

“Take Me to the River”: Mapping Global Flows from Crayons to Connections

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Abstract:

In this article we report on a participatory action research project that involved educators from Belize and the United States. We argue that sustainable change within transnational and transcultural professional development activities and research projects is most effective when it involves continuous dialogue, sharing life stories and sharing lifeworlds. We begin by describing the origins of the Belize Education Project (BEP) and its focus on providing material resources and “best practise” teaching strategies to teachers in Belize. Next, we describe a watershed moment in which the director of the BEP realized that something more—something more human and more humanizing—was needed for the project to flourish. We then provide brief accounts of how we enacted the transformative potentials of dialogue, sharing life stories, and sharing lifeworlds, followed by accounts of how intentionally engaging in these practises led to key changes in the professional identities and practises of all BEP participants. Finally, we discuss the relevance of these transformations for transnational and transcultural professional development work and global educational stewardship.

Key Words:

sustainable change, transnational and transcultural professional development, transformative dialogues, professional identities and practises, global education.

Introduction

Loaded with two small suitcases, one with some children's books, crayons, and pencils, the other with chart paper, handouts and explanations of my most effective instructional strategies for teaching reading, I boarded a plane to Belize with a medical group. It was 2007. Both the principal of Saint Gabriel's Primary School (pseudonym) and I believed that my 15-year career as a first-grade teacher in the United States, my presence, and the stuff in my suitcases would afford me easy access and eventual success in working with teachers at the school. So, I began working at Saint Gabriel's, and soon thereafter three colleagues and I created an organization called the *Belize Education Project (BEP)* to expand this work.

During the next several years, I gathered a team of elementary school teachers and principals, as well as professors from the United States, to join me in this professional development work. We increased the scope of our work from one school to four schools. Again, during each annual visit, we brought our very best resources and strategies. By 2014, over 50 educators from the United States had joined me in my travels to Belizean classrooms. Additionally, each year the *BEP* has brought 10 educators from Belize—teachers, principals, and members of the Belize Ministry of Education—to work and learn in Colorado classrooms.

Throughout, we have changed some surface-level instructional strategies and reconfigured some aspects of classroom environments. A few years ago, however, I began to realize that the changes that matter most—deep understanding of texts, critical reading of texts, and sustainable dispositions for life-long learning—had remained more or less unchanged. Despite almost seven years of working together, teachers from Belize and the United States still inhabited widely separate worlds with respect to thinking about the nature and functions of literacy, teaching dispositions, and instructional practises. What possibly could have been missing?

Reframing the Work: Troubling the Waters

"When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy."
Rumi

I experienced a watershed in 2013. I realized we needed to do something other than bringing new resources, instructional tools, and instructional strategies to Belize, but I wasn't exactly sure what that would be. This led me to pursue a Ph.D. Under the direction of George Kamberelis at Colorado State University, I began to trouble and re-imagine my work in Belize. Over time and through my engagement with narrative theory, critical social theory, and critical pedagogy, I realized the ways in which I had been working with my participants needed to change, perhaps in seismic ways. If we were to achieve sustainable shifts in our work together, we (educators from Belize and the U.S.) needed to become allies who were committed to each other, intercultural understanding, and global stewardship if we were to achieve sustainable shifts in our work together.

It was at this time it became clear to me that relationship building had to be central to this work. It had to become the major waterway. As I tried to work in more participatory, dialogic ways, three potentially powerful forces of change came into view—dialogue,

sharing life stories, and sharing lifeworlds. Because they seemed so entangled, I imagined these forces as a confluence of three rivers. Each river came from its own set of streams and springs, but once these rivers flowed into each other, they became a single waterway with considerable transformative potential—troubling sedimented assumptions and ways of thinking, acting, and being. This newly formed wild and powerful river was the water of deepened relationships.

Because of the force of this powerful new river of relationships, along with the three rivers that created it, I will spend considerable time and space first describing the new river, as well as the three rivers of dialogue, life stories and shared worlds that poured into it. Next, I will share some of the most important changes their collective force carved into the landscape of our work. Finally, I will discuss the relevance of these changes for professional development work and global educational stewardship.

Building Relationships

In a recent focus group, my participants told me that, when they first met me, they were worried about being able to establish a relationship with me and my U.S. colleagues that would last. They wondered whether we were really willing to become committed allies. Cecilia, a principal we had been working with since 2007, recalled the group's sentiments during those early days. "I sensed Jean was a bit apprehensive because she didn't really know us and we didn't know her. So, it was like, she didn't want to be like pushy with our teachers" (Cecilia, focus group, April 4, 2018). She continued, explaining her intuition that building relationships and trust would be sustaining: "Jean won us, she won our confidence, our trust. I knew Jean would come back, and I made sure she would come back because we tried to shower her with love, as the children fell in love with her and the other American teachers" (Cecilia, focus group, April 4, 2018).

Noelly, another principal with whom we were working, was not as confident. In the same focus group, she recalled wondering about my commitment: "I saw you on that day and saw that you do not make huge decisions right away. In your heart, you wanted to help, but...I guess I saw you as very very thoughtful. Not to say yes. Not to say no. I was wondering, 'Will you work with us or not?'" (Noelly, focus group, April 4, 2018). Eve, a teacher from Noelly's school had similar apprehensions: "Well, at first it looked like, oh, you were just looking. Maybe; maybe not. Or that you are just doing it to help, to help the sick. But now I see it different. You show love" (Eve, focus group, April, 4, 2018).

Our Belizean colleagues also experienced considerable risk when they anticipated getting onto an airplane for the first time and flying far from their own beloved classrooms, families, and communities to the high plains and Rocky Mountains of Colorado. The trust they put into their U.S. colleagues to welcome them and care for their bodies, hearts, and minds was tremendous. During a focus group, several teachers from Belize recalled their early memories of this experience. Noelly recalled, "I said to my colleagues, 'I don't know Jean. I don't know these people. I've never been to Colorado. I am putting my life in their hands.' I told my husband this is a big risk" (Noelly, focus group, April 4, 2018). Eve expanded on these trepidations:

I was also scared because it was a place I had never traveled before, but I was willing to take the risk because I wanted to learn and I have learnt a lot. I was also wondering, 'Where will I stay? Where will I sleep? What will I wear?' But you [Jean] said, 'Don't worry about sweaters, we have everything here.'" (Eve, focus group, April 4, 2018)

Through dialogue and sharing lived experience, a bond formed in Colorado just as it had formed in Belize. Noelly continued to unfold her wonderings: "I must say the moment I walked into Jean's home I felt like I was here before, like I have known her a long time, and in two days I was making fry jacks in her kitchen" (Noelly, focus group, April 4, 2018). Jae also described how he came to trust me and my U.S. colleagues: "You start thinking conspiracy theory... 'OK they are here. What is in it for them? Why do they come?' Then we met, and we spoke, and there is this energy that says, 'OK, these are good people'" (Jae, focus group, April 4, 2018).

As the Belizean teachers came to see me and my U.S. colleagues as trustworthy, we wondered together about what we were doing and where our work was going. We had begun with what seemed a simple task—to help Belizean teachers become more effective at teaching reading and writing. We had little or no idea that building relationships, building solidarity, and having our own assumptions troubled would be part of the work. One U.S. teacher, Paige, recalled, "Before joining *Belize Education Project*, I thought it would be an amazing opportunity to go and maybe help some people in Belize with literacy" (Paige, personal communication, April 29, 2018). However, almost immediately she witnessed a shift in her own thinking:

Once I started volunteering my whole perspective on what this project had to offer completely shifted. It's not just about going down to Belize for a week in October or even having them come to Colorado every April. There's so much more than that. The relationships that are built are beyond what I could have ever dreamed (Paige, personal communication, April 29, 2018).

The U.S. teachers also expressed a profound appreciation for the willingness of the Belizean teachers to open up their classrooms and lives to us. Violet described her appreciation in the following way:

I remember the moment when the truth barriers came tumbling down and we connected. I realized what a risk taker this Belizean teacher was to welcome a stranger into her domain when she was in the infancy stages of becoming the teacher she was destined to be (Violet, personal communication, April 29, 2018).

These kinds of experiences and realizations cemented the commitment to move past the "one-day missionary" model of working with this community of teachers in Belize. As Violet continued to reflect, "I am not sure I knew when it was my calling, a part of my destiny to return to Belize. I just remember feeling a want and a need to be a part of this journey" (Violet, personal communication, April 30, 2018).

To be human is to be immersed in relationships with others. As we come to know and understand new things, our "personal knowing is always set within the context of both linguist-cultural and experiential shared meaning" (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 283).

Noelly picked up on this: “We meet these challenges united rather than separate” (Noelly, personal communication, February 22, 2018).

But Noelly was not alone. The teachers and I came to understand that new understandings have emerged from our collective work. In this regard, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) noted that “knowing—even of the most unexceptional kind—is always too big, too rich, too ancient, too connected for us to be the source of it individually” (p.141). Cecilia echoed their insights, adding a spiritual twist: “We are connected by truly divine providence. We clicked, and we worked together all these years” (Cecilia, focus group, April 14, 2018).

Ironically, in the past, developing relationships with research participants was considered unscientific. Freire (2005) contested this practice, arguing that “We must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not antiscientific” (p. 5). Building relationships of commitment has been foundational to our work as Selah noted in a focus group: “Well, it has been like 10 years. You come and you are always excited when you come to our school, and so I finally said ‘these are good people’” (Selah, focus group, April 4, 2018). And Noelly shared insights about how these relationships have grown and changed: “As each year goes by I see you becoming more and more connected to us...more determined to conquer this quest despite the barriers. You have learned to be tolerant about the differences between our school cultures and people” (Noelly, personal communication, February 22, 2018).

Also, countering extant anthropological beliefs and practices of neutrality and objectivity when doing participant observation, Behar (1996) argued that we must become “vulnerable observers” if we are genuinely going to understand others. As Noelly disclosed in a focus group interview, vulnerability has, indeed been central to relationship building in the *BEP*:

Sometimes it would have made us feel a bit embarrassed—the amount of resources you have compared to ours. That brings some, or **used to** bring, some discomfort. I wondered if our bathrooms are up to you to standard. If we offer you a plate of food, will you eat it? The standard and our environment is not like yours, the way our classrooms are, our unpainted or broken furniture. But I could recall that you said, “Look at us. Look how we see you and what you do” (Noelly, focus group, April 4, 2018).

Teachers from the United States experienced vulnerability too: “I used to struggle with my role, always feeling a huge case of the imposter syndrome. At some point, I realized it wasn’t about the topic, or the schedule, it was about igniting honest conversation” (Emma, personal communication, May 10 2018). In a Facebook message to me, Rose, a Belizean teacher, expressed her combination of excitement and vulnerability about working with me and the *BEP*:

REALLY I AM SO HAPPY I DON’T EVEN HAVE THE WORDS TO EXPRESS
MYSELF THANK YOU MY DEAR SISTER
These are my students
They are such beautiful kids

They are loving

Have a good time with them (Rose, personal communication, October 9, 2017).

Behar (1996) also asserted that, for her, research that involves vulnerability and pain is the only research worth doing. “Anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing anymore” (p.177). Indeed, my heart has broken many times. Some instances have touched me such as when I have come to know the physical hardship of a teacher’s life, like when I listened to Joe’s story about his trek to and from school each day:

Then I walked a mile and a half to school. I said, “No, this is not for me. This is too hard, too far.... The students they liked me. So that gave me more energy. For a year and six months during the dry weather, just to walk there, just from the dust, I was white from the dust. But I said, “This is good. I ‘m doing it for the kids.” It was the kids that pushed me during the rainy season. They picked up my shoes. They rolled up my pants (Joe, personal communication, October 16, 2015).

I also experienced many instances of heartbreak in relation to my Belizean colleagues’ shattered hopes and dreams, such as Grace’s response to my question about her aspirations:

My goal is to do a degree in special education because we only have about two special ed teachers in the country. I want to do this. They don’t offer it in Belize. But something is stopping me. The finances. How can I get finances? You know education in the United States is so expensive, especially the universities. This is where I feel like I am going to be in a hole, and so...I say, “Wow, OK, so let me stop” (Grace, individual interview, October 14, 2015).

Finally, relationship building within communities of practice like the *BEP* can be transformative. Upon returning to Belize after her last visit to Colorado, Cecelia noted that she and other teachers from Belize were doing “an excellent job in presenting what was learned and modeling it.” She continued, underscoring the emotional aspects of their transformations: “Selah and Mabel have taken it on as a passion! My teachers were in tears of joy. We are not perfect, but we are working hand and hand with you” (Cecilia, personal communication, May 10, 2018).

In sum, relationships are central to the human experience and to the process of learning. To be human is to be immersed in relationships and to be engaged in learning together. And as Lave and Wenger (1991) have taught us, learning is a matter of transforming our identities—becoming different kinds of people with different dispositions, sensibilities, and ways of seeing others and the world.

Dialogue

Throughout my work in Belize, I have engaged in dialogue with my Belizean colleagues. This dialogue has included not only talk about teaching practise and experience, but also about our hopes, our passions, and our deepest fears. In 2013, though, I began working to be much more intentional about our dialogic interactions. Besides trying to be more intentional about the nature and functions of dialogue in our

work, I also formalized our dialogic interactions by conducting focus groups with Belizean educators when we were together both in Belize and in the U.S.

Dialogue is a powerful transformative force because it involves love. “If I do not love people, then I cannot enter into the dialogue” (Freire, 1970/2015, p. 90). Noelly expressed this dynamic beautifully when she said, “You could have opted to turn a blind eye. You knew it was not going to be easy. You chose a different route. That speaks volumes about love” (Noelly, personal communication, February 22, 2018).

Dialogue is also “the way by which we achieve significance as human beings” (Freire, 1970/2015, p. 89) because we “are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (p. 88). As we engaged in ongoing dialogue, the significance of our work became increasingly clear to us, galvanizing our commitments to each other and propelling us forward, which Anisa expressed eloquently in a reflection about her day in a Colorado classroom: “Today I felt a new cycle of change come into my life coming to Colorado. I’ve gotten the opportunity to work and talk with an inspiring teacher” (Anisa, personal reflection, April 7, 2015).

As teachers from Belize and the United States talked with each other through various modalities (e.g., face-to-face, Facebook, text messaging, email messaging, and Facetime), we came to understand each other and our work in deeper, more complex ways as Paige noted in an email message: “The dialogues we start in October or April when we’re together continue year-round and we continue to work together whether it’s through email, Facebook or Facebook video chats to take our learning and collaboration to the next level” (Paige, personal communication, April 29, 2018).

In this regard, Bakhtin (1984) noted that new knowledge “is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (p. 110). Through dialogue, we take on, and internalize, each other’s understandings because “any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 68). Indeed, our dialogue disrupted old assumptions and birthed new ones. It helped us develop shared ways of seeing and thinking about teaching, but also, about family, social structures, spirituality, the purpose of literacy, and the purpose of life itself.

Sharing Life Stories

Throughout the history of the *BEP*, the Belizean teachers and I have shared bits and pieces of our life stories. As I began reading about narrative theory and narrative enquiry, I came to realize that sharing life stories could be a potent catalyst for change, and I began to elicit them more formally. As sharing life stories became a central focus of the work, we began to gain insights like the ones Cole and Knowles (2001) described: “In as much as it is humanly possible, life history enquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans” (p. 11). This is because:

Stories don’t fall from the sky (or emerge from the innermost ‘self’); they are composed and received in contexts—interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive—to name a few. Stories are social artifacts, telling us as much about society and culture as they do about a person or group (Riessman, 2008, p. 105).

Indeed, as I listened more intently to the Belizean teachers' stories, I deepened my understanding not only of their classrooms, but also of their students, their students' families, and their communities, as well as the histories and cultures of life, work, and education in Belize. Likewise, as my Belizean colleagues listened to my stories, they better understood my classroom, my school, my district, my family, and my life in Colorado.

Life stories function in other ways too. They enable storytellers to imagine and become new versions of themselves. I am reminded here of Eve's reflections about coming of age as a teacher:

When I walked in, I still was like, didn't know what to do. So I didn't feel like a teacher. Then I learned that from my peers and from experience. I researched for myself. I read about what I can do. At the end of one year, I noticed this child couldn't read, but I helped him. And then I said, "Now I feel like I am a teacher." (Eve, individual interview, October 15, 2015)

Grace, too, recalled the moment in her life when she identified herself as a teacher: "I can't even tell you the feeling I felt, because I was eager to do my first class, just me. And to see what I could bring to my kids, and how close we would become, and finding out how I could help" (Grace, individual interview, October 14, 2015).

As the teachers from Belize and the U.S. shared narratives of possible worlds and possible selves, we began to transform our beliefs and practises about children, learning, and teaching, our identities as teachers, how we show up in our worlds, and what we will be and do in the present and in the future.

Sharing Lifeworlds

Along with dialogue and sharing life stories, sharing lifeworlds (Lebenswelt) can be a powerful transformative force. The more time we (teachers from Belize and the United States) spent in each other's communities and homes, schools and classrooms, the deeper our connections became. Allowing teachers from Belize to witness the good, the bad and the ugly moments of my own first grade classroom (along with classrooms of other Colorado teachers) was especially powerful.

Bringing teachers from a developing country into suburban classrooms in the U.S. is an uncommon way to approach both global professional development and research. In her groundbreaking critical anthropological work, even Ruth Behar (1993) brought Esperanza's story, but not Esperanza, across the U.S.-Mexico border. Although bringing teachers from Belize to the U.S. involves certain risks, it also opens up transformative potentials. For example, allowing teachers from Belize to witness not only our successes but also our challenges and failings helped to build (un)common ground with transformative teeth. Freire's (1970/2015) insights about relationships between the resource rich and the resource poor are instructive here. "The oppressed must see examples of the vulnerability of the oppressors so that a contrary conviction can grow within them" (p. 64). He continued, arguing that building caring, trusting relationships "requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity" (p. 43). Clandinin (2013) echoed these insights.

As participants' and researchers' lives meet in the midst of each of our unfolding complex and multiple experiences, we begin to shape time, places, spaces where we come together and negotiate ways of being together and ways of giving accounts of our work together (p. 44).

Through sharing the lived spaces of our professional and personal lives, we became both more vulnerable and more united. In this regard, Mabel recalled that her relationships with me and the *BEP* began to change when she was able to come to Colorado and live, breathe and be in the spaces of my home, my family, and my classroom:

I am not really shy, but I was not really in my comfort zone [when we met in Belize] because it was the first time I met you and I saw all the teachers talking to you and the others [American teachers traveling with Belize Education Project]. I was just there, like quiet. I just stayed to myself. I started to gain a little trust, but I still didn't get too close until I came here (Mabel, focus group, April 4, 2018).

As we inhaled and exhaled the air of each other's spaces, we were changed. As we looked at each other's classroom wall charts, we were changed. As we heard each other's children laugh with triumph, cry out in frustration, or chatter among themselves, we were changed. As we tasted each other's food, be it a MacDonald's Big Mac or plantains fried in coconut oil, we were changed. As we felt the air on our faces of each other's worlds, be it a steamy tropical breeze or the sting of a Colorado blizzard, we were changed... By experiencing each other's lifeworlds, we emerged with changed relationships, identities, and practises.

Working Together Differently: Navigating New Waterways

As I reflect on the findings from the past few years of our work—during which time we intentionally shifted from providing resources and strategies to building authentic relationships through dialogue, sharing stories, and sharing lifeworlds—I am beginning to understand more fully how these shifts have disrupted sedimented assumptions and brought forth new ways of thinking, acting, and being for the Belizean teachers, for the U.S. teachers, and for me.

Moving from Materials and Resources to...

Although relationships and solidarity had already begun to develop, our work was still largely grounded in bringing materials, programs, and teaching strategies from the United States to Belize. I recall my own reaction to the lack of material resources in the first school I visited. Although I had traveled to developing countries before, this was my first opportunity to spend extended time in classrooms. I was alarmed by the lack of books in the classrooms and how students had to share school supplies. Fixing the apparent lack of resources appeared to be an uncomplicated task. Within the first few years of our work, we had shipped over 10,000 children's trade books and thousands of pounds of pencils, pens, crayons, and other school supplies.

In addition, during my first visit, I observed whole group instruction in classrooms without any differentiation. Again, I imagined shifting to differentiated instruction would be a very simple task. I could bring down my most effective assessment tools, and I could explain to the teachers how to assess children's knowledge and how to

differentiate instruction accordingly. Again, within the first few years, we had several Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) kits in each school, and we conducted several professional development workshops on how to administer the DRA.

As Eve explained, the Belizean educators expressed great appreciation for these resources largely because it indicated to them our commitment to working in their schools. "I noticed that you were serious because you sent books for us, and we were like WOW, a LOT of books. Teachers and the children were so excited!" (Eve, personal communication, April 4, 2018). And Cecilia elaborated on the usefulness of the initial strategies we taught them in 2008:

The first thing that struck me was the way they work in the land of literacy, how their children are able to read at a very early stage, and the strategies they use to teach reading. So, I spoke to Jean about that and we started to talk about how to implement these same strategies in our schools. The first thing we dealt with was the DRA, because I was really amazed to see how Jean worked with the children at the different levels. And I was like how does she know that. And then I found out there was testing done to be able to find out the level in which the children were reading, and how to help them move up. She dealt with that through the DRA, and then about the possibilities of our schools getting the DRA to work with the children and to be able to use the leveled books (Cecilia, focus group, April 4, 2018).

Many other Belizean teachers also expressed their hunger for, appreciation of, and excitement about having more instructional resources and learning new strategies for teaching reading.

Yet, Something Was Missing...

Belizean teachers' classrooms had more books and supplies. New programs for assessment and differentiation had been delivered, and workshops on how to use these resources had been provided. Yet, we were seeing very few changes in actual classroom practices. At this time, I began seeking the guidance from others, which led me to the work with George Kamberelis. My initial correspondence with him reflected my dismay at what I considered a barrier of thought and a lack of shared assumptions in this work:

We have gotten several DRA II kits for each of the schools we work with. We have modeled them, co-taught with them, and had them DRA our own kids up here in Colorado...It's the reflection/analysis part where I feel we have come up against a wall (J. Kirshner, personal communication, August 29, 2014).

I also shared the fact that I wondered whether the barriers between us were more complex. Were our core ideas about literacy and learning aligned, and if not, what had to shift and how?

The idea of finding virtue in curiosity, questioning, human growth, the act of change, and even human triumph over a risk is problematic. The idea that these qualities could be humanity's great gift is a huge paradigm shift for the Belize teachers. If it does, is it possible to change their paradigm? *Do we need to?* (J. Kirshner, personal communication, August 29, 2014).

With new direction from Dr. Kamberelis, I was able to see, tap into, and channel the power of the three rivers of dialogue, sharing life stories, and sharing lifeworlds. As they flooded together, I believed a shift could occur. We must ALL become vulnerable. We must ALL become available for transformation.

I recall a particular transformative moment in which I was modeling a lesson in Belize for an Infant II class (6-year-olds). In front of a group of Belizean teachers, my intent was to demonstrate the importance of extending both the author's and the illustrator's craft, using a mentor text to engage students. It involved using watercolours. I was still becoming familiar with the classrooms in Belize. Although I knew there was no running water, I had never experienced, nor even considered, the implications of watercolours and 6-year-olds without running water or an endless supply of school-provided paper towels. With my water bottle in tow, I poured a couple of tablespoons into a lid for each child. Soon, coloured water was all over wooden desks, little hands, and faces. Knowing what it meant for their uniforms to be clean for the rest of the week without washing machines, my heart raced. I turned around to see every one of the teachers who had been observing me, as the expert on delivering effective literacy strategies, jump up to save me from myself. Each one of them found the rationed amount of tissue they had in their own pockets and mopped up my mess. In the end, we all looked at each other; we all laughed; we all shook our heads; and we began talking about what had just happened. This shared moment, the dialogue that was part of it, and yes, the laughter too, began to trouble years of sedimented assumptions we held about each other's positionality, authority, ability, strengths, failings, and simple humanity.

Another transformative event occurred in 2018 when Eve witnessed a particularly trying moment while observing me teach in my Colorado classroom. This year's class was probably the most behaviourally problematic class of my entire career. One of my most behaviourally challenging students, who at the time was being diagnosed with Obsessive Defiance Disorder, was engaging in some especially problematic behaviours, including shouting and throwing white boards across the room. The school psychologist, one of the school district behaviour specialists, Eve, and I were all trying desperately to meet the needs of this child at this moment, but to no avail. When the moment had passed and the children had left for the day, Eve and I cried together. It was another moment of truth. No longer could this Belizean teacher believe Americans had all the answers to the challenges we face. It changed who we thought we were as teachers; it changed our relationship; and it changed our capacity for self-reflection about our own practises. Eve recalled this moment later that evening after we had all prepared and enjoyed dinner together and sat down for a focus group conversation:

I identified with you because I have been through that. I have been there, so I know. At first I thought, 'They are Americans. They have everything under control. They don't have to worry. They have counsellors, special needs teachers, they are all set.'" And now that I see the class that you have, I kind of say, "We don't have counsellors, or anything like that, but we go through the same thing." Even though you have counsellors and all those people who help you, you suffer what we suffer without the counsellors. I could see that it hurt you because you want to meet his needs (Eve, focus group, April 4, 2018).

Upon hearing Eve during the focus group, Cecilia responded with similar thoughts, along with her own realization that, even though U.S. teachers have abundant resources, we don't always have answers to the problems we face:

When I hear about that moment in Jean's classroom, it makes me know for a fact that our hearts are united because we all deal with children and their common problems. The thing is that sometimes we depend on you to see how you are going to solve the problem...like for **you** to model it for **us** to take it back to our country. But then again, you are a teacher, you are a colleague, we are human (Cecilia, focus group, April 4, 2018).

Through these shared lived experiences and dialogue about them, old assumptions about each other have been troubled and new ones have begun to emerge.

Transformed Selves

As our relationships changed, so did our identities, which was reflected in many interviews, Facebook messages, emails, and face-to-face conversations, and Facetime interactions we engaged in with each other.

I begin with my own story, drawing on memoirs, correspondences, and field notes. As I construct this story, I draw on Spry (2017), knowing my own understanding of my identity and experience is negotiated in relation to how I am with my participants. Spry eloquently claimed that "self is never built upon living solely and discretely within our material body; rather, our negotiation of knowing exists in the embodied relations of who we believe ourselves to be with others" (p. 643). This process, as Spry argued, involves wrestling with power and privilege:

When I begin to float out of my messy unruly researching body with its white skin... [and] its financial privilege to sit for hours in a sunny well-appointed office at home or at work, Paulo Freire whispers to me that I can always and only speak from this oft-privileged body, that I can only speak from myself (Spry, 2017, p. 631).

Like Spry, I struggled with my positionality in relation to my participants. This struggle was both "unsettling" and "expanding" because it was "the vulnerable ecstatic story of relation" (Spry, 2017, p. 638). I have, indeed, felt unmoored during much of my professional development work and research in Belize of late.

Yet, as Spry also noted, "although unsettled, we are not undecided, unsure, or unresolved about the moral and ethical work" (p. 638). Indeed, my work in Belize began with and continues with an absolute sense of resolve. During my first visit to Belize, for example, I knew I would remain in this community for a lifetime. I had spent the week reading alone with students sitting on a rain tarp under a tree. I remember a particularly overwhelming sense of commitment wash over me as I stepped over some cinder blocks of a yet-to-be-built wall of a classroom. At that moment, I became sure of two things. First, I would be back. (This turned out to be true.) Second, I could teach every child in that school to read using the resources and strategies I had brought with me. (This truth morphed into new and different truths.)

In a focus group conversation in April, 2018, my Belizean colleagues commented on what they saw as a truly important change in me. They believed I had come to appreciate exactly who they are. Noelly expressed this realization in this way:

You have changed, I think, by us opening our doors for you to come into our classrooms; showing you the reading level our children read compared to yours changed you. And in your own growth, I can see that you appreciate us for who we are" (Noelly, focus group, April 4, 2018).

Cecilia shared Noelly's sense of things: "In your own growth, I can see that you appreciate us for who we are" (Cecilia, personal communication, April 4, 2018).

The Belizean teachers felt that the changes in me had occurred largely through sharing the passions and the challenges of classroom teaching. In Eve's words:

I think I have changed you. Since you have come to our classroom you have seen our struggles. You can identify with us. We have the same passions. We have the same struggles. We wonder the same things as a teacher. It's changed you too (Eve, focus group, April 4, 2018).

Earlier in the year, Noelly had Facebook messaged me to share her sense of how I had changed: "I know that from the first day, from the first step, you made into Saint Gabriel's Primary School, you were transformed in that moment in seeing the challenges our children and our teachers face" (Noelly, personal communication, February 22, 2018).

Chief among the transformations my Belizean colleagues perceived in me was embracing their spirituality, which is absolutely central to their lives. In this regard, Cecilia had the following to say:

Now when we are with you at school we pray. That's a change I have seen in you. When you first came to us, I know how strange you found it that we are always praying. But now when you go to our school, it is something you have accepted. That is us. We don't judge your spirituality, but we notice we have seen a growth (Cecilia, focus group, April 4, 2018).

Although she did not explain herself further, I think what Cecilia meant was that I have not only come to accept their spirituality, but I have also begun to understand it and to celebrate how their most deeply held beliefs provide their lives with meaning and purpose. Not only that, I also think Cecilia sensed I had begun to think a lot about my own sense of spirituality, its meaning, and its purpose in my life. If I am right about this, she was correct. Through my work with my Belizean colleagues, new forms of spirituality have begun to emerge within me.

Finally, my Belizean colleagues talked about ways in which they were changing too. Jae, for example, noted, "I can say that I know you. I have spent time with you. I have heard some of your stories. That has changed me" (Jae, focus group, April 4, 2018). In a Facebook message, Noelly described a feeling of empowerment, which was an important change for her: "Meeting you and your group has empowered my whole being. I am now different in my perspective of the strategies and approaches as a school leader and classroom teacher. I have learnt to be more resilient to persevere" (Noelly, personal communication, February 22, 2018).

Transformed Practises

As relationships and identities were changing, so were classroom practises. Although these changes were small, they were also significant. Joe, a classroom teacher, told us “*BEP* has influenced me a lot. You have influenced my teaching and my strategies so much” (Joe, personal communication, October 16, 2015). In an anonymous response from an evaluation survey at the end of a week of professional development, one participant reflected on trying to use some of what she had learnt: “I heard about grouping for different levels, so I have been trying. It doesn’t always work. Still, I want to keep trying. I want them to enjoy working in groups. I want to keep trying. I will keep trying” (professional development evaluation survey response, October 14, 2014).

Significant shifts in culture were also beginning to occur. For example, corporal punishment as a form of behaviour management in classrooms remains a deeply sedimented aspect of the educational culture in Belize. Teachers experienced corporal punishment when they were children, and they engage in corporal punishment in their classrooms. Yet, in and through their participation in the *BEP*, they began to be troubled by their use of this practise. In interview after interview, my participants discussed their struggles regarding how to manage the behaviour of certain children, how to manage their anger when children behaved badly, and how corporal punishment might have a negative effect in teaching children to read. During Grace’s life story interview, for example, she reflected on how her thinking and practises regarding behaviour management had changed since working with us:

I am going to confirm that I have learnt a lot from this work with the *BEP*. I have learnt a lot. I remember my ways of dealing with children in my classroom. I used to punish them when they do something wrong. I have learnt whole new ways of dealing with them. And you know I look back, and I think back on how I used to run my class. And I really felt sad, and I really felt like a little ashamed. So now, what I’m trying to do now is try my best to be a friend to my students, to be a role model for them, and to let them know I am there for them (Grace, personal communication, October 14, 2015).

Marie noted a similar shift in her identity and practise in regard to behaviour management not long after one of her visits to Colorado:

When I got the opportunity to go to Colorado, it was a breakthrough for me. The discipline is quite different. It is SO different. When it comes to discipline in the U.S., they discipline, but in a loving way, in a way will tell a child WHY. It doesn’t entail hitting. It entails a punishment, but a punishment that will not hurt in the long run. It won’t leave a scar. Here in the Belizean system, our discipline is more, I would say more harsh, that the first thing we do is this! (Lifts her hand to show slapping). But now, I quit. And whenever I wanted to do this (showed slapping hand again), I put on the brakes. I found other ways to discipline. I said, “OK, no recess, or stay back 15 minutes after school, and when you can tell me why you did this, you can go” (Marie, personal communication, October 14, 2015).

Beyond troubling and reimagining classroom practises like corporal punishment, the Belizean teachers were also troubling and reimagining how and why literacy should function in their lives and their students' lives. In this regard, Cecilia shared some of her recent thinking about the purpose of education in a Facebook message to me: "I have seen your visits as something deeper—preparing teachers and students to be lifelong learners; giving them necessary tools to move forward, beyond just an exam" (Cecilia, personal communication, October 2, 2017).

In sum, partly as a function of their involvement in the *BEP*, Belizean teachers and administrators were beginning to embrace new forms of classroom practise, albeit in small and not always fully intentional ways. They were noticing changes in their own thinking, acting, and being. And they were beginning to think differently about the nature and purposes of literacy education itself.

Final Thoughts: Connections Matter Most

Teachers are role models for the next generation and are builders of the future. If teachers are able to see the world in different ways through different cultural lenses, our children will be able to understand the world from different perspectives and will be able to share the world and live together in harmony and peace.
(Howe & Xu, 2013, p. 41)

Through the intentional use of Freirean dialogue, sharing life stories, and inhabiting each other's lifeworlds, teachers from Belize and the U.S. discovered new ways of talking and acting across lines of difference. Even more importantly, we began to move from being a multitude of singular "I"s toward becoming more and more a "we" in solidarity. As this "we" in solidarity, we co-created previously unimagined ways of being and working together and of how to prepare children to be citizens in a global cultural economy. Surely these changes have important implications for western scholars working with teachers in developing countries.

Although the new ideas and classroom practises that have emerged in our work are significant, even more momentous and even more relevant to the professional development of teachers in developing countries might be the suggestion that transformed human relationships themselves are the primary engines of all other changes that might occur. If so, relationship building must be seen as central to sustainable transcultural and transnational work. In this regard, Fry (2012) captured what, for me at the time, was only a hazy sense of how my work with teachers in Belize might unfold when she quoted me saying "paradigm shifts only happen within the context of relationships" (p. 77). As the Belizean teachers and I continue to strive for richer and more complex understandings of learning and instruction we are creating collective hopes for a future that is more global in nature—a future within which the children we teach embody our highest ideals for humanity and a more socially just world. This hope-becoming-reality orientation seems desirable, even necessary, for western scholars working with teachers in developing countries.

When professional development and research are built around dialogue, sharing life stories, and sharing lifeworlds, they are more likely to be sustainable. As teachers from Belize and the U.S. imagine our future together, we cannot help but share a sense of

optimism. Jae expressed this sense powerfully on the last evening of his first trip to the Rocky Mountains: “This can only get better. It’s my first time on the mountain top, and I can assure you it won’t be the last.” He continued:

I don’t have a crystal ball to look into what will happen down the road, but what I do know is this work will continue to keep growing. It will not only impact these four schools, but all the schools in the district. There will be bits and pieces that will now get into these schools. There are lots of possibilities and the blessings will continue (Jae, focus group, April 4, 2018).

Implied in what Jae had to say is the idea that, as educators, we are role models for the young people who will create the future. This means we have considerable power. The Belizean teachers and I are just beginning to recognize this power. This recognition was born of relationship building through dialogue, sharing life histories, and sharing lifeworlds. Our capacity to exercise this power is likely to be born of the same.

Recognizing the power we have, we are ever more grateful to be teachers. Whatever currents brought us to the sacred space of classrooms, we joyfully embrace our collective calling. In this regard, Rose cried out in an interview, “Well, I am a teacher!” (Rose, personal communication, October 12, 2016). Her cry has been echoed by many of the other teachers involved in the *BEP*. Once Marie joyously exclaimed, “Yes, I am a teacher now, my job as a teacher is to do whatever it takes” (Marie, personal communication, October 15, 2015). Once Eve proudly announced, “I am a teacher. This is where I am now!” (Eve, personal communication, October 15, 2015). Joe once reflected, “This is good, this teaching” (Joe, personal communication, October 16, 2015). Finally, while telling her life story, Anisa shared the following:

Before my grandmom passed away, she made a visit to our home, and I welcomed her with a cup of water, and she said, “Anisa, someday you are going to become a teacher.” And when I was called to do the job, I was shocked, I can’t believe this, really, I am in the classroom just like she said. Here I am today! (Anisa, individual interview, October 13, 2015)

Teachers from the United States, too, expressed their deep and abiding investments in the teaching profession. Emma, for example, reflected on the sense of solidarity teaching brings her:

I realized that it is TOGETHER, collectively, that we have the skills to teach our students well, and that each one of us brings something important to the whole. With each new traveler, each debrief, and each conversation, we refine our understanding of what it is to teach (Emma, personal communication, May 11, 2018).

I, too, have always been deeply invested in and incredibly proud of being a teacher, and my investment and pride has increased through my work in Belize. Indeed, our chorus of voices is testimony to the power of collective struggle and triumph through dialogue, sharing life stories, and sharing lifeworlds to build an increasingly committed, knowledgeable, and united teaching coalition that will shape our shared future in an increasingly complex, globalized, connected, transcultural world.

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