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The transformative power of representation among youths: toward appreciating diversity and inclusion in Norway

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In Norway, contemporary challenges linked to racism, discrimination, and social exclusion advocate for original approaches to enhance inclusion and appreciation of diversity. In this article, we draw on empirical material from two workshops with four youths from diverse backgrounds. The empirical material includes participant observation, group discussions, reflection logs, and informal dialogues. Using transformative learning theory, we explore whether and what kinds of learning processes occur when youths engage and interact in reflective activities aimed at appreciating diversity. Emphasizing the need to expand youths' existing frames of reference and points of view, the empirical material unveils the power of representation. The analysis suggests that although movies might have transformative potential, personal or peers' experiences make the movies "come alive" and more relatable. This increases the level of critical reflection and self-reflection among the youth participants, thus strengthening the transformative potential. Lastly, the analysis shows that both representation and context are crucial in activities seeking to enhance inclusion and appreciation of diversity.

KEYWORDS

transformative learning theory, inclusive education, youth, representation, social inclusion, diversity

1 Introduction

This study emerges as a response to contemporary challenges Norway faces regarding inclusion and citizenship among young people, parallel with increasing diversity, globalization, and migration in society. A recent [UNICEF \(2022\)](#) report in Norway reveals that 37% of the participating youths (aged 13–19 years old) reported having experienced racism based on how they look, while 25% had experienced racism based on religion. Moreover, 67% felt the government was not doing enough to prevent social discrimination in Norway. Other studies show that ethnic minority youth sense they are not "entitled" by the majority population to feel Norwegian, and some report experiences of ethnic discrimination, identifying themselves as foreigners even though they were born in Norway ([Chinga-Ramirez, 2017](#); [Erdal and Strømsø, 2016](#); [Frøyland and Gjerustad, 2012](#); [Mathisen, 2020](#)). Transnationally adopted youth report similar levels of discrimination as immigrant youths ([Leirvik et al., 2021](#)). Several studies reveal that exclusion among youth is most often experienced in the school arena ([Anti-rasistisk Senter, 2017](#); [Mathisen, 2020](#); [Leirvik et al., 2021](#); [UNICEF, 2022](#)), some even suffering increased bullying when curricular themes concern their background ([Anti-rasistisk Senter, 2017](#)). Ethnic majority Norwegians engaging in inter-ethnic relationships display more positive attitudes toward diversity than those who do not ([Rafiqi and Thomsen, 2014](#); [SSB, 2020](#)). Recent efforts of

inclusive education in Norway have resulted in teaching resources on democratic attitudes, discrimination, and racism from actors such as the Rafto Foundation and Dembra. Despite their thematic suitability and timeliness, teachers report a low level of usage (Thomassen et al., 2017). Moreover, the impact of available resources has not been studied or adequately theorized (Lorentzen and Røthing, 2016). Hence, despite crucial efforts to develop pedagogical resources, teachers continue to lack research-based pedagogical tools that stimulate their own and students' critical thinking and enhance intercultural dialogue (Faye, 2021; Røthing, 2019; Thomassen et al., 2017).

Motivated by these societal and educational challenges, we explore how activities inspired by inclusive education and transformative learning have the potential to promote a sense of belonging and social inclusion among youth with diverse backgrounds. Traditionally, transformative learning has mainly been used and studied among adult populations (Illeris, 2014). More recently, studies have engaged young people in transformative learning processes (Bentz and O'Brien, 2019; Lopez and Ortiz, 2019; Ursin et al., 2023). However, as far as we are aware, no previous research has investigated the transformative potential of activities regarding social inclusion, recognition, and sense of belonging among youth in a Norwegian context.

This article contributes to the field of inclusive education and transformative learning among youth. We draw on empirical material from two workshops with four youths aged 14–16. The youths are from diverse backgrounds in terms of skin color, ethnicity, religion, class, and neighborhood, and the group consists of both girls and boys. The following research question is posed: Whether and what kinds of transformative learning processes occur when youths engage and interact in reflective activities aimed at appreciating diversity?

The article is structured as follows: First, we describe relevant concepts within transformative learning theory before we move on to describing the outline of the workshops and the overall project, the study's methodology, and ethical procedures. The analysis is twofolded, according to the two workshops we describe and analyze. In the end, we offer some concluding reflections about the transformative potential of activities aimed at triggering (self) reflection regarding the power of representation, inclusion, recognition, and sense of belonging.

2 Theoretical framework

As the overall project had a goal to expose youth to (self) reflective activities that promote social inclusion and appreciation of diversity, we have chosen theoretical concepts from transformative learning theory. In this section, we introduce this theoretical framework and describe the scarce literature available on transformative learning with youth.

2.1 Transformative learning theory

In this study, we employ Transformative Learning Theory (TL), developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s as he was

studying factors that impeded or facilitated US women's return to postsecondary study or the workplace after an extended time out. Mezirow (2000) was heavily influenced by Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, particularly the concept of conscientization, which involves developing critical awareness to take action against oppressive elements of reality. Freire (1970) emphasized the need for a transformative relationship between all actors in a learning environment and education as an important tool for social change. TL has been expanded by scholars such as Cranton (2006), who critiqued and revised the theory by emphasizing the importance of context, emotional dimensions, and creative and expressive activities.

In this study, TL is reckoned as both a theory (Mezirow, 1991) and a methodology (Cranton, 2006) and involves those learning experiences that challenge individuals' existing perspectives and cause a change in action (Mezirow, 2000). Hoggan (2016) describes TL:

as a process that results in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world, metaphorically referring to the heart (lived, felt experience), head (sensemaking of the world), and hands (behavior) (p. 71).

TL is defined as the process of creating change in an individual's *frame of reference*. Mezirow (1997) defines frames of reference as the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences and make sense of the surrounding world. As Mezirow (2000) asserts, transformative learning is:

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference... to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove truer or justified to guide action (p. 7–8).

An individual's frame of reference is developed through childhood, shaped by one's upbringing, educational trajectory, and the wider sociocultural context in which a person grows up. As Mezirow (2000) elaborates, frames of reference provide us with a sense of coherence, community, and identity and, thus, are often emotionally charged and strongly defended. According to TL, frames of reference always change and develop with new experiences and encounters. This makes TL a life-long process that transforms our frame of reference to become more inclusive, critical, and self-reflective.

According to Mezirow (1997, 2000), a frame of reference comprises two dimensions: *habits of mind* and *points of view*. Habits of mind are broad, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by cultural, social, educational, economic, or political codes. An example relevant to this study is ethnocentrism. Habits of mind become articulated in specific points of view, that is, beliefs, value judgments, attitudes, or feelings toward, for instance, people with different skin color. TL may occur in one of four ways: By elaborating existing frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view, or transforming habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000).

Transformations in habit of mind, according to Mezirow (2000), may

be *epochal*, a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight, or *incremental*, involving a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a transformation in habit of mind (p. 21, emphasis in original).

Epochal transformations are dramatic changes that challenge an individual's core identity, worldview, or sense of who they are (Mezirow, 2000). Incremental transformation happens over time, often as a result of a series of encounters with *cognitive dissonance* (Gambrell, 2015; Taylor, 2008), while epochal transformations often entail a *disorienting dilemma*, that is, an episode imposed by external "triggers" such as a life crisis or any other experience (an event, art or argument) which involve intense emotions, and which require a reordering of epistemological assumptions (Mezirow, 2000). Gambrell (2015) notes that while cognitive dissonance may or may not lead to transformation, a disorienting dilemma leads to transformation. According to Robinson and Levac (2018), actual transformation is difficult to pinpoint in time as it tends to occur gradually through a sequence of small incremental changes. Following this, Lawrence and Cranton (2015) introduce the concept of *catalysts* as differing from disorienting dilemmas; "a catalyst can be traumatic, a turning point in a process, epochal (dramatic) or incremental (gradual)" (p. 63). Kitchenham (2012) finds that when adults experience a catalyst that causes them to question their worldview, it may lead to a fundamental change in how they view the world (p. 1659).

Regarding processes of transformation and change, Mezirow (2000) refers to transforming a frame of reference as *reframing* and defines two kinds of reframing: *Subjective reframing* involves critical self-reflection assessing our own ideas and beliefs (Tedford and Kitchenham, 2021) or learners' personal's subjective interpretations of their experience (Cranton, 2006). *Objective reframing* involves critical reflection on the assumptions of others (Van Breda and Agherdien, 2012) and includes a critical examination of external realities, such as societal norms, and an understanding of power dynamics, such as systematic inequalities that may influence personal and social experiences (Cranton, 2006). Both types of reframing may occur when a student explores a given activity (Shaw et al., 2018) and are therefore viewed as two types of critical reflection that can be used as a framework for assessing transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Tedford and Kitchenham, 2021). According to Schnepfleitner and Ferreira (2021), TL consists of four core interrelated elements: Critical reflection, dialogue, individual experience, and context, which will guide our concluding discussion.

2.2 Transformative learning among youth

Since TL originates from adult learning, its adoption in education and research with youth has been limited. Mezirow (2000, 1991) argued that although young people may learn to

become critically reflective of the assumptions of others, becoming critically reflective of one's assumptions occurs only in adulthood. However, Illeris (2014) argues that mental development and identity formation that takes place through childhood and youth sets the scene and conditions on which transformations take place. Thus,

transformative learning during youth becomes by degree the means of development and learning concerning the various elements of the identity, at first through very unsteady trials but gradually by means of more consistent thinking and behaving (ibid, p. 159).

Illeris concludes that TL in youth is both important and demanding for learners and for those who try to help and assist them. In support of this, researchers have recently argued that TL is highly beneficial to youth. For example, high school students in Portugal used art as a driver for societal transformation regarding climate change awareness (Bentz and O'Brien, 2019). The study showed that a transformative learning approach enhances critical thinking, new perspectives, and a sense of empowerment among youth. Ursin et al. (2023) found that the involvement of 13–17-year-olds in a 2-day climate workshop with creative and discussion-based activities catered for the vital exchange of opposing views and wishes, which again generated the necessary critical self-reflection to initiate transformative journeys. Although such transformations occur on a personal level, they have the potential for systemic transformations in the long run. Lopez and Ortiz (2019) explored features of a summer program envisioned to support the personal and academic development of ethnic minority high school youths. Their findings show how youths cultivate meaningful relationships based on care and trust. Lopez and Ortiz argue that interpersonal interactions that cultivate trust reinforce communal learning and transformative educational experiences connected to processes of self-reflection and identity exploration. Our study builds on the small but growing body of literature on TL with youths, connecting it to issues of youth diversity and social inclusion in Norwegian educational contexts.

3 Materials and methods

In this section, we first describe the recruitment process and the workshop content before explaining the research methods and discussing ethical issues that arose. We draw on empirical material from a TL project conducted by the first author. TL inspired the methodology in the workshops, where the chosen activities (further described below) sought to cause a change in how youths see themselves and others. As described above, TL includes a shift that involves critically examining, challenging our existing assumptions and perspectives (the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live), and becoming aware of one's own and others' assumptions and expectations. TL may be fostered in many ways, however in this study, it is fostered through direct and active experiences, discussions, activities and critical reflections (Taylor, 2007).

3.1 Recruitment and participants

The initial goal was to recruit six youths, as a small group is beneficial when working with critical (self) reflection activities with young people on sensitive issues of diversity, discrimination, and social inclusion (see also [Van Breda and Agherdien, 2012](#)). However, the recruitment process turned out to be challenging. The plan was to recruit youths through public schools and after-school activity programs, but gatekeepers declined as they had a lot of piled-up activities put on hold due to COVID-19. To reach youths, flyers were put up in public places and libraries and distributed on Facebook. In the end, five participants were recruited, but one only participated in one workshop due to a busy after-school schedule. Thus, the empirical data in this article concerns the involvement of four participants (14–16 years old). They are given pseudonyms and include Ragnhild and Bjørg (girls with Norwegian backgrounds), Nakabugo (girl born in Norway, parents of African background), and Kintu-Karl (boy born in Norway, parents of African and Norwegian backgrounds).

3.2 Transformative learning workshops

The project entailed 7 weekly workshops, each lasting for 2–3 h, but here, we will only focus on activities conducted in two workshops. These two workshops are chosen as their activities turned out to have transformative potential. Moreover, the analysis of all workshops is beyond the scope of this article. The workshops were held at a centrally located youth center in a major city in Norway. The center was regarded by the youth participants as a youth-friendly space characterized by a safe, welcoming environment ([Hawke et al., 2018](#)). The workshops were organized and facilitated by the first author. The youth participants agreed upon the schedule of the workshops, length and time of breaks, and time and content of snack hours. The above-mentioned process, coupled with the youth-friendly location, contributed to the youths' continuous active participation in the workshops for 7 weeks.

The workshop activities are inspired by inclusive education initiatives ([Dembra, n.d.](#); [Lorentzen and Røthing, 2016](#); [Skeivungdom, n.d.](#)) and the first author's personal experiences, being a woman of immigrant background living in Norway (see [Lyså and Hoem, 2024](#) and discussion below). The activities were discussed and further developed in collaboration with the participating youths along the course of the workshops, utilizing their interests and creativity, regarding them as experts on their perceptions and experiences ([Hawke et al., 2018](#)). The two workshops that this article draws on involved movie sessions. As [Blackburn Miller \(2020\)](#) finds in her review on arts in TL, the use of movies may provoke reflection, awareness, and critical thought, potentially contributing to meaningful transformational experiences. When selecting activities and movies, the aim was to trigger critical (self) reflection, dismantle potentially existing stereotypes, and contribute to tolerance and appreciation of diversity.

During the movie sessions, curtains were put down for a cinema feeling, and snacks and drinks were offered. Markers, pens, and paper were available at the table in case anyone needed them. After the first movie, some youths wrote reflections individually while

everyone participated in a discussion afterwards. In addition, there were informal conversations about the movie during the snack break, which also turned out to be crucial. After the second movie, all the youths wrote down individual reflections before they shared them to each other in pairs. Everyone was encouraged to provide feedback on shared thoughts and reflections about the reflective activities (movies) and the entire workshop. This part resulted in discussions on issues youths found meaningful, revealing ways they made sense of their everyday lives within broader cultural and socio-political systems ([Lopez and Ortiz, 2019](#)).

3.3 Research methods and analysis

As the project set out to explore potential journeys of transformative learning among youth participants, a qualitative approach was chosen. Participant observation, group discussions, reflection logs, and informal dialogues were conducted to track shifts in attitudes, values, and affect among participants. This methodological approach resulted in three forms of empirical data—the researcher's observation notes, youth participants' reflection notes, and materials produced by youths (the latter is not an object of analysis in this article).

In the observation notes, Hoem kept a record of events, emotions, body language, reflections, and reactions, tracking potential shifts in attitude, values, and affect. The notes had two purposes. First, as a reflective journal, Hoem recognized meaningful examples of interactions and reactions. Second, as a reflexive journal, she provided thoughts concerning her role in the field, that is, the tension between roles as researcher and facilitator ([Tedford and Kitchenham, 2021](#)). In the reflection logs, the participants wrote their reflections on the activities. Some youths wrote more in their reflection logs than they shared in the group, while others wrote less.

Although the workshop design was developed and discussed among the three authors, Hoem conducted the workshops alone. In the analysis process, we engaged in an interpretative community ([Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014](#)). We discussed empirical material and explored theoretical concepts to better understand the realization of workshop activities and their potentially transformative power, by conducting collaborative analyses. Since Ursin and Ramirez had no connections to the workshop activities, they were able to contribute to maximizing the reflexivity and criticality of the research ([Finnegan, 2023](#)).

Transformative experiences can be fostered through artistic expressions and narrative storytelling ([Cranton, 2006](#)). In working with the empirical material, two layers of narratives emerged: the youths' life stories (presented in and through the workshops) and their meta-narratives of transformation (due to the workshops). The analytical process, therefore, took the form of a basic narrative inquiry ([Connelly and Clandinin, 2012](#)). As seen in the analysis, stories are decisive in constructing a sense of self, and are important in both individual and social transformation ([Smith, 2007](#)). Key in narrative inquiry are temporality, place, and sociality ([Connelly and Clandinin, 2012](#)) which were all crucial in the current study. The dynamic and temporal character of what is narrated allows for (personal) change to occur. The place is also crucial in

understanding the context in which the narrative emerged. Lastly, sociality refers to the need to attend to the personal and the social dimensions of narratives, that is, a person's feelings, hopes, desires, and so on, and the surrounding environment, people, and otherwise, that form the person's context.

3.4 Ethical reflections and methodological challenges

The participants and their parents gave informed consent to participate in the project, allowing the youths to withdraw whenever they wanted without any negative consequences. Refreshments and workshop materials were provided to ensure youths' participation and inclusivity independent of economic status. The research was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (No. 470424). The four youth participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. However, after careful and critical evaluation, we decided to include their ethnic background as part of the analysis. As [Rysst \(2020\)](#) argues, research in sensitive fields should be possible without total anonymization because of the need to describe and interpret reality and avoid detrimental "colorblindness."

As Hoem both carried out workshop activities and studied potential transformations among participants, she had to find a good balance between these different roles. During the workshops, the researcher's roles were exchanged by zooming in as an educator and zooming out as a researcher. Working with youths also entails challenges regarding intergenerational and cultural differences. Participants had their own youth culture and youth language or way of talking (despite having different backgrounds) that differed from the (adult) researcher. Concerning intergenerational differences and power asymmetry between the first author and the youths, Hoem sought to listen with interest, not judging or giving them answers on how to deal with their lives (see [Hawke et al., 2018](#)). Moreover, she sought to utilize youth participants' expertise in their everyday lives whilst exposing them to various activities from which youth could reflect and make their own decisions.

As Hoem had personal experiences of discrimination and racism as an ethnic minority woman in Norway (further elaborated in [Lyså and Hoem, 2024](#)), this not only motivated this study but also has implications in the design, implementation and analysis. These experiences resulted in feelings of inadequacy and a diminished sense of belonging. As a mother, Hoem was particularly motivated in triggering change among young people to promote social inclusion. This motivation made her attentive to inclusionary and exclusionary discourses and dynamics in the workshops, resulting in an increased focus in the following analysis. In this article, Hoem's personal experiences are first and foremost perceived as a strength in encounters with ethnic diverse youths. However, being aware of possible biases, interpretations and analysis were thoroughly discussed in the interpretative community.

The implementation of the workshops showed the importance of being flexible and accepting youths' meaningful participation. The participants expressed a preference for reflective activities with less writing, resulting in more group discussions and informal conversations. One participant found one video too long. Hence,

they were given a transcript to take home so they could read and share potential new reflections in the following workshop. Additionally, one participant fell asleep during a workshop. Hoem suggested a break, but the participant wished to continue. Bearing in mind that the workshops started at 5:30 p.m. and the youths were busy with after-school activities, Hoem became wary of taking away the youths' precious free time. However, they kept coming and giving positive feedback. This motivated her to facilitate more activities according to their desires to keep them awake and engaged as well as remind them that they could stop whenever they wished.

4 Results: the youths' journeys of transformative learning

In the following analysis, we explore transformative experiences through youths' participation, encounters, narratives, interactions, and exposure in two workshops. The analysis is divided into two parts, according to the two workshops. In the first workshop, the participants watched the movie *The Danger of a Single Story*. Here, we analyze the reactions, reflections, and narratives of Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl first, then of Bjørg and Ragnhild. In the second workshop, the participants saw a Danish documentary, *All That We Share* (this consists of two parts). Here, we focus on Ragnhild and Bjørg first, then Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl.

4.1 Journey I: "The Danger of a Single Story"

In the first movie session, the youths watched *The Danger of a Single Story*. This is a TED Talk by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi [Adichie \(2009\)](#). She narrates about identity and her lived experiences of stereotypes about Africa and Africans while living in North America. While watching Chimamanda's talk, Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl, both with African backgrounds, showed interest, being more attentive, smiling, and occasionally positively nodding, for instance when Chimamanda underlines that Africa is not a country, but a continent:

Not just a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner ([Adichie, 2009](#)).

Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl's reactions show that Chimamanda's story was relatable on a personal level. They felt represented and included by Chimamanda's storytelling, feeling resonance and recognition of her story in the workshops. Nakabugo shared the following story and reflection in the group discussion:

That [referring to Chimamanda's talk about ignorant stereotypes about Africa] is what happens with me. I have been both in Africa and Europe, and people here always present the worst about Africa, and it is so unfair. I sometimes wonder if they have ever lived there to present it that way.

In a similar vein, Kintu-Karl said in the group discussion:

I feel exactly like Chimamanda. Many people here tell me *only* negative stories. I guess they have seen it in the media or as tourists in my country. And inside me, I don't listen to them. I'm like, you have never lived in my country, and you're going to tell me how bad it is?

The representation Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl are talking about is what we call “good” or “fair” representation that is meaningful to them. They critically reflected on how representation is done in their experiences. For them, it was not only about the lack of representation, but that the few times Africa and Africans are represented and included, it is the negative stories that are told.

Kintu-Karl later wrote the following in his journal:

A girl thought that I was a refugee who came to Norway without a father. When I started to talk about my dad, she said: “Do you have a dad?!” and I answered, “Yes, of course.”

For Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl, the video confirmed their habits of mind and represented and acknowledged their feelings. Both agreed that the video embraced African values and perspectives. Chimamanda's representation and recognition of negative experiences with stereotypes was an A-ha moment that can be interpreted as empowering, therapeutic (Tedford and Kitchenham, 2021), and emotional (Cranton, 2006). It made them reflect and realize that they are not the only ones facing stereotypes. Furthermore, the movie demonstrated that it is okay to share personal experiences and stories as Chimamanda did. Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl experienced both objective reframing, where they reflected on Chimamanda's experiences of people's beliefs and attitudes, and the external realities (Cranton, 2006) like Kintu-Karl reflected on the possibility of the negative image the media portrays, and subjective reframing, when they reflected on their own experiences, feelings, and interpretations which resonated with Chimamanda's experiences and interpretations (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1997, 2000; Shaw et al., 2018; Tedford and Kitchenham, 2021; Van Breda and Agherdien, 2012).

Chimamanda's representation served as a catalyst of transformations (Kitchenham, 2012; Lawrence and Cranton, 2015) among Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl as processes of transformation were gradual and incremental, occurring through a series of events both during and after watching the movie (Mezirow, 2000). Their transformative journeys were triggered by self-reflection on their own experiences (subjective reframing) of others' attitudes and value judgements, and in the process, they became motivated to share their own stories and experiences. From the youths' journals, listening to Chimamanda made them feel proud and included, empowering them to embrace who they are. This was a gradual transformation that became more evident through the activities to come.

In the group discussion, Nakabugo stated: “It's cool for me to see an African person telling African stories rather than someone who doesn't look like me, not an African, telling our story.” She experiences that African stories often are represented and interpreted by people without an African lived experience and/or background. Chimamanda's representation reorients her perceptions, making her realize that this needs not to be the case, expanding her habit of mind (Kitchenham, 2012; Mezirow,

1997). Chimamanda's story expands both Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl's habits of mind by realizing that “one of their own” tells and meaningfully represents how it is being an African in the North.

Chimamanda's looks and way of dressing made an impression on Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl. In her journal, Nakabugo writes, “I was so inspired by what she narrates, the one from Nigeria, and how she is dressed. Proud of being who she is.” Chimamanda's representation seems to influence Nakabugo's frame of reference by becoming proud of her own multiple identities. Through their critical reflection, a bridge is built between their experiences and those of others, which presents an opportunity for change (Van Breda and Agherdien, 2012). During the following workshops, Hoem noted in her reflection log that Kintu-Karl started wearing T-shirts with African motives, and head and arm bands with African patterns. This may suggest a change within Kintu-Karl, becoming prouder of who he is with his multiple ethnic belongings.

Kintu-Karl felt that Chimamanda's words resonate on a deeper level and shared this story:

I lived there [in his African home country] for more than 7 years, and I didn't feel like a foreigner there, but here... Anyway, I still love and miss my country. My mother takes me there on holiday. I love this one, too. I belong to two countries, too, like Chimamanda.

The transformation for Kintu-Karl is personal and emotional (see Cranton, 2006), as he continues to reflect on his feelings about embracing his diversity of being both African and Norwegian. Originally, he felt like a foreigner in his home country Norway, while not having this feeling of being a foreigner in his African home country. Kintu-Karl expresses belonging to two countries, appreciating both belongings. He experiences objective reframing by critically reflecting on the assumptions of others encountered in the narrative by Chimamanda. Through subjective reframing involving self-reflections (Mezirow, 1997; Shaw et al., 2018), Kintu-Karl reflects on the importance of being well-represented and how meaningful representation could diminish feelings of being a foreigner in Norway and foster inclusion.

Among the two youths with African backgrounds, subjective reframing thus occurred through both narrative and therapeutic forms of critical self-reflection on assumptions, the former through the stories of Chimamanda and the latter through emotional identity work in the group (Tedford and Kitchenham, 2021). Van Breda and Agherdien (2012) argue that when information is emotionally relevant, it becomes alive. Students are likely to better understand, remember, and apply it, resulting in deeper learning. Such learning goes beyond academic learning and intellectual development and includes physical, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual growth (Van Breda and Agherdien, 2012). However, having the same experiences as Chimamanda did not automatically lead to epochal transformation. As Hoem wrote in the reflection log, Chimamanda's story provoked critical reflections and space to share and discuss personal experiences. Feelings of being genuinely listened to and trusted by Ragnhild and Bjørg while Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl told their experiences and stories in the group seem to have contributed to transformative learning processes.

Ragnhild and Bjørg also paid attention to the movie by Chimamanda but seemed to relate less to the content. Their body

language showed surprise and perhaps even discomfort when they heard Chimamanda's stories, including the story about her roommate's great shock when Chimamanda was asked to put on her "tribal music" and put on a pop song by the North American singer Maria Carey. Movies, documentaries, and stories may function as catalysts causing cognitive dissonance (Lawrence and Cranton, 2015). However, Chimamanda's narrative was not as emotionally relevant or easy to relate to for Ragnhild and Bjørg as it was for Kintu-Karl and Nakabugo, thus perhaps having less transformative power for Ragnhild and Bjørg (cf. Van Breda and Agherdien, 2012). Listening to Kintu-Karl and Nakabugo's reflections made it easier for Ragnhild and Bjørg to relate to the topic. As a response to their peers' talk about negative stereotypes about Africa and Africans, Bjørg stated: "It is important to have information about other people to avoid stereotypes." This may suggest that listening to the personal experiences of her peers held a stronger transformative power than simply watching the movie.

Ragnhild, on the other hand, consolidated her peers by saying:

It's sad that you guys experience those stereotypes that I don't even have to think about. Why don't we hear more of the positive stories? The media shows us only the negative ones: NGOs and their crying and dying children to get support. We need to see more such videos [referring to Chimamanda's movie].

Here we see both objective reframing and subjective reframing (Mezirow, 1997; Shaw et al., 2018). Objective reframing happens when Ragnhild reflects on Kintu-Karl and Nakabugo's feelings and experiences of stereotypes and the role of the media, whilst subjective reframing is evident when she critically reflects on what she takes for granted, an emotional reflection that invokes empathy. This can be interpreted as Ragnhild experiencing cognitive dissonance and perhaps a gradual transformation that is emotional (Gambrell, 2015; Taylor, 2008). Ragnhild does not only critically reflect upon the media's role in reproducing stereotypes but also how she does not have to worry about this, as stereotypes are invisible to her. She recognizes the negative representation in the media that Kintu-Karl and Nakabugo experience in their everyday lives. In this way, she contributes to the reframing for Kintu-Karl and Nakabugo, by acknowledging it instead of sweeping it under the rug. The atmosphere of trust, comfort, and understanding that emerged in the workshop prompted both Nakabugo and Kintu-Karl to share personal and painful stories and experiences of racism in the informal conversation afterward, including bullying in school.

Through sharing personal stories, youths without connections to the African continent were exposed to new information and novel perspectives of the continent told by Chimamanda, Nakabugo, and Kintu-Karl. These new insights fed into their frames of reference, expanding them, and potentially transforming their existing perspectives or taken-for-granted beliefs about and attitudes toward media representations. This may influence how Bjørg and Ragnhild relate to and view Africa and people of African background in Norway. In this first workshop, we see the power of meaningful representation. First, we see the significance of the representation of Chimamanda's story for the transformative learning experience of Kintu-Karl and Nakabugo, and second, we see how Kintu-Karl and Nakabugo's representation (by sharing

their own experiences after seeing the movie), is significant for the transformative learning process of Ragnhild and Bjørg.

4.2 Journey II: "All That We Share"

In the following workshop, the youth participants watched a Danish documentary named *All That We Share* (part I and II). In part 1, people are asked to step forward if the answer is yes to a wide range of questions (TV2 Play, 2017). The people differ in terms of age, profession, religion, skin color, class background, etc., and questions vary in degree of sensitivity, including: "Who was the class clown?" "Who loves to dance?" "Who has experienced bullying?" and "Who has felt lonely?" The movie shows that it is easy to put people in boxes, just by first looks, and people have more in common than we think. Part 2 shows how strangers are linked to each other life journeys in surprising ways (TV2 Play, 2019).

Hoem's reflection log shows that, in general, the youths expressed an awareness of what people might have in common despite differences in appearance and background in the second movie part. There were cases where youths, regardless of their ethnic background, were surprised and showed emotions. In her reflective journal, Bjørg wrote: "[I] liked getting to know new people in a different way. The activity gave me different impressions of other people." Ragnhild reflected in her journal: "The video shows how much love there is in the world. Throughout the video, many people have experienced a lot and are still here today. They spread joy." It seems like the movie triggered reflections about our common humanity. People were interpreted as being interconnected, as Bjørg noted in her journal:

I feel that people are not only in my life. They have their own life and their own stories and maybe sometime in the past, our ancestors have met, maybe they said "hi" on the street but do not remember. But they have met and have their own, maybe short, story together.

Above, we see Bjørg subjectively reframing the new information, potentially expanding her frame of reference about how human beings are interconnected. Nakabugo also noted the shared humanity shown in the movie, writing, "What was important to me was the body language of all of them. Nice, smiling."

Opposite to the movie with Chimamanda, this movie was in a Scandinavian language and the people in it had both Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian backgrounds. Their differences ranged across many dimensions as earlier mentioned, not only social categories such as gender, nationality, and ethnicity. Yet, as in the Chimamanda movie, representation is key. The diversity covered and embraced in the movie made it easier to relate to for more youths. For instance, when two gamer friends met physically for the first time in the movie, some of the youths started smiling. Ragnhild noted in her journal: "Today's activity was quite relatable and useful." Furthermore, Ragnhild and Bjørg were much more engaged when watching this one than the first one. This might be due to the Scandinavian language and the broader diversity of people represented. This may point to the importance of critically reflecting on who is represented (as well as how and why) and not

represented in materials used in inclusive education and critical (self) reflection activities.

This second movie calls on youth to critically reflect on their assumptions and others' assumptions. People of all backgrounds were welcome, included, and invited to belong, showing examples of unity despite diversity. After having watched the movie, Kintu-Karl said:

What was important for me was that everyone was so different but, at the same time, so similar. Everyone had their own stories, but they could relate to other people's stories.

By reflecting on the movie, Kintu-Karl realizes that people tend to have more in common than what meets the eye. In the discussions in pairs after the movie, Kintu-Karl shares his experiences of being bullied because of his weight.

The movie involves persons who have been both bullies and bullied, which might have triggered his confession to Bjørg. Kintu-Karl recounted that he practices sports, but his body weight keeps adding on. He disclosed that although he does not perceive himself as overweight, the bullying makes him sad. Bjørg reassured him that he was tall, not fat, comforting him that our bodies are different. Bjørg said then that even though she does not exercise and eats everything she wants; she still never gains weight. Kintu-Karl smiled and responded: "I don't even eat candy every weekend, just occasionally." To which Bjørg replied: "They're just bullies." Bjørg reveals that she also has experiences of being bullied because she started to fast in solidarity with her Muslim friend.

As seen in the way Bjørg comforts Kintu-Karl, subjective reframing can be therapeutic (Tedford and Kitchenham, 2021) and emotional (Cranton, 2006). Bjørg made an empathic connection with someone different from herself, that such can aid transformations involving the development of social responsibility (Tedford and Kitchenham, 2021). As Clark and Rossiter (2008) underscore, dialogue is where learning happens (see also Cranton, 2006). Listening to Kintu-Karl's reflections, Bjørg becomes not only the receiver but also the actor, moving from a cognitive understanding of the story, making sense of it, and linking it to her own experience (Clark and Rossiter, 2008). Once again, we see the importance of personal stories, where Kintu-Karl's confession (in addition to the movie) makes his experiences more real and immediate (Clark and Rossiter, 2008), enhancing Bjørg's trust and confidence to tell similar experiences in group discussions in the workshop.

5 Concluding discussion

In this article, we have explored whether and what kinds of transformative learning processes occur when youths engage in reflective activities aimed at enhancing inclusion and appreciation of diversity. Four youths of diverse backgrounds participated in a range of workshops, where we analyzed the content of two of them above. The youths watched two short movies, chosen to instigate critical (self) reflection about diversity, discrimination, and social inclusion and dismantle potentially existing stereotypes. As mentioned earlier, TL consists of four core interrelated elements—individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, and

context (Schneppfleitner and Ferreira, 2021). We find it fruitful to discuss the above analysis according to these themes.

First, we recognize the importance of individual experience in TL projects. Although the movies watched and discussed by the youths carried with them transformative potential, it seems to be the connection and reflections to either personal or peers' experiences that had the most impact on the involved youths. The empirical analysis reveals how empathetic connections and stories between youth participants of diverse backgrounds can aid transformations (Tedford and Kitchenham, 2021). There were many moments of surprise, pondering, and processing of the two movies. In the first one, Ragnhild and Bjørg were exposed to new experiences, perspectives, values, and beliefs, showing them the other side of the story that they perhaps did not know. Kintu-Karl and Nakabugo, both with African backgrounds, shared personal experiences concerning what Chimamanda talked about.

Second, critical reflection and self-reflection (reframing) were at the core of the activities, as the topics involved are of emotional and sensitive character at the same time as they touch upon vital societal issues of racism, discrimination, and social exclusion. Kintu-Karl and Nakabugo reflected on the importance of fair and meaningful representations and previous stigmatizing experiences based on their African backgrounds. Their stories were new experiences for Ragnhild and Bjørg, making them critically reflect on what they take for granted. This reveals the importance of the third theme, dialogue. Personal dialogues and engagements became practical learning materials and authentic representations that made the movies "come alive," hence enriching and strengthening the activities in the workshops. Through the discussions, the youths often lifted personal experiences to a societal level, touching upon challenges like stereotypes, racism, feeling like a foreigner, and lack of belonging. This sometimes resulted in discussing what they can do to increase inclusion in their educational and societal contexts. This kind of objective reframing involves a critical examination of external realities, such as societal norms and power dynamics, which is essential in TL (Cranton, 2006).

In line with Tedford and Kitchenham (2021), the youths in this workshop had therapeutic experiences as they shared what was on their hearts and comforted each other. Thus, the transformative potential grew as their stories were told, heard and recognized with engagement and trust. Furthermore, we observe two types of experiences. First, the individual experiences of youth participants as they shared their narratives in the group through dialogue, and second, the new experiences derived from these encounters and through these narratives. Both types of experiences were catalysts, working together in the process of subjective and objective reframing, potentially expanding the frames of reference, point of view, and habit of mind of the participants to be more inclusive.

The fourth theme, context, was also crucial. Kitchenham (2012) and Cranton (2006) have criticized TL studies for ignoring the importance of context, highlighting its importance for the potential of transformation. The location of the workshops was in a youth center in the city, and the air was filled with "youth vibes." This atmosphere reproduced a positive feeling for youths from different parts of town. The size of the group, consisting of four youths, made the group socially intimate. Van Breda and Agherdien (2012) remind us that deep learning is challenging in bigger groups. Initially, the youths were strangers. Through the activities, they built trust and shared personal stories and experiences. In addition,

Hoem is genuinely interested in embracing an appreciation of diversity and inclusiveness and shared her own personal stories and experiences as an immigrant woman and a mother, living and working in Norway.

In relation to context, the analysis also reveals the importance of representations when organizing transformative learning activities. Meaningful representation turned out to be crucial in embracing diversity and reducing negative stereotypes, as seen in the youths' reflections after watching the two movies. The facilitator or educator ought to critically reflect on who is (not) represented or who is over-represented in the process, as this has consequences on the outcome of the transformative learning process.

On a retrospective note, Hoem saw how the reflective activities influenced how youths interacted with each other in the following workshops. Youths' frames of reference of mutual respect, recognition, appreciation, and sensitivity to their diverse backgrounds and experiences continued to develop as they engaged in each workshop. This involved emotional and personal changes where youths opened up and shared personal stories, thoughts, opinions, and memories. This gradual development reveals a potential for incremental transformation because of a series of encounters with cognitive dissonance (Gambrell, 2015; Taylor, 2008), triggered by exposure to unfamiliar narratives, for instance, in the case of Bjørg and Ragnhild about racist stereotypes.

These encounters—the exposure to the movies and youths' narratives—and the following critical reflections and self-reflection can all be interpreted as “seeds of change” (Lawrence and Cranton, 2015) holding the potential for transformation. Yet, there is no guarantee. Like beads on a string, these events help produce an ongoing process rather than a final, transformed state of being. This is in line with what Robinson and Levac (2018) perceive as the messy, real-world context in which transformative learning may occur, preventing transformative journeys from being neat and tidy. Hence, instead of being able to easily identify whether and when transformative learning took place, we rather witnessed a change in communication forms and enhanced levels of sharing (personal stories and experiences), trust, comfort, identification, and inclusion among the participants.

A potential limitation of the study is the low number of participants. In line with narrative inquiry, we value the study's uniqueness as it demonstrates what is achievable within a specific social context (Chase, 2005). The qualitative approach and the length of the series of workshops increased the richness of the data, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of their personal experiences and stories. A main priority was to create an intimate and safe environment for the youths to be able to engage in sensitive issues of diversity, discrimination, and social inclusion. We perceive the intimacy of the workshops and the openness of and among the youths as essential and recognize that this might have been jeopardized if the number of participants was higher (see Van Breda and Agherdien, 2012).

Although the study's findings are not generalizable, we encourage readers to consider the possibility of transferring the theoretical and methodological discussions and findings (see Chase, 2005). We perceive TL as useful in working with youth populations in relation to social inclusion. Furthermore, we argue that TL is of vital relevance for inclusive education, where

every student is well represented, acknowledged, and welcomed, enhancing feelings of social belonging in classrooms. Although we acknowledge that the societal challenges described initially—discrimination, racism, and social exclusion—are not primarily the individual's responsibility to solve as they are structurally embedded, we agree with O'Brien (2018) in that systemic change start with individual transformation. An important implication of this study is, therefore, to propose further research on transformative learning through reflective activities in different contexts (both within and outside formal educational settings) and with different groups of youth (varying according to variables such as age, gender, sexuality, level of disability, ethnic background, socio-economic status, religious affiliation, and so forth).

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

IH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MU: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CR: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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