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COVID-19 as a Crucible: The Transformation of Global Educators

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Abstract: This article examines how the crisis of Coronavirus disease (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 and 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.

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Introduction

A noble group of individuals throughout the history of civilization have long been drawn to the vocation, the call, to teach. They have been drawn to the task of transferring the collective knowledge of humanity to the next keepers of civilization. Even more ambitious, educators have sought to inspire the next generation to go on and do even greater work for the human experience than what has already been done. In the midst of a global pandemic, educators across the world continued to pursue this gallant call. As they left the space of their sacred classrooms to quarantine for Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in 2020, they left classrooms in steamy jungles of Central America, and classrooms tucked in suburban and urban neighborhoods of the United States. They left classrooms along the Grad Canal in Ireland, and alongside a wind powered grist mill in the Netherlands. Teachers left classrooms under the palm trees of Malaysia, and classrooms alongside ancient stones of Uzbekistan. Even as the sacred 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. Specifically, this study has created a greater picture of how teachers leveraged a historic experience as a “crucible” to become the “who” they are as teachers, and how they come to show up in the classroom.

Lessons in Transformation from History: A Review of Literature

As teaching during the lockdown imposed by COVID-19 is a new phenomenon, little knowledge exists on the impact of this experience. Yet, lessons exist from historic examples of crises serving as a crucible for educators across the world. Winthrop (2020), drew on her experience working with education globally facing emergencies as she wrote, “Despite this unprecedented situation, there is a useful body of knowledge on school during prolonged crises. Over the last 20 years, ‘education in emergencies’ has coalesced as a field of research and practice” (para 6).

The 2005 earthquakes that decimated schools in Pakistan, led to the transformation of not only stronger and earthquake resistant school buildings, but a renewed sense of collaboration from its community. Hagan and Shuaih, (2012) wrote, “Eight years later, hundreds of thousands of earthquake survivors see the fruits of a massive rebuilding effort” (para 1).

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They continued to quote MacLeod, former director of the USAID/Pakistan Earthquake Reconstruction Office, who claimed, "Reconstruction is not just about bricks and mortar but rebuilding communities and the people who occupy them." (para 10).

The horrific crisis experienced in Rwanda also transformed the education of an entire nation. Winthrop (2020) explained, "In the post-genocide rebuilding, schools and the content students learned were dramatically revised" (para 26).

Drawing on the crisis of Hurricane Katrina, Patton (2008) researched the lessons and the transformation schools experienced in New Orleans. One of Patton's participants explained, "I had to learn that it's OK to believe in something that nobody can see, and nobody can hear. So, I feel like that was my biggest lesson 'cause that just helped me with everything" (p. 10). Another participant discussed her transformed understanding of relationships in the wake of the hurricane:

I've really learned about the temporary value of materials. It's there, it's good, but it's gonna fade away. Either it gets old, gets broken, or it gets caught in the flood. And those things can always be replaced. But the most important thing is having meaningful relationships with people and really setting up yourself with people that can uplift you" (p. 13).

Educators historically have leveraged crises to transcend old versions of practices and identities. Winthrop reflected on examples of past calamities and their potential for transformation, "A central principle in post-crisis recovery is to take advantage of the moment to build back better. In education we have seen this principle applied across many different elements of school systems" (para 26).

The literature of reviewed in the article demonstrates crises can result in transformation of old version structures, practices, and identities into new ones.

Question

The scientific term of a crucible refers to a durable or indestructible container in which elements are changed - often within extremely high temperatures. For the purpose of this article a crucible is understood as the container in which the life experiences of COVID-19 came to interact. That process led to the creation of new identities and new ways of being. This article examines the question:

How did the crisis of COVID-19 serve as a crucible, 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 have changed their practice and identity through teaching in the midst of this historic COVID-19 crisis.

Positionality

At the time I collected experiences from teachers around the globe, I, too, found myself in the trenches alongside my participants. At the time I was a first-grade teacher in a public-school. I, too, was flailing to meet my own young learners through a laptop in March of 2020. In addition to teaching first-grade for over twenty years, I had also been working with teachers in Belize, Central America for over a decade as the president of Belize Education Project (2021). At that time, and in that capacity, I was communicating regularly with my colleagues in Belize as we co-created virtual professional development. I had also been writing for several international education journals and books, including a piece for International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies (Kirshner, 2020) on how my colleagues in Belize were responding to lockdown utilizing the National Radio to reach remote learners without internet or devices. During this period, I was not only experiencing my own transformation as a classroom teacher, but also hearing the experiences of my global colleagues. It became clear this was a global phenomenon that needed to be captured and better understood.

Methodology

Approach and Design

With my research question and the narratives, or lived experiences, of my participants in mind, 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.) My design included collecting a wide range of teachers' stories around the globe. (I describe the interview design below). In collecting these narratives, I ensured a multitude of voices representing a multitude of experiences. In this design, I coded the responses and found themes in their stories. As my research was based in grounded theory, the data determined the themes. I also strove to adhere to Bazeley's (2013) advise on design for qualitative research as he explained that despite the hope to engage in systemic inquiry and "its pristine and logical presentation," qualitative research is often messy and non-linear and therefore calls "for considerable flexibility in design" (p. 33). My design was flexible in the interviewing

process and the collection process as I allowed my data to drive my findings.

Participants.

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. At the time of the interviews the duration of online instruction varied from 4 months to 12 months. Some teachers had already returned to face-to-face teaching, while others continued to teach online. The teachers, (pseudonyms), the countries where they teach, the position, and the date of the interviews is shown in table 1

Table 1: Interviews

Teacher	Position	Location	Date of Interview
Tracy	Early Intervention Reading Teacher (Teaches primarily ages 6–8-year-olds)	Parker, Colorado United States	March 19, 2021
Victor	Professor of Education (Teaches primarily young adults)	Selangar Darul Ehsan Malaysia	March 20, 2021
Lydia	First-Grade Teacher (Teaches primarily 6-7-year-olds)	Denver, Colorado United States	March 21, 2021
Nathan	Standard 6 Teacher (Teaches primarily 11–13-year-olds)	Santa Elena Belize, Central America	March 22, 2021
Susan	Teacher Mentor (Mentors teachers in elementary school)	Parker, Colorado United States	March 24, 2021
Ellen	Standard 2 Teacher (teaches primary 7-9 year-olds)	San Ignatio Belize, Central America	March 25, 2021
Marlene	First Grade Teacher (Teaches primarily 6–7-year-olds)	Woerden Netherlands	March 28, 2021
Shannon	Middle School Teacher (Teaches primarily 12–14-year-olds)	Naas, Kildare Ireland	March 29, 2021
Nick	Middle School Teacher (Teaches primarily 12–14-year-olds)	Naas, Kildare Ireland	March 29, 2021
Sarah	Elementary Special Education Teacher (Teaches primarily 6–11-year-olds)	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania United States	April 5, 2021
Mula	Elementary School Teacher (Teaches primarily 6–12-year-olds)	Chirchiq City, Tashkent Uzbekistan	April 15, 2021

Data Collection.

I interviewed each participant using Google-Meet, recorded their interviews, and then transcribed the them. I used semi-structure conversational interviews (e.g., Mishler, 1986), using conversational interview strategies with open-ended questions to ignite authentic conversations. My questions were formulated to elicit stories not only of their teaching experiences during COVID-19, but also of their reflections on fears, hopes, and shifts found in their identity and practice during this year.

As I drew on Reissman's (2007) description of narrative inquiry, I sought to situate myself as an active participant in dialogue, understanding that both the storytellers and I were co-constructing new meanings together. In other words, my position as a "facilitating" interviewer, who asked questions, and a vessel-like "respondent" who gives answers, was

“replaced by two active participants who jointly construct narrative and meaning” (p. 23). In this way my colleagues and I co-created the narratives and the meaning we constructed in those narratives.

Trustworthiness.

As this piece of research is qualitative, rather than quantitative, I draw from scholars of qualitative research in reporting the findings of my work. Corbin and Strauss (2015) discussed the inappropriate use of the terms “*validity* and *reliability*” when discussing qualitative research” (p. 346). They clarified that the terms “*validity* and *reliability*” carried “too many quantitative implications” (p. 346). Instead, Corbin and Strauss (2015) advocated for the use of the term “*trustworthiness*” which they explained. “Findings are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants’, researchers’, and readers’ experiences with phenomena, but at the same time, the explanation the theory provides is only one of many ‘plausible’ interpretations from the data: (p. 346). In that I have chosen to establish credibility and trustworthiness in my methodology.

In Moss’s (2004) description of trustworthiness, she also underscored the “researcher’s commitment to include all points of view as contrasted to the common points of view that emerge, protecting the participants’ well-being while putting their voices in the forefront as a model of authentic participation in educational research” (p. 371). I took pains to ensure all points of view were considered and contrasted.

In the process ensuring that multiple perspectives were included, it also served to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of this phenomena, or to triangulate the data. As described by Bazeley (2013), the use of triangulation as a strategy for validation involves “independently obtaining one or more alternative sources of data” (p. 406) and further “checking to see if the inferences that you draw from the data are comparable” (p. 406). The multiple perspectives that I obtained came from the variety of voices represented in my data. I compared and contrasted the content of each interview against the other interviews. It was in this way common themes emerged as significant to the educators I interviewed.

Just as significant as triangulation of the data, was the attention to the trustworthiness in coming to understand the global experience of teaching through the year of COVID-19. Moss (2004) referred to “trustworthiness as an art ...where multiple voices or multivoicedness is allowed to flourish” (p. 363). In this research, multiple voices and points of view have been included through the interviews of teachers around the world, as well as the literature examined, to better understand the nature of these teachers’ experiences.

Data Analysis

As I reviewed the data, I conducted my initial analyses by searching for repeated ideas and concepts, or what Ely et al. (1991) defined as themes: “statement[s] of meaning that (1) run through all or most of the pertinent data, or (2) one in the minority that carries heavy or emotional data” (p. 150). Using this basic thematic analysis approach, I extracted themes from the data to better understand my colleagues’ experiences and perspectives of teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown. I began the process by familiarizing myself with the data in a way that Nowell et al. (2017) described “as a faithful witness to the accounts in the data, being honest and vigilant about both my own and my colleagues’ perspectives, preexisting thoughts and beliefs, and developing theories” (pp. 4-5). In the next phase, I identified themes in the data, which is what Nowell et al. (2017) called a “theorizing activity” that required me to keep revisiting the data. (p. 5). Ely et al. (1991) described the search for “highlights explicit or implied attitudes towards life, behavior, or understandings of a person, persons, or culture” (p. 150). This process of creating themes the relations between and among them “brings a researcher into intimate acquaintance with the data” (Ely et al., 1991, p. 145). At some point, I came to a place where I felt I had saturated my understanding of the themes teachers were describing in their experience during COVID-19 and how they related to one another. Or, as Ely et al. (1991) put it, I arrived “somewhere between ‘barely sufficient’ and ‘any number of cycles of the recursive qualitative research process’” (p. 159). It was there I found what Ely et al. (1991) described as “the place where enough may not be all, but enough is enough.” (p. 159). When “that place” was found, I began to write the story of the teachers’ lived experiences teaching throughout COVID-19.

Here I found these teachers discussed their purpose in the call to teach, along with the triumphs and times they were brought to their knees by the challenges. In particular, teachers discussed the disruption of their purpose, the fear, and the disconnectedness they experienced as a result of this global pandemic. They also discussed gifts from the year of COVID-19 which they will bring back to their “previous” classrooms. The results are organized by themes that emerged during this process.

Narrative Approach.

A narrative approach was chosen to present the work of educators across the world in this year of COVID-19. When Goodson (1992) was studying teachers’ lives, he noted that, “our minds work with truth in narrative” (p. 225). Bruner (1993) also inspired narrative tropes and strategies to engage in this representational process. For example, he wrote, “our capacity to render experience in terms of narrative” as “an instrument of making meaning that dominates much of life in culture” (p. 97). A narrative approach was also chosen in order to capture what was real, what was true; not report

just “the facts” of COVID-19 school closures across the world, but to convey what these facts had to say about this human experience. Drawing on Loh (2013), a narrative approach best allowed “others to have a vicarious experience of being in the similar situation and thereby being able to understand the decisions made and the emotions felt by the participants in the study” (p. 10). In other words, a narrative could best achieve verisimilitude, which Schwandt (2015) defined as “evocative power or sense of authenticity,” which could draw the readers “into the experiences” of these global colleagues in such a way that their experiences could be felt (p. 323). The story of the transformation of these educators’ within the context of a global pandemic was most appropriately presented as a narrative.

Findings

Purpose and Identity

The teachers I spoke with all described an unwavering sense of clarity in regard to the purpose of their call long before COVID-19 made international headlines. These educators, who each taught in different corners of the planet, agreed that their charge was to “give knowledge” to their learners as Mula from Uzbekistan told us, (Mula). More importantly, teachers felt their purpose was to facilitate their students’ transformation, even transcendence, into new potentials. They found the call to teach interwoven into their sense of identity, and for some, even an expression of their faith. Finally, the act of teaching for this global group of educators was the very essence of being human.

These teachers strove to become catalysts for the transformation in their own students. Susan, who teaches in a suburb of Denver in the United States told us her work was “to empower students to become the best version of themselves.” She continued, “I believe it is my job to get them to see their place in their greatness – by empowering them to have the tools to take them from wherever they are to a higher level” (Susan). Susan’s thinking appeared to be global as Victor, who teaches in Malaysia 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.

Teaching was also deeply embedded into their identity. Shannon explained from Ireland that teaching “is who you are, your identity as a part of something greater.” She elaborated, “it is who you are, even if you are not a religious person” (Shannon). As Susan noted, the extent to which teachers self-identified as “religious” varied. For instance, Ellen stated from her home in Belize, Central America that she found purpose in “Living my life and walking the steps that Christ walked, so my students can see that image in me” (Ellen). Victor’s view of his relationship with the sacred was more abstract than Ellen’s. He drew on a broader sense of spirituality as he explained from his home in Malaysia,

I believe that what we do is spiritual. There is always light and always darkness. I truly believe you invite your students, who are in a sense, soul mates, to learn with you. There is a reason you are all together. (Victor)

Finally, Marlene expressed from the Netherlands, “I am very down to earth. I am *not* a believer in God” (Marlene). Even as the formal views on faith’s role in education differed, the teachers were united in their claim for the humanity found in teaching.

They believed the very process of education could be considered ultimately human. Nathan from Belize explained the humanity himself as a *teacher*: “I teach from the heart. I am human” (Nathan), while Victor explained the humanity of his *students*: “If I unleash their creativity and spark that energy inside, they will do it by themselves. They are human. They are human!” (Victor,). To learn and to teach is to be human. This was a truth these teachers deeply held as they lived, moved, and had their being within the sacred space of their classrooms across the globe.

Disruption

March 2020 brought the COVID-19 lock down. It came fast. It came fierce. I include multiple examples to drive home the global nature of this experience Shannon explained the moment she experienced in Ireland.

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. It came as a complete shock to everybody. (Shannon).

Sarah, who teaches in an urban neighborhood in Philadelphia, recalled her experience: “March 12th was fine. March 13th-the morning seemed normal. Then around noon, they said we were going home” (Sarah,). Nathan described the shock of his community in Belize, “Nobody could believe that COVID-19 came the way it did. I just came up all of a sudden” (Nathan). The shock of leaving classrooms across the world left teachers stunned.

As teachers staggered to find their footing, both denial and fear for some set in. First came the denial that Ellen in Belize described,

At first, I didn’t accept that school was closing. I was like, “Ok, it’s a month. We can work with that.” But then as the time went by, I started to think, “OK, we are not going back to school this year.” It was hard for me to accept. (Ellen)

As denial subsided, came the fear. Tracy, who teaches in a suburb of Denver, explained, “When change happens suddenly, like COVID-19 did, I panic. In all honesty, I shut down for a while at the beginning of COVID-19. I was in denial and I shut

down” (Tracy). Marlene echoed Tracy explaining her own experience in Ireland. “When something is new and different, it’s all fear. I am talking about myself. I avoid it when it is possible! What is unknown is scary!” (Marlene) Disruption, which ushered in the sense of denial and fear, may have delayed action, but not for long.

In the midst of disruption, teachers stood back up and began to teach. Shannon described her experience in Ireland, “We kind of muddled through to a large degree. I have to say, we have NEVER worked as hard as we have since last March. It has been relentless.” (Shannon). Ellen recalled her experience in Belize, “... as the time went by, I started to accept our situation. It was so hard. I am not a virtual person. I don’t even own my Facebook! I don’t like it - or DIDN’T like it. Well, I still don’t like it - but I adapted.” (Ellen) It was not long before teachers were working to reach their learners. But it was not without struggle.

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 must say it makes me feel incomplete. I’m incomplete! That’s how it makes me feel as a teacher - Incomplete” (Ellen). Ellen continued,

I can’t be there for them when they need me. When we are physically with them, they might have a problem at home night before and they might come to school and talk about it and you offer them your help. But that hasn’t been possible this year. The nurturing part of teaching has gone away. (Ellen)

What Ellen expressed from the jungles of Belize was felt across the world in the urban neighborhood of West Philadelphia. Sarah explained:

When we left for the pandemic, I was worried about food security for my families. It was tough. I wanted to see them. I wanted to make sure they are okay. Before, I could hold, and touch, and see my kids - and be there with them and know everything is ok. Now I stay up worrying about them. Are they eating? Is there home safe? I don’t know where they are. (Sarah)

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. In a real class you can get the vibe. On Zoom I keep telling my students to keep their cameras on, but they are human, they will not listen to you. There are moments I feel like I was just talking to a screen, a mirror. (Victor)

Victor’s experience was also global. Nick described his experience in Ireland, “It’s painful watching a screen. You’re in the corner. Everyone else is blank.” (Nick). Susan from Denver also noted the shift in her own identity, commenting, “You are a different person behind a screen” (Susan). 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. We don’t know if it was COVID-19, because they weren’t testing corpses at that time, because of lack of testing. It is unclear whether it was COVID-19, but a death for a class when you can’t be together is really hard. It’s hard being isolated during these times; I was the one who gave the news to the class on a Zoom call. I couldn’t really even hug his sister, which is all I wanted to do. (Sarah)

The sense of powerlessness felt in attempts to reach each other in the midst of arguable the greatest global humanitarian crisis was staggering for Sarah, perhaps for all teachers. Be it the passing of a child, or of the demise of deeply connecting with students, these teachers experienced death, an abyss, in their own ways.

The Learning Pit

In the absence of connecting in old ways, by old rules, teachers came to reimagine new rules of connections. As the teachers began to ascend from their abyss, they found technology could be their means to reach students in new ways. However reluctant they were, technology appeared to be there, waiting for their embrace. Nick from Ireland noted with hesitancy, “It’s there. It’s a necessity. We have to live with it and learn to use it properly” (Nick). In that hesitancy, teachers may have found themselves not so unlike their own students. Marlene explained,

We have this expression in Holland called the ‘learning pit.’ We say we don’t want to go to the learning pit. We say all the children don’t want to get into the learning pit, they want to just hop over it to get to the other side! Well, me too now! I don’t want to go to the pit! I want to just hop over it too! (Marlene)

Teachers have been asking their students to engage in this very courageous act of diving into “the learning pit” for the as long as this profession has existed.

As it turned out, COVID-19 swept teachers right into this tumultuous pit of learning, willing or not. Shannon reflected on the force of this tide:

I think COVID-19 forced everybody, everybody, regardless how willing people were to engage or not - nobody was left with a choice here. You just had to. You just had to get on board with technology here. Nothing could have happened that would have moved education and everything else in the world, on so quickly. It wouldn’t

matter how many in-services you get as a teacher. You were never going to move everybody to this digital platform. Every single teacher in your school, every single teacher in your district. It was never going to happen. But this – COVID-19 - forced it to happen. (Shannon)

Enthusiastic travelers, or not, learning, and even embracing, this new platform in order to reach their students occurred.

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). Nathan explained the experienced in the small and resource poor country of Belize, “Those types of virtual meetings weren’t something we would have had in Belize at all! At all! It was something we heard about, but we were certainly not using. *Yet.*” (Nathan). Nathan continued to describe his and his colleagues’ journey:

It made us be independent learners, because we had to research how to send this, or screen cast that, or how to record, or how to create things from nothing. We used our cell phones - our little cameras. We did as much as we could with those little devices we had. (Nathan)

Teachers immersed themselves in the pit of learning and began to find new ways to connect.

As teachers began to find new ways of connecting, teaching, and practicing this ancient art of teaching, their own transformation was becoming visible to themselves. Marlene noted, “I am better with technology now, I am better at skills,” and then she chuckled as she continued, “but my confidence isn’t! When I look at my feelings, it’s still the same - I am *still* uncomfortable, *still* not confident, I *still* have fear. Yet, when I actually do it, I find I CAN!”. Marlene concluded, “Yes, technology is more effective than I thought it could be... when everything works, yes. I can do more with it than I ever thought” (Marlene). It was in this way, teachers experienced transcendence from previous ways of connecting with their students.

Enhanced us of Technology

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. They found new resources available to them.

Still, even as teachers returned to their classrooms with an enhanced ability to use technology, some also expressed that this new gift came at too high of a price. Nick spit out his comments with a sense of disgust from his home in Ireland.

No, no, no...no gifts from COVID-19!! OK. It’s painful. No gifts. Never. Never! If somebody has a good idea, whether it’s a website, a google form, you don’t need COVID-19. If a teacher is not willing to be the student, willing to learn new things, they are in the wrong job. We should be getting new ideas from each other, but we don’t need COVID-19 to learn new things. (Nick)

Lydia reflected in Denver, “Sure, I have learned a lot – but at the expense of my students’ learning” (Lydia). To be sure, the new capacities with technology that teachers gained came at a steep price.

Nick sighed, and also had to admit, “Yes. We have taken this opportunity to be learners with technology. We will bring that forward and take it on board.” (Nick, March 29, 2021). 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.

I am thinking of a particular student of mine. 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. With these messages she tells me more than she could in classroom before lockdown. She is now sending me things all the time. So, for her, it is easier to talk to me like this than in the face-to-face classroom setting. That was something I could have never *never* have imagined! (Marlene)

These new skills, this comfort, and yes, the messy everyday use of technology to reach students would never be taken away.

As the teachers’ skills in technology blossomed, so did the availability of new resources. Just as teachers’ fingertips were flying more nimbly across their devices with more confidence and ease, Shannon declared, “the number of resources that have been developed in the past year - that will remain on-line forever. It’s incredible!” (Shannon). She explained in more detail:

For instance, we speak Irish to our children. When I have gone online there has been a billion resources in English – English books being read aloud, English games - you know, English everything. Irish language, obviously being a minority language, didn’t have the same number of resources, never will. But Irish was *way way way* behind. So, for parents who had wanted to engage with resources online for their kids speaking Irish, there was a very

limited number available. Over the last year, the organizations who normally organized physical activities for people couldn't. So, instead they pumped their time and money into developing online resources. Now there are huge numbers of games and beautiful Irish books being read now online. They'll be there forever. COVID-19 will go away, but those resources will all remain. (Shannon)

As technology changed teachers' practice, it changed other parts of their lives as well. Shannon noted, "I used to hate FaceTime and Skype – I used to hate the idea of that – but now we have a family get together every two weeks over zoom with my brother in America. That will continue." (Shannon). Instructional practice *and* lives were transforming.

Fellowship

Teachers' relationships with each other, with students, and with families were also shifting. Connections in each of these contexts had deepened.

Ellen reflected this 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). That same sense of closer connections with colleagues was explained across the ocean by Marlene in the Netherlands, "My school partner and I became a stronger team during this past year, much closer." Marlene continued, "Without my colleagues, I couldn't do what I did last year! I needed them a lot!!!" (Marlene). Teachers found they needed each other and grew together in order to simply breathe in this learning pit.

Teachers also became closer to families. Nathan explained, "COVID-19 made me build a relationship with the parents with of these children." He expanded on this shift in Belize.

In past years we saw the children, but we didn't know who the parents were. COVID-19 brought families together as well. It made us have a bond as a family in the class of Standard 6. Parents and students felt a little more comfortable in giving us a little call: "Sir, can you help us, sir I do not understand." Rather than just not doing the work, they felt more comfortable, so that made the student teacher bond grow a lot. (Nathan)

Lydia also considered her new insights into families living in Denver, "I will always remember what their houses look like. It was cool to see the bunk bed and the little brother. Maybe my students' home lives will be more real to me now" (Lydia). Connections with students and families had strengthened in various ways.

Empathy

As fellowship increased, so too, did empathy for the lives of students and families. Tracy from Colorado stated, "My empathy has evolved" (Tracy). Tracy's four words were echoed across the globe. Sarah shared her own shift within the urban setting of Philadelphia:

Prior to COVID-19, I would know in my head -maybe they were in a shelter last night, maybe they didn't sleep...but *now* I can hear what's going on. I heard a baby brother just scream the whole time...now I know what she lives with. I can mute them, but she can't. (Sarah,)

The capacity to empathize grew in each teacher.

Empathy and perhaps compassion, as well, were not only growing in teachers, but also in their communities. Sarah spoke to increased humanitarianism in Philadelphia:

With the pandemic people have become more aware. For instance, there is a local lower income housing place near me. They told me they had gotten many more donations during the pandemic. They felt people were more gracious, that they were more willing to give than before COVID" (Sarah).

Perhaps collectively, COVID-19 had brought a renewed sense of devotion to each other, to the transcendence of the human condition for all of us.

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.

One of the shifts teachers talked was in their ability to let some things go. Tracy from near Denver told me "I have learned to have some fluidity and flexibility and not be so rigid. I think COVID has made me realize that there is only so much I can control" (Tracy). Marlene described the tremendous courage that letting go had required in the Netherlands, "I think one gift from COVID-19 was that I learned to 'dare.' A teacher likes to keep all things in the hand. I had to dare to let some things go" (Marlene). Possibly the act of releasing control allowed these teachers to enter new places of being, affording greater freedom for reflection.

As teachers released a level of control, some found grace in taking a breath, slowing down, and reflecting on their practice. This, too, appeared to be a global phenomenon. Susan told us from the plains of Colorado, "I have slowed down. By slowing down and listening, my practice has changed" (Susan). Victor, in Malaysia echoed Susan'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. There are things I myself was practicing that might not have been the best" (Victor). Sarah gave us an example of how the opportunity to slow down was transformative in her practice in Philadelphia.

In the past in my classroom - I had been so focused on this well-oiled machine of these groups - you know this group is with me, this group moves here, that group moves there, and we can't interrupt this magical running machine - and if you don't keep that up, you think you're going to mess up your entire flow. Whereas during online teaching, I take breaks when I see we need one. I want to continue to be deliberate about giving my kids breaks when COVID is gone, because my kids DO need those breaks. You can have a kid right on the breaking point, and if you offer them a dance break, maybe they won't have a meltdown, maybe they'll have a better day. So, yes, I will be more deliberate about breaks. (Sarah)

On the other hand, Lydia in Denver questioned whether her new disposition of flexibility benefitted her students.

I'm not sure yet how COVID has helped me. I'm not sure. Yes, I've become more flexible. I'm not sure that's better for my kids. I'm not sure losing focus and a sense of urgency to teach my kids how to read has benefited them. (Lydia)

For better or worse, teachers might have found that new space of flexibility afforded the opportunity for reflection, for new ways of practice and of being.

As COVID-19 provided the crucible for transformation, teachers told me they were becoming more of who they had always been destined to be. 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). Victor continued,

I have been observing myself. The pandemic has made me stronger in what I believe. I have become more pure in the way that I am. I felt closer to my real self - to my ideal self - during the pandemic. (Victor)

A newly constructed version of "self" appeared to be present.

The transformation in some senses came abruptly, as educators scrambled to reinvent their practice that third week of March 2020. Yet, in other ways the transformation was gradual and even unnoticeable as Victor explained,

This little virus was so tiny that it was invisible - you couldn't even see it. Yet, it was so strong that it pushed us to do things that huge powerful people could not make us do. But it did it *so* quietly. Maybe that's the meaning of transcendence. Maybe with transformation there is resistance. But with transcendence, it happens quietly, unnoticeably. Practice has so quietly changed in some very good ways. (Victor, personal communication)

Perhaps COVID-19 had been both a catalyst and a durable crucible for the transcendence of educators across the world.

As teachers look onward, to returning home to their own classrooms, they carried (and carry) gifts from their transcendence. They find themselves a master of more worlds now.

In Belize, it had been over a year since students and teachers have met in person. Ellen anticipated her first meeting and imagined herself crying out to her students, "I am here! I know we have been far from each other. But I am here now! Together we are going to make it even better than before! (Ellen).

Some teachers return with tremendous gratitude, as Lydia noted, "I am much more grateful to be in the classroom now. I hope I keep that" (Lydia). Beyond gratitude, Lydia also deepened her commitment to advocacy, "It solidified my belief that education is a right. I see now that it can be taken away. It's made me a better advocate" (Lydia). Teachers not only gained a sense of gratitude, but a new sense of urgency.

Discussion

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 in the midst of COVID.

Purpose and Identity in Teaching

In considering each teacher's expression on the purpose and the identity found in teaching, Palmer's (2007) words echoed theirs as he noted when "face to face with my students, only one resource is at my command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this "I" who teaches" (p. 10). He continued to write that, "good teachers join self and subject and

students in the fabric of life” (p. 11). The identity of these teachers was rooted in the purpose they found in their lives. A large part of this was found in their capacity to facilitate transformation and even transcendence in their own students. Tisdell (2003) wrote that teachers “hope that their educational work is transformative in some way” (p. 187). This echoed Susan’s comment in my findings, that her purpose was to take her students “from wherever they are to a higher level.” Huebner (as cited in Hillis, 1999) further explained that transformation “is what education is about” (p. 345). Both the identity and the purpose of a teacher is deeply embedded in the business of transformation.

The purpose and identity of teaching in this data also drew from a variety of perspectives of spirituality. From “walking with Christ,” to “I am not a religious person,” Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) claimed that regardless of the structure religion takes on in education, “it could be argued that spirituality is common to the act of teaching” (p. 45). The humanity of teaching and the yearning for transcendence appeared to be universal in my data. Perhaps the very process of education could be considered human. Hillis (1999) noted that “(e)ducation is only possible because the human being is a being that can transcend itself” (p.345). In this way to learn and to teach is to be human.

Disruption

The abrupt nature in which their classrooms were shut down and the shock that came with that experience was common to every teacher. The speed in which schools closed their doors across our entire planet left educators breathless. Within the period of a few weeks, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Education Organization (UNESCO) (2020) reported that 1.19 billion learners were out of school. The enormity of the school closures impacted the entire planet.

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 lockdown elicited a sense of fear in each of the teachers I interviewed. While the lockdown itself was disruptive, fear itself also impacted practice. Palmer (2007) reflected “As a teacher, I am at my worst when fear takes the lead in me” (p. 36). A deeply held fear of the unknown was a part of every teacher’s experience. Part of the disruption and the fear was rooted in the nature of teaching and learning, which are social processes. Wenger (2002) reminded us, “learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing” (p. 3) Freire (2005) also told us, “Knowing is social process” (p. 165). As such, teachers are natural connectors. It has always been the breath of the business.

With the unknowns, including the empty classrooms, the economic disruption, the uncertainty of the health, and even the threat of lives within their communities, more than ever, teachers felt the weight of their desire to connect. Hillis (1999) explained, “We can face the threat of the unknown ... if we are not alone; if we are in the presence of love which affirms life. (p. 363). Just as the enormity of the need to deeply connect with each other presented itself, it was denied. It inflicted a deep wound on teachers’ identities and ways being without an immediate salve.

While fear was initially paralyzing, the teachers soon found themselves figuring out ways to begin to work in this new territory. Huebner (as cited in Hillis, 1999) claimed, “Teachers must act in an imperfect world. To postpone action until the makers of knowledge and techniques establish the millennium is sheer irresponsibility. We have no choice but to risk ourselves” (p. 385). These teachers began to risk themselves and act in this imperfect world.

Teachers across the world began the transformational work of redefining connections to reach each other. Day (2018) noted that “Teachers’ capacity for resilience is associated both with individuals’ internally driven strength of purpose and relationships” (p. 67). Yes, their students were still there in the wreckage of COVID-19. It was up to teachers to find them.

Learning Pit

In this search, teachers entered the learning pit. The very nature of learning new skills put them in what Britzman (2009) described as a “helpless” position. As a psychoanalyst who writes about teacher identity, Britzman (2009) explained Marlose’s description of herself as the “baby,” when she wrote 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 “relieve the profound dependency of infancy” (p. 7). Day (2018) wrote that the “frustration, helplessness, stress offer key feedback for teachers upon which to reflect and react” (p. 57). She went on to explain that as teachers “reflect, analyze, and make sense of” these difficult experiences, “a new more for a cohesive teacher identity emerges” (p. 57). Wrestling with the reluctance to embrace new ways of teaching, learning, and being is not unique to COVID-19. Michalec (2020) from Denver University admitted that sometimes “rebuff and hesitancy are the first moves.” He continued to reflect how he had come to see his struggle to embrace online instruction “as a normal part of true learning relationships with content, learning platforms, students, and myself” (para 4). Michelic continued to wonder,

“Why have I fallen asleep to the potential of online classrooms to transform me as well as my students? Why do I so dearly and intentionally strive for mystery in face-to-face teaching, but somehow barred it from entry into my online instruction?”(para 5)

In this new urgency to leverage technology to reach learners, teachers may have also found kinship with Socrates more than two millennia ago. The concerns Socrates raised about transitioning from an oral culture to a literate one perhaps reflected today’s teachers’ reluctance to dive into this pit; this colossal transition to a more digital culture. Socrates

argued that literacy, compared to dialogue released knowledge without care, perhaps even irresponsibly. As Wolf (2007) put it, “reading presented Socrates with a new version of Pandora’s box: once written language was released, there could be no accounting for what would be written, who would read it, and how readers might interpret it” (p. 77). Wolf (2007) continued to explain that “Socrates knew well that literacy could greatly increase cultural memory by reducing the demands on individual memory, but he did not want the consequences of that trade” (p. 75). How we distribute our collective knowledge to each other has been examined and argued throughout our history. From Eve’s first bite into the fruit of knowledge, to the Greek’s obsession with the written language, to Gutenberg’s printing press, and now to Google, human beings have wrestled with the power of this ancient ability to teach, to learn, and ultimately to know. Wolf (2007) reminded us that, of course,

Socrates lost the fight against the spread of literacy both because he could not yet see the full capacities of written language and because there would be no turning back from these new forms of communication and knowledge. Socrates could no more prevent the spread of reading than we could prevent the adoption of increasingly sophisticated technologies. Our shared human quest for knowledge ensures that it must be. (pp. 77-78)

Like Socrates, teachers found this strange and unfamiliar form of connecting and sharing knowledge moving forward with or without them.

The collective experience of these teachers was evidence of their nature as human beings to transcend old practices and old versions of themselves. In other words, as Henry (2019) noted, “teachers are constantly involved in identity work; everything that a teacher does and knows is in some way implicated in the continual process of identity formation” (p. 279). As earlier established, the purpose of a teacher’s life call is to transform not just others, but themselves. Huebner (as cited in Hillis, 1999) also reminded us “that which we seem is not what we are, for we could always be other. Education is an openness to the future that is beyond all futures. Education is the protest against present forms that they may be reformed and transformed” (p. 360). In other words, teachers had “opened themselves to the future.” They were “protesting current forms” of instruction that could not serve them at this moment in our global history.

So, it was, teachers, alongside Michelie and Socrates, found themselves in the learning pit. They found the humility that Palmer (2007) referred to when he wrote that, “humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen” (p. 110). They became vulnerable and allowed parts of their deeply held assumptions to die, in order to become more.

New Gifts

As teachers reentered the space of their classrooms, they returned “home” bearing gifts. Educators across the globe returned with greater and more complex skills and resources in technology. They also deepened their sense of fellowship and empathy, and perhaps becoming more fully human.

The first apparent gift was the enhanced and more purposeful use of technology. Every teacher in the data set experienced not only an increased sense of competence with technology, but new resources that would benefit their practice and enhance instructional strategies. As they had already mastered connecting with students, they had now mastered technology as well. As Campbell (1949) may have claimed, these teachers had ascended from their abyss as “masters of two worlds.”

Possibly even more powerful, was in how teachers transcended old versions of themselves. Those interviewed experienced an enriched sense of fellowship as their connections with each other as educators deepened. Ellen’s comment in my findings, “We have held hands as educators. By joining forces, we made this a learning experience and have grown together” was reverberated by Rendon’s (2009) thoughts that what is sustaining for educators during great times of change is the knowledge we that “we are not alone, that many others are engaged in the struggle” (p. 148).

Not only did the teachers find deeper connections with each other, they also came to empathize with the lives their students and families in profound ways. They found themselves placed into the worlds of their students, as Lydia noted in my findings, “my students’ home lives will be more real to me.” Freire (2005) argued that building relationships of solidarity “requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity” (p. 43). As Tracy claimed, “My empathy has evolved,” she echoed the words of Whitman (1892/2010) over a century ago, “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I, myself, become the wounded person” (sec. 33). This ability to understand what other people feel and to see things from their point of view is, perhaps, the very thing that makes us human. This crown jewel of humanity, empathy, grew in each teacher, and possibly facilitated the transcendence of each teacher to become a more fully human version of themselves.

New versions of old selves, after all, is what education by its very nature offers. Huebner (as cited in Hillis, 1999) described education as an “invitation to remain open and vulnerable, and occasions to re-shape and re-compose the story of our life” (p. 382). I recalled Victor’s words in the findings: “I felt closer to my real self - to my ideal self” as I read Tisdell (2003) explain that the “act of transcending towards versions of who one is ultimately destined to be a spiritual act.” She continued that “spirituality is about moving toward this greatest sense of one’s deepest spirit or more authentic identity” (p. 33).

As Campbell (1949) would have predicted, teachers returned from the abyss transformed.

Ellen's claim in my findings, "Together we are going to make it *even better* than before" answered Tisdell's (2003) question to all of us, "Things are changing all the time. Can't we?" (p. 185). Teacher can change. Teachers did change.

Unforeseen Insights.

While I was clear the onset of COVID-19 was a global phenomenon, as was the universal lockdown of classrooms, the extent of commonalities between every one of these teachers' lived experiences still took me by surprise. I was intrigued that the reluctance to embrace technology was as powerful in the jungle of Belize as it was in a city in the Netherlands. I was equally intrigued that the inability to see, to touch and to physically touch students brought teachers to their knees in the urban neighborhood of Philadelphia as surely as it did in the classrooms of Malaysia. Perhaps the most surprising finding to me was the universal and human ability to come out of teaching through COVID-19 transformed. The global nature of how COVID-19 served as a crucible to transform the identity and practice of teachers captured my imagination.

Scholars such as Campbell (1949) would have predicted that teachers would emerge from the abyss of the COVID-19 transformed. Nevertheless, hearing these teachers' stories in one ear, while noting the whispers of scholars in the other still took me by surprise. The solidarity and the common experience of teachers spread so far and wide will always take my breath away.

Recommendations

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. Even across cultural lines of difference, the findings imply teachers can and do transform identity and practice within the crucible of crisis. This is powerful. If teachers are able to continuously transform themselves, the possibility for effective and sustainable shifts in practice can be realized.

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-19, 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.

Limitations

As I wrote about the journeys of my colleagues teaching during the year of COVID-19 lockdown as a narrative, I was aware of the hidden pitfalls in the process of narrating their conversations with me about their experiences, and my own interpretations of their stories. I remain cognizant of Tuhiwai-Smith's (2012) insights about the fact that "academic writing privileges sets of texts, views about the history." She caused me to realize writing in this way "can be dangerous because we reinforce and maintain a style of discourse which is never innocent" (p. 37). In this writing, I strived to represent the voice of my colleagues to the best of my ability, knowing that this writing can only be from my own perspective. I am also clear that generalizability of any collective human experience is always partial.

In addition, as Reissman (2007) emphasized, simply by being present, I could not help but shape the dialogue and the stories about teaching during COVID-19 that these teachers choose to share (p. 50). My presence impacted the recollection of their experiences in untold and unique ways that I will never fully understand. Behar (1996) reminded me as an interviewer, I will never hear "an account identical with that which the same narrator would give to another person" (p. 6). What is said to me and what is heard will always be influenced simply by my presence.

Finally, my relationships, the individuals I interviewed, the time and space we inhabited together, and the interactions will always be unique to some extent; or in Heath's (1983) wise words, "every ethnography is a unique piece of social history" (p. 7). This piece must be considered a "unique piece" of understanding the lived experiences in this way.

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