

COVID Carving New Lenses: Transformation in Global Educators

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Abstract: *This article examines how the crisis of COVID-19 became a crucible, or a means of transformation, for global educators. How teachers leverage their lived experience of teaching through the implications of COVID-19 to transform identity and practice is a new phenomenon, a merits examination. Through a collection of interviews, the ways in which the life experiences of teaching through COVID-19 worked to create new identities in teachers and new practices within the classroom is examined. Data was gathered through informal interviews from eleven educators teaching through the crisis of COVID-19 across the world, including four continents and six countries. Drawing on simple thematic analysis, a narrative approach was utilized to examine the process of transformation in teachers across the globe. The findings and analysis of this research will help those working with teachers better understand how teachers leverage a crisis be it COVID-19, or another disruptive force, as a crucible for transformation.*

Keywords: transformation, practice, identity, COVID-19, Global Educators, narrative

A noble group of individuals throughout the history of civilization have been drawn to the task of transferring the collective knowledge of humanity to the next keepers of civilization. During a global pandemic, educators across the world continued to pursue this gallant call. This research examines teachers who left the space of their sacred classrooms to quarantine for COVID-19 in 2020, in Central America, suburban and urban neighborhoods of the United States, Ireland, the Netherlands, Malaysia, and Uzbekistan. Even as space of these classroom were left silent and empty, teachers continued their call. As they did so, they could not help but imagine the return to the previous settings of their classrooms with new identities as teachers. This qualitative study offers a deeper and more complex understanding of how this experience impacted the identity and practice of educators. This research examines the question:

How did the crisis of COVID-19 serve to carve new lenses for teachers creating a means of transformation, for global educators?

Professionals working with educators across the world, as well as those to seek to better understand educators and their practice, will benefit from a deeper understanding of how teachers changed their practice and identity through teaching during this historic COVID-19 crisis.

METHODOLOGY

APPROACH AND DESIGN

I designed my approach to allow for the most complex and rich analysis of my data. As a qualitative researcher, I drew on Bazeley's (2013) description of good qualitative design which "embodies both artistic merit and practical utility" (p. 32.) I ensured a multitude of voices representing a multitude of experiences. Data was gathered from eleven educators across the world who were teaching during the crisis of COVID-19. Specifically, teachers from four continents and six countries were interviewed. They were teaching in Malaysia, Belize, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Uzbekistan, as well as within suburban and urban of communities of the United States. I chose the participants with the intent of selecting a variety of geographic locations, demographics, and age ranges of the participants themselves, as well as the ages and levels that these educators taught. The teachers, (pseudonyms), the countries where they teach, the position, and the date of the interviews are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Interviews

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Date of Interview</i>
Tracy	Early Intervention Reading Teacher	Parker, Colorado United States	March 19, 2021
Victor	Professor of Education	Selangor Darul Ehsan Malaysia	March 20, 2021
Lydia	First-Grade Teacher	Denver, Colorado United States	March 21, 2021
Nathan	Standard 6 Teacher	Santa Elena Belize, Central America	March 22, 2021
Susan	Teacher Mentor	Parker, Colorado United States	March 24, 2021
Ellen	Standard 2 Teacher	San Ignatio Belize, Central America	March 25, 2021
Marlene	First Grade Teacher	Woerden Netherlands	March 28, 2021
Shannon	Middle School Teacher	Naas, Kildare Ireland	March 29, 2021
Nick	Middle School Teacher	Naas, Kildare Ireland	March 29, 2021
Sarah	Elementary Special Education Teacher	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania United States	April 5, 2021
Mula	Elementary School Teacher	Chirchiq City, Tashkent Uzbekistan	April 15, 2021

FINDINGS

PURPOSE AND IDENTITY.

These educators, who each taught in different corners of the planet, agreed that the call to teach interwoven into their sense of identity. Shannon explained that "teaching is who you are,

your identity as a part of something greater.” (Shannon). Susan told me her work was “to empower students to become the best version of themselves,” Victor concurred, “My purpose is not just to transfer knowledge, but to kindle and unleash the creativity” (Victor). These teachers believed they were in the business of transformation.

DISRUPTION

March 2020 brought the COVID-19 lock down. It came fast. It came fierce. Shannon experience in Ireland reflected the universal experience of teachers around the world.

In March we closed. No preparation. No expectation that this was going to happen. We found out on a Thursday during the school day that the schools were going to close, and everybody had to leave that evening with everything. (Shannon).

The speed in which classrooms closed their doors across our entire planet left educators breathless. As noted above, within the period of a few weeks, UNESCO (2020) reported that 1.19 billion learners were out of school, causing Director-General Audrey Azoulay (2020) to declare, “Never before have we witnessed educational disruption at this scale” (para 1). The enormity of the school closures impacted the entire planet.

Mula from Uzbekistan lamented, “this year I have not been able to fill my purpose as a teacher” (Mula). Ellen cried out from Belize, “Incomplete! I’m incomplete as a teacher - Incomplete” (Ellen). Teachers wrestled with how to connect with their students utilizing technology, which for most teachers was new and unfamiliar. Victor discussed his struggle in Malaysia, “I can’t see them. I can’t touch them. I can’t get the vibe. There are moments I feel like I was just talking to a screen, a mirror. “(Victor) The inability to connect was especially excruciating for Sarah, as she described the death of one of her students, “I lost a student who passed away in October. He was 10. I was the one who gave the news to the class on a Zoom call. I couldn’t even hug his sister.” (Sarah)

This powerlessness in attempts to reach each other during arguable the greatest global humanitarian crisis was a true abyss (Campbell, 1949) for Sam, perhaps for all teachers. In this moment of death - be it the passing of a child, or of the demise of deeply connecting as teachers knew how - was conceivably the moment they would cross a threshold.

THE LEARNING PIT

In the absence of connecting in old ways, by old rules, teachers came to reimagine new rules of connections. COVID-19 swept teachers right into this tumultuous pit of learning, willing or not. Britzman (2009), a psychoanalyst who writes about teacher identity, especially as they find themselves in the “learning pit,” explained that the very nature of learning “begins with the anxiety of dependency, helplessness.” More poignantly, she wrote it puts the learner into the position of having to “relive the profound dependency of infancy” (p. 7). Marlene described her experience in the Netherlands. “I was the dummy! The baby! I knew you had to connect a device to electricity, and that’s all I knew” (Marlene) Wrestling with the reluctance to embrace new ways of teaching, learning, and being is not unique to COVID.

RETURNING WITH NEW GIFTS

TECHNOLOGY AND RESOURCES. As teachers crossed the threshold of the learning pit, they returned carrying new tools. Teachers began to connect with their students leveraging this new

aptitude with technology. Nathan reflected on the impact of newly acquired skills in technology for his students in Belize,

Even if I didn't have the most expensive device, whatever I had, I did my best. I know my children will look at me and value the little efforts that I did for them. When they are grown-up, they will say, "Oh my teacher used his little cell phone to make a lesson for us." (Nathan)

Marlene considered one of her students in the Netherlands, who is non-verbal. "She can't really talk in real life, so it has been very difficult for her to learn. But since the lock down, with "Teams," she sends me messages and she tells me more than she could in classroom. That was something I could have never *never* have imagined! (Marlene). The capacity to use technology and the resources it now afforded had exploded for teachers.

FELLOWSHIP. The crisis of COVID-19 also shifted teachers' relationships with students, families, and each other. The communion with others who shared the common vision to continue to transform their students or themselves was strengthened in voluminous ways. Rendon (2009) wrote that what is sustaining for educators during great times of change is the knowledge we that "we are not alone, and that many others are engaged in the struggle to create a new belief system and a new language that speaks the truth of who we are as human beings (p. 148). Ellen reflected this very experience in Belize. "We have held hands as educators. By joining forces, we made this a learning experience and have grown together – spiritually and emotionally. Sometimes we may have felt like we were not going to make it through, but we were never alone." (Ellen)

NEW SELVES. As teachers ascended from the abyss, or the learning pit, they were transformed. New selves were constructed. Shannon reflected, "I think it would be really strange if we all went through this and didn't change" (Shannon). Teachers could not help but rewrite their lives, their identities. Victor, in Malaysia echoed Shannon's thoughts, "This pandemic, like any world crisis, asks us to go back and question. It has taught us to stop, look around, and evaluate our practice." Victor reflected in Malaysia, "I feel I am more of the Victor I was trying to be" (Victor). Nathan in Belize expressed similar sentiments, "this crisis has made all of us find out a lot more about ourselves, about how who we really are" (Nathan).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Common themes that presented in this data included a deep sense of purpose and identity, an overwhelming sense of disruption that COVID-19 created, the fear experienced in the abyss of the learning pit, and finally a sense of transformation in the teachers' capacities, practice, and identities. In this section, the themes which emerged from the data, along with insights scholars have been writing about for years are woven together to better understand the lived experiences of teachers during COVID.

This research gives us more complex understandings and optimism in the continuous and global nature of teachers' ability and inclination to transcend old versions of themselves and develop new identities and new classroom practices within a crisis. COVID-19 had been a historic and a unique phenomenon. We are in the early stages of coming to understand how COVID-19 shaped and continues to shape teachers' identities and practices. We are in the infancy of our grasp of the impact on, and implications for, our profession. Future research will help those working with

teachers better understand how teachers leverage a crisis be it COVID, or another disruptive force, as a crucible for transformation.

CONCLUSION

As we continue to strive for greater understandings of how teachers show up in the classroom, or more notably the “*who*” that shows up in the classroom, the implications of transformation are significant in understanding and creating teacher development across our globe. We have seen that in this newly created sense selves, teachers will better answer their call to teach; better answer their call to pass on the ever-growing collection of knowledge that belongs to all of civilization. They return better able to follow the call to stir the imaginations of our young citizens to do even more extraordinary and still unimagined work for humankind. Teachers emerge from this crucible of COVID-19 better equipped to answer their call to teach.

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