



# Exposing the Emotional Dynamics of Making Tensions Tangible in Systemic Design

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Increasingly in systemic design there is an emphasis on the value of visualizing, materializing and enacting tensions. However, there has to date not been much focus on what happens when these tensions are exposed within systemic design processes. The emotional aspects of responding to tensions play a particularly central role in guiding people's resulting actions, but are seldom discussed in the systemic design discourse. Fear is recognized as a key emotion in relation to tensions and a framework highlighting four responses to fear is leveraged to unpack the implications of fear in systemic design practice. Ignoring emotions such as fear in change processes may perpetuate a false narrative about emotional dynamics and increases the risk of harmful, unintended consequences. This paper shares stories and reflections from Förnyelselabbet's work that uses designerly approaches to facilitate meaningful change within complex societal challenges in Sweden, particularly in relation to newly arrived minors. These stories, situated in the context of exploratory lab and co-design work, reveal the emotional dynamics that unfold when tensions are exposed and help raise an emotional literacy in systemic design practice.

Keywords: materializing systems; enacting tensions; facing fear; co-designing for social change

## Introduction

Within the evolving systemic design discourse, there has been growing acknowledgement of the role of tensions in this practice. In design, conflicting requirements are recognized as fruitful triggers to creating alternative frames for understanding a problem situation (Dorst, 2011). One key strategy that is often advocated for within systemic design is to make these tensions tangible through visualizations, materializations or enactments. For example, GIGA maps offer a way of investigating the tensions amid complexity by exploring the relations between seemingly separate things (Sevaldson, 2011). In addition, there are approaches to materializing relations by representing them through different types of string that support a more open dialogue on the tensions between stakeholders in a system (Aguirre Ulloa & Paulsen, 2017). Constellations have been another way in which tensions between stakeholders have been explored with different people positioning themselves relative to others within a room to explore the energy and tensions within a stakeholder network (van der Lugt, 2017).

Questions have been raised about how far tensions should be pushed and how to create safe spaces for working with them (Ryan, Baumgardt and Pangaro, 2016). A lot is still unknown about what happens when designers work with, make tangible and further expose tensions in systemic design. In particular, there is a need to further delve into the emotional dynamics of making tensions tangible as these emotions play such a significant role in people's responses within the evolving systems adaptation. As such, this paper zooms into the emotional dynamics of exposing tensions in the context of systemic design practice through a narrative exploration by designers in Förnyelselabbet, a group that has been employing systemic design to address complex challenges in Sweden. The stories told through the perspectives of the designers, often with input and reflections from others involved, offer hopeful and sometimes uncomfortable accounts of what happens when tensions are made explicit and the different emotions that emerged from various stakeholders involved. These situated anecdotes help to show the importance of building an emotionally conscious practice when confronting tension in systemic design.

## About Förnyelselabbet

Initiated by the Swedish Ministry of Social Affairs and the Swedish Association of Local Municipalities and Regions, Förnyelselabbet has been run by the Swedish Industrial Design Foundation since 2016. In an effort to explore new methods and mindsets for design in the field of organizational complexity, the lab has served as an explorative arena. There has been a particular emphasis where inhabitants risk falling in between the cracks of the system and where a more holistic and collaborative approach is needed across siloed organizations. The team is made up primarily of designers but collaborates with other disciplines as well such as analysts, change managers and legal experts.

When the lab was first set up, the societal challenge most pressing at the time was the wellbeing of newly arrived minors. This has been a focus of the work in Förnyelselabbet and the context in which most of the methods have been developed. They believe the work with systems change needs to be contextual, which is why the labs have been set up in close collaboration with local municipalities and the stakeholders needing to drive the change locally. The Förnyelselabbet team has worked in several local communities all over Sweden and engaged hundreds of children, youth and related stakeholders. The team now has an ambition to apply the same methods and mindsets to other societal challenges in need of a systems and collaborative transformation. A central acknowledgement in the Förnyelselabbet team is an awareness that these design processes need time for reflection both amongst participants, but also within the design team itself.

Tensions have been inherent in the complex, highly-political, and multi-stakeholder systems in which the design team is working. Förnyelselabbet has worked to apply systemic design theory through their practice to actively engage with the underlying mental models that contribute to the tensions in these systems (Vink, Wetter-Edman & Aguirre, 2017). The team uses a variety of designerly approaches to work with complex challenges and expose tensions within the systems their labs are situated within. In particular, Förnyelselabbet has made visual maps, developed a visual survey for children, make enactments of tensions out of clay and materialized relations between people with different types of yarn (based on the work of Aguirre Ulloa & Paulsen, 2017). By examining the emotional dynamics that emerged when making tensions tangible in systemic design practice, it became clear to the Förnyelselabbet team that fear was a significant driver across these situations.

## The Four Responses to Fear

Patterns in people's responses to fear can be connected with the key behaviours that occur in the context of a perceived threat, described as "fight or flight" (coined by Cannon, 1927). These possible responses were later expanded to also include "freeze", where for example one could "play dead" (Gallup, 1977). More recently, LaConte (2017) extended these possible responses when considering the organizational context, highlighting a fourth possible response of "face". Building on this long history of research, LaConte's framework (adapted below in Figure 1) highlights four responses to fear: 1) *fight* – where someone has an aggressive reaction attacking out of anger, which may result in blame or mistreatment, 2) *flight* – where someone responds by hiding from or removing themselves from the situation based on denial, often resulting in avoidance or sabotage, 3) *freeze* – where someone complies with what is happening, shuts down emotionally and justifies or rationalizes their behaviour, and 4) *face* – where someone directly confronts their fear by being connected with their emotions and working to mitigate issues in the situation. These four responses offer a lens for analysing emotional dynamics, particularly responses to fear, when exposing tensions in systemic design practice.

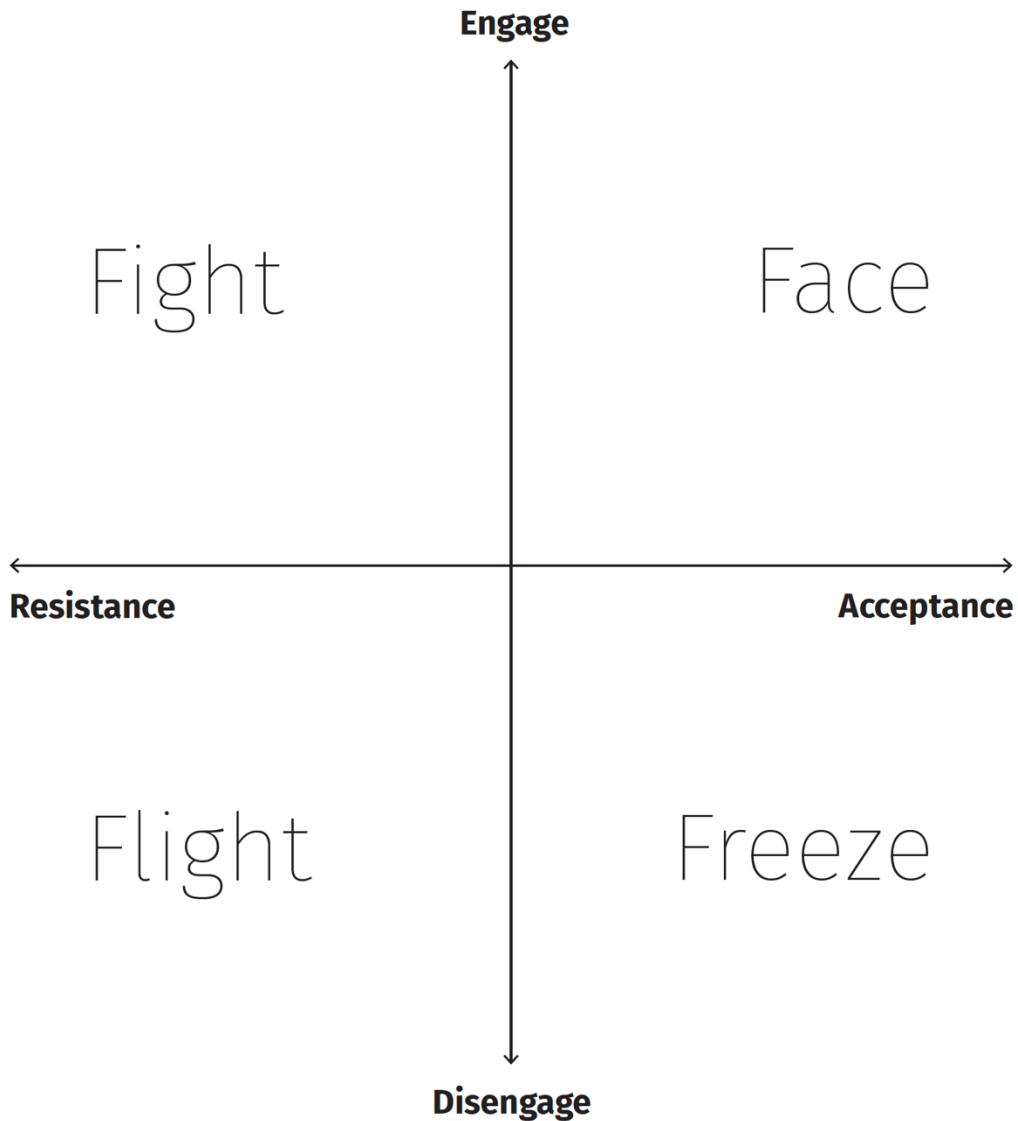


Figure 1: The Four Responses to Fear Framework (adapted from LaConte, 2017).

## Stories from Systemic Design Practice

Below are four stories told through the perspective of the Förnyelselabbet team members involved: The Wall Between Us, Forces at Play, Winter Sandals and A Sign of Relief. In the development of these stories some other stakeholders engaged in the systemic design process also provided input by mapping their own emotional journeys during this process. The stories unfold the emotional dynamics that Förnyelselabbet and engaged stakeholders encountered when exposing tensions in their systemic design work. These narratives demonstrate how the four responses to fear are enacted by different actors as well as the changes in responses to fear over time as the situation evolves.

### *The Wall Between Us*

During 2019, we set up a lab where we worked with the general reception of children and youth with migration experience. “What is their experience and how can it improve?” —the integration coordinator in the municipality asked a group of teachers and civil servants that were gathered from different parts of the administration to join this exploration. The work of the lab is organized in activities where this group (called the lab group) shares their own experience and reflect upon stories from the children’s experience when interacting with the municipality

and other agencies. These activities serve to broaden the understanding from different perspectives and develop a more systemic view on the underlying patterns of issues.

In this process, we mainly met children at their school or at the local leisure centre. The municipality has a policy document that suggests that the school is the space to meet and interact with people from different backgrounds. However, the stories from children and youth at different schools in the town show that what is experienced is much different. The newly arrived students (from age ten) spend their first couple of years learning Swedish and other subjects in introductory courses. These systems differ between municipalities, but many schools organise the newly arrived children in separate introduction classes at first. The classes, regardless of age, were all situated outside or at the periphery of the school. This meant that the students rarely interacted with the other students as they did not share the schoolyard nor did they have breaks at the same time as the other children and youth. To surface the experiences, we asked the youth to map where they felt safe and unsafe around the school. "They probably think I'm a monster" —said one eleven-year-old girl as she described how it feels eating in the canteen. "I feel unsafe walking in that part of the school, where the national programs are" —said a teenager at a high school in the same town.

The students were also invited to describe the social dynamics inside the school through clay, role play, and storyboards. They were asked to share their gestalt with the rest of the group and their stories were documented through video. One group of students from the high school, with students from both the national and the introduction programs, shared their experience by shaping an imaginary wall raised between them, dividing those in the national programs from those in the language introduction program (shown in Figure 2). The realness of this imaginary wall was described in how they felt they could not walk in the corridor of the other. They felt as the wall was placed by the school, in particular by their principals and administrative staff as one student was told not to go to the corridor of the introduction program. The imaginary wall, they said, reproduces and upholds segregation and feelings of uncertainty inside the school. "As there is this wall between us, we feel like question marks to each other in our shared space." When we asked them how they would change these segregated dynamics, they felt powerless at first, but then they reflected on their space of action, on the micro actions that could change the dynamics. The group checked out from the session by sharing their experience on participating in the workshop, and most of the students shared that they felt motivated to act differently.



Figure 2: The clay wall that represented the school segregation, created by one of students who participated in the project.

The stories from the students were shared with the rest of the lab group and the leading civil servants of the municipality at two different occasions. “I’ve always thought the school was a reflection of society, but what if the society is a reflection of school?” —a leading manager asked, while listening to the students’ video clip. The lab group responded emotionally and said that their suspicions were confirmed. However, they said, slightly resigned, that change will never come out of this, even if we have these stories to share. The lab group suggested that these stories were too loaded as they were also a description of the overall mental model that the lab unfolded; children with migration experience are treated as a burden rather than people with resources. As our first phase of the lab process ended, the municipality was offered to continue a second phase of the process focused on actions within the school. They turned down the offer and we had no continuous mandate to help the lab group and the integration coordinator to build up a larger system learning process.

Throughout the lab process, the lab group described a nervous administration, where people who engage with a critical view and from the perspective of the citizen are less supported. At first, the integration coordinator, who gathered the lab group, felt that the only way to use the stories was to go to the media. She felt uncertain of the consequences she would face if she would suggest changes based on these stories. She felt at risk of losing her position or becoming discarded from projects. Despite her fear, she took the video clip and stories to discuss the school dynamics with the responsible principals. The principals’ responses to the stories were defensive in nature and they wanted the names of the students who had shared their experiences. Shortly after, the integration coordinator then concluded that driving change from within the system was too emotionally demanding and left the administration. The emotional dynamics and movements of the integration coordinator and principals are visualized with Figure 3. Förnyelselabbet had no further mandate to facilitate a process where actors like the principals of the school could be invited to work progressively with the stories from the children with migration experience.

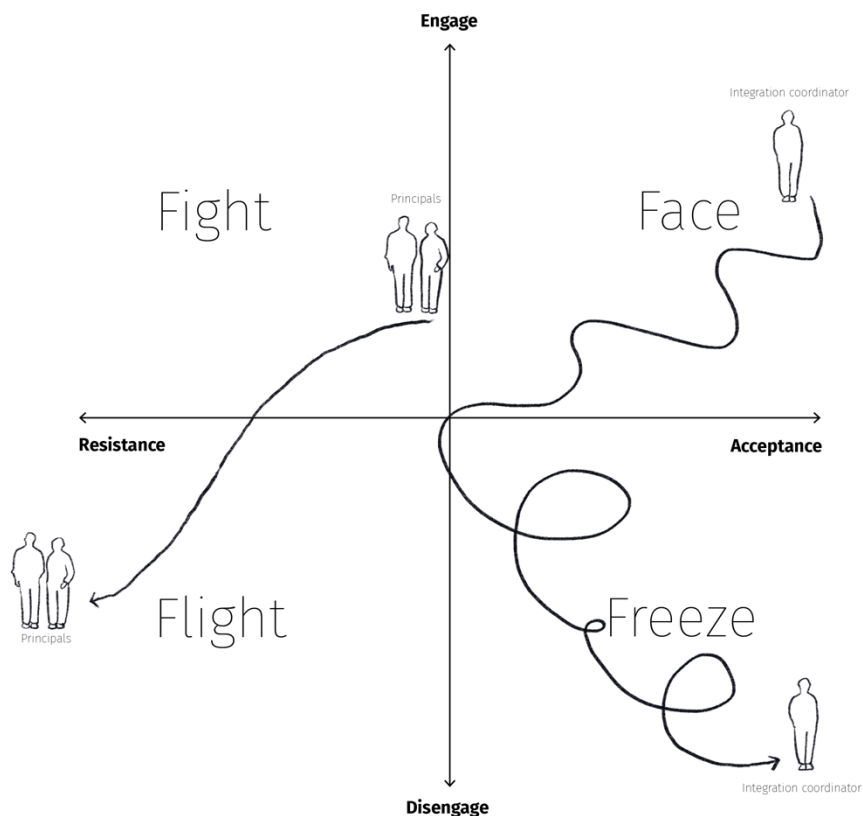


Figure 3: Matrix visualizing movements of actors while dealing with tensions in the story “The Wall Between Us”.

Facilitating this process brought us to learn that change in systems is a fragile process drawing on a possibility to build trust between actors. In this system, the civil servants showed fear in sharing their experiences with us, in using the stories from the children to drive change and as a response to the stories. To drive change in social systems, understanding the tensions is crucial to create safe learning spaces, where actors can participate and

continue to unfold transformative dynamics. How can we as facilitators better follow the process and map responses to understand what tensions are at play?

### *Forces at Play*

The finale of a year-long project was coming up. We had explored the situation of arriving in Sweden as a child with refugee status, unaccompanied by parents. The participants in the lab ranged from the border police to the Red Cross—all actors who meet the child in the process of entering Sweden. We were, for different reasons, not able to include the youth who had participated in the process in the final event, but we felt that it was crucial to include children and their experiences in some way. This event included both the people that had participated during the year, but also people new to both the findings and the method. The main purpose of this event was to present findings and get feedback from the organization's funder. This was an important event with a lot at stake for everybody involved.

To bring the voices and bodies of youth in the room, we suggested that a youth theatre group, with their own experience of arriving as refugees to Sweden, come and perform a play. The play had already been performed a few times at theatres and we had seen it. The play pin-pointed the situation of being a lonely child, and the feeling of being in a slow, odd process where you feel randomly tossed around by a grown-up world with a language that is, perhaps intentionally, hard to understand. We, as designers, were aware of the power of the arts and making things tangible and experiential. We saw the benefit of using “another language” as a means to tap into the experiences of one's own. We saw that this process was also a way to allow others to be invited to the feelings of an experience. However, in this case, we did not fully account the immense power of the arts and that this power can be scary when you are not in control.

The script for the play was sent to us by the theatre group, and we communicated this to the project manager who was hosting the event. We had, together with the theatre group, chosen two scenes that we felt were most fitting to the event. The email was sent, and the response was: “Scene 1 is ok, but do you have another alternative for the other scene? This is not really relevant for this particular process.” Another scene was selected, and so the back and forth continued. This process was tormenting. It was extra frustrating because the project manager, who was initially positive in their response, later became more hesitant around the inclusion of the play. We understood, since she also was a project leader, that she was trying to balance the needs she recognized in the project with the organisation's approach. The tension between a stand-alone project and the main organisation became more visible.

The final request was to exclude one specific word “because it is so politically sensitive”. At this point we had a tense relation with the theatre group who had gone from expressing excitement at the invitation to do their play at this event to telling us how many hours it took from their free time to do all these changes. We claimed the right to the theatre groups artistic freedom, as we had tried to do during the process, and suggested to find a middle ground. We knew that the youths' own stories of their own experiences would not be possible to have opinions on in the same way. Therefore, to comply with the resistance of the organization, we suggested that the youth in the theatre group instead would do a reading of a story they had written themselves of their own experiences. This was asking a lot from these youth. They had already committed a willingness to perform a play to make visible the process and the system. At the same time, they were making visible their own story, but through a collective story anonymising their own experiences through artistic expression. But because performing the play was too hard to pull through, the youth agreed to put themselves as themselves in the spotlight for to hopefully improve the reception of all refugee minors in Sweden. The suggestion that the youths would tell their own story was met with relief from the organisation, and frustration from the theatre group.

The performance at the event went well, as expected. The youth had written a story of how they experienced coming to Sweden. They got advice on how to perform a monologue from their theatre teachers in front of an audience consisting of municipal migration strategists, people from civil society, seniors from the migration office and politicians. Everyone in the audience and the organization were pleased and found it emotionally moving and important to listen to the stories from the youths' experiences. However, there was a risk that too much focus on the negative experiences of individuals with little possibility to interact with the stories as a stakeholder can also create tendency to freeze among the participants. Another ethical risk connected with the youth telling their own story, even willingly, is putting them and their traumatic experience on the spot and re-triggering the

traumas associated with these very difficult experiences. One of the boys in the group decided not to participate 10 minutes before he was about to enter the stage due to his emotional reactions when rehearsing the reading of his own story. The intended emancipating effect for these kids to be in this room with people of power had slightly shifted, from preforming something great together to standing on your own, exposed, without the armour of the artistic expression. We were standing in the back, deeply impressed by the guts of the youth to stand up front of everyone to tell their story, but thinking what would have happened if they would have been allowed to performed their well-rehearsed play?

After this event we reflected on the notion that we as designers (and facilitators) were a bit naïve trying to bring a critical piece of art in the room full of stakeholders, and that the organisation was not. We apparently did not fully understand the fear connected with the forces at play from the moving power of the arts. Figure 4 shows a matrix visualizing the movement between the states of the organization and the facilitator in this situation. As the organization realizes the power in the script of the play, they fear that the reactions from the audience at the event will be too emotional and put them in a state of reluctance against the project. This put the organization into a fight mode. We, as facilitators, tried to argue for the emotional reactions being an important asset for project. But we made a compromise, by asking the children to share their own experiences instead of preforming the scripted play of their collected experiences. In this way, we were still able to have the youth present their stories in the room. However, our relation with the theatre group took a toll and we as facilitators ended up in a state of compromise, freeze and eventually disengagement and flight.

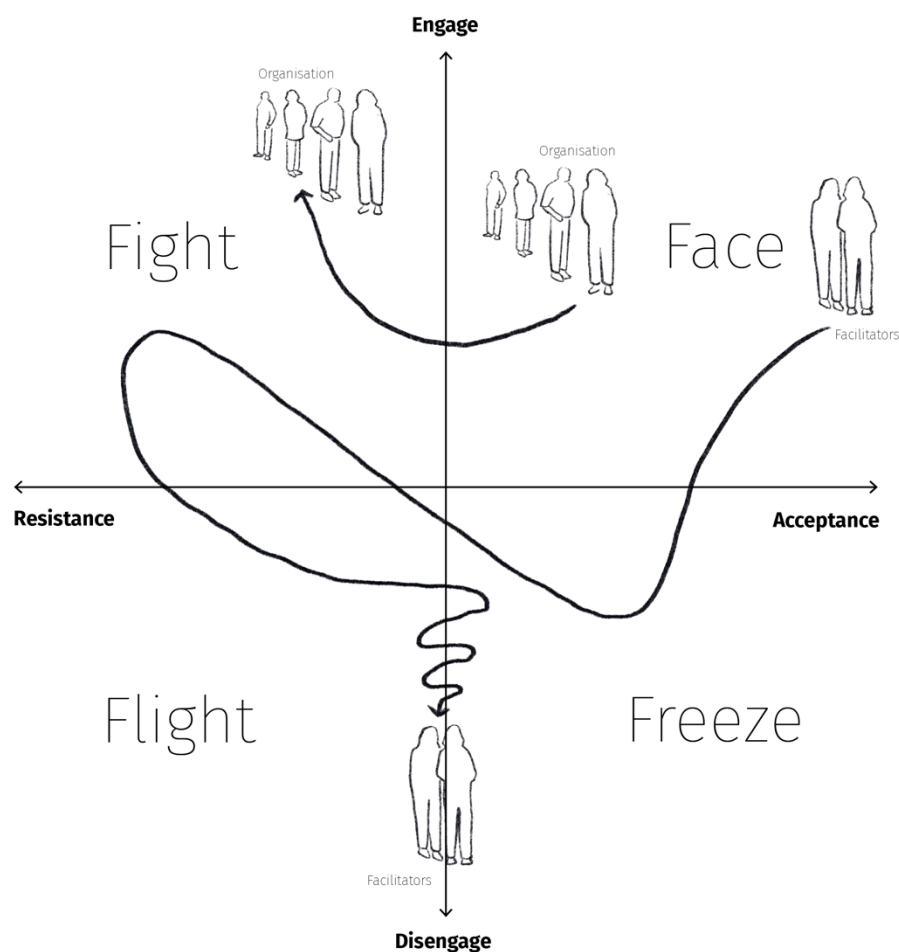


Figure 4: Matrix visualizing movements of actors while dealing with tensions in the story "Forces at Play".

During this process and its aftermath, we have questioned our assumption of why art is not more strategically involved in change processes of communities. We have assumed that art or artistic expressions are not used

due to a lack of knowledge of arts or craft skills that are wrongly assumed as needed to participate in artistic processes. However, in light of the reaction to our work, we are inclined to believe that the artistic expression is not used partly *because* of its power. Art's interpretation is not specific, but rather dependent on the person's previous experiences, and is often multi-layered. It is beneficial as a facilitator to use an artistic expression, such as sketches, or clay to get in touch with the feelings within participants. Through this process, these feelings are placed in a physical object, or in this case a presentable play, and thus become possible to bring into another room. The communication between the rooms, or different explorative workshops, is crucial, as we try to create an understanding of all the perspectives in a social system in a facilitated change process.

To turn experiences into a complete piece of art that awakes feelings, maybe feelings of guilt and discomfort, is scary to do, because it is hard to get it right from the perspective of those who have contributed with their experiences. One of the worst fears, described by many in an organisation, is to create feelings of discomfort in contact with your superior. And this was not a risk that the organizational project team was willing to take. But sitting with feelings of discomfort is one way to start a process for change. To support those feelings of discomfort, we must play out in safe rooms with a safe group in a guided session with supported reflection, in this case, it was not possible to do with your superiors.

### *Winter Sandals*

We were invited to a pre-school as a part of an exploration into the school system for children with experience of migration, either experienced by themselves directly or by their parents. We scheduled an interview with three pre-school teachers. Our semi-structured interview started by laying a blank paper on the table, drawing a line across with "entering the Swedish school" at the start and "included in the school" at the end. The task was to describe what happens and what information is given when a child starts at the preschool. The preschool teachers talked about the difference for children with parents who are born in Sweden and who have lived experience of what a "mellanmål" (snack) is, compared to the blank faces expressed by parents with no previous experience of the Swedish system and no knowledge of preschool terminology.

As the preschool teachers were talking, we were using the blank papers to visualise their words by drawing the children' and parents' way into the school system and into an understanding of Swedish culture. Then one of the preschool teachers says: "At one time, a mother brought her three-year-old with sandals on her feet in the middle of the winter", the mother explained. "If she can't have the sandals she screams, and if she screams, then the neighbours think I am hitting her, and then the social workers might come and take her away." This is a common and very present fear for many of the newly arrived parents. The winter sandals were embodied in clay, shown in Figure 5, to reflect on and spark further dialogue around this underlying tension.





Figure 5: An embodiment of winter sandals in clay to spark dialogue around an underlying systemic tension uncovered by the designers in conversation with system actors (sandals by: Matilda Legeby).

It is a terrifying outcome to fear that your child might be taken if other's fear that you are not obeying the government. According to the pre-school teachers, this fear affects the parent's behaviour and clouds their judgement. The preschool teachers handle situations like these by explaining, time and time again, how the system is set-up. However, what was more heart-breaking was the next discussion, which made the fear expressed by the newly arrived parents more tangible and real.

"Sometimes we understand that a child is being physically reprimanded in some way by their parents. We have a duty to report child abuse to the authorities. But when the families recently have arrived, we explain to the parents that physical reprimands are not allowed in Sweden. They often know and understand that it is wrong but are unsure of how to raise a child without being physical. How do I teach my child what is right or wrong if I can't reprimand them properly?" One of the preschool teachers told us.

The pre-school teachers continued to talk about how they weigh their responsibility towards the child. They experience a tension between them being physically hurt and being emotionally traumatized because of separation from their parents. They also must adhere to the dualities of teachers' responsibility in relation to Swedish authorities and laws. How much bending is beneficial and when is the actual law broken? This type of question, they said, is the main reason for their loss of sleep.

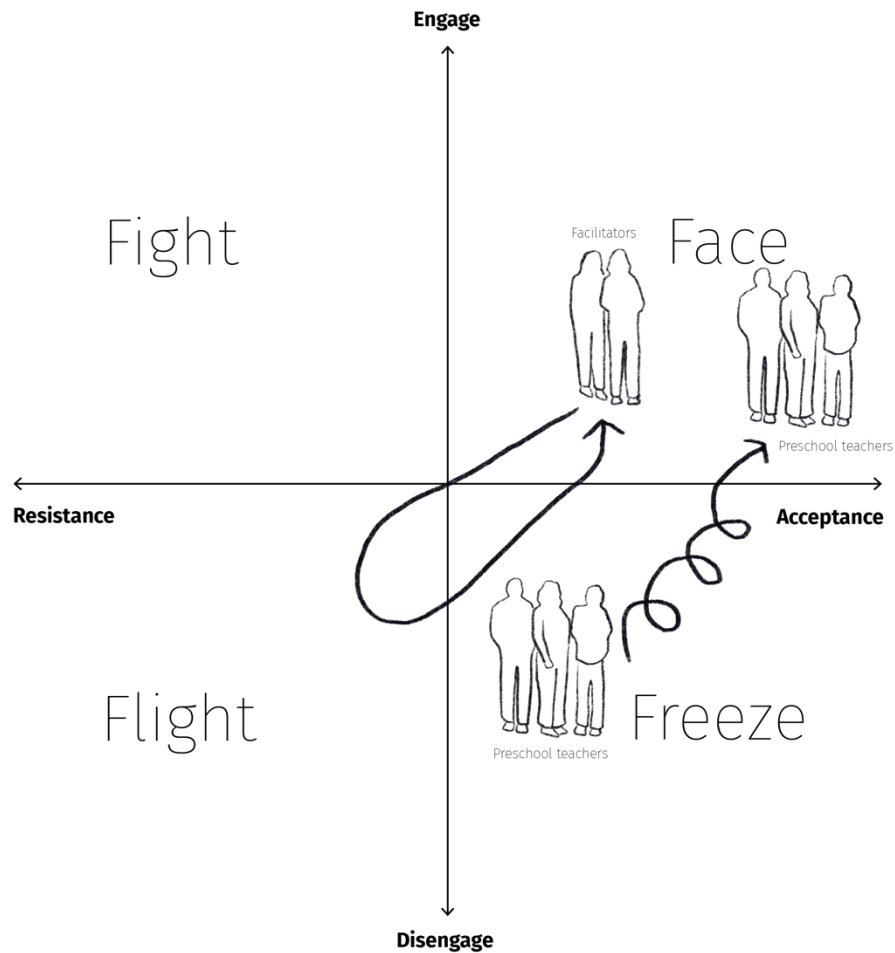


Figure 6: Matrix visualizing movements of actors while dealing with tensions in the story “Winter Sandals”.

Figure 6 shows the pre-school teachers’ journey between freeze and face as they are listening to the parents’ issues with adapting to the Swedish public system. Juggling the parents unrealistic fear of losing their child to the social welfare office and a realistic fear for the same authority. The preschool teachers’ best interests for first the child and second for the parents are evident. As facilitator in this process, we were glad that this interview provided a safe room for this conversation to take place. During the interview an increasing fear for us as facilitators of the complexity of all preconceptions on all levels being too much to handle, created a sense of hopelessness and a sense of freezing for us. But at the same time, seeing the power within the service providers in the system, in this case the pre-school teachers, was giving us hope for the best of the children, and future system change.

Setting up a safe space where this discussion can take place is what we as designers aspire to do. Analysing the experiences and putting these experiences in the context of the system of laws, authorities, policies, practitioners, and cultures surrounding these issues. Considering the fears involved in making decisions and affecting relationships in this system of actors.

### *A Sigh of Relief*

The final story we want to share is about tension made visible in relation to hierarchy, mandate, and power. The context was within a lab workshop where we engaged participants who assisted newly arrived children (refugees) living in unsafe housing conditions. Throughout the lab process, we had become curious to learn more about conditions for our participants to innovate and collaborate. There was a noticeable amount of tension especially between the public and civil society organisations in the lab group we had formed. Distrust and years of conflicting views on how to best tackle the hardships for the newly arrived people to the city was part of the

backdrop. By dividing the participants into groups, and we hoped to bridge that gap by allowing them time to reflect on the conditions they worked in.

The participants often talked and referred to their managers and the political will at play and how it negatively affected their mandate to tackle the challenge. We believed that these structures needed to be made visible to them, to us, and to each other. What do layers of hierarchy do to creativity and collaboration? How much tension is being created and how much is being released in such a structure? These were some of the questions that surfaced in the process, and that we asked participants to explore further. Due to Covid-19, the lab workshop was digital, and participants were organised in breakout rooms based on the organization they belonged to. The participants were invited to engage in an exercise in which they were to identify how many levels of managers or governing bodies there were in in their respective organizations (as shown in Figure 7). The participants in our lab groups are often positioned at lower managerial levels, close to the citizens, but sometimes higher-level managers are also included in the groups. In the exercise we also asked them to discuss where they themselves were situated in the hierarchy that they modelled. During the workshop the organizations identified as many as 5-8 different layers of hierarchy. “I have no idea what the top management of my organization does, and they probably have no idea what kind of issues I deal with at work. There is no contact between our layers.” —said a social worker participating in the lab.

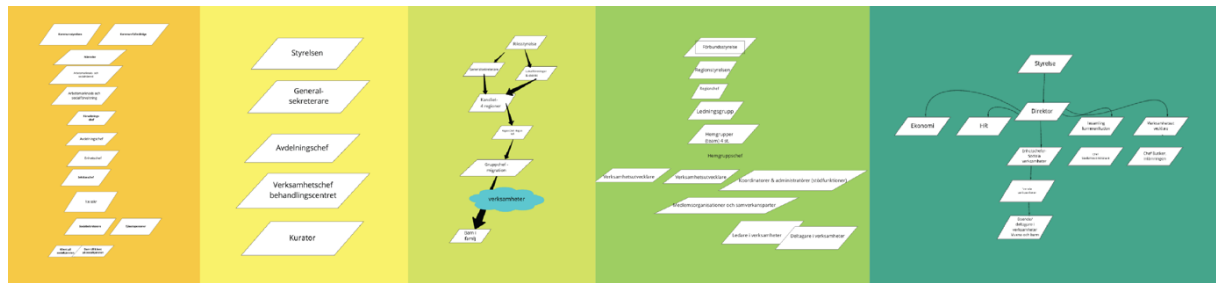


Figure 7: Visualizing the managerial or governing layers of public sector organizations and civil organizations who assist newly arrived minors.

When the exercise was over, we all got together, and each group presented their chart. We started to see similar patterns, the hierarchies and where in these structures our participants were situated. There was a feeling of recognition, deeper understanding between the participants and the earlier tension and divide felt as if it lessened its grip slowly. Showing each other the insides of their organizations helped to form a shared understanding of underlying patterns. There were many layers in all the participating organizations, both in the public sector organization, but similarly in the civil society organizations. The feelings of being trapped and unable to manoeuvre were made visible and could be discussed. In us, the question arose as to if this pattern and these layers interfere with our ambitions to collaborate across sectors? Can these hierarchical layers be attributed as a key issue of why collaboration fails? Does the layering of organizations tell us something important about our mental models, both in terms of structures of organization and cross-sectorial collaboration?

Our feeling at the start of the workshop was that most of the participants ranged from disengaged to actively showing resistance. As shown in Figure 8, some participants were obviously in flight mode expressing feelings of overwhelm and not being able to do anything, others more in fight mode blaming the other side for more not being done. The organizational models that appeared in the breakout sessions were astonishingly similarly multi-layered. We had thought that public sector organisations might have more hierarchical structures, but the civil society organisations had very similar structures. We were starting to wonder if these layers might instil a fear of making mistakes or make it more difficult to collaborate. We were hoping that a joint workshop could bridge the divide that we saw between the participants, increase understanding, and even create a transition towards a mode of engagement and acceptance.

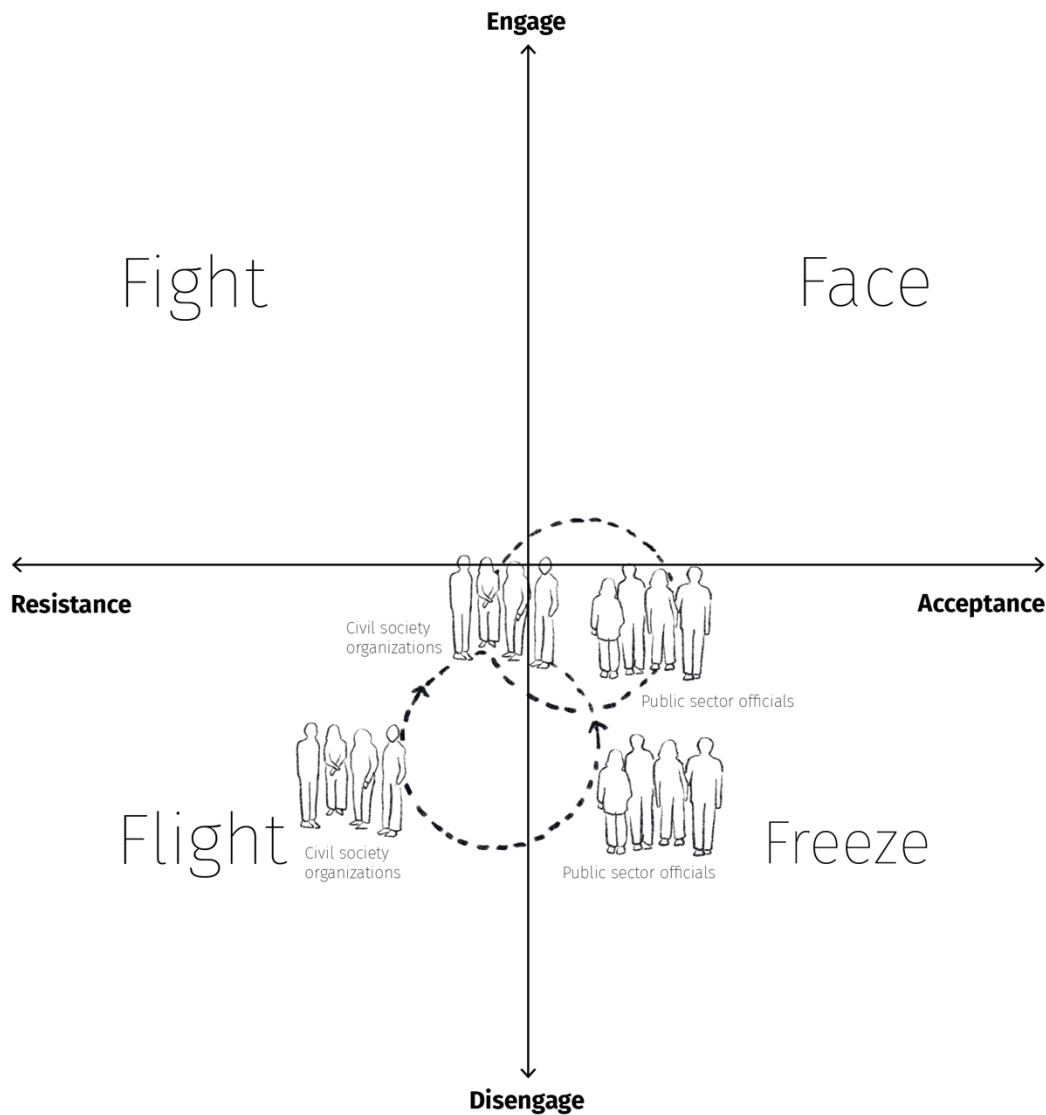


Figure 8: Matrix visualizing movements of actors while dealing with tensions in the story “A Sign of Relief”.

What we found in our lab exercise was essential for our understanding of how to bring about change in systems. We gave the lab participants a chance to discuss their own embedded structures, cultures, and their space for action. We gave them the chance to experience the reality of the participants that they were expected to collaborate with and their shared underlying structures, norms, and mental models. We found this to be a critical step for reflection and believe it to have helped shape one element of a better understanding of how to intentionally shift the systems they are embedded within. The exercise allowed the invisible structures to be visible and a discussion on how this affected the participants and their possibility to collaborate could easily be followed. The process could then help each participant see their own room for manoeuvring more clearly and within the joint system to know how best to create space for action.

In this way, we believed the lab participants would perhaps feel more resilient and curious to let in others in order to collaborate in their transformation processes. We believe they became more comfortable making these things visible so that they can address them head on. Helping them visualize, craft representations, see patterns and explore new ways of dealing with these layers will hopefully help participants feel their tensions and grow their understanding of how to best influence their organization. The intention was to make it possible for the lab participants to see themselves in their own organizational systems and in their joint endeavour to shift it collectively. In this workshop, the design patterns of hierarchy were visualized and made tangible. In doing this, they are also made actionable for future collaborative endeavours. Showcasing participants individual and joint frustrations of being trapped in a system and in-between layers of hierarchy, not always feeling you have sufficient room for manoeuvre, was one way of feeling the tensions, and thus releasing them to allow for creativity to

take place. It also allowed for participants to shape alternative spaces for collaborative action later in the process.

In the workshop exercise the states fluctuated mainly between flight and fight at the start and slowly moved towards a state of facing the structure. Several of the civil servants described feeling overwhelmed and nearly being crushed in the hierarchy. We observed them blaming the system and each other as well as feeling overpowered and unable to manoeuvre. It was also an exercise that enabled different organisations to see these traits in each other's organisations and numbing some of the frustration they felt towards each other. This was a mirror that explained, to some extent, why things do not always move as fast as you would hope.

It is essential as a facilitator in these kinds of processes to have the courage to tackle these organizational preconditions for change. Made visible, they can be steppingstones for both collaboration and renewal. Through our lab process, there had been growing acknowledgement that our lab participants need to navigate entrenched hierarchical organizational structures which result in many tense relationships, high thresholds to meet and structures around power sharing and mandates. Could hierarchical layers be a reason for participants' feelings of a lack of mandate in collaborative processes, or difficulty finding a will to collaborate in the first place? What can we do in our lab to enable these discussions to be had, how can we visualize them throughout the system and into the right managerial level? Would these visualizations make the sigh of relief even greater and more sustainable? Would this decrease tension and allow for more meaningful and significant systemic shifts?

## Towards a More Nuanced Understanding of Emotions in Systemic Design

Each story told provides insight into the emotional dynamics that emerge when making tensions tangible in systemic design practice. In the first story (This Wall Between Us) and the second (Forces at Play), we see examples of *fight* as a response to fear, with the principals seeking to blame the students and the organization censoring the play that was based on lived experience. The first story also shows an example of *flight*, where in the end one of the civil servants seeks to remove themselves from the situation by quitting her job. The third (Winter Sandals) and fourth (A Sigh of Relief) stories show *freeze* as another response to the intense emotion of fear, where the pre-school teachers feel as though they are stuck carrying out the law and the staff have little room to act amid the many layers of their organization. However, the first (This Wall Between Us) and the last (A Sigh of Relief) stories also show a fourth response to fear which is to *face*, where the youth, by embodying the tensions, start to feel the dynamics of the divide in the school and it motivates them to act, and the staff within the organizations start to genuinely take-in what their hierarchies mean for them and their collaborative work.

These stories also reveal the critical role of the systemic designers as facilitators as various actors are engaging with these tensions. As was the case in A Sigh of Relief, systemic designers can aid actors in confronting tensions in such a way that brings them closer to facing these underlying issues constructively and collectively. However, systemic designers too experience their own fear responses which may play into less intentional or desirable ways of facilitating the situation, such as in the case of Forces at Play, where the designers complied with the resistance brought forward by the organization by simply asking the youth to tell their personal stories on stage. In addition, these stories also demonstrate that without strong emotional literacy, systemic design may inadvertently perpetuate harmful unintended consequences in complex and sensitive situations.

We see the four Fs – *fight, flight, freeze, and face* – as a potential starting place for understanding responses to fear that arises in systemic design practice more generally. Perhaps knowledge of the four Fs can aid systemic designers in recognizing their own fear, the fears of those they are working with and support more conscious and constructive responses to these systemic tensions. Further investigation into the four Fs and the conditions that contribute to each response would help to further advance working with the nuances of emotions in complex systems change processes. In addition, we think that mapping the responses to fear by different actors using the four responses to fear framework could aid systemic designers in building a greater level of intentionality in their own responses and how they are supporting others to move toward constructively facing these tensions.

These stories prompt many questions and suggest that there is a lot more knowledge needed on how best to navigate the emotional dynamics of exposing and working with tensions in systemic design. What contributes to

tangible enactments of tensions sparking motivation for action versus defensiveness? How can systemic designers support safety in exploring the tensions and constructive dialogue related to tensions? How might systemic designers confront resistance and instead support people in feeling tensions to address them head on, where appropriate? What does a trauma informed approach to working with fear in systemic design practice look like? Much work needs to be done within systemic design, not just in the technical aspects of how to make tensions tangible or leverage them in problem reframing, but also with the emotional dynamics that transpire, particularly in response to the fear that these tensions often provoke.

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