each version provides an alternative version of the four months, all equally incomplete and complete.

## 5.1 Analysis

The analysis of the student agency inscribed as challenging began in the field and continued for two years. In the analysis, I focused on the situations in which student agency was inscribed as challenging. The analysis was based on 1) the relationship between the students and me and 2) the analysis of my own emotions in the field. To be explicit, analysing the relationship and my own emotions was not the objective of the research but the tool for analysing the situations with new perspectives.

First, I asked, “*What are the students pursuing with this agency in this particular situation and in the broader context?*” When we were working on our relationship, the students explicitly let me know which reflections of them or interpretations of their actions did not do justice to their own experiences. In my analysis, I tried to respect their experiences and avoid talking over their heads while practicing the same honest criticality I had practiced in the field. Second, drawing from the interactionist approach to emotions, I analyzed the emotions in the situations in which student agency was inscribed as challenging.

The purpose of the analysis was not to present rival inscriptions to the same student agency but 1) to analyse how the inscriptions depended on the broader relations regarding the northern rural village school, 2) to broaden the spectrum of inscriptions available and, 3) to recognize the central role of emotions in inscribing meanings. Here, I begin with the analysis based on my relationship with students and my own emotions, and proceed to the presentation of the results.

### 5.1.1 *Working on the relationship between students and the researcher*

As I analysed student agency inscribed as challenging, I reflected upon the challenging incidents I witnessed or experienced, placing them in the broader societal framework described above and using the knowledge I constructed in the relationship with the students. Bakhtin and Holquist provided words that helped to conceptualize and describe what I found during the fieldwork: student behaviour could be seen as utterances to which we replied with our own behaviour. Self was a relation. I came to see that the relationship was something performed together. The relationship between the researcher and the participants formed a significant part of the data (see also Davies 1999, Duncombe & Jessop 2002).

The *working* on the relationship between the students and me was crucial (and still is; this thesis is an utterance within the same relationship). The concept “work”, here, does not refer to anything strenuous but refers to the valuing of something through the act of putting work into it. Describing the process simply as “establishing a relationship” implies that it is a static stage that can be reached and it fails to address its essence: a relationship takes place through the work both parties put into constructing it. A relationship is a continuous deed, performed through the effort. The effort is the willingness to learn and hear what the other is saying, to endure the difficult emotions, and to reflect on one’s own actions. Working on the relationship provides the basis for the data analysis.

In the relationship with the students, instead of introducing a variety of participatory research approaches to the students, I focused on participating in the roles that they gave me. This methodological approach finds congruence in the works of Gallacher and Gallagher (2008). It relies on the stance that children do not require ‘empowerment’ from adults if they are to act in the world, as Gallacher and Gallagher argue while criticizing some participatory research methods for limiting student agency rather than encouraging it. In these methods, according to them, the form of student agency tends to be predetermined, and the possible failures to partake in the predetermined ways end in a failure to participate. Instead, agency should not be something given but something assumed. The ways in which students appropriated me (as opposed to being appropriated by me) provided data rather than instances of non-compliance (see also Gallacher & Gallagher 2008). Put simply, when constructing data with the children, I took my directions from them.

In practice, I started a school paper with the students, attended birthdays, learned to play a couple of versions of Grand Theft Auto, and I became familiarized with their favourite YouTube videos and internet games. I met pets and listened to stories about friends’ pets, sat with them in silence as we stapled the school paper, looked at old pictures of various people, sat next to them when they tried to focus on schoolwork, and took rides on their mopeds. I relearned how to do a somersault on a trampoline and in hoops, took part in reindeer roundups, helped them paint their desks, discussed favourite movies, played dodge ball, made weapons from Lego, and played city war in the school halls<sup>12</sup>. I laughed at stories, among countless other similar things. The relationship between

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<sup>12</sup> The teacher and I had agreed that I was not a teacher nor did I have to behave like one, while, at the same time, I showed support for her and follow the rules she had constructed with the children.

the students and me was caring, close, and challenging and it cannot be fully described without the undervalued term “liking”. We liked (like) each other.

Contrary to what Davies (1999) suggests, the participation was not secondary to the purpose of engaging in “meaningful discussions”. There was always something meaningful to hear in the participation itself. Identifying what this was became the focus of the analysis. In Bakhtinian terms, there was always an utterance directed to me to which I was compelled to reply in the sense that whatever I chose to do constituted a reply. Ultimately, any action or word directed to me, or on the contrary, *not* directed to me, could be seen as an utterance to which I replied, if only by ignoring it. The analysis began in the field and consisted of working and learning to hear,

1. What the participants uttered to me, specifically focusing on the responses that the students’ utterances seemed to invite from me.
2. What I uttered in response, specifically focusing on the possible utterances (responses) from me that would respect the relationship

The analysis was not a process with a clear beginning and an end but it lasted throughout the fieldwork and it continues. It was also deeply personal, as we “receive ourselves from the Other” (Holquist 1990, 28). With our utterances, we gave and received various Selves. The utterances were not ‘one-of’ instances as much as a discussion unfolding with time; a certain utterance would only be possible in the light of my response to the previous one. As a simple example, the students initiated physical games with me once they learned that I seemed to enjoy them. This took place both ways; I subtly tried things to check how a child responded, to find out if that was what she/he would like. This relied on intuition rather than analysis, and I did not instantly know whether it was a hit or a miss. Although I did my best to respond to all the utterances as the participants hoped I would, there were limitations. These could be instantaneous, such as not cutting off the talk with Axel’s mother even though Axel (loudly) wanted to be with me too, or general, such as not taking part in a game I really did not like or not inviting them to my home (where I reserved time for my children).

After moments of perplexity as to how to make sense of this kind of data (as the utterances came in many forms and could be about almost anything), I noted that the overarching feature in them was exactly that which I had initially seen as external to the research: my own emotions. As I worked to respond in ways that respected the relationship, I noted that regardless of the topic, the actions taken,

the words used, or the concrete situations, the response required from me was usually an emotional investment. The students invited me to participate in their lives emotionally. Thereby, emotions rose to the centre of the analysis.

### **5.1.2 Shared emotions as basis for analysis**

Even though emotions were not often explicitly *described* or even spoken about, I noted that they were very efficiently *shared* in the field. With this observation, I analyzed the challenging situations using the question, “What is the dominant emotion here?” beginning with “How do *I* feel?” Article IV describes how analyzing how I felt in the various situations provided a window for recognizing non-verbalized emotions. My own emotions in the situations, many of which I reflected upon together with the teacher and students, were tools for the analysis. They were my way into the powerful, unspoken emotions in the field. The following provides two examples:

Joni was a boy who had, half way through a field trip, pretty much ignored me. I had already established that if I were to have Joni as an “active participant” in classic research terms, I would have to go against the “friendly mutual ignorance” relationship he was pursuing with me. In accordance with my chosen method, however, I respected his stance. Then,

*“My time here is 3/4 gone. For my first two months in the village, Joni [a 13-year old boy] hasn't made much contact with me. Now, he asked me to help him staple the school paper. I joined him in the office. He closed the door. We sat on the floor for over an hour, neither one of us saying a word. We heard only the clatter of two staplers, with an occasional laugh when a staple went awry. It was a warm hour, like a quiet, still water in the middle of rapids. After that, he asked me to help him every time he was stapling.”* (Described also in Article IV)

The stapling hour with Joni cannot be analyzed based on the words exchanged or information transmitted. It can only be understood through the emotion that we shared: peace. This quiet and frail yet relaxed moment relied precisely on the relationship that had been built during the previous months: letting each other be. During the stapling hour itself, I felt a sting of guilt since I felt I should use this hour for asking him questions, for “doing research”, not “missing my opportunity”, whereas I just relaxed and enjoyed the calm moment instead. Later I came to realize that listening to Joni's silence was just as valuable as listening to

his words. He allowed me to participate in one of the moments I later came to call restorative (Article III), opening my eyes to an alternative inscription for student agency (Chpt 4) – and it would never have been restorative had I tried to ‘work’. Similarly, recognizing the restorative meaning in the cry “I’m a reindeer herder!” (Article IV; Chpt 5.2.1) was achieved only after sharing the emotions the students experienced and performed in reindeer roundups.

The second example is the conflict prior to my leaving (described at length in Article IV). Out of nowhere, students attacked me verbally and emotionally two weeks before I left. I felt let down, betrayed, hurt. It took a while to realize that those emotions were not brought into the situation by the students. They were already in the situation, now performed by the students. They were caused by the impending departure. That was how my leaving made them feel. Until that time, the emotion of rejection had not been a part of our relationship, but now it was. As they shared the emotions with me, I realized that I should not feel the need to overcome their emotions as much as to endure them with them. This experience and realization truly opened my eyes to the fact that managing difficult emotions does not (necessarily) mean the containing of difficult emotions; it can also mean enduring them together.

In the field journal, my notes describing any forms of “challenging agency” decreased as the fieldwork advanced. This could indicate that as our relationship developed and that the students no longer challenged me. However, when I looked into the actual actions described in the journal, it appeared that the students’ actions did not change very much. Moreover, in the journal, it became clear that even my emotions regarding the actions did not change. What changed, however, was my reaction to the emotions. In Article IV, I quote my field journal:

*“Now that I know there will be upheaval, it’s just a part of the routine. The teacher feels the same way. She is no longer afraid; she just kind of rolls up her sleeves when a child comes to school worked up about something or a parent calls.*

*Also, it feels warmer, somehow, when emotions are not hidden in contemporary versions of Jane Austen-style equivocations, but they are right there, to be dealt with together. I dread going back and maturing my expression again (i.e. depriving it of emotion).*

The quote describes a moment, about half way through the fieldwork, when I suddenly had a feeling that “I know this now”. I talked about it with the teacher

and she shared the feeling. At some point, what had previously caused worry and stress had become routine. This personal experience shared with the teacher was essential in recognizing the role of personal emotions in the inscribing of meanings to student agency.

## **5.2 How does student agency become inscribed as challenging?**

As outlined in previous chapters, this thesis sees student agency as utterances, which enables seeing meanings as *inscribed* to the agency. This is significant, as it opens up possibilities for inscribing alternative meanings to the same agency. Of course, these meanings cannot be just anything; they must be meanings enabled by the relations.

Through the analysis, I found four alternative inscriptions for student agency that was inscribed as challenging, in the situation in which it occurred: seeking for relevant knowledge, seeking for trust, seeking for negotiation, and seeking for restoration (article III). Bakhtin and Holquist offer the conceptual framework for understanding why these inscriptions did not take place in the situations: *the relations in a context limit the possible meanings with which an utterance can be inscribed*. There are certain things that are almost impossible to utter within the relation between a teacher and a student in school. Actions pursuing trust, relevant knowledge, restoration, or negotiation tend to be inscribed as challenging simply because these are already fixed in the relation; student agency challenges these fixed definitions, as described below.

In other words, the relations express themselves in the meanings with which specific utterances are inscribed; for example, potato smashing was inscribed as resistance. This process relies on emotions. As the interactionist approach to emotions argues, our emotions are simultaneously personal and social, and the emotions performed in particular situations derive, like habitus, from the broader relations. Through this framework, challenging student agency can also be viewed as “*Performing emotions* that are experienced as challenging, and thereby, the agency becomes inscribed with challenging meanings.”

In this chapter, I answer the main research question: ‘*How does student agency become inscribed as challenging?*’ by first providing alternative inscriptions for the same student agency, and second, by presenting the process through which the agency gains challenging meanings. After this, I sketch out the role of interactive emotions in the process of inscribing meaning to student agency.



### ***5.2.1 Adaptive agency that happens to challenge the structures***

When asking “What are the students pursuing with this agency in this particular situation and in the broader context?”, I found that the students in the village school did not resist the situation in the school as much as they creatively used a wide variety of means to *adapt* to the situation: pursuit of knowledge relevant to them, personal psychological restoration, trust in their own terms, and negotiation. This was contrary to my initial expectations. The ways in which they adapted, or pursued adapted goals, however, easily became inscribed as challenging behaviour or resistance. As I stated in Article III, I saw students turning to resistance only as a last option, when they saw no other way.

The four answers provided here should not be seen as all encompassing, static, or final; rather, they should be read as context-bound interpretations of agency reflecting specific, temporal contexts and relations. The significance of the answers is not in their finality but in showing the variety of motivations that can be found behind seemingly challenging or resistant behaviour; this shows that characterizing any such behaviour simply as “misbehaviour,” or as student resistance, does not do justice to the agency.

#### ***Knowledge in students’ own terms***

Article III depicts a situation between Otto, Aki, the teacher, and a schoolbook task as an example of a situation in which both students seemed to be frustrated and angry, and they described their feelings as such, but their behaviours were almost opposite to each other. Aki did the task, accepting direct instructions from the teacher while Otto had to redo it five times, as his answers weren’t from the book (the first two), in proper sentence structure (third), or in polished handwriting (fourth). Otto’s agency was inscribed with challenging meaning and Aki’s with conforming meaning since Otto was actively questioning the task while Aki was not.

As I explained in Article III, in the broader context of the students’ lives, however, the situation can be approached the other way around. From this perspective, Otto is the conformist and Aki the resister in the same situation. Otto, in our encounters, indicated that he accepted the broader goals of Finnish education, including the goal of leaving the village. In this situation, he pursued knowledge that would help him succeed in achieving this goal; he was actively looking for the meaning in what he was doing. Aki, in turn, did not accept the

broader goals or his own projected departure from the village. He was not interested in initiating dialogue about the methods to achieve static goals that he did not accept. His far more fundamental, passive resistance appeared to be compliance. For him, the relevant knowledge concerned how to complete the task with as little effort as possible. The students' different task-specific goals and strategies reflected the broader goals they had regarding their lives. In this way, both students pursued knowledge relevant to them.

Seeking for relevant knowledge outside the curricula challenges the established 'modus operandi' in school where the content to be learned is largely predefined. It does not regard as relevant many topics perceived to be relevant to everyday lives, such as understanding emotions or balancing between different ways of life. Otto's actions, seeking for 'meta' knowledge of the task, became inscribed with challenging meaning simply because the school relation does not allow any other inscriptions.

### *Negotiation*

In Article III, as well as in the introduction to this thesis paper, I describe the potato-smashing situation. The year was just beginning. The teacher and the students knew each other but they had not yet clearly positioned themselves regarding the tender issues that had arisen during past years. The students smashed their potatoes, looked at the teacher, and said, in unison, with their act, "*Look, we smash our potatoes*". This single act included several overlapping meanings. First, echoing the voices of their parents, it said, "We do not need to be civilized", referring not only to them, but defending their entire home culture, Othered in school. Second, they positioned themselves in preparation for future negotiations, stating what many researchers have stated: when a child is made to choose between home and school, it is likely that the child chooses home, since home is the source of security (Payne 1996, Rastas *et al.* 2005). Third, and most importantly, because it was such a flamboyant act, it was an open invitation for negotiation. As the teacher responded by paying no attention to the act, it was defused of its challenging or resistant meanings. Instantly, the students smashing potatoes became just that: children smashing potatoes.

The fact that the relation allowed the teacher to inscribe the utterances with new meaning originated from the work she had put into the relationship. It went as far as to return to the sentence I heard in the beginning of the semester: "We finally have a teacher who wants to be here". It also showed that anything that

was uttered in school, in any specific encounter, could later be subsumed with new meanings. Any utterance, when looked back upon, can gain alternative meanings in the light of new experiences.

### *Trust in students' own terms*

As I argued in Article III, the pedagogic relation inherently assumes that *trust goes mainly one way* - from the child towards the adult. Similarly, a pedagogic relationship assumes that this trust between child and adult is *inherently just there*. As Gert Biesta (2006, 25) puts it, "One of the constituents of the educational relationships is trust [without ground]." The students in the village school questioned both these assumptions with their agency. Based on my own relationship with the students, I argue that students see trust differently from the way educating adults often see it, and that students look for two components of trust.

One, the love and caring the adult shows must not be conditional; in other words, it endures difficulties. Students seek this trust to rid themselves of the fear that the adult will withdraw her caring and love because of their actions or emotions. Where there is such fear, there is no trust. Leaving is a central question in rural and isolated schools where many teachers literally leave, and students think of this in terms of their own relationship with the teacher. "*She's gone; she had a nervous breakdown with us*". When the adult proved to see the relationship as worthy of investment, then students were more willing to invest in the relationship.

Two, the adults must be taking the children towards futures they want. Again, in a context in which school leads children away from their place of dwelling and in which locals feel their lives are Othered, this is a central question. Are the adults presenting the children's homes as something from which to escape? A similar conflict was found, for instance, by Fine (1989) in her research in which a teacher presented "education as the only way out of the Bronx". Some children are accustomed to defending their homes in school. The experienced failure of the school to recognize (Fraser 2000, Honneth 1995) and value local life is a cause of distrust that must be refuted by building trust in everyday school life.

When students pursue trust in their own terms through dialogue, they point out the absurdity of the assumption that trust exists in the relationship regardless of the social location and agency of the individuals involved. When they attempt to ensure that an adult is worthy of trust, it becomes inscribed with challenging

meanings because it implies that the adult is not automatically worthy of trust, that student trust must be earned. This, in turn, questions the hierarchy and the implicit assumptions of school.

### *Personal psychological restoration*

As described in Article III, I found that students create temporary restorative environments for themselves throughout their school days in order to recover from stress. Restoration refers to a method of self-regulation and follows on “efforts to address ordinary adaptational demands” (Hartig & Staats 2003, 103). It “involves renewing diminished functional resources and capabilities”. In the article, I describe how I came to interpret a frequent call I often heard, as a restorative call.

*“I’m a reindeer herder!”*

Students would yell this out often while doing schoolwork they did not like doing. For the first two months, I interpreted this as a resistant shout, one signalling the insignificance of the tasks to their own lives. Only after having been invited by the students to reindeer roundups and seeing what “being a reindeer herder” meant to the students, did I think to consider an alternative interpretation.

In the roundups, seeing the students as reindeer herders, I could see an entirely different version of them. In Article III, I describe this as *doing* their own sense of self-worth. Self-worth became a verb in this context. Therefore, the cry, “*I’m a reindeer herder*”, so often heard in school, especially when students were required to do de-motivating school work and fell into the role of helpless students, could be interpreted as a way of tapping into the versions of Self that gave emotional resources and strength – reminding students that they were not simply students evaluated by teachers. I found that Restoration could also be found in temporary relief from the pressure of the school day in a non-controlled space, in a quiet, relaxing moment alone, in focusing on artwork, in wrestling, or in a hug.

Restoration in school requires relaxation of control and the actions pursuing restoration may thus gain resistant meanings although the purpose might be the opposite to that of resistance: students may be accessing sources for restoration in order to *stay engaged* in school.

### **5.2.2 Performing emotions that are experienced as challenging**

At the end of chapter 4, I describe how the mutual Othering between two ways of life in the village school is narrated and takes place in the small everyday choices students must make, such as whether to smash potatoes. When the students smashed their potatoes at the beginning of the new school year, looking at the teacher, they were not only defending their home culture and positioning themselves for future negotiations as described above. They were also *performing the emotions* that they were constantly dealing with: the frustration, the anger, the ungivingness (and there are plenty of stories in which equal amounts of frustration, anger, and ungivingness were returned by adults performing the same emotions). I come to my final argument: The inscription “challenging” did not come to the student agency from the particular action itself, but rather from the emotions that were performed by the actions. In other words, it was not the agency or actions, as such, that were challenging; it was the emotions that were performed by the actions, resonating in the people that were challenging them.

These emotions, performed in school with student agency as well as with teacher agency, derive from the broader national and local historical, cultural, and societal disputes described in previous chapters. These challenging emotions are not going to go away by targeting any student action that performs them. As the potato-smashing example shows, virtually any action can become a symbol for the difficult emotions and for the performance of them.

What was significant in this particular potato-smashing instance was that during it, the teacher managed to surpass years of Othering and performing of difficult emotions. She managed these difficult emotions instead of performing them or denying them<sup>13</sup>. She showed that managing emotions did not mean “doing away with unpleasant emotions”, but also enduring them together and carrying on. In fact, the more fiercely the emotions are “done away with” the more fiercely they stay. Some emotions can be managed only by enduring them.

Just as utterances exist only in dialogue, emotions need to be managed interactively rather than privately because they are not private but interactional. The interactive management of these interactive emotions does not gain its importance because it would provide skills for becoming more successful in life (see Zembylas 2007a for critique). It is important because the emotions are, even

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<sup>13</sup> Students knew she was well aware of the meaning with which potato smashing had been inscribed. She knew that they knew.

in their sharedness, a part of us, no less than an arm is. Once the emotions did not have to fight for their right to exist, even the difficult ones became a rewarding aspect of school life. What was perceived as “challenging agency” lessened through enduring the challenging emotions, not by targeting the agency.

## 6 Discussion: Disaggregating challenging student agency

This thesis disaggregates a problem that, in a large part of research and in the public arena, has looked like this:

Challenging student agency → challenging situations in school →  
challenging emotions → lack of teacher and student wellbeing

During the research process, all the components of the problem have taken new meanings and the problem has altered until it is unrecognizable. Challenging student agency has become merely one of the many meanings that can inscribe the same student utterances. Alternative inscriptions, found during this research include seeking trust on one's own terms, relevant knowledge, negotiations, and restoration. According to dialogism, every meaning has a homecoming festival somewhere, sometime. This thesis is the homecoming festival for those four alternative inscriptions. The significance of these inscriptions is not that they would be more 'accurate' than the inscription of challenging meanings. Accurateness is not a relevant concept in dialogism that sees any meaning inscribed to an utterance, and its accurateness, as always subject to change. At the same time, any meaning that becomes inscribed is equally accurate for the moment of being and has equally real consequences. The significance in the inscriptions found through this research is that they do not place people on oppositional sides. Thereby, I argue, they are more ethical.

In the course of the research process, the incident with smashing potatoes has reoccurred repeatedly. The research itself has smashed some potatoes, so to speak. I have grappled with some illusions among educators.

The first of these illusions is that education "should be more dialogical". Education is dialogical already, and those of us involved in education should be more aware of what we are saying. In this thesis, dialogue is seen neither as the goal nor as the method of education. Education is dialogue that takes place on micro and macro levels. This thesis discusses the micro level utterances. On the macro level, the utterances come to carry significant meanings. For instance, the "When in Rome do as the Romans do" speech (maassa maan tavalla) is often heard and opposed in the context of discussing immigrants in Finland. The speech is one of the most central methods of smothering the discussion of culturally flexible rules (Souto 2011). In this research, it became clear that a form of this speech is also applied to rural villages; someone else, somewhere else, determines

the ways that everyone should live in order to earn their place in the society. In the same way that the questions of racism and its consequences are dissipated into a seemingly neutral culture speech, so are the questions of rural rights dissipated into seemingly neutral speech of progress.

At the same time, however, it is difficult to sketch alternatives, since the purpose of Finnish education is to minimize the differences of opportunities in education by offering everyone the same opportunities regardless of background. The questions differentiating cultural particularism, universalism, and pluralism - fairly new arrivals in Finnish educational discussions - remain as questions.

The second illusion is that “we should help students engage emotionally in education”. Again, it is not a question of whether or not educators seek to encourage students to respond emotionally; students will do this anyway (Skidmore 2006). It is much more a question of what these emotions are and whether they are denied or accepted. This thesis proposes, hereby, to redefine the problem conceptualized in the beginning of this chapter: *the problem is not that there are difficult emotions. It is the belief that there should not be*. The idea that difficult emotions indicate a failure of any kind makes it difficult to accept them as a part of school. Experiencing difficult emotions in a school context may feel wrong and trigger guilt. In school, there is not much room for accepting difficult emotions and managing them interactively; this aspect of education is not taught to teachers as subject content is.

The inscription of the meaning “problem” to the idea of “difficult emotions” does not come from the one uttering the emotions or the one perceiving them. It comes from the relation in which no other inscription is easily accessible. Thereby, in school, the situation of a teacher being challenged emotionally leads to the interpretation that the particular agency is challenging, simply because it challenges the existing relation in which emotions, especially difficult ones, are not accepted openly. Simply stated, the ultimate theoretical-practical finding of this thesis is that in school any emotions, pleasant or difficult, deriving from broader societal contexts, performed in the everyday, and experienced on a personal level, are not problems to be solved. The challenging situations and challenging student agency are instances of shared challenging emotions, and as such, are a part of life, and a part of school.

The third illusion is the assumption that students either learn in school or do not learn. They *always learn*; it is a question of what they learn, and if what they learn is something that educators see or not.



Fourth, there is the repetitive demand, especially in research, for “giving students a voice”. They already have one, even if it does not speak in the language educators would understand, or say the things that educators would like to hear.

## **6.1 Evaluating the research**

When conducting research of other people’s lives, the evaluation of the research cannot be separated from the ethics of the research.

The reflection of the students provided in this thesis is only one of many. The students contested many of the first reflections, provided to them on the field in my responses to them, and with which they did not agree. Thereby, my initial perceptions of them have been “member checked” (Rallis 2010) in our relationship. In addition, the students reflected me in various ways, some of which I did not agree with but which were equally ‘true’ for that particular relationship at that particular moment.

In this research, I have addressed the Kantian maxim (that people should never be used as means for someone else’s end) by attempting to bridge the gap between the needs of both members in the relationship (Rallis 2010). Instead of trying to establish shared goals (e.g. Guillemin & Gillam 2004), I have pursued the aim to reach our different goals through the same relationship by constructing the research on the needs the participants revealed to me. I aimed to leave enough space in the research for the participants to use for their own purposes and to respect those uses in my own actions. While the relationship between the children and me was defined as that of a researcher and participants, it was also defined by them for their own purposes, and they assumed roles beyond those of participants. This is a purposeful stance towards participatory research: children are seen as empowered in their own right, and the adult is simply appropriated in this empowerment. If I were to make power existent by putting it into action (Foucault 1982) through the research, and by defining only certain kinds of actions as participatory and the rest as nonconforming, the child would be decentred in the research, not empowered.

Although, in research literature, ethics and pursuing knowledge are at times represented as making choices between the two, during the course of this research they began to show themselves as one. When constructing the research method in a dialogue with the participants, I grappled with Levinas’s (1995, 1996) idea that the pursuit of knowledge is but a secondary feature of a more basic ethical duty to

the Other. Levinas does not pursue to draft a research method or approach, but his ideas are worth reflecting in research. He speaks of the demand the revelation of the other's face makes, and the ethical responsibility it brings. The research approach, the self-positioning, and most of all, the method I constructed with the students, the "working on the relationship", and the "learning to hear", have been my ways of facing up to this ethical responsibility.

The guiding principle has been openness: I have conducted several member checks (Rallis 2010), continuously submitting my thoughts for the critiques and comments of the teacher, the villagers, and the students. At the same time, it has been important not to burden them, engaging participants only in research discussions to which they responded. Any material I collected regarding an individual was for the individual to see - transcripts of interviews, notes about them in the notebook. It was not for others to see, however. Similarly, my own written reflections were for only me to read. When the researchers held a seminar in the village, I organized with a teacher so that the students could send a representative to the seminar to hear what I said about them and to comment. I felt that the students and I were similarly excited by the opportunity to change our relationship from me observing them to them observing me and commenting on my thoughts and claims in front of my own work community. It made my work more transparent and brought a new twist to the power relations.

The ethical perspective has been that of relational ethics rather than 'procedural ethics' (Gildersleeve 2010, Rallis & Rossman 2010, Rossman & Rallis 2010) and ethical decisions have been made moment to moment. I have constantly evaluated the research with the question, "Have I fulfilled my role in this relationship?" Despite the mutual heartbreak that occurred at the face of my leaving, and the ethical challenges it brought (Duncombe & Jessop 2002, Heyl 2007, Murphy & Dingwall 2007, Stacey 1988), I would conclude that the answer to that question is "yes". The students, the parents, and the teacher managed to use the presence of an outside researcher as an opportunity to create something together, and I managed not to ruin it; I consider that an achievement.

Instead of relying on informed consent (which of course has been acquired also), I have asked the question, "What is ethical practice in this instance with these people?" (Rallis & Rossman 2010). In general, I pursued to ask the question of the people themselves instead of answering it for them. There was, however, one case where this could not be done: when discussing incidents with collective consequences or experiences. There was no one voice to consult, which would represent the voices of everyone, and not everyone touched by the incidents could

be asked. This concern arose when writing article IV. In the article, I revealed nothing that had not been revealed to me in the role of a researcher, and nothing I spoke of could be considered to be anything but fairly common knowledge. However, the issues were so very sensitive and emotional that I had to be cautious. Is telling this story simply evocative or is it necessary? I would like to justify the decision I made by telling a limited but informative version of the stories in article IV.

Practically everyone goes to basic school and many have strong emotional experiences in their background. The main thrust of this research is that emotions do not stay outside the walls of school buildings. However, they are not generally recognized within schools; they are silenced. Silencing or shushing these experiences attaches not only respectful distance but also shame to them, whereas stories were told to me, not with shame but with valour and respect for everyone concerned. Had I chosen to shush stories that were told to me in the role of a researcher, I would have acted out of my own worry or insecurity in the face of publishing these emotions, not at the request of those sharing them with me. Therefore, I would have continued the culture of excluding difficult emotions (arising from difficult experiences) from educational discussion. So as not to do this, I chose to be open about the experiences and emotions shared with me while, at the same time, sharing only what was needed to recognize their influence in school every day. There was a conscious choice to focus the descriptions of emotions mainly (but not entirely) on my own.

I would like to address a second ethical problem here. Schoolteachers do a difficult work, having to balance themselves between various societal forces and values, cope with difficult emotions, and become personally, bodily, involved in all of this. At the same time, teachers are thrown into these life-wide challenges with a 'sink or swim' mentality, labelling classroom challenges as multicultural- or special education-related "problems", falsely seeing them as unrelated to the daily work, and instead, focusing the training on subject content and didactics. In this research, some of the choices that teachers had made earlier presented themselves in a negative light. I would like to emphasize that the work of many of these teachers has been praised, especially in other schools. The teacher interviews, without exception, described efforts to do what was best for the children.

In this research, knowledge is not seen as static, but as dialogic, a composition, a plurality of narratives, which is constantly socially and psychologically reconstructed in the process of social interaction (Heikkinen

2002). In such “ontology of experience” (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007), a number of different realities are continuously constructed in people’s minds through their social interactions with each other (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007, Heikkinen 2002, Steedman 1991). In other words, there is no *one* meaning to strive for; the world consists of vast congeries of contesting meanings; it is a heteroglossia so varied that no single term capable of unifying its diversifying energies is possible (Holquist 1990). There is no complete answer to pursue (Kuntz 2010). The demand for reliability - whether another researcher in a same circumstance would make the same observations and come to the same conclusions - in this kind of research needs to be understood accordingly. Since the knowledge is constructed in a dialogue between the participants and the researcher, the assumption is that it is, in some way, unique. Another researcher would bring out different voices in the participants, ask different questions, and reach different conclusions. No ethnographic study is repeatable (Davies 1999). To view truth in terms of consistencies, in this kind of research, would be not only naïve (Davies 1999) but also against the very ontological basis of the research, the founding argument of which is that people are multi-voiced (Elbaz-Luwisch 2005) and that no meanings are static (Holquist 1990). Instead of generalizability, narrative researchers often speak resonance (Conle 1996). For instance, the findings of research in a fishing community in coastal Atlantic Canada (Corbett 2007) cannot be generalized to apply to a reindeer herding community in Finnish Lapland; there are, however, resonances between the two. Neither should this research be taken as a statement of the general situation in all northern Finnish village schools.

I have represented the lives of rural villagers as ones of contentment, as they were characterized to me. While it is likely that the villagers’ accounts of their lives were indeed influenced by the so-called “wall of happiness” (Kortteinen 1982), their argument for contentment is supported by the fact that they were, in fact, staying, and therefore, actively resisting the pull to move away like so many others.

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## Original publications

- I Lanas, M. (2008) Oikeus paikkaan – kuinka koulu ja pohjoinen pienkylä kohtaavat? [The Right to Place - How Do the School and a Small Northern Village Meet?] In Lanas, Maija, Niinistö, Hanna & Suoranta, Juha (Eds.) Kriittisen pedagogiikan kysymyksiä 2. [Questions of Critical Pedagogy 2] Tampere: The Department of Education of the University of Tampere: 51–80.
- II Lanas, Maija (in press). Beyond educating marginal - recognizing life in rural north. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*.
- III Lanas, Maija & Corbett, Michael (2011). Disaggregating Student Resistances: Analysing What Students Pursue with Challenging Agency. *Young* 19(4): 417–434.
- IV Lanas, Maija (2011): How can non-verbalized emotions in the field be addressed in research? *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 34(2): 131–145.

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