

## **“You gave us a lens to look through”: Teacher transformation and long-term impact of action research**

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The focus of this paper is to shed some light on three Indian English language teachers' transformational experiences, following their participation in an action research project, and investigate how these teachers' project experience continued to impact their classroom practices more than two years after the actual project came to an end. The main themes in the teachers' narratives are related to the core values of freedom, choice, no hierarchy, collaborative learning, individual attention to learners and the unexpected/surprising joys of taking the children seriously as partners in teaching and learning. The unique iterative methodology, which invited the teachers to carefully craft their stories over multiple cycles of reflection, shed light on the nature of their transformations and also helped them to articulate and identify with their new professional identities. The findings of this study are directly relevant to teacher education contexts around the world where deep reflection on one's experiences is desirable and feasible.

### **Introduction**

Dikilitaş and Yaylı (2018) proposed that when teachers have the opportunity to problematise pedagogical issues in action research, such opportunities can create a sense of transformation in their roles and their professional identity (p. 416), yet little research to date has targeted the exact nature of such teacher transformations. The focus of this paper is to shed some light on three Indian English language teachers' transformational experiences, following their participation in an action research project, and investigate how their project experience continued to impact their classroom practices more than two years after the completion of the project.

In order to understand teachers' transformational experiences, Johnson and Golombek (2011) recommended the use of narratives as these facilitate the process of externalising thinking, i.e., making thoughts and beliefs explicit while creating cohesion from disconnected ideas. Inspired by this potential, the data for this paper comes from an in-depth open interview in which the three teachers were invited to reflect on their experiences in the project by sharing their stories of transformation.

### **Background: the BC classroom action research project**

The action research project that the three teachers participated in was a British Council (BC) English Language Teaching Research Partnerships project (Pinter, Mathew & Smith, 2016), which involved 25 teachers and approximately 800 children from different elementary and lower secondary schools across India during January 2015 to December 2016. The teachers were volunteers recruited with the help of the local academic colleague's extensive professional network. The main purpose was to explore whether it was feasible for teachers of English, working with children in ordinary classrooms, to

engage together as partners or co-researchers in classroom action research, following key principles adopted from the *New Childhood Studies* approach (Kehily, 2009; Kellett, 2010; James & Prout, 2015). Working with children as partners in research promotes a perspective which positions children as capable, responsible, and as 'experts' of their own experiences. Such an approach to working with children and consulting them about important matters of teaching and learning is in line with the rights-based approach as prescribed by the key articles of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, 1989). While most educators and child researchers broadly agree with these principles, practical implementations of rights-based or voice-based approaches with children in school contexts have been lacking, and even where promoted at all, implementation has only been possible at tokenistic levels (although, for example, see Lundy & Cook Slater, 2015; Quinn & Owen, 2016).

Ethical calls to engage children more actively in research have been getting stronger and louder over the decades since the publication and ratification of the UNCRC, but studies in English language teaching or second language education are rare (Pinter, 2014), and those that exist focus on small groups of children, often outside of classrooms, such as in after-school clubs or community centres. Some inspiring examples come from multilingual classrooms (e.g., Andrews, 2021; Prasad, 2013; 2015) and from *Exploratory Practice* (EP) projects around the world (Allwright, 2005; Hanks, 2019) with a handful of publications focusing on younger learners as partners (Miller et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2015; Gunn, 2003; Al Falasi, 2009). These inclusive perspectives assume that teachers' classroom investigations are not '*on*' children but '*with*' children, meaning that children play active roles as contributors or partners in research (Kellett, 2005; 2010; Thomas, 2017; Bucknall, 2012). The BC project aimed to extend this approach to explore the potential of working with large numbers of children in a longitudinal project, with co-researching firmly embedded in ordinary English classrooms.

In the BC project, accordingly, teachers and children experimented with ways of working together, which meant that the children were given the opportunity to take active roles in choosing content, designing learning tasks and, most importantly, researching the impact of their jointly negotiated classroom activities (see more details in Pinter & Mathew 2016; Pinter et al., 2016; and Mathew & Pinter, 2017). For example, in one classroom the teacher and the children decided to work with a large box of authentic story books. The children were all encouraged to choose a book to read but were allowed to put books back if they did not like them. This meant that all children quickly settled down to read something that was right for their individual level of English proficiency and for their interest, with the consequence that they all were fully engaged and motivated to read. Having enjoyed reading a good book in English prompted some children to want to share their stories in class with more and more children joining in. As a last step, after several weeks of working in this way, the children designed a survey tool to be completed by everyone to get an understanding of the impact of the story book project. The results of the survey were analysed and presented by the children in a school assembly.

The backbone of the BC ELTRP project consisted of a series of three face-to-face workshops (February and September 2015, and February 2016) facilitated jointly by two

academics (one from the UK and one from India) and attended by 25 teachers, including the three teachers in this article. In between workshops the whole team kept in touch using social media. The first workshop was devoted to exploring the concept of 'researching with' children and discussing possible ideas for initiating joint action research projects with children. The second workshop, several months later, was organised around teachers' initial experiences of working with children as partners in their classrooms. Success stories as well as challenges were shared and discussed in the team. Following the first workshop, armed with new ideas and inspired by their colleagues' examples, as well as ideas from reading some literature in this area, all teachers returned to their classrooms to continue with a new cycle of their projects. Finally, several months later again, the last workshop was devoted to reporting outcomes of the second cycle and evaluating the BC project as a whole.

## **Teacher identity transformation and narratives**

Teacher development programs or action research projects with longitudinal designs that allow for reflection, sharing and communication (Lamb, 1995; Wedell, 2009) are more effective than one-off 'bootcamp style' interventions. This is because 'creating a mediational space for teachers to engage in self-reflexive or collaborative activities' will strengthen their teacher agency (Cong-Lem, 2021, p. 729) which in turn will promote professional development. Opportunities to engage and reflect on the promoted pedagogy (here researching with children) are important to have meaningful impact (e.g. Tomlinson, 1988; Waters, 2006). It is well-documented in the literature that changes in attitudes and beliefs which lead to the formation of new identities are crucial in bringing about lasting change in classroom practice (Kagan, 1992). Borg (2011, p. 378) argued that as a result of participating in a project, teachers' beliefs can be strengthened and extended, they can be made more apparent to them by assuming a form that can be verbalised. Teachers can learn how to put their beliefs in practice by developing links between their beliefs and theory. Yet, empirical studies documenting these transformations are rare, especially with experienced teachers. Burns (2017) suggested that very few studies have to date investigated how action research projects actually impact teacher development and teacher identities, adding that almost no research exists on how any impact of action research is sustained, if at all.

Narratives about one's experiences are excellent vehicles to make sense of changes or developments, and telling a story is in fact doing identity. Incorporating narratives as a reflection tool into teacher education is well-established (Farrell, 2013; Phillion 2005; Ates, Kim & Grigsby, 2015; Barkhuizen 2017). Teaching is the embodiment of one's knowledge, skills, beliefs and practices as these are moulded together (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 70), and as Benson (2017) added, teacher identity is the ongoing outcome of stories we tell about ourselves (p. 19).

Teachers constantly negotiate and re-negotiate their identities and their stories (Clandinin et al., 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Huber & Clandinin, 2005; Huber et al., 2011). Telling stories also evokes emotions and has the ability of foster empathy (Phillion, 2005).

Identity construction is a dynamic and reflective integration of personal and professional experiences and teachers' reflections upon their experiences and they 'influence feelings of belonging to particular intersecting communities of practice' (Woolhouse 2012, p. 749). Akkerman and Meijer (2011, p. 318) discussed multiple I-positions that teachers juggle in such a way that a more or less coherent and consistent sense of self is maintained. Reflective conversations can lead to new ways of making sense of one's practice and such reflection can help teachers to explore the tacitness of their understanding of what they do. Shared experiences facilitate the de-construction of experiences and re-building shared meanings (Crow & Smith, 2005).

Collaborative narrative inquiry facilitates the expression of multiple voices:

As the reflection becomes more public, it becomes collaborative, where groups of individuals pose questions that move beyond the self. There is a move towards understanding the actions of others and how the self is constructed in relation to the social context. Communal reflection then situates the self in relation to broader society and issues such as social justice. (Barkhuizen & Hacker, 2009, p. 75).

The effectiveness of reflective conversations can vary and it always hinges on high levels of trust. Individuals with varying levels of experience can make the process rich in content. Crow & Smith (2005) suggested that a common subject matter during reflective conversations leads to a shared commitment and understanding of this subject. Reflective conversations require open-mindedness (Dewey 1933; Zeichner & Liston, 1996) and it is important that all members of the group hear and respect different views. Reflective practice, as it is conducive to constructing, re-constructing and co-constructing new knowledge, insights and understandings, may lead to the emergence of new identities. Barkhuizen (2011) referred to this 'multistage, active meaning making as narrative knowledging.' (p. 393).

## **Methodology**

This study uniquely combines features from narrative research and interpretive phenomenology as defined by Smith et al. (2009) and discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018). In terms of the focus on the phenomenon from the start (i.e. teacher transformation), the goal was to describe and understand the 'essence' of the phenomenon. Interpretive phenomenology involves a double hermeneutic in that it integrates not only the participants' sense of their life experiences but also the researcher's attempt to understand how the participants make sense of their personal and professional experiences relating to the phenomenon. This phenomenological approach has been further enriched by including features of a collaborative narrative research methodology, i.e. putting the emphasis on the teachers' individual and shared stories told in a specific place and time, focusing on the turning points as identified in their chronology (past-present and projecting to the future).

### **The iterative process of reflection**

The author, together with the academic colleague from India initiated an in-depth, open interview with the three focal teachers in February 2018. The interview was an opportunity to take stock and investigate the long-term impact of the teachers' experiences in the project and after the project. Prior to this opportunity, all three teachers had already mentioned the 'transformative impact' of the project on their development, their classrooms, and their own professional identities, but only in passing (Pinter et al., 2016; Pinter & Mathew, 2017; Mathew & Pinter 2021), so this was seen an opportunity to document and understand the very nature of their transformation and identity change and the impact of the project in terms of sustained pedagogical practices, two years after the final workshop of the project.

The two academic facilitators initiated the conversation and asked most of the questions, but these were handled in a fluid manner where one association led to another, with all five of us asking questions, making comments and adding points of relevance. While the resulting data is about the three teachers' experiences, the two academic facilitators have also self-disclosed some of their own stories, creating a non-hierarchical, horizontal conversation. As Gao et al. (2002) suggested, open interviews, which are similar to conversations, "provide ample freedom for the informants to narrate their stories, explore events and themes that they deem critical or important for self-identity development" (p.98).

The conversational data was then transcribed, and the transcript was used as a mediational tool to deepen the teachers' reflection and give them an opportunity to closely examine what was said. All five of us (two academic facilitators and the three teachers) took turns reading through the written transcript, adding questions, comments and corrections to the text. Occasionally we reworded and reframed parts of our own text and clarified ideas or elaborated on our original contributions. We also prompted each other with further requests for detail until the original transcript grew into a larger text. As Paley (1997) suggested, committing your own stories to writing and taking a step back from them is one of the best ways to listen to yourself and to others. Having engaged with the ideas in the written mode this way added further distance from the experience and facilitated deeper levels of reflection. The hybrid 'account' of the transcript (original spoken text with written additions) was circulated within our group three times, until we each felt satisfied that nothing more needed adding or altering.

This iterative, summative process of externalising and clarifying our own thoughts to ourselves and to each other and laying bare the personal narratives of the three teachers' transformation enabled a reflective process where every example, every episode and even every word and phrase was carefully considered and crafted with deliberate precision.

### **The three focal teachers and the children**

The three teachers (T1, T2 and T3) are accomplished, experienced English teachers working in the Indian primary sector in the capital city. They represent a unique group

since research tends to target early career teachers' or pre-service teachers' professional development (Ruohotie-Lythy, 2019).

Table 1: Teacher participants

Teachers	Experience	Qualification	School
T1 (female)	14 years	BEd and MEd	State school
T2 (female)	37 years	BA in primary teaching	State school
T3 (female)	12 years	BEd and MEd	Private school

Two of the schools (T1's and T2's schools) are state schools with mostly 'first generation learners' while T3's school is a private school, which follows English medium instruction (EMI), meaning that the children are learning their subjects through English. They also come from a better SES background compared to the other two schools. For many children whose first language (L1) is Hindi, or a language quite closely related to Hindi, like for example Haryanvi, Bhojpuri or Maithili, English is their second language (L2). For others, who may have Punjabi, Bangla, Oriya or any of the South Indian languages as their L1, English will be their third language (L3), because they also have to learn Hindi, the medium of instruction in Delhi state schools. In summary, all three schools are characterised by a large variety of linguistic backgrounds.

### The research questions

1. How is transformative change conceptualised and verbalised from the teachers' point of view?
2. What is the sustained/ long term effect of the action research project on teachers' classrooms?

### Approach to data analysis

All five of us read and re-read the data several times to familiarise ourselves with it. As a first step, we all contributed to initial open coding and identifying categories and themes in the data with the broad research questions in mind. First this initial analysis was undertaken individually and then collectively, comparing codes and themes that overlapped across all participants. Polkinghorne (1995, p. 15) suggested that in the case of multiple informants the "strength of paradigmatic procedure is the capacity to develop general knowledge about a collection of stories", i.e. notice what is common across the three teachers' stories. This process, albeit messy and laborious, goes some way to ensure that the final representation of the outcome is not seen through the lens of the author of this paper alone, but instead is in part at least a reflection of joint interpretation. In this sense the study was 'participatory' (e.g. Stapleton 2021; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) in a limited way at least, by inviting the three teachers as joint data interpreters, not just data sources.

## Findings

### How transformation is conceptualised and narrated

The three teachers described their transformative experiences in very similar terms and consistently aligned with each other, not just in terms of the key points they made, but also in terms of the discourse structure of their stories, which consisted of a chain of loosely connected mini-narratives, all embedded within their macro-narrative (a sum of mini-narratives within the interview data).

A typical mini-narrative was found to juxtapose past and present (*used to – but now*) in a classic problem-solution text, often with a turning point to indicate how a realisation suddenly occurred. Here, in this example, T1 emphasises the idea of letting go of control and gaining an identity as a teacher-learner by pointing out the contrast between what she used to do and think and what she does and thinks now:

I used to think that I am responsible for everything which was a kind of burden. But now, I have realised that being a teacher I can teach more effectively if I can involve students' choices and voices in the classroom. They had become comfortable to share their choices as they decided a theme which they want to work on <...>. Now I am relaxed and students are ready to learn, and they are responsible for each of those learning tasks.

All three teachers started their stories with a description of their teaching lives prior to the project. T1 said that before the project she felt stagnated:

I was feeling stagnated, kind of disappointed, there was no progress in my life so I thought let's go for this meeting. < .....>. I thought let's try this in my classroom and I shared it with my students and I said, OK, can we try a new thing, I shared with them that we could start a new project as co-researchers.

T2's initial metaphor aligns perfectly with T1's as she starts her story by saying '*Previously I was in a suffocating environment...*' Interestingly both of them nonetheless also indicate that in fact in many ways they were doing a good job as teachers. T2 says: '*initially < before the project> what I was doing was planning activities, very good activities, but I did not realise that I was 75 percent in control of everything*'.

There was a sense that their practice was lacking in something. T3 states here: '*I was quite active..... and I used to talk to the other teachers.....*' and yet 'something was missing'. These initial static, stale states of being are then sharply and emphatically contrasted with what happened during the project and as a result of the project. T1 began to notice that planning together with the children made a huge difference:

It worked. I was able to see that each and every student was concentrating, listening and they were actively involved. Then I realised that it can work. I could not only find positive elevation in students but for me too it was an experience which helped me grow professionally and personally.

For T2, the sudden realisation that she should just let the children take more control made all the difference. She refers to becoming 'broadminded':

Then when this topic came children as co-researchers, then it made me a little broadminded about getting their feedback, asking about the lessons, talking about the lessons, endings, only then I began to think that the children could come up with the endings of the lessons they can choose their own way of learning, they can help me teach them better.

For T3, even though before the project she considered herself active, well-prepared and generally a good teacher, she was not focusing on her students as individuals. This gets contrasted with *'but now I really focus on individuals, each child is a human being, so that kind of voice that I am able to see in children is there'*.

### **No hierarchy and freedom**

One of the most striking shared themes in the data is the recognition of parallels between what the teachers experienced in the project through the three workshops and their own classrooms, where they explicitly implemented some of the core values they identified and 'borrowed' from the workshops. The most often mentioned core value was no-hierarchy and the associated freedom and building a 'bond' in our workshops. T1 comments on this:

The way both of you [academic facilitators] used to meet us created a very open environment and a comfort zone. I could see the impact of no hierarchy in our relationship as our relationship has created a platform for open and regular communication. <.....> Our group was very diverse as teachers were from different parts of India and all were from different types of schools. It was very multilingual and multicultural but together by exploring this project we created a strong bond. The same happened in my class, my students were first generation learners, they were from slums of Delhi and they were multilingual. But over a period of time by working together without any hierarchy all our gaps were filled and we were able to develop a strong bonding between us.

No hierarchy was equated with 'giving people freedom' and 'opening up discussions' in a way that all responses in our discussions were appreciated. T3 describes how this core value permeated both our project group and her own classrooms:

With feeling free and making choices for myself really made me confident with the children and in turn let them make choices in class. And this attitude became my personality to the extent that this was not only in English classes but otherwise also. I could see myself offering choices in other classes, in circle time and in other grades.

T2 makes a similar link between how experiences in the workshops were mirrored in her classroom:

... it [the project] did not give us freedom consciously but naturally, but in our classrooms we gave freedom consciously because we were experiencing it.



At the time of our open interview/ conversation, all three of the teachers were working as new mentors in local Indian British Council projects, so it was natural for them to draw further parallels between our project, their own classrooms and their new roles as mentors. T2 makes the following link:

I do not remember a single instance where I gave any of my ideas to my mentees. Instead I just provided them with a boat to sail on. The rest of the journey was theirs and I saw the results to be excellent.

### **New roles as teacher-learners**

All three teachers discussed extensively in concrete terms how their own classrooms changed. First of all, with regard to their teacher identity, T1 refers to her new role as that of a teacher-learner rather than a traditional teacher:

My role as teacher was changed as it was just teaching but now I was learning and exploring new things with my students. I think I was the one of first ones who started this project in my class and even till today my students are doing this project. I got freedom which helped me to take this learning lifelong. My <experience> has been elevated from professional dissatisfaction to professional satisfaction and joyful teaching-learning experiences.

T2 also mentioned her teacher role being ‘turned upside down?’

All of a sudden it dawns on you that they can do it by themselves. I need to just guide them and they are the best teachers for me. <..> The teacher of my students (in their new school) came up to me and said: Your students give me ideas, they want to be my teachers, so when the children go to another school they carry on with this. So, I can say that learning has passed on to the other teachers in other schools through my children. Wow, what amazing learning!

As teacher-learners, the teachers also talk about the importance of both giving and receiving feedback in a more balanced way in their classrooms. T1 says:

I have realised that feedback is very important for learners and teachers. I have seen the positive impact of giving feedback to each other in my classroom.

T2 also mentions the importance of feedback, especially in terms of listening to the children’s feedback and taking it seriously:

Giving feedback is the heart of learning but I have started taking feedback from the children and realised that it was a great thing.

T3 underlines the importance of children’s feedback by focusing on the idea of listening to children. She says that before the project she did not ‘hear’ individual children but now she does, and this change is impacting on her personal life, well beyond the classroom and the workplace:

... but now I really focus on individuals .... It penetrated into my pedagogy, slowly and deeply. My attitude towards others has also changed. I have more acceptability to people. I understand if my colleague is saying something. I listen to it and accept it. This is even impacting on her personal life: Even when I am getting married I will listen to the voice of my partner because males are not so good at this < laughter>.

### **Unexpected change in learners**

There is a strong sense in which the teachers initially under-estimated what the children could and would be willing to do, and they were all surprised to see how organised and responsible the children could act and how naturally they took to new ways of working in the project. T1 commented on the unexpected achievements of her young students:

I was amazed to hear from my school officers that they (the children) put up a puppet show with confidence and in an organised way without the help of any teacher when I was away at the conference.

T3 makes a similar point: *'I was amazed to read the children's comments when I first asked for feedback and ideas in writing.'* T2 mentions the power of collaborative learning and how it was surprising to see the children share their work:

I was surprised when children were sharing their work with one another. Their learning was going on without effort in collaboration with peers. I noticed many children were sharing their work with others, how they did it, what they did, the outcomes.

T1 also highlights how collaborative learning changed her classrooms and impacted her learners even after they moved up a grade. She explains that her students:

... had become responsible for their learning, and whenever they do not understand with the new teacher, they just sit together and collaboratively try to understand it ... By and large I think working collaboratively is magical. Working collaboratively with the learners ... also helped to build bond, comfort and trust between us. Basically it helped to develop a community of learning and sharing. It helped me to become more sensitive to my students' needs.

### **Fragile teacher-researcher identities**

One challenge and concern was that even though the British Council project created a learning community for the participants that all benefited from, individual teachers were rather isolated in their own schools. Even though officially school principals had all agreed to support the project initially, actual support over the period of the project waxed and waned, and in some cases disappeared completely. In schools where teachers who undertake action research projects lack colleagues' and the managements' full support, positive experiences can easily be damaged, indicating the teacher-researcher identities can be fragile.

Out of the three teachers, T1 had the smoothest journey in her school as colleagues appreciated her achievements. Some teachers in her school invited her to take circle time

in their classes in an attempt to learn from her. T1 won prizes and continues to mentor her colleagues and other teachers both formally and informally. She proudly commented: *'When my director of education acknowledged my efforts I felt confident to move forward'*. T3's principal was originally fully supportive of the project and her role as a teacher-researcher, but over the course of the project the situation changed and she lost the school's full support. She noticed that the school was using her ideas without acknowledging her input and this shook her confidence in her work colleagues and her school authorities. Towards the end of the project she felt the learning community of the project was her only source of support.

In T2's case the project helped her to establish herself as a confident teacher-researcher and this slowly changed her originally 'difficult' situation in her own school. As the project unfolded she felt more and more confident and she noticed that others in her school were looking more favourably at her ideas. *'I think because they have seen me doing it, they are adapting it; it is good.'*

## Discussion

### The transformative change

All three teachers summarised the essence of their transformation in a series of mini narratives that contrasted past and present practices (pre-project and after). Lakoff & Johnson (2003, p. 233) commented that it is in a problem-solving process that we build 'new coherences' which can also 'give new meanings to old experiences'. The three teachers' previous identities as hardworking, committed professionals were gradually re-evaluated as they looked back on themselves. Burns (2017) similarly reported that teacher-researchers who engage with research for the first time described themselves pre-research as bored or stale. T2 herself comments like this: *'a teacher who questions herself and questions the system would be one to join you in a project like this.'* One potential reason why these teachers' stories are so overwhelmingly positive could be rooted in the timeliness of the project and their readiness to explore and embrace change.

The main themes which were discovered in the narratives are related to the core values of freedom, choice, no hierarchy, collaborative learning, individual attention to learners and the unexpected and surprising joys of taking the children seriously as partners in teaching and learning. The three teachers' stories were closely aligned with one another, confirming and re-affirming the key principles they declare to live by. McNiff (2007:318) said that 'by telling their stories, practitioners can show how their action has an immanent relation to truth by articulating explicitly how they give meaning to their lives in terms of what they consider valuable or good'.

### The method: delayed focused reflections

The account (a mixture of oral and written text of our transcript) of the open interview, which was revised over and over again in writing, and was used as a tool to help the teachers crystallise the main components of their transformation was an unusual, artificial

product, and very much a product of a specific time and place, one that perhaps invited the teachers to somewhat exaggerate their transformative experiences because they may have perceived the conversation as a cathartic conclusion to the whole project, i.e., the final time we had the opportunity to talk together and 'enjoy' these success stories. Nonetheless the delayed, focused reflections two years after the project can be enlightening in that they shed light on what could stand the test of time in terms of sustainability. In addition to the delayed opportunity to reflect again, the methodology that was employed here helped to articulate the most important aspects of the transformational change and the most striking changes that occurred in the classrooms. Since the content and the actual wording of the stories were both revisited so carefully in the iterative method, it is perhaps possible to argue that they are genuinely owned by the individual teachers and as accounts they are possibly more precise, more accurate and more carefully crafted than would have been the case in an ordinary reflective interview.

The teachers reflected together as close, trusted colleagues, and this also inevitably influenced the outcome. Just as Woolhouse (2012, p 755) commented, 'it is the collegial and public acknowledgment of their previous troubles that affirms [their] new identities'. A strong affirmation of new identities, based on Marcus & Nurius (1986) has been theorised by Kubanyiova (2020) as emerging acts of imagination which in turn act as triggers to change. The way the teachers now see themselves is them embodying the core principles that they explicitly identify with. Individuals who acquire autonomous/ self-integrated goals and strongly identify with explicitly stated core principles which are genuinely owned by them develop a sense of identity with a strong conviction central to them. (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998).

### **A top-down or bottom-up project?**

Given that the original focus of the BC project aimed to elevate the children to the role of 'partners', this could not have been achieved without concomitantly elevating the teacher into a 'teacher-researcher' who is actively engaging in innovative practices. It is this elevated status as teacher-researcher and someone whose traditional gaze downwards was lifted to consider children as partners - through a new lens - may have also compelled the teachers to develop new, lasting professional identities.

Interestingly and perhaps ironically, the BC project, which was characterised by the three teachers as giving them freedom, new perspectives and all that '*fresh air to breathe*' (T2), was in fact a project that was very much pre-determined in its focus, i.e., top-down in that it was presented from the beginning as an opportunity to experiment with ways of 'co-researching with' children. Nonetheless, the teachers still saw the project as full of choice and individual opportunity. As T3 put it:

Although we were all doing children as co-researchers, you did not give us a choice, it was still given as it was a lens for us, project as lens.

T1 said that even though the project was focused on children as co-researchers and that was a given, there was a great deal of freedom about how one wanted to go about interpreting it and implementing it:

I remember at the beginning the focus was clear but the process was unfolding and we were not given a destination. The process was gradual and we all appreciated children as co-researchers and we were all asking: Is this possible? We discussed how a good learner-centred language class is different from a co-researchers' class? We were questioning each other on that and constantly exploring.

## Conclusion

The iterative process of engaging with the transcript of the open interview recorded two years after the project had finished, proved to be an excellent way of eliciting stories of transformation that have matured and crystallised into a publicly owned image and a renewed teacher identity. The iterative re-reading and co-editing of narratives, as described in this study, can be a useful tool in other teacher development contexts where deep soul-searching reflection may be equally appropriate.

A clear limitation of this paper is that it is based on three teachers only. The stories of these three teachers are not representative of the whole group and it would have been interesting to elicit the experiences of the other 22 teachers two years after the project. The reason why these three teachers were invited is because their positive experiences stood out all along.

While experiences in the larger group were also largely positive (Pinter et al., 2016), it is important to note that not all teachers had transformative experiences. One of the most important reasons why some teachers were less enthusiastic overall was related to the level of support they received in their schools. The very natural expectation that becoming a teacher-researcher and undertaking a research project should be legitimated in one's professional circles (Burns 2017) was simply not always met.

It is important to remember that stories change all the time. They change with each re-telling, and in the future when these three teachers tell their stories again, they will add new hues and new meanings with respect to their changing lives. What is offered in this paper is only a snapshot of their transformative stories carefully preserved at a particular time and place. Nonetheless it is believed that these stories can serve as an inspiration to teachers and teacher educators in other contexts, both in terms of the method that was used in accessing these stories, and in terms of the embodied core principles that may have the potential to sustain long-term impact affecting classroom practice.

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