

Journal of Educational Research and Innovation

Volume 10
Number 1 *Preparing Future Educators for
Diverse Roles and Contexts*

Article 4

2022

Rivers of Change: The Wisdom of the Rapids within Transcultural Teacher Education

Jean Kirshner
University of Northern Colorado

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri>



Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kirshner, Jean (2022) "Rivers of Change: The Wisdom of the Rapids within Transcultural Teacher Education," *Journal of Educational Research and Innovation*: Vol. 10: No. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri/vol10/iss1/4>

This Practitioner Stories: Voices from Near and Far is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Research and Innovation by an authorized editor of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact Jane.Monson@unco.edu.

Rivers of Change: The Wisdom of the Rapids within Transcultural Teacher Education

Jean Kirshner
University of Northern Colorado

Birth of a Dream



Before I ever entered a Belizean classroom in 2007, the sense of urgency for literacy instruction was already resonating within me. I had been a first-grade teacher for decades before I took on a trip with a medical mission to Belize. My initial intention was to support the medical team in whatever way a teacher could. However, a four-sentence email to a principal at a school near the hospital we were working with changed the course of my life. Cecelia (pseudonym), the principal, informed me that the students' reading levels in her building were in crisis. She asked me to help the teachers learn how to teach reading more effectively. I filled two, fifty-pound suitcases with pencils and books and filled my heart with a sense of hope and purpose

as I headed down to Belize with a medical team. I was the only teacher on an airplane with around thirty doctors and nurses.

Cecelia met me at the airport and took me to her home where we unpacked and stacked the pencils, crayons, pens, markers, and books. A life-long connection was born, and this cradle of our infant friendship was sturdy and warm.

As I entered the classrooms in Cecelia's school for the first time, I 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 my attention. Finally, the apparent challenge of reading competencies throughout the entire community was noticeable.

At the end of that first visit in 2007, as I got back onto the plane, the emptiness of the suitcases spread to my own state of being. I was not finished. Cecelia and I continued to talk and e-mail each other about instructional practice. I knew I had to invite her to my Colorado classroom. She left the tropics of Belize to join in me in Colorado that chilly January of 2008. Along with a photograph of her standing next to the thermometer reading 11 below zero, she also took pictures of my classroom, my reading groups, the school library, and

more. She came to know, and to fall in love with, my 7-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy and helped inspire my other young daughters who became teachers themselves. We were beginning to share our lives.

After Cecelia left my snowy classroom, I co-founded a non-profit organization we called, “*Belize Education Project*.” I began to gather teachers, principals, and professors from the United States to join me in conducting professional development on literacy education in Belize. In November 2008, with four teaching colleagues by my side, along with a nurse and a surgeon from the original medical group, we launched our first *Belize Education Project* education trip.

Truthfully, we were not successful in teaching Belizean students that day, or that week. Our attempt to break students into small groups for differentiated instruction, which worked in Colorado, resulted in chaos. The Belizean teachers watched us struggle with their students in disbelief. Each one of us teachers from the United States cried in frustration as we fell into our steamy beds with a sense of failure. And yet we were not finished. What was it that pulled us closer into the community instead of pushing us out? What was it that caused our Belizean colleagues to forgive our shortcomings and assumptions, and call us back into their circle, their space, their classrooms, and their lives? Perhaps it was raw vulnerability. I asked Cecelia this. She laughed, “I am no quitter! I saw good things coming. I saw there was hope. Alright, there was hope!” (Cecilia, personal communication [telephone interview], October 21, 2018). In addition, the word “solidarity” touched Cecelia, and brought tears to her eyes as she recalled our early conversations, “I liked the words you used.

‘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.” (Cecilia, personal communication, [telephone interview] October 21, 2018). With this small gift of trust, we were able to become something new.

On that thread of trust, we began. We packed more airplanes in the following years. We increased the scope of our work from one school to four schools. By 2014, over 50 educators from the United States had joined me in my travels to Belizean classrooms. Additionally, each year the *Belize Education Project* brought educators from Belize to Colorado who were greeted at Denver International Airport with Belizean and Colorado flags, sweatshirts, and promises to observe effective instructional strategies.



Barriers and Stagnation

As we formed new bonds, new connections, and understandings, we also wrestled with our differences. Cecelia’s focus on Walmart made sense on a certain

level. When she returned with white plastic Walmart bags of watches, blue jeans, and socks, I knew her community would benefit. Still, it frustrated and disappointed me too. I felt Walmart was at war with focus on instructional strategies. Spry's (2018) process of wrestling with her own privilege and how to continue to work resonated with my conflicting thoughts and emotions at that time. She described the struggle I was experiencing of my "white skin, its body-without-organs, its financial privilege" which was (and is) steeped within my own Walmart existence, my own land of excess and abundance. Spry (2018) reminded me 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, wrestled with what she was observing in our opulent classrooms. She recalled my 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" (Cecilia, personal communication, [telephone interview] October 21, 2018). Cecelia also noted the luxury of specials, such as music, art, and P. E., not to mention reading specialists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, special educators, school psychologists, and more. She reflected on how easy it would be to teach children with these extravagances. Indeed, how could we begin to compare our teaching practices with these enormous differences that seemed to be ignored?

By 2014 we had changed some surface-level instructional strategies and reconfigured some aspects of classroom environments. However, the work felt superficial and unsustainable. The

assessment kits we had brought sat in the corners of the rooms untouched, as did boxes of leveled reading books which remained in their plastic wrappers unopened. Few, if any, differentiated reading groups emerged out of this work. Despite seven years of working together, teachers from Belize and the United States still inhabited widely separate worlds with respect to thinking about the nature and functions of literacy, teaching dispositions, and instructional practices.

In the meantime, Cecelia wondered about my commitment to her and her school. Weeks before we were to leave for Belize, she Facebook messaged me:

I heard something that is very disturbing to me today. I was told you are taking your program away from our school as you are not getting the returns for your effort. You have never said that to me and you know my situation at my school. We try, but we can only do so much. (Cecilia, personal communication, [Facebook message], September 11, 2014)

This caused me to question whether I was acting as a committed ally in this work? Where was the sense of solidarity now? It was time for a shift. I needed direction.

It was at this time, we reconfigured the board of our non-profit organization, *Belize Education Project*. With new members came a greater sense of cultural competence. It was also around this time that I began to seek the guidance of outside sources, which led me to doctoral studies with Dr. George Kamberelis.

It was time to truly address the questions, Who was Cecelia? What had her journey been? Who were these women and men who held the potential of these young Belizean learners in the palms of their

hands? What had they been through to get to this sacred space of a classroom? I shifted my focus from changing instructional practice, to building a sense of solidarity, to more deeply connecting with each other as mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters, and sons, and yes, as imperfect, yet committed teachers.



Three Rivers of Change

Motivated by the desire to deepen my connections to my Belize colleagues, three potentially powerful forces of relationship-building and community engagement came into view—*dialogue*, sharing *life stories*, and sharing *lifeworlds*. I imagined these forces metaphorically as a confluence of three rivers. Each river came

from its own set of streams and springs, but once they flowed into each other, they became a single waterway with considerable transformative potential—troubling sedimented assumptions and ways of thinking, acting, and being.

First, inspired by Freire (1970/2015), I reflected on the transformative potential of ongoing *dialogue* between Belizean and American educators. Besides paying more attention to the nature and functions of dialogue in our work, I also conducted focus groups with Belizean educators when we were together both in Belize and in the United States. Next, I considered the transformative potential of sharing of *life stories*. I began collecting life stories from my Belizean colleagues in more intentional and formal ways. Finally, I noticed the transformative potential of sharing of our *lifeworlds*— living, breathing, and dwelling within each other’s communities, classrooms, and homes. In response to this realization, I paid more attention to how we inhabit each other’s lived spaces. These three rivers of change continuously collided and coalesced, creating muddy, messy, and unpredictable experiences that were nevertheless teeming with life and with new possibilities for thinking, acting, and being.

With this shift, we noticed our connections with each other had changed. Another principal, Noelly (pseudonym), expressed in a Facebook message to me, “As each year goes by, I see you becoming more connected to us. More determined to conquer this quest despite the barriers” (Noelly, personal communication [Facebook message], February 22, 2018). Teachers from the United States changed too. One member of *Belize Education Project* board expressed, “I used to struggle with my role, always feeling a huge case of the imposter

syndrome. At some point, I realized it wasn't about the topic, or the schedule, it was about igniting honest conversation" (anonymous teacher, personal communication [e-mail], May 10, 2018).

As our relationships shifted, so did our identities. The asymmetrical power relations that had characterized our relationships for so many years began to transform. Shared moments of our own successes, but more importantly, our failures began to trouble years of sedimented assumptions we held about each other's authority, ability, failings, and simple humanity. Perhaps, even more courageous than traveling to Belizean classrooms, was opening our *own* classrooms to our Belizean colleagues. It was when we allowed the Belizean teachers to witness the nitty gritty and messy everydayness of our own teaching, that Belizean teachers could witness our greatest shortcomings right along with our triumphs. This changed our relationships, and it changed our capacity for self-reflection about our own practices.

My colleagues from Belize and the United States began to develop a collective identity as comrades in struggle. Our sedimented roles—those from the United States as the givers of knowledge and our Belizean colleagues as the receivers—were shifting. Inhabiting these new relationships and roles, we also began to share our collective work with larger audiences in our profession. For example, two teachers from the Belize joined me in co-authoring a piece for *Education Leadership* (Kirshner, 2017) about our experience teaching each other's children and encouraging them to move from being "Pen-Pals to Global Citizens." Additionally, Cecelia worked with Dr. Kamberelis and me to write and present a paper on our work at the 2019 Congress of

Qualitative Inquiry (Kirshner, Kamberelis & Gabourel, 2019) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. In short, my Belizean colleagues were 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.

As our relationships deepened, and as we reconstructed our identities together, practices could not help but change. Especially salient were ideas and practices about (a) behavior management, (b) learning environments, (c) assessment and differentiated instruction, (d) student learning.

I noticed shifts in how teachers in Belize managed the unpredictable, independent, and especially non-compliant behavior of their young students. Teachers were using more jingles and chants to get their students' attention and other behavior management techniques such as relationship building through conversations, themselves.

Classroom environments shifted. Whole group instruction with students in rows of tablet armchair style desks began to morph into more creative spaces with carpet scraps, and even blankets for their students to sit on within the classroom. Tables had replaced armchairs in some classrooms.

Finally, my early hope that teachers could come to know their readers strengths and challenges so that they could differentiate instruction never left me. We witnessed the leveled books and tools for assessing wear off the shelves and had evidence of use. Students were in different groupings and engaged in Socratic debates. Now, in addition to taking back jeans and blouses from Colorado, teachers who

visited our schools in the United States also took back new tools for new forms of classroom practice. It should also be noted I also changed my beliefs and attitudes about shopping at Walmart. I came to understand and honor the importance to my Belizean colleagues of acquiring material goods to bring back to their community.

So many changed practices emerged simultaneously, it is hard to determine whether and how each of them affected others. As Lave and Wenger (1991) noted, “activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not come to me, nor exist, in isolation” (p. 53). However, transformations flowed within and around us

Noelly told us that Ministry of Education supervisors were noticing differences, “When external supervisors visit, they are amazed at the reading and writing” (Noelly, personal communication, [Facebook message]). Standardized scores increased. A teacher enthusiastically messaged me on Facebook, “Maybe you know already about our results for the national exams! My students and Richard’s class did well. Ministry of education can no longer say that they don’t see the BEP effect in the classrooms. You are an inspiration for me” (personal communication [Facebook message], June 12, 2018). While standardized test scores are only partial indicators of student learning and thinking, it is possible for tests to also give educators some sense of teaching effectiveness.

We were beginning to feel like our work was aligned with our original quest, which was to help teachers help students become better at reading comprehension and more critical consumers of the texts they read.



Summary

In and through the deliberate shift to more dialogic ways of working together, along with sharing life stories and lifeworlds, our relationships had deepened. That deepening had catalyzed changes in our identities and practices. I had come to understand the lives and the communities of my Belizean colleagues better, and they had come to understand mine better. As these new understandings allowed our relationships to change, we were able to engage in professional development in new ways. Our new, co-constructed identities offered pragmatic teeth in our professional development work that we had not experienced before abandoning resources and strategies focus for relationship building and co-constructing what we were doing together.

In the end, we have all come to better understand and better live out Freire’s (2005) claim, “It impossible to teach without the courage to love” (p. 5). In our courage to truly know and connect with each other as committed allies, we have also come to more profoundly love our call to teach and to *collectively* better educate the future stewards of our shared worlds.

Jean Kirshner, PhD., is an Assistant Professor for the School of Teacher Education College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639. She can be contacted at jean.kirshner@unco.edu.

References

- Belize Education Project. Retrieved September 16, 2022, from <https://www.belizeeducationproject.org/>
- Freire, P. (1970/2015). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Teachers as cultural workers*. Cambridge, MA: Westview Press.
- Kirshner, J., Kamberelis, G., Gabourel, T. (2019, May). "Take me to the river:" *Mapping global flows from crayons to connections*. Paper presented at 15th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Urbana, IL.
- Kirshner, J., Tzib, E, Tzib, Z., & Fry, S. (2017). From Pen Pals to Global Citizens. *Education Leadership*, 74 (4), 73-73
- Lave, J., Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Spry, T. (2017). Autoethnography and the other performative embodiment and a bid for utopia. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds), *Sage handbook of qualitative research (5th Ed.)* (pp. 627-649). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.