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Deep Engagement: Imagining and Enacting Possible Selves and Possible Worlds for Global Change

Jean Kirshner*
*Douglas County School District,
Parker, Colorado*

George Kamberelis**
*Western Colorado University
Gunnison, Colorado*

Abstract

In this article we discuss the transformative power of relationship-building as a means of transcending old versions of self and classroom practice within an ongoing professional development and Participatory Action Research project between teachers from Belize and the United States. The project is a testimony to the power of collective strength and vulnerability, shared successes, and setbacks, to build an increasingly committed, knowledgeable, and united teaching coalition. This work has also shaped the worlds we imagine for our students in an increasingly complex, globalized, connected, transcultural world. relevant to readers who are creating professional development of teachers, *with* teachers, we want to argue across cultural lines of difference. We argue here that the process of deep engagement, and true relationship building, is a central engine for transcending identities, classroom practices, and most significantly, for our ability to imagine new and meaningful social solidarity. That all these changes happen through participant's willingness to become vulnerable to each other has important implications for conducting professional development in developing nations and across multiple lines of difference.

Keywords: *Engaged scholarship, Cross-cultural teacher collaboration, teacher transformation*

* Jean Kirshner is a public school teacher in the Douglas County School District, Parker, Colorado, United States. E-mail: jdkirshner@dcsdk12.org

** George Kamberelis is Professor, Chair, and Graduate Program Director, in the Department of Education at Western Colorado University, Gunnison, Colorado, United States. E-mail: gkamberelis@western.edu

Introduction

*Quien soy yo? Who am I?
The truth is that I am more than
I appear to be today...
Quien soy yo? Who am I?
I am a multiplicity of identities
That frighten me, guard me, teach me,
Love me.*

Laura Rendón (2000, p. 10)

Transformation . . . is perhaps one of humanity's greatest capacities. Human beings can, and do, transform themselves. They transcend current and past constructs, identities, and practices throughout their lives. Make no mistake, this ability to transform is no easy feat. It is not done on a whim or casually. Reconfiguring sedimented assumptions and practices is gradual, often mundane, often unnoticed, sometimes courageous. But the possibility is there. In this article, we tell a story of transformation of a group of teachers from Belize, Central America, and a group of teachers from the United States. We present our engaged research in a paper that is developed from elements of case study method, individual and focus group interviews, and embedded storytelling. We believe this blend provides an important method for readers to understand more fully the context their work, and its true generalizability to other sites and situations. Here we want to show that a level of trust, including deeply shared personal, family and community lives, is required for the deepest levels of social, educational transformation to occur. This is true especially, when scholarly partners come from different cultural, political and

philosophical worlds, and world views. Transformation is then possible, which builds faith in future collaboration and community across boundaries.

It is a story that began with a desire, perhaps an initial imagined world, that these groups of teachers shared to raise literacy levels among Belizean children, and therefore the prospects of their lives. In this shared hope for future literate and democratic citizens, an authentic connection between these two groups of teachers developed. As Freire (2005) explained, in the shared love of, and the commitment to, the teaching process itself, as teachers, we could not help but develop a love for each other (p. 5). In the authenticity of our shared passion and imagined worlds, true collaboration was able to find its beginnings.

It began when Jean (first author) entered the classrooms of Belize in 2007. As an experienced first-grade teacher, she was struck by the lack of material resources, such as classroom books and school supplies. The singular use of whole group instruction without formative assessment and differentiated learning and teaching also caught her attention. Finally, the apparent challenge of reading competencies throughout the entire community was noticeable.

Jean was ready, and with a sense of strength, and perhaps arrogance, that came from her positionality as a white middle class woman from the United States, this work began. In 2008, she co-founded Belize Education Project (BEP) which included a group of educators from the United States with the hope of developing more effective literacy instruction in Belize. Our teaching colleagues in Belize shared this hope. Our initial work involved gathering material resources, such as books and pencils, along with bringing programs for assessing and differentiating instruction for young readers. Jean assembled a group of teachers from the United States to travel to Belize and work side by side in the classrooms of Belize. Jean also initiated a program that brought teachers from Belize to travel to Colorado to witness and work in classrooms there.

We soon discovered that our shared desire to enhance Belizean primary

schoolstudents' literacy might be hampered by the reality that teachers from Belize and teachers from the United States inhabited quite different national and educational cultures. More significantly, we realized we were stepping into a context still largely informed by colonial ideologies and practices. All of us became more aware of our own histories, assumptions, and practices both as teachers and as people. Old and deeply held assumptions about practice would have to be disrupted and new assumptions would have to be created collaboratively. New figured worlds would have to be constructed together for us not only to transform classroom practices, but to sustain those changed practices as we moved into the multitude of tomorrows that the walls of these classrooms would hold.

For effective collaboration to occur, interactions between teachers would have to involve levels of vulnerability with each other. Both groups of teachers would need to be willing to risk their own perceptions of competence and their attachment to preconceived assumptions of their own understandings. Effective interactions between the two groups of teachers would also require a level of empathy to each other's life experiences and how they came to create each other's identity and practice. In other words, for collaboration to be effective, authentic relationships--would have to be formed. These relationships would have to involve vulnerability, empathy, and an openness to change.

Old Assumptions and Constructs

As we all entered these uncharted waters of coming to know each other, we reflected on the assumptions we held personally. Perhaps more significantly, we reflected on the assumptions that were deeply imbedded in our respective cultural worlds. Adisa, one of the principals, reflected on her early personal experience of her own assumptions of education for herself. Specifically, she addressed the notion that hope for an education did not belong to her, as young woman, but that education belonged only to men.

For me to make it to high school was difficult. It was really, difficult. I am the ONLY one from my family, from four girls to go to high school. I had to cry one ENTIRE day to make it to high school...for my dad to CONSIDER sending me to high school! So, you know, that's in our culture. If you're a girl, especially, you have to stay home." (Adisa, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 7, 2020).

Gizem, a teacher, expressed similar assumptions, that hope for an education was not for her because she was a young woman. "My father didn't want his children to go and learn. He wanted me to stay home and help my mom. It's the culture from his father" (Gizem, personal communication [focus group], April 12, 2016).

Adisa explained these deeply embedded assumptions for education were not only apparent in her own family, but also held by the community;

Especially in my little village, the culture is – ok, especially if you are a girl, you just finish Standard 6 (approximately 6th grade in the United States), you belong in the kitchen, you belong just around the house, and that is it for you. Even for the boys, very few would be the ones that went to high school... Sure, if they were performing academically, then they would be considered to further their education. But it would be like only for the top students. (Adisa, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 7, 2020).

Although cultural assumptions of who deserved how much education were firmly sedimented in our colleagues' lives, so were assumptions and classroom practices. These practices were didactic in that the teachers were the primary keepers of the knowledge, and they delivered instruction, giving little or no opportunity for students to engage in questioning, reflection, or collaborative learning. Eve explained her earlier practice about this issue: "In Belize we are accustomed to just coming to the classroom, to what do you call it? 'talk and chalk.' That is what we practiced" (Eve, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020). Sloane, another teacher, also reflected on his earlier, more surface level practice. "Comprehension for me before was just the teacher gives the book and asks the five questions at the end of the story. Ok, that's it. In a way I felt like we were in a shell, in a box., those were

the only strategies we knew” (Sloane, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020).

For Jean, stepping away, even for just a moment, from the suburbs of Denver, from the suburban school district and classroom with all its trappings, history, assumptions, and practices, and into the tropics of Belize and their classrooms, their history, their assumptions, and practices, was not a small step. It was a process that would disrupt old and deeply held assumptions about practices within her own classroom. It caused her to reflect on her own whiteness and the history that came with the color of her skin and place of her birth, along with the birthplace of her great-great-grandmothers. While she remains forever bound to the light pigment of her fingertips, and by the privilege that her great-grandmothers had bestowed on her, stepping away from that lifeworld opened vulnerabilities and messy new selves that would forever become part of her identity.

Early Hints of Possible Worlds

It was our hope –our collective imagined world -- that we could easily transform classroom instruction in Belize. It was, after all, a vision shared by teachers from both countries. What we had not considered was the durability of our own cultural assumptions born of 500 years of colonization in Belize and histories of privilege in the United States. Nor had we contemplated ways our own cultures had cemented our lenses and our practices. As we all found ourselves disappointed in the barriers and in our own resistance to change, it became clear that we have quite different life stories, histories, and are influenced by different cultural forces. With this increased awareness, we began to look closely at Belize’s history of colonialism, and its continued impact on the stories and the identities of each other. In our very up close and personal experiences, we understood Said’s words (1989) on the lasting impact of colonialism when he noted “to have been colonized was a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results” (p. 207). In sum, the impact of colonialism is not merely a

happening of the past but is the reality of the lives and experiences of the people living in corners of the globe that were colonized.

Further, we came to understand the human nature in all of us that Cole and Knowles (2001) argued is the very definition of being “human is to be molded by the context” (p. 22). Human identity itself is shaped by the culture it inhabits. In being human, so were we.

Additionally, we had not realized the courage it would take by teachers from both countries to be changed by each other. The journey of transformation required all of us to give up at least some of what we had come to know and believe as true. In that sense it required what Heubner (1923/2008) described as a “death, as we willingly, or perhaps forcefully, give up part of ourselves” (p. 363). For us to give up what we already knew in exchange for new understandings and perspectives we did not yet know was frightening. Transformation, or simply learning, would require allowing new and strange ideas into our consciousness. These new ideas from each other would require us to risk firmly sedimented assumptions of how we understood ourselves as teachers, and our assumptions of best instructional practices.

Both the teachers of Belize, as well as the teachers from the United States, with their privilege of resources and assumption would have to become more “human” to each other. From Jean’s perspective, bringing teachers from Belize to the United States, into her own home and the homes of other teachers and into these teachers’ classrooms involved a vulnerability Jean and other U.S. teachers had not previously experienced.

At the end of her first visit in 2007 to Belize, when Jean got back onto the plane, she knew she was not finished. When she returned to business as usual in her first-grade classroom and suburban elementary school, the presence of the principal Jean had first worked closely with in Belize, Cecelia, would not leave her thoughts. Cecelia seemed to be with Jean’s consciousness everywhere; her drive to school,

every corner of the classroom, the library, and in her conversations about teaching reading with my colleagues in the United States.

Jean knew she had to invite Cecelia to Colorado. She knew Cecelia belonged in this Colorado classroom with her. Cecelia left the tropics of Belize to join us in Colorado that chilly January of 2008. Along with a photograph of her standing next to the thermometer reading 11 below zero, (minus 24 Celsius) Cecelia also took pictures of the classroom books, reading groups, the school library, and more. Cecelia came to know about a Colorado morning, which involved a cold drive to school clutching a hot cup of coffee. She came to know Jean's family, her colleagues, and her life world. They were beginning to share their lives.

Yet, as they formed new bonds, new connections, and understandings, they also wrestled with their differences. Jean would marvel at Cecelia's time spent at, and focus on, America's retail colossus Walmart. It made sense to Jean on a certain level, knowing Cecelia's background. For, when she returned with white plastic Walmart bags of watches, blue jeans, and socks, Jean knew Cecelia's community would benefit. It was not lost on Jean that what was housed in our one suburban Walmart dwarfed what was available to Cecelia back in her entire town. Still, it frustrated and disappointed Jean too. She had hoped a greater portion of focus would be on instructional practice instead of Walmart.

Spry's (2018) process of wrestling with her own privilege and how to continue to work resonated with Jean's conflicting thoughts and emotions at that time. Spry describes the struggle Jean was experiencing of her "white skin, its body-without-organs, its financial privilege" which was (and is) steeped within her own Walmart existence, her own land of excess and abundance. Spry reminded Jean that Paulo Freire whispered to her --and the rest of us-- that we "can always and only speak from privilege" (Spry, p. 631).

Cecelia, too, had to wrestle with what she was observing in Jean's luxurious classrooms. Cecelia, too, had to make peace with what she saw as she chose to

pursue her connections with teachers in the United States. Cecelia recalled Jean's first-grade classroom; "The first year I was there, I saw what we considered luxuries here... were nothing there to you! Like pencils! Our children would do anything for a pencil. And there you had pencils all over the floor. It was no big deal to any of you" (Cecelia, personal communication, [telephone interview] October 21, 2018).

More than material goods, Cecelia noted the luxury of learning specialists, such as music, art and P. E. teachers, not to mention reading specialists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, special educators, school psychologists, and more, that educators in the United States took for granted.. Cecelia reflected on how easy it would be to teach children with these luxuries. How could Cecelia and Jean begin to compare teaching practices with these enormous differences that seemed to be ignored? To move forward with collaboration, Cecelia and Jean would need to become more "human" to each other. They would need to address their positionality and the discrepancy in resources and in privilege. Freire (1970/2015) wrote that claiming humanity applies to all of us in that "as oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized" (p. 56). Freire (1970/2010) continued to explain as the colonized, or "oppressed" fight for their own humanity, they also "restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression" (p. 56). It was a mutual fight for both Jean and Cecelia to claim humanity for not only themselves, but for their colleagues on both sides of privilege.

Exposing our Belizean colleagues to our complicated family dynamics and allowing them to witness not only the successes of U.S. teachers in their classrooms, but also their challenges and failings, exposed fragilities. One particularly transformative event occurred in 2018 when Eve witnessed an exceptionally trying moment while observing Jean teach in her Colorado classroom. One behaviorally challenging student, 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 had passed, and the children had left for the day, Eve and Jean cried together. It was another moment of truth. Jean had shed the illusion of having superior solutions to common classroom struggles. No longer could this Belizean teacher believe educators in the United States had all the answers to challenges every teacher face. Eve recalled this moments later and she said:

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 counselors, 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 counselors, or anything like that, but we go through the same thing." Even though you have counselors and all those people who help you, you suffer what we suffer without the counselor. I could see that it hurt you because you wanted to meet his needs. (Eve, personal communication [focus group], April 4, 2018) It changed who all of us thought we were as teachers; it changed our relationships; and it changed our capacity for self-reflection about our own practices.

Upon hearing Eve during the focus group, Cecelia responded with similar thoughts, along with her own realization that, even though teachers in the United States have abundant resources, they do not 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. (Cecelia, personal communication [focus group], April 4, 2018)

Among other things, Cecelia's comments reflect an emerging understanding that teachers from the United States do not have a special set of answers to difficult problems all children can present; we, surely, struggle too. It was only through this raw vulnerability that we could move forward in in building productive,

collaborative relationships by troubling and reimagining our identities and practices. Perhaps it was a foreshadowing of seismic transformation to come both intellectually and spiritually that Dillard and Okpoaloaka (2011) would have predicted when they wrote, “the place of the scared...requires radical openness” (p. 159). Further they suggested that the act of sharing with colleagues who inhabited significantly different positionalities and life histories or with “those who have been silenced or marginalized is a spiritual task that embodies a sense of humility and intimacy” (p. 159). This new sense of humility and intimacy may have become what Dillard and Okpoaloaka (2011) described as a “spiritual task” for Jean and many of us from the United States.

All our own vulnerability in this work was essential for transforming instructional practices not only in Belizean classrooms but in classrooms of the United States as well. Through sharing our life worlds, we developed what Dillard and Okepoalaoka (2011) described as “a sense of reciprocity” which was fundamental. It allowed us to be “changed in the process of mutual teaching and learning the world together” (p. 159). In this work, teachers from the United States had to release any notion of themselves as more expert in the classrooms than our Belizean colleagues, and we became open and exposed in the process.

Our Belizean colleagues faced risks too. For example, Adisa (a principal from Belize) considered this risk for herself as a leader, as well as a member of her Mestizo community. For example, she recalled:

That’s one of our things, you know, “curiosity killed the cat.” Right? (laughter) That was something that would hold us back from trying new things. Sometimes we are curious about trying something, but maybe, me, well, I as a leader... I was fearful of failure. I was like “what are we putting ourselves into just for curiosity - or just trying something new?” (Adisa, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 7, 2020).

This risk was especially real if past experiences of opening to the Other had been damaging. Violet discussed her reluctance to let outsiders into her classroom:

So, the principal says to me, “We have a group, BEP, coming into your classroom.” To me, I was like ‘what are they coming into be classroom to do?’ ...because as Belizeans, we have not had good experiences. Some of them (Americans) go to Belize take pictures and videos and take it back and that’s the picture of Belize that they share in the United States. So, I was reluctant and intimidated. We were so vulnerable. (Violet, personal communication. [Focus Group], Wednesday, April 17, 2019)

Raymond, too, explained that his reluctance was not only for himself, but for the students in his stewardship: “When they said I would have somebody from BEP working with me, I thought, ‘I am not sure about that.’ I get nervous when someone is in my class. I spoke to my students. They were nervous too...” (Raymundo, personal communication, [Focus Group], Wednesday, April 17, 2019). Adisa, Violet, and Raymundo all captured the tremendous sense of risk involved in the invitation of not only BEP members into their classrooms, but also the invitation of new thinking that would result from this act of courage.

Yet, despite reluctances we all had a hunger to learn, to be transformed. The lure of self-transformation, and more concretely, improving the literacy levels of our students, pulled at us. We yearned for a connection to strangers in our midst. We all imagined new worlds of deeper connections and more literate futures for our students. Perhaps, being both human and educators, we had no choice. All of us began to seek out the opportunities for transcendence.

As an educational leader, Adisa recalled her first nudge to seek out transformation for herself, her community, and most significantly, the future as she saw it reflected in her students:

I had always wanted to see growth for our school. Yes, there was a time where I thought that wouldn’t be possible because of all the challenges that we have...to get them to a certain academic level. I thought it wouldn’t be possible. But.... I still, I had this big dream for our little school. (Adisa, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 7, 2020)

Cecelia recalled an early conversation we had regarding solidarity in this regard. “You said, ‘We are here in solidarity.’ That is a word that stays in my heart. I didn’t see you judge us; I saw you as willing to work side by side.” (Cecelia, personal communication, [telephone interview] October 21, 2018). As committed allies in literacy, we moved forward. Cecelia’s comment reflected what Freire (1970/2015) had instructed us when he wrote that transcultural transformation “requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity” (p. 43).

Another principal, Noelly, discussed her own journey of trust and transformation specifically regarding her first trip to Colorado:

I didn’t know Jean from nowhere. I told my friends, “I think I am taking a big risk. I am leaving my family. I am going someplace where I have never been before. I don’t know who Jean is.” I had some reservations to be honest. I communicated that to her. She said, “don’t worry, I am going to keep you warm and cozy.” I took that big step. I am not sorry. To me it is the zenith of my career. It has empowered me. Because, as teachers, we thought we had it. But there was so much more ahead of us to make a difference, to transform us into the best possible teachers that we could ever be. (Noelly, personal communication [Focus Group], Wednesday, April 17, 2019)

Noelly’s willingness to risk traveling to a place she had never been and to stay with people she did not know was an example of a willingness to risk her physical safety along with the security of her own sedimented assumptions of instructional practice, and ultimately her identity. Our trust in each other led to deeper relationships and the beginnings of transformation. Adisa echoed her colleagues’ recollections of early transformation because of deepened connections:

I have seen the challenges we face together draw us closer. I feel that confidence in coming to you and being open to you. I think you know me as a person. When I started with the group, I was in a little corner, and would just speak when I needed to. Through the years, I have seen myself grow as a leader. (Adisa, personal communication [Facebook interview], January 7, 2020)

Adisa articulated what we all shared, what possible selves and worlds we might explore together. Transcending old constructs, assumptions, identities was underway.

Jean's own shift as a teacher, as a scholar, and as a human being also became apparent. Initially, Jean did not relate to the depth of her Belizean colleagues' faith and the way it played out in their lives and in their classroom practices. As she came to know her Belizean colleagues more deeply, she came to understand spirituality as a driving force in educating their children. Jean's new appreciation and recognition of their religion was important to the Belizean teachers. In her recognition and appreciation for her Belizean colleagues' religion, more common ground was able to be cultivated.

Cecelia noticed changes in this aspect of her identity and commented on them in a focus group conversation:

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. (Cecelia, personal communication [focus group], April 4, 2018)

Perhaps Cecelia was referring to the fact that Jean had shifted her assumptions simply through the act of digging more deeply into new ways that spirituality presents itself in the lives of her colleagues.

Many other U.S. educators had similar experiences. In this growth through the process of digging more deeply, not only into the everyday experiences in our respective classrooms, but also into each other's spiritual lives, we could all begin to include each other in our shared experiences, and we could explore our visions for education more deeply - together.

As we imagined new possibilities for ourselves and our communities, we drew not only on each other's knowledge, but also appreciated the importance each other's sense of faith and of humanity.

Embracing vulnerability and the wholeness of each other, we moved toward new possibilities. Ray affirmed, "we can work as a family, together, to build a better world" (Ray, personal communication, [Focus Group], Wednesday, April 17, 2019). We knew what was at stake. We understood that allowing of old parts of ourselves to perish; that inviting new ideas to inhabit our identities and practice was a risk.

Transcendence of Ourselves as Teachers

We developed new, more collaborative ways of being together, and in doing so we found new possibilities. As educators ourselves, we found we were living out the very definition education itself. As Huebner (1923/2008) wrote, education itself is only "possible because the human being is a being that can transcend itself" (p. 345). We were mutually changed, as Eve declared: "We have changed you. You have changed us" (Eve, personal communication, [focus group], January 8, 2020).

Jean, too, had changed her identity as a teacher, and more importantly as a professional developer in Belize. She had come to understand that she did not enter the Belizean classrooms as the expert, but as a participant in social change, and as a learner as they all co-constructed new ways of being.

With these changes came new forms of courage. Richard discussed his new-found valor declaring that his work with us "empowered me and encouraged me to try new things. To be different, to be a teacher who is not satisfied, but to do better" (Richard, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020). Richard continued to discuss his new mindset in relation to the Ministry of Education:

I used to be nervous whenever the Ministry came, thinking, "what if they don't like it..." I was scared to do a game where the students are moving...but I realized it is not about them (the Ministry of Education), it is about the kids learning. I had that thought from the

beginning, but I was afraid. But BEP gave me the courage. (Richard, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020).

In the face of authority, Richard had developed a sense of confidence and courage. Jean too grew as she became more straightforward and bolder in her interactions with the staff of the Belize Ministry of Education. She began to question mandated policies and instructional practices with much more courage, commitment, and persuasiveness. Additionally, within the more neutral space of her home in Colorado, she encouraged conversations between principals from the United States and members of the Ministry of Education. Many of these conversations addressed how the Ministry of Education might support rather than just police teachers and leaders in Belizean schools.

Despite the very real possibility of failure, the lure of new worlds overcame the urge to remain safe; unchanged. Noelly shared her perspective on change: “Now we are different. Failing is a part of life. It is not the falling, but the raising that from where we are that, to me, makes the big difference within our school and within our walls” (Noelly, personal communication, [Focus Group], April 17, 2019).

By imagining possible worlds, new realities were born. The imagined worlds did not stay in the heads of teachers but became new practices, new realities. Richard put it this way: “BEP has changed me as a teacher by making it real” (Richard, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020). Richard’s comment reflected what Holland et al. (1998) wrote in that “we have our existence not in repose, but in practice” (p. 279).

Teachers were specific about how their transformations were made manifest inside the walls of their classrooms

While teachers were considering new ways to instruct their students how to interact with text, changes in how teachers viewed, and therefore worked with, students shifted too. For instance, teachers found new importance in the self-

expression of their students. Eve reflected on her changing perceptions and in practices:

Now, I want my kids to know it was ok to make mistakes. That is new for me. Before, I was looking at teaching as just teach, teach, teach, and I didn't allow my kids to be engaged. The minute my kids wanted to say something I went like this (put up hand) "let me talk." I realize now that kids need to express themselves. I want to know what they are thinking - what they are learning. That whole thing changed for me when you came. (Eve, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020).

Minds were opening and transformation was occurring. We were all transcending earlier versions of ourselves.

This new sense of openness to each other and a new kind of courage we all felt not only affected what happened in the classroom but also what happened in other domains of our colleagues' lives. Richard described how he took his new identity from the classroom to other parts of his life. In particular, he discussed how shifts in how he viewed himself and those he interacted with empowered him to become the choir director at his hometown church:

Working with BEP has impacted a lot in the way I interact with other people. The word that kept coming to my mind was vulnerability. When I went back this year to my church in Corezal, I said I wanted to form a choir at church, even though they have a prepared musical teacher from Panama. She wasn't there so, I said, "Let me try this! Let me try to see if I can form a choir." So, I just called to see who would want to participate. I had a turnout of about 20 to 25. So, we did a song for Christmas Go Tell it to the Mountain, then we did Revelations 18 for New Years ...and the church was surprised that suddenly, we have a choir! The elders from the church said, "we want you to be the choir director." I was like, "OK. I will try my best." (Richard, personal communication [Facebook interview] January 8, 2020)

Richard had become, in a sense, a different person. Like Richard, with new knowledge, new skills, and new understandings, we all learned, and we all found new meanings and new ways of being. As Lave and Wenger (1991) put it, “learning thus implies becoming a different person” (p. 53). Richard, like the rest of us, had indeed become somebody new.

Transformation of Students and Community

As teachers transformed, the students and the community changed too. The fact that we had all come together and shared our practice was powerful. As Wenger (2008) wrote, we had become a “force to be reckoned with” (p. 85). Wenger (2008) continued to explain that a group of people engaged in shared practice, within relationships, shared knowledge, and shared visions, “hold the key to real transformation – the kind that has real effect on people’s lives” (p. 85). We were all having effects on lives beyond our own.

Teachers were impacting other teachers’ practices and lives by engaging them in new practices. Richard described his impact on other teachers in a Facebook chat with Jean:

I share experiences, guided reading being one. Whenever we go to other reading workshops, I say, “oh, but you can do guided reading, you can use running records, you can do checklists, you can do the assessments, you can do the DRA.” I just share what I have learned, but I tell them you can do much more, so much more. (Richard, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020).

Members of entire communities outside of Belize Education Project were being touched and inspired by changes our colleagues were experiencing.

Sloane also discussed the new visions and potentials he saw in his students “Now our school isn’t only connecting to our own little school, our own little village...now we are connecting to the world. Now we have a world-wide view” (Sloane, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020).

Noelly expressed similar changes in her students' newly imagined worlds not only through working with us, but the new books that we were sending the classrooms:

It gives these children now a whole vision of what the world is like because they were a very closed community. They will now simply go get a book and read, because before they didn't have anything at all, they didn't have like a textbook in their home, not one single book. They barely had writing materials and resources, and now they are surrounded by books and they are making use of it. The language they talk now from Infant to the upper...they can tell you what fiction and non-fiction is, and elements of a story. You couldn't imagine the impact that this has made for them. It has changed a whole community and future generations. The mindset is so much different. Before they had their mind to finish standard 6 or drop out. Nothing beyond. Now they look forward to getting a higher education. (Noelly, personal communication, [Focus Group], April 17, 2019)

We were all engaged in changing ourselves and our ways of being and acting, and our engagement became an engine for more change. This work was changing imagined worlds for whole communities.

Imagined Worlds of Tomorrow

... the poet's function is to describe not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen.

(Aristotle, Poetics II.9)

Poets. Perhaps if Aristotle were to describe us, we would all have earned this title. We were now living in a world of things that “might happen.” Imagined worlds and new possibilities had become evident, had been made noticeable in the classrooms as well as in the lives of the teachers and their communities. Those experiences “had happened,” and yet we know that for changes to become sustainable we need continue to imagine new possibilities, new “things that might happen” in our lives, for our students, and for our profession as a whole. If we all continue to co-create

new, richer, more complex, and higher possibilities for ourselves, the trajectory of our work is likely to be formidable.

A hunger for transformation has been birthed and now lives within our imaginations. It appears there is no going back. As Eve declared, “I want change! I want change! I am envisioning some great things will happen soon. It may not happen next year, but change has to happen” (Eve, personal communication, [Facebook Interview], January 8, 2020). Violet declared: “I will change the future! My hope for the future is to go back to Belize, to practice. My hope is that change begin with me.” (Violet, personal communication, [Focus Group], April 17, 2019)

Hopes for transcending old practices were becoming more concrete too. The abstract or “heady” ideas of change have the teeth of pragmatic plans for shifts in instructional practice. Katerina detailed her plans to change her reading instruction as she told us: “I will do running records and place the students in groups.” (Katerina, personal communication, [Focus Group], April 17, 2019). In addition to shifts in delivering content, teachers also discussed new intentions for interacting with students. Eve told me about her newfound commitment to a shift in working with her students, “Looking how you guys engage with your students, and the love your students have for you all, I want the same for my kids. I want my kids to look at me the same way your kids look at you. I am going to shift the way I teach my kids. I want them to feel how you wanted your kids to feel towards you. I will start practicing it. Little by little I am changing and will keep changing as a teacher.” (Eve, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020)

Real plans to transcend previous practices are now central to the visions of our colleagues. New expressions of hope inhabit all of us now. With hope, new constructs become possible.

New ideas for immediate shifts within the classroom were swimming in teachers’ minds. Just as significantly, intentions to develop personally as professionals also inhabit our collective imaginations. As Jean shifted her

assumptions of not only professional development and the role of participatory action, but also her identity as a teacher, as a scholar, and as a professional developer, she was transformed. Richard echoed Jean's transformation in himself as he declared, "BEP has changed the idea of who I want to be!" (Richard, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020). Violet also discussed her hope to continue her education, even as the specifics of "how" are still forming. She told us that "I realize how much I have to learn. In fact, I want a masters. I am not sure how, but now it is a passion for me." (Violet, personal communication, [Focus Group] April 17, 2019). The yearning and the intention for more learning remains in the minds of our colleagues and of ourselves.

Inspiring and impacting community is part of our newly imagined worlds. Sharing histories and stories of what transformed us, as well sharing the histories and stories of others, is inherently part of the human experience. Richard told Jean, "I can be an inspiration to others to be different. I can tell them about my experience" (Richard, personal communication [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020). We are all seeing the possibilities of a different life not only for ourselves, but for others as well.

As we imagined new ways to influence education for the shared future of Belize and our world, we also imagined seismic shifts within their careers and lives. Sloane shared the long term hopes for his life. "If I want to make a wider impact or change, I need to have a certain degree or a certain education so I can be recognized. I must educate myself. I must continue to study, I must continue to get more knowledge to able to be recognized, to be able to get a wider impact." (Sloane, personal communication [Facebook interview], January 7, 2020)

For Sloane, the intention to obtaining more education comes with the intention of altering his social position, of being recognized, to make a wider impact. Holland et al. (1998) writes that "social positions. . . become dispositions through participation, identification with, and development of expertise within the figured

worlds” (p. 136). Like Sloane, Richard described a professional shift he holds in his imagination to make a greater impact on his profession:

I am changing my mind a bit from being a regular classroom teacher - which my ultimate work was - but I want to be a university teacher to teach future teachers. Why? Because I believe that, yes, I am impacting a group of children in a community, but I believe if I can be lecturer in the future than I can impact teachers and influence them to be better teachers and impact even more teachers and students.(Richard, personal communication, [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020)

The pull Richard felt to influence others was also felt by Jean, Cecelia, and other Belizean colleagues. Inhabiting these new relationships and roles, we also began to share our collective work with larger audiences in our profession. For example, Cecelia and Jean worked with Dr. Kamberelis to write and present a paper on our work at the 2019 Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. In addition, two teachers from the Belize joined Jean in co-authoring a piece for Education Leadership about their experience teaching each other’s children and encouraging them to move from being “Pen-Pals to Global Citizens.” In short, we were all beginning to have a voice in global conversations about literacy learning and teaching. The power of this new voice also began to shift assumptions of who held what knowledge on a global level. Echoing what Holland et al. (1998) claimed, the self “cannot be finalized” (p. 173), we continue to reimagine new futures for ourselves.

More and greater possibilities for ourselves and our professions continue to exist in our imaginations. We continue to re-imagine our connections to each other in more socially just and effective ways. We have new dreams of collaborative work in classrooms spanning decades to come. The words of Bruner (1986) echo in our ears: “the power to recreate reality, to reinvent culture” begins in the mind (p. 149). Newly imagined worlds continue to emerge and be nurtured in our minds.

Tomorrows for our Students

As our imaginations are filled with possible worlds for ourselves as teachers, we envision possible worlds for our students too. Their lives are part of our own stories. Participating in our students' life stories is our calling, our vocation.

Sloane now turns his eyes towards the future through the lens of his students: "I expect my students to be people of great influence. I expect them to be great leaders in our community to our country, to give back and to improve" (Sloane, personal communication [Facebook interview], January 8, 2020). New tomorrows for our students emerged in our newly figured worlds.

As our vision for the tomorrows of our students transcends old assumptions, we are also shifting who we dream about. What was once a durable assumption—that life-long literacy, according to Adisa, was only for "the top boys"—has been troubled and re-imagined. Now teachers hold bold new possibilities in their minds for a diverse group of learners, thus, embracing Rendon's (2011) claim that "one of the key aims of education is to be of service to the richly diverse human family" (p. 91). Indeed, Belizean teachers now strive to meet the diverse needs of all students. Noelly discussed this shift in a focus group:

We have students that can learn and memorize so quickly. They are the ones that will be a lawyer and a doctor and things that we all look up to ...but , *yet*, we tended to ...I wouldn't say ignore, but never give the farmer the credit they deserve, that put the food on the table that we all we need. I believe that is our job, to bring out the hidden stars that lie within ALL these children, who especially for those who believe "that they *can't* do it." (Noelly, personal communication, [Focus Group], April 17, 2019)

A larger group of students are now included in Noelly's, and in our, collective vision for our students' tomorrows. Cecelia, was more specific about this vision, referring one student at her school, as she described the shift in new possibilities she sees in the learners under her stewardship:

At our school we have a boy, who is going to be seventeen in September. People ask me, “why you have him here?” I said, “because I want him to learn to read.” His mom said, “I just want him to write his name.” I told the teacher, “you don’t need to just teach him to write his name. We can go beyond that.” I now believe it (reading) is a barrier breaker. (Cecelia, personal communication, [Focus Group], April 17, 2019)

Cecelia’s and Katerina’s clarity that literacy is a “barrier breaker” now holds truth and significance for students who had previously been left out of our imaginations.

As we dream of more possibilities for our students, and as more of our students are included in this dream, we also imagine greater purposes for the education of our students. We dream about the kind of global citizens we are raising; we imagine worlds for the next keepers of our shared civilization of human beings. Noelly put it this way:

They will be better citizens. Yes, in literacy overall, but most of all they will learn to share and to collaborate and to build good relationships with each other to make a better community. I can see this change in the future! (Noelly, personal communication, [Focus Group], April 17, 2019)

Cecelia expressed a similar vision for her students in the same focus group:

I now believe it is important for the children to embrace each other, different cultures, different religions, different ethnic groups, that we work together to be good excellent citizens, not only for Belize, but as global citizens. Our students will respect the children from different parts of the world, as we share one common goal, that is to be good to humanity. (Cecelia, personal communication, [Focus Group], April 17, 2019)

Jean also feels a new sense of optimism for her own students as global citizens as their awareness of universal human connections grows. Jean’s students develop both lessons for, and receive lessons from, their Belizean peers. Her young learners now find common ground and new bonds with their tropical peers. They notice their

Belizean cohorts are not only simultaneously growing as readers, but they also share a passion for their own families, they share fears of failure and disappointment, and share in the joy of the birthday celebrations, and the wonder of caterpillars.

The optimism of these newly imagined worlds that teachers hold for students as contributors to a global community is powerful. It is the courageous human attribute to dare to transcend previous versions of ourselves and our realities that affords us the gift of hope.

Concluding Thoughts

Risk and transformation can and have occurred. We hope the reader can see the levels of interaction that constituted this “deep engagement,” which is multifaceted, and also, open ended, and points toward education which is a democratic process not just a product of research. With this truth, comes an understanding of the courage, the vulnerability, and even the messiness of this process. As all of us have transcended old versions of ourselves, our practices, and our realities; we have let go of (sometimes precious) old constructs. Through sharing our life worlds, we developed what Dillard and Okpoaloaka (2011) described as “a sense of reciprocity” which was fundamental. It was also from the raw vulnerability we all experienced, that we could really grow, in building productive, collaborative relationships, by troubling and reimagining our identities and practices. Perhaps it was a foreshadowing of seismic transformation to come both intellectually and spiritually that Dillard and Okpoaloaka (2011) would have predicted when they wrote, “the place of the scared...requires radical openness” (p. 159). Further they suggest that the act of sharing with colleagues who inhabited significantly different positionalities and life histories or with “those who have been silenced or marginalized is a spiritual task that embodies a sense of humility and intimacy” (p.159). This new sense of humility and intimacy may have become what Dillard and Okpoaloaka (2011) described as a “spiritual task” for Jean and many of us from the United States.

We have experienced a multitude of “deaths” so that we might become more. Even in the celebration of our new selves, we still walk with doubt and with disappointment that we are still not our best selves and that we still inhabit an imperfect world. Yet, in that understanding we still embark on the courageous work of transformation. It seems we have no choice, and we have support in the process. Risking ourselves to become more than what we presently are is made possible through our connections, our deepened relationships, and our shared community. In this, we continue to transcend previous forms of who we were to collectively create new imagined worlds and try to make them realities.

The transforming possibilities for hope within a community are powerful. In considering a world of “greater yet to be,” we have become Aristotle’s poets. We imagine our instructional practices within today’s classrooms in different parts of our globe to generate greater possibilities for humanity.

The claim of transcendence is ours, as we are members of a shared community, and members of the family of humankind. As teachers of our students and of each other, too, we also hold Freire’s (2005) claim it is “impossible to teach without the courage to love” (p. 5). With tremendous courage, we know we can transform. We know this because when we each ask ourselves, “Who am I,” we see that we are a multiplicity of identities becoming an even greater multiplicity of identities. We also know that, as we experience fear and vulnerability, we still love one another, and we are still learning.

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