

Relationship Building Across Transcultural Lines for Transformation in Teachers' Identities and Classroom Practices

Jean Kirshner¹ & George Kamberelis²

¹Colorado State University, ²Western Colorado University

Abstract: *This participatory action research involved Belizean and American educators engaged in professional development work that became increasingly collaborative. First, we describe early focus on resources and teaching strategies. Next, we discuss shifting to a more participatory, dialogic approach. We then explain how intentional engagement in Freirean dialogue, sharing life stories and sharing lifeworlds led to transformations in identities and practices. Finally, we discuss relevance of our work for transcultural professional development work.*

Key Words: Participatory action research, transcultural, professional development, teacher identity, transformed practice

BACKGROUND

The *Belize Education Project* (BEP) was created by Jean Kirshner (first author) in 2008 to recruit teams of teachers, principals, and professors from the United States to conduct professional development with teachers in Belize designed to improve students' literacy learning. These recruits work with Belizean teachers in Belizean classrooms for a week in October every year. Additionally, each year the BEP brings approximately 10 educators from Belize—teachers, principals, and members of the Belize Ministry of Education—to work and learn in Colorado classrooms.

When we first began working with teachers in Belize, we were surprised by their lack of material resources, the singular use of whole group instruction, and the lack of assessment and differentiation tools. So, we began gathering material resources, along with programs for assessing and differentiating instruction. Additionally, each year we brought 10 Belizean educators to our classrooms in Colorado. After almost seven years of work we realized simply bringing resources and strategies from the United States to a developing country was not enough.

After exploring various research literatures on working across lines of cultural difference, we realized we would need to collaborate as equals across cultural boundaries to find common ground and collaborative solutions, and we intentionally refashioned our work to be participatory

action research. The key question guiding our new efforts was: *Whether and how does intentionally building relationships through dialogue, sharing life stories, and sharing lifeworlds lead to sustainable changes in teachers' identities and classroom practices?*

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK/RELEVANT LITERATURE

Based on the theory and research we read about working within intercultural contact zones, three powerful tools for relationship building, enacting decolonizing pedagogies, and sustainable change came into view—egalitarian dialogue, sharing life stories, and sharing lifeworlds. Dialogue is a powerful transformative force because as Freire (1970/2015) wrote, dialogue is “the way by which [we] achieve significance as human beings” (p. 89). Highlighting the dialogic nature and transformative effects of discourse, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) stated that “when teachers come together to share stories, new stories to live by can also be composed” (p. 102). And Souto-Manning (2010) demonstrated the transformative power of Freirean dialogue across multiple social contexts (first-grade classrooms, pre-service teacher education, in-service teacher education, adult education). Sharing life stories is also a potent catalyst for transforming relationships, identities, and practices. Linde (1993) explained that “life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way” (p. 3). Solinger, Fox, and Irani (2008) *edited* a collection of essays about community-based projects where storytelling was used to generate critique and collective action designed to promote and sustain social justice projects in locations as diverse as New Orleans, Chicago, China, Afghanistan, Uganda, Darfur, and South Africa. Finally, sharing lifeworlds is a powerful relationship building force. The construct of the lifeworld (*lebenswelt*) comes from 19th and 20th century German phenomenology (e.g., Husserl, Heidegger, Habermas) and refers to our lived experience, which is concrete (rather than abstract), culturally informed, and frames how phenomena (people, experiences, thoughts and feelings) are perceived and interpreted in our everyday lives. In his classic text based on many years of ethnographic research in the Philippines, Rosaldo (1989) concluded that when people from different backgrounds and cultures move out of the “defined locations” of their typical lives with their “marked centers and outer edges,” new potentials for thinking, acting, and being become visible. More recently, Bonacker, von Heusinger, and Zimmer (2016) demonstrated how the success of many global development projects depended on understanding, celebrating, and preserving dimensions of the local lifeworlds of people and social formations where these projects were enacted.

METHOD

Participatory Action Research (PAR) emerged as the most desirable approach for this research. We strived for what Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) described as a respect “for the complexity of local situations” (p. 25). “Given that this research impact[ed] our colleagues lives in profound ways,” it was critical that they be “involved in the knowledge process that affect[ed] their lives” (Heron and Reason, 1997, p. 288). We used interviews, focus groups, personal communications, and field notes to explore the potentially transformative effects of Freirean dialogue, sharing life stories, and sharing lifeworlds with our colleagues in Belize. Consistent with our PAR approach, we worked with our Belizean colleagues to distill themes from the data to more deeply understand their lives and perspectives, as well as the effects of our work together on their classroom practices and their students’ academic outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS

The deliberate work of engaging in more genuine dialogue, sharing life stories, and living within each other's lifeworlds deepened our relationships, transformed our identities, reconfigured our practices, and ultimately enhanced student learning. Especially salient were our ideas about and practices of (a) behavior management, (b) learning environments, (c) assessment and differentiated instruction, and (d) student learning.

Through Freirean dialogue, we discovered new ways of understanding each other and new directions for our collaborative work. Sharing our life stories allowed us to understand each other's communities and cultures (and, in turn, ourselves) in more complex ways. Living in each other's classrooms, homes and communities (lifeworlds) also strengthened our bonds. We emerged with changed relationships, identities, and practices.

RELATIONSHIPS

Not long after we shifted our research focus to relationship building and its effects, we noticed our relationships were changing in a variety of ways. Noelly, one of the Belizean principals, commented on the deepening of our relationships in a Facebook message to Jean (first author), "As each year goes by, I see you becoming more connected to us, more determined to conquer this quest despite the barriers" (Noelly, personal communication [Facebook message], February 22, 2018).

Our connections were deepening, and we were changing. More specifically, the asymmetrical power relations that had characterized our relationships for so many years were eroding. In this regard, 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 was, indeed, central to relationship building within 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, personal communication [focus group], April 4, 2018).

It is important to note that it takes a leap of faith to accept human imperfection, especially in a context still riddled with the effects of colonial rule. Shared moments of Jean's own successes, but more importantly her failures in Belizean classrooms began to trouble years of sedimented assumptions we held about each other's authority, ability, failings, and simple humanity.

Perhaps even more courageous than trying to be vulnerable in Belizean classrooms was opening up our own classrooms to our Belizean colleagues, which allowed them to witness the nitty-gritty, messy everydayness of our practice. One particularly transformative event occurred in 2018 when Eve witnessed an exceptionally trying moment in Jean's Colorado classroom. One of Jean's most behaviorally challenging students, who at the time was being diagnosed with Obsessive Defiance Disorder, was engaging in some especially problematic behaviors, including shouting and throwing white boards across the room. The school psychologist, one of the school district behavior specialists, Eve, and Jean were all trying desperately to meet the needs of not only this child, but the rest of the children in the classroom at this moment, but to no avail. When the

moment passed, and the children had left for the day, Eve and Jean cried together. It was another moment of truth. No longer could this Belizean teacher believe educators in the United States had all the answers to the challenges we face. Eve recalled this moment later that evening and shared that she identified with Jean because she had experienced similar events in her own classroom: “At first, I thought, they are Americans. They have everything under control. They don’t have to worry. They have counselors, special needs teachers; they are all set.” But Eve ended her thoughts that evening with a truth we all acknowledged that afternoon. “Even though you have counselors and all those people who help you, you suffer what we suffer. I could see that it hurt you too” (Eve, personal communication [focus group], April 4, 2018).

This deeply troubling classroom event and our collective reflections on it changed all of us. It changed who we thought we were as teachers; it changed our relationships; and it changed our capacity for self-reflection about our own practices.

IDENTITIES

As our relationships shifted, so did our identities. For example, Jean was the first of the American participants to notice she was changing. Long-held assumptions and understandings began to feel uncomfortable. She began to realize that her identity and interpretations of experience were being affected by her changing relationships with our Belizean colleagues.

As she took stock of these changes, our Belizean educators were taking stock of them too. For example, in a focus group interview, Noelly commented on Jean’s growth, noting how Jean had come to appreciate and understand who they were and how this seemed to prompt a reciprocal shift in Jean’s identity:

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, personal communication [focus group], April 4, 2018)

Later, in the same focus group interview, Eve echoed and extended these sentiments:

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. We try to get everything we need to teach the children. Same experience. It’s changed you. (Eve, personal communication [focus group], April 4, 2018.

As Jean witnessed her own identity shifting, our Belizean colleagues talked about ways in which they were changing too. As “transformation” emerged as a topic we revisited frequently, Noelly described the sense of empowerment she was feeling as a function of participating in the project: “Meeting 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 [Facebook message], February 22, 2018). Similarly, Cecelia, another principal, articulated how she was changing:

Trust me, I am a new Cecelia. I look at things differently. I believe I am a better advocate for children. I believe I value children and their learning more. I believe they need to

become good global citizens, Jean. If we help the children now, we have better chances for more respectable society. (Cecelia, personal communication [telephone interview], October 22, 2018)

These comments all reflected Wenger's (2002) important insight that learning, in its deepest sense, is about disarticulating and rearticulating identities; it is about exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current states; it is not merely formative; it is transformative as well (p. 263). Becoming vulnerable to and with each other—by opening ourselves up to each other's lives and lifeworlds—incited powerful and long-lasting changes in many of our identities as teachers and as people.

PRACTICE

BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT. We first began to notice shifts in how teachers in Belize managed the unpredictable, independent, and especially non-compliant behavior of their young students. In the early years of our BEP work, corporal punishment was a common practice. A few years into our work, Grace talked about ways she had reconsidered corporal punishment as an acceptable mode of behavior management:

I have learned a lot. I have learned a lot...I used to punish them when they do something wrong. I have learned whole new ways of dealing with them. If I have children in my classroom that are giving me trouble or something, I try to give them extra work in the classroom. I never used to do that. It's working. (Grace, personal communication [personal interview], October 10, 2015)

Transformation is difficult and messy. As changing identities usher in changes in practice, practice exerts transformative effects on identities. In this regard, Grace continued to talk with me about her changed practice, emphasizing who she was becoming as she reflected upon and altered her practice. She realized that with shifts in practice came shifts in her identity as a teacher. "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" (Grace, personal communication [personal interview], October 10, 2015). Grace's "confession" was not simply an example of a significant shift from our early years of work; it also foreshadowed a deepening of our connections and more consequential transformations that would happen in the years to come.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS. One example of how learning environments were changing had to do with classroom furniture and how it was arranged. Common practice in Belizean classrooms was to engage in whole group instruction with students in rows of tablet armchair style desks. How classrooms were structured rendered all but invisible potentially powerful learning-teaching experiences such as small, guided groups or collaborative learning groups. Suggesting that our Belizean teachers use small groups to differentiate instruction was easy to do. Actually making this change—with rooms crowded with tablet armchair desks and a long cultural history of whole group instruction as the norm—was another matter. Still, trusting us, the teachers were willing to experiment with flexible grouping. We sweated and strained together as we lugged heavy tablet armchair desks across cements floor with deafening scraping sounds each time we wanted to create different group structures. Sustaining experimental dispositions and practices, however, was difficult. Almost as soon as we got on the plane to return to the United States, the tablet armchair desks were back in their rows, and there, they stayed. Why wouldn't they?

Troubling long-standing cultural practices is extremely difficult and takes lots of time. Additionally, sweating while struggling to move heavy desks across cement floors is really hard work on top of the already hard work teaching involves.

These social facts notwithstanding, the idea of flexible grouping haunted the Belizean teachers. In April of 2015, they expressed more interest than ever in how Colorado teachers organized their classrooms to maximize the effects of differentiated instruction using small groups. They noticed the ways small tables and chairs, and even sitting on carpets, afforded different physical possibilities for learning-teaching activities. They asked us to help them figure out how to build spatial and grouping flexibility into their own classrooms. They also became increasingly resourceful—finding carpet scraps and even blankets for their students to sit on within the classroom. When we returned the next fall, tables had replaced tablet armchair desks in those few classrooms. Carpet scraps and blankets were laid out in corners of classrooms.

We celebrated the fact that new seating arrangements afforded collaborative. This was an example of some of how small changes in classroom spatial arrangements led to social interactional and academic shifts. Transformations of practice were happening, even if in only small ways.

ASSESSMENTS AND DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION. Our early hopes of influencing how teachers could come to know their readers so that they could differentiate instruction continued to haunt us in the early years of BEP. Seeing untouched DRA kits and Heineman leveled books still in their shrink-wrap on shelves troubled us; we had spent countless hours fundraising to buy leveled books; we found ourselves feeling hurt and resentful. Yet, we were also beginning to rethink our perspectives on this issue as we shared the lifeworlds of our Belizean colleagues. Was it unrealistic of us to think that completing running records for all children on a regular basis would be a simple and welcome change in practice? While troubling our own culturally-informed thinking, we also wondered how the Belizean teachers could know their readers and differentiate their instruction without using the assessment tools we had shared with them.

We were soon surprised, however, that the potentials of differentiated instruction were not lost on our Belizean colleagues. As they visited our classrooms in Colorado, they thought hard about what might work in their classrooms in Belize. They asked us for copies of sight word lists, and they practiced running records on trade books. As the years went by, we began to see other small shifts. One year we noticed the shrink-wrap was off the leveled books. We even noticed evidence of wear on the books themselves. In our Facebook correspondence, we began to get questions like “I tried the running record today, I have a question. When a student doesn’t know the word, I make a note of it. At what point do I teach the word? Is it before going to up to the next level” (anonymous teacher, personal communication [Facebook message], October 16, 2018). We also began seeing teachers working hard to assess the individual reading levels of their students and to construct profiles of their reading strengths and challenges. Progress indeed!

STUDENT LEARNING. Small changes in student attitudes, behavior, and achievement became increasingly visible to us when we spent time in Belize. Noelly told us that Ministry of Education supervisors were also noticing differences. When Ministry supervisors came to visit her school, she said they were “amazed” at the reading and writing performances of the students, as well as the instructional strategies they observed from the teachers who had visited Colorado. More importantly, these supervisors noticed teachers sharing ideas and working collaboratively with each other, which they viewed very favorably (Noelly, personal communication, [Facebook message] May 2015).

Standardized test scores were also improving. Knowing that standardized test scores are only a partial reflection of achievement, we also knew that test scores give educators some sense of their teaching effectiveness. In this regard, Noah enthusiastically messaged Jean on Facebook to share some exciting news:

Maybe you know already about our results for the national exams! My students and Richard's class did well. Ministry of education can no longer say that they don't see the BEP effect in the classrooms. You are an inspiration for me. (Noah, personal communication [Facebook message], June 12, 2018)

We had, in fact, heard about the scores. After years of being on the “watch list,” or what the Ministry of Education labeled a school needing “intense intervention,” the schools we had been working in for so many years were elevated to a status that no longer required strict surveillance by the Ministry of Education. A member of the Ministry of Education also emailed me to announce joyfully, “Good afternoon Jean! St. Gabriel Primary School has improved and is no longer on my hit list!!” (personal communication [e-mail], June 16, 2018). In addition, each one of the schools had moved up in the rankings of primary schools in the Cayo District (Primary School Exam, PSE, Belize Ministry of Education, 2018).

Painfully aware that standardized test scores are a narrow, and often over emphasized, measurement of learning, we were nevertheless beginning to feel like our work resonated with our original goal to help teachers help students become better at reading comprehension and more critical consumers of the texts they read. We also knew how much classroom practices had changed and how these changes were related to changes in student attitudes, behaviors, and reading success. We were succeeding, albeit in small ways.

SUSTAINABILITY. The fact that we have worked with Belizean educators for 13 years and that they still want us in their classrooms speaks to the sustainability of our work. In this regard, Ofni noted, “BEP has changed me as a teacher by making it real. To me, I feel more complete as a teacher. ...It empowered me and encouraged me to try new things. To be different.” (Ofni, personal communication [Facebook interview] 1/8/2020). Clarita, a principal of a school in a small village discussed how our ten years of work together allowed her to witness sustainable changes in her community:

I know the change has been because of us working together . Parents, who NEVER thought their child could make it to high school would tell their children “you know it's just primary school, and that's it for you.” But *that* has changed drastically. (Clarita, personal communication, [Facebook interview], 1/7/2020).

As our colleagues in Belize thought about their own futures as teachers, they discussed the new selves and the new worlds they hoped to bring into being. Reflecting on her experience in Colorado, for example, Rose said: “I want change! I want change! I like what I see here, the approaches. I am envisioning some great things will happen soon. It may not happen next year, but change has to happen. I will change the future!” (Rose, personal communication, [Focus Group] April 17, 2019).

A sustained commitment to be change agents emerged among the Belizean teachers. They began talking about influencing other teachers in their communities, and even the educational system in Belize as a whole. In relation to this commitment, Karen emailed Jean about her work

with other teachers: “Now that BEP has changed my hope, I am working along with the other teachers to improve the literacy and the educational standard of the school at large.” (Karen, personal communication, [email] January 4, 2020).

Ofni echoed Karen’s commitment to influence others when he told Jean, “I think I can do much better, I can be an inspiration to others to be different I can tell them about my experience. I can tell them about what I have learned in BEP.”- (Ofni, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020)

Our colleagues’ work to inspire and affect the work of other teachers in their schools has grown considerably in the past few years. Clarita discussed the progress of her staff, as well as their collective vision for the future:

Even if they start with small, small, small steps venturing into something new, they do it. At times I can see that they are little fearful, you know, they are not confident. But yet, they try, they give it a try. Yes, we have improved as a school. We are not there yet, *but*... we are improving little by little, *and* we will continue to! (Clarita, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 7, 2020)

Clarita’s teachers were not only trying out new things; they were also energized by engaging in new practices and bring new worlds into being. Conversations with one of Clarita’s teachers, William, corroborated her account of change and progress:

We are building on these new strategies in the classroom. I am excited to know more...anxious to know what else there is for us! I am excited to know what is there for us and how we can apply it in our classrooms, and how we can build on it! Oh, I am excited! (William, personal communication, [Facebook interview] January 8, 2020)

The sustainability of this work is clearly reflected in the transformations that have occurred during the past decade, and especially during the past five years. And we anticipate a trajectory of continued transformation as our Belizean colleagues imagine and enact new and more effective classroom practices.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Surely the new ideas and classroom practices that have emerged from our work are significant and could be applied in other professional development projects in developing countries. Perhaps even more important and relevant to the professional development of teachers across cultural lines of difference might be the idea that transformed human relationships themselves are the primary engines of change, and that all other changes are dependent on them. As we continue to strive for more complex understandings of learning and instruction, we are co-creating collective hopes for a future that is more global in nature—a future within which the children we teach come to 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.

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