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Disruption, Transformation, Resilience, and Hope: The Experience of a Belizean Community During COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

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Keywords

COVID-19 lockdown, disruption, global literacy, community, identity, resilience, qualitative research, narrative

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This is dedicated to the creative, passionate, and ever resilient educators of Belize.

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Disruption, Transformation, Resilience, and Hope: The Experience of a Belizean Community During COVID-19 Lockdown

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This qualitative research explored the lived experience of teachers, school administrators, parents, and children in Belize, Central America during the COVID-19 lockdown. Through field notes, correspondence, and interviews, a narrative approach was leveraged to convey the impact of two years away from classrooms and from each other. Both the trauma and loss of this disruption on global literacy, along with three forces that nourished the capacity for resilience, were examined.

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Introduction

People on each corner of the globe experienced the pandemic, and yet each lived their own unique story. This research examines the experiences of educators, families, and children in Belize, a small country nestled along the coast of Central America, as they, too, were torn from the normalcy of their classrooms for over two years. The purpose of this qualitative research was to better understand the impact and the implications that those two years had on this community. As part of Latin America, the World Bank (2022) reported that my colleagues in Belize experienced, one of the worst records of school closures globally (p. 32). Specifically, this research looks at both the loss and the beginning process of rebuilding.

This is a story of disruption, trauma, and despair. It is also a story of transformation and resilience. This is the story of an economically fragile community, as defined by the Index of Economic Freedom (Heritage Foundation, 2022), being snatched out of school for over two years, and how that experience has changed this community forever. The two questions that drove my research were: (1) How did two years of disrupted learning of classrooms due to the COVID-19 lockdown impact this Belizean community? (2) In the context of this disruption, what nourished the capacity for resilience in rebuilding their community? With one hand still holding grief and loss, members of this community stretched out their other hand to reach for new ways of being, for new possibilities.

Approach/Positionality/Limitations

I have worked with this community of teachers, students, and families in the Cayo District of Belize since 2007 within the context of the Belize Education Project (2022). However, this qualitative research is a narrow look at how my Belizean colleagues experienced the lockdown due to COVID-19 and the cautious return to the classrooms in March of 2022. A more complex understanding of how this experience impacted global literacy, as well as what potential lessons could be harvested, could enhance our own perspective and practices as we collectively move forward in the aftermath of the COVID-19 onset. It is in pursuit of this objective that this qualitative research was designed.

The nature of this work is as an oral history, which my institution deems exempt from IRB (Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects) approval. Specifically, the interviews were open ended. In addition, as noted in the limitations section of this paper, the intent of my findings is not to generalize the unique lived experiences of my participants, nor will these findings influence policy. With that said, considerable caution was taken to ensure my participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation. They were also informed that the purpose of my work was to tell the story of their experiences of the lock down due to COVID-19 as it related to school in their communities. I remained in continuous contact with my participants to confirm that they felt I was accurately portraying their experiences. I safeguarded their safety and privacy through pseudonyms for all participants as well as purposefully not disclosing the schools and locations where they worked and lived.

In March of 2022, I traveled to be with my Belizean colleagues within the space of their tropical classrooms. The data I collected for this research included field notes from my experiences in the classrooms in March of 2022. It also included informal dialogue and semi-formal interviews via Zoom, upon my return in March and April of 2022. My interviews were with 13 individuals, including school administrators, teachers, parents, and children from surrounding villages and towns of the Cayo District in Belize. To inform participants that I was interested in their stories as they related to their school experience during the COVID-19 lock-down, I leveraged the use of a Facebook thread, personal Facebook messages, WhatsApp messages, emails, and oral conversations at schools and communities in Belize. Specifically, I communicated that I hoped to share their experiences for others in my field to read. In addition, many of those I had communicated with conveyed the nature of my work to other groups and other community members. This process afforded me a wide range of possible voluntary samples.

Following Patton's (1999) advise to "guard against a single" perspective, I was deliberate in choosing participants that represented a wide range of positionalities (p. 1197). I constructed a sample of teachers, principals, parents, and students. I also worked to represent a variety of ages from twelve-year-olds to participants in their 60s. Finally, I worked to reflect experiences from a multitude of schools and communities within this area of Belize. Table 1 indicates the dates of the interviews. Names have been replaced with pseudonyms and are listed in chronological order of the semi-formal interviews. The data that were informed by the semi-formal interviews were taken from the following interviews and participants.

Table 1
Semi-Formal Interviews with Belizean Individuals

Name	**Position at the time of the interview**	**Date of Interview**
Tanya	Primary School Principal	March 24, 2022
Anna	Standard 1 Teacher (6 and 7-year-olds)	March 25, 2022
Clarissa	Primary School Principal	March 25, 2022
Melvin	Standard 6 Teacher (12 and 13-year-olds)	March 25, 2022
Elizabeth	Primary School Assistant Principal	March 27, 2022
Esmerelda	High School Student 14 years old	March 28, 2022
Rachel	Standard 6 Student 12 years old	March 28, 2022

Valaree	Mother of 14-year-old and 12-year-old	March 28, 2022
Tony	Standard 6 Student 12 years old	April 1, 2022
Bernice	Mother of 12-year-old	April 1, 2022
Abram	Father of 12-year-old	April 1, 2022
Shantell	High School Assistant Principal	April 7, 2022
Flora	Standard 4 Teacher (9 and 10-year-olds)	April 8, 2022

Data Gathering

In my semi-formal interviews, I chose open-ended questions. Drawing on Mishler's (1986) work, I viewed these interviews as a conversation which would result in a joint product. In other words, I was aware that the very nature of all conversation produces a story that is to some extent co-created and shaped by the very process of this discourse. I utilized the Zoom platform, as my participants had become familiar with this technology during the COVID-19 lockdowns. It also afforded the ability to conduct a face-to-face conversation. Finally, it provided an easy way to record the conversation, with an acute awareness of the recording process for all parties. I gathered field notes between March 13th and March 20th of 2022 with the informed consent of my participants. I was able to spend seven full days in the classrooms and the communities of Belize. During these days I used my iPhone to take photos and notes. In the evenings, I organized my findings and photographs into a separate document for each day.

Analysis of Data

Once I had completed my interviews, I transcribed the recorded interviews, which I had stored on my desktop. Transcribing these conversations was one of the more significant processes. During the procedure I was often surprised to hear whole new pieces of the conversation that I had forgotten. The process of transcribing interviews also offered new perspectives and new understandings of emphasis and emotion in specific pieces of the dialogue. This allowed me to familiarize 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" (pp. 4-5).

When I had completed the transcriptions, I combined them with my field notes. At this point, I began 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). Throughout this process, I continuously adhered to Ely et al.'s advice and considered which themes presented not only most frequently but carried "heavy or emotional data" expressed by my participants. I color-coded themes on each document looking for relations between and among themes and subthemes which provided meaning and cohesion.

Often new themes arose in the middle of this process. For instance, the theme of reaching for or seeking to find lost students during the lockdown emerged as I continued to code my themes. Themes that I initially believed to be significant faded out. For instance, an early theme included home remedies for COVID-19 that some of my participants tried. At some point this theme became irrelevant to the bigger story. Likewise, what I had coded as multiple themes merged into a single theme. For instance, I had coded the loss of loved ones and fear as two separate themes. However, as I progressed in this process, the two merged with sickness, and the three became the one theme: "Fear, Sickness, and Death." Single themes split into several subsections. For example, I had initially coded one large theme of "Reaching for our Students." As I continued the process, I noticed three distinct subsets emerged: "School Radio," "Online Learning," and "Learning Packages."

During this process, I continuously checked with my participants on themes they personally found significant, or as Heron and Reason (1997) advised, I sought the "support and the creative and corrective feedback" (p. 287) from my participants.

Once I had settled on important themes, I created a new document for each one. I copied and pasted the data from the interviews and the examples from my field notes into respective documents for each theme. At that time, I began to research the literature, finding scholars that had written about the themes which had developed. With the combination of data from interviews and field notes, and the literature, I was ready to begin to tell the story of my participants as they wrestled with the challenges of schooling during COVID-19.

Throughout the process of coming to understand both my participants and my data, I reflected on Paris and Winn's (2014) question, "What does it mean to be a worthy witness?" (p. xiii). As I worked to be a trustworthy witness, I drew on Moss (2004), who referred to trustworthiness as an art, "where multiple voices or multivoicedness is allowed to flourish" (p. 363). I was committed to keeping my Belizean colleagues' experiences and voices in the foreground.

While there was an abundance of member checking and communication regarding my interpretation of their experiences, I am also clear that the lens is my own, as I am bound to my experience as a White woman growing up, living, and breathing within the limited constraints of my life. It is these fingers of own limitations that were on the keyboard as this story unfolded. I wrote this research as a narrative, as I found this to be the most appropriate and authentic way to portray my participants' lived experiences. Connelly and Clandinin (1999, p. 375) view the use of narrative inquiry as a "portal," for the teachers, families, and students to make meaning of their experiences. This allowed me, as a researcher, to study the experiences embedded in their stories. Drawing on the themes that emerged from my participants' stories, I organized them into a narrative that could best give voice to their experiences.

Findings

The findings come from the data I found in my interviews in March and April of 2022 and from field notes during my March 2022 visit. The sources of data from the interviews are indicated by the pseudonym of the interviewee. Table I identifies the pseudonym, date, and position of the participant. As I unpacked the findings from my data, 15 themes emerged. The first twelve themes addressed my initial research question: *How did two years of disrupted learning of classrooms due to the COVID-19 lockdown impact this Belizean community?* The final three themes spoke to my second research question: *In the context of this disruption, what nourished the capacity for resilience in rebuilding their community?* The data and findings revealed both disruptions and dreams. They tell the story of loss, as well as the capacity to reimagine and rebuild.

We Are Disrupted

The data first revealed the tremendous sense of disruption for my participants as COVID-19 lockdowns upended the educational settings in these communities nestled in the heart of Belize, Central America. As Oliver's (2007) poetry described the common human phenomenon of the grief found in disruption, her words may have also expressed the experience of my Belizean participants as this pandemic settled across the world, and across the communities of Belize.

> *That time*
> *I thought I could not*
> *Go any closer to grief*
> *Without dying…*
> *(p. 53, lines 1 -4)*

Our Call to Teach

The first theme which emerged from my data came from a subset of my participants, the educators. This theme reflected the power these teachers and principals found in the call to teach. I included several examples to convey both the collective mindset of this the call, as well as the varied ways it was expressed. "Let teaching be a mission, not a career." Elizabeth, an assistant principal of a primary school, told me with her chin jutted, but with her eyes lit up with dreams. Shantell, also an assistant principal, but of a high school in the same town concurred, "We are the educators. We are the leaders. We are that light and that gem in our corner." These educators reflected the lifetime of commitment that the teachers in Belize have always held. These data revealed how Belizean educators, along with their global counterparts, pursued this gallant call of what Palmer (2007) referred to as the "ancient and exacting exchange called education" (p. 10).

Classroom Doors Slam Shut

A second theme that emerged was the astonishment at the sudden closure of schools. As the earth spun itself into a new day, millions of classrooms doors opened to the morning sun in March of 2020. According to Viner et al. (2020), 1.7 billion students (Viner et al. 2020) walked away from those classrooms that third week in March of 2020. Across the globe, the collective story was similar. Multiple recollections of the abruptness and the confusion in classrooms during that third week in March of 2020 reverberated across the continents. Teachers, students, and families in Belize, too, recalled that day. Part of what made this phenomenon so striking was the universality of it; the way it touched all people living on the planet. Yet, as it was profoundly global, each story was deeply personal too. In that vein, I chronicled multiple examples of this experience to convey the commonness of it on one hand, and the very intimate nature of it as well.

Anna remembered, "It wasn't even a Friday. It was a Tuesday when they said this was the last day of school." As a student, Esmerelda recalled, "I was 12. The teachers simply said, 'you are going home today. You are not coming back to school tomorrow.'" Flora, a primary school teacher remembered, "We didn't know what was happening. We didn't know what to expect."

Unfinished schoolwork sat idly in messy cubbies. Once proud pieces of writing hung limply on walls and faced empty classrooms with nobody to view them. Esmerelda, explained, "I became so sad. I didn't want to be home." Rachel, who was ten years old at the time, recalled, "It was so sad, the virus kept going *and going*, so we couldn't go back to school."

In these statements, Rachel, Flora, Esmerelda, and Anna articulated not only the astonishment at the sudden closure of classroom doors, but the dismay at the apparent longevity of this sudden closure.

Fear, Sickness, and Death

As the sadness of extended time away from classrooms settled in, my data also revealed fear, sickness, and death as a theme. Anna explained, "We were scared when we heard we had to close the school. We were all scared to leave our house."

Two mothers discussed their fear with me. Valaree, Rachel's mother, told me, "The hardest part was that I was afraid because my daughters are my life. I was afraid they would get the COVID. I prayed for God to help us. I was afraid as a mother." Another mother, Bernice recalled,

> We had a new baby. She was born in COVID time in a hospital. We were afraid. Everybody was sick – the nurses, the doctors in the hospital. Two weeks after the baby was born the doctor got sick. We were praying and waiting for weeks to the see the results. We were so afraid.

The fears were not unsubstantiated. Sickness was real. Anna remembered, "I had a parent that could not talk to me because she was gasping for air. Her son also had COVID. She was scared because he was all alone in the hospital, that nobody could be with him."
Death, too, was real. Elizabeth expanded:

> Everyone at school was sad. First, we had parents of children as loss. We felt sad for them. Then Ms. Margorie's mom died. Then a few days later ***my*** dad died. It effected the whole culture of the school. They were afraid to accompany me to the burial!

Another principal in a neighboring village, Tanya, shared,

> Children lost their loved ones. We had a widowed father who was taking care of the two daughters. He got COVID and died. That was so devasting. I could not be with them. The teachers could not either. We gave them calls, but we could not hug them or grieve with them.

Amid sickness and death, the comfort gathering with each other to grieve was denied. Kaye-Kauderer et al. (2021) explained that "the most basic method of managing stress and surviving adversities is connecting with each other. This very basic coping strategy was stripped from the community" (p. 7). Although social distancing was crucial to slow the viral spread, this separation came at a colossal cost.

Through these stories embedded in my data, the theme of fear, sickness, and death during the COVID-19 lockdowns became apparent.

Reaching for Our Students

Another theme which emerged from my participants' stories dealt with the three ways educators and families gallantly worked to find each other when they could not physically be together. As educators grappled with the emotional impact of disconnecting with students and families who might be afraid, grieving, sick, or conceivably dead, the weeks turned to months. Months turned into years. Saavedra World Bank Global Director for Education, reported, "The pandemic brought education systems across the world to a halt." (United Nations News, 2021, para 5). Latin America has one of the worst records of school closures globally, according to a World Bank Report (2022), which reported children in Latin America faced almost 60 weeks of fully or partially closed schools between March of 2020 and March of 2022. During this time, Belizean educators reached for their children with a three-pronged strategy. This included school radio, on-line learning, and paper/pencil learning packages.

School Radio. In the spring of 2020, the Belize Ministry of Education began school radio (Kirshner 2020). Students who lived remotely, without internet, or even electricity, could tune into with a battery-operated transistor radio to the grade appropriate lessons each day. The use of radio to reach its own country's learners was not new to educators in Belize either. In Belize's infancy, the radio was used to broadcast school lessons. This had played a critical role in building Belize as a nation and as a culture after its independence in 1981 (Kirshner 2020).

Within the first few weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, teachers in Belize, volunteered to record lessons for school radio. By the end of April, 2020, the school radio that Belize had leveraged to build its nation and its culture, was back with as the 2020 COVID-19 version. Tzul, one of the teachers who volunteered to broadcast lessons, explained that each teacher who participated in Belize's radio school broadcasts needed to have "internet, and a computer microphone." He continued, "The ministry trained us in one day how to do the lessons on the radio" (Kirshner, 2020, p. 94).

Teachers in Belize immersed themselves in meeting the planning and implementation required to reach their students through school radio. The school radio lasted through June of 2021. (Belize Ministry of Education, 2022). While the collective and innovative nature of this work was remarkable, there was no evidence in my data that this strategy effectively impacted student learning.

Online Instruction. Beginning in the fall of 2020, schools also attempted to reach students via devices and the internet. My data revealed that teachers were responsible for securing and paying for their own laptops and internet. This came at a time that all Belizean teachers endured a ten percent pay cut due to the financial hardship COVID-19 had of the entire country (Flowers, 2022).

The students of Belize reflected what the United Nations had already reported; that only a "small percent of families living in developing countries have access to internet" (Vegas 2020). Elizabeth, an assistant principal explained, "Students may have had a device, but no internet, or internet but a device that was very old, or a phone, but no credit. What was I supposed to do?"

Rachel, ten years old at the beginning of the pandemic, told me that six out her class of 23 could join an online session, because, as she explained, "most of my class doesn't have internet." Tanya reported "75% of my students joined with phones." Finally, Bernice, the mother of a ten-year-old explained, "I was worried for Tony because we did not have a laptop. We only had a phone."

Added to the stress of limited devices, extended use of mobile phones could harm students' eyes. Elizabeth explained, "All of a sudden, my son's eye got red and swollen. We took him to the doctor, who told us that the light of the phone was affecting his eyes." Several studies (e.g., Mohan et al., 2020; Kaya, 2020) found extended use of a phone for online school during COVID was associated with the deterioration of eye health and eye fatigue in online education.

With the combination of little internet availability, limited access to sufficient devices, and the risks of extended use for students' eyes, online learning presented staggering barriers.

Learning Packages. Finally, my data revealed the most widespread strategy to reach students during the lockdown was through what the Belize Ministry of Education described as "learning packages." Teachers prepared and printed out schoolwork. Families could pick these packages up for the children to work on at home, and then return them to the teachers. As the Deputy Chief Education Officer for the Belize Ministry of Education, Cecilia Smith, explained to Belizean citizens, this was to be a short-term solution for the first few weeks of the fall of 2020 (Smith, 2020). As it turned out, the learning packages continued for more than two years.

While students remained at home, Anna explained that "beginning in September (2020), teachers went to school to prepare the packages." The learning packages were cumbersome. Elizabeth reported that each package could be "23 pages a week" for primary school. At the high school, Shantell reported that "a package, which went out every week, was about 100 pages." She continued, "The students don't have internet, so you had to send them all the resources. For instance, if it was book chapter for them to read, we had to copy the book."

The cost for the printing and the paper was extraordinary. It was up to the principals, the teachers, and the community to find the resources. Tanya shared,

> At the beginning the government gave $5 (US $2.50) for each child. This was a one-time donation. That lasted for a couple of weeks. After the $5 ran out, we asked for donations. We were turned down because everybody was struggling because of COVID.

Clarissa also told me, "It was very challenging because our school had limited resources. For instance, we didn't have a printer to prepare packages. I started knocking on a lot of doors."

In addition to the cost of paper and printing, there was the challenge of delivering the packages. Elizabeth conveyed that "only half of the families came to pick up the packages. We, as teachers, had to find a way to get out into the community to deliver these packages, because parents were afraid to get them." At the high school, Shantell explained. "We were sending out packages every week to 400 students in 22 villages – *all* delivered by the principal" Shantell continued to describe the principal's work:

> He would leave early in the morning and drive out to all those 22 villages. Some of them are really far apart. He would take out packages and give information to parents. Some of those parents in those rural areas don't have electricity, running water, let alone internet or devices. Some of those families don't even have phones.

Early in the pandemic, teachers wondered if they could get COVID-19 through surfaces and therefore, Elizabeth explained, "When students returned the packages, we had to let the packages sit for a week to quarantine. Then we had to grade them fast."

Once the preparation, the printing, the delivery, and the quarantine was accomplished, the next task was to ensure learners were being reached. Now, in addition to the cost of internet and the devices teachers, also had to pay for cellular data to reach families who were not completing the learning packages. Elizabeth continued, "We had to find extra data and extra credit to make the calls."

Even for families who did manage to obtain the learning packages, completing them was challenging. Flora explained,

> We did our best to tailor this package to the children's needs. We made it as simple as we could. Some of the children had other people do their work or didn't do it at all. There were sections of the packages that were not touched. We didn't know what the children were learning - if they were learning *anything*.

Rachel explained the student perspective: "The packages were kind of confusing because I didn't have the teacher to explain. Students were not allowed to go. So, I would tell my mom my questions, and then she would ask my teacher." Rachel was lucky. Shantell explained "many of our families are not literate, so they could not provide assistance to the students, which caused learning packages very challenging for many."

Like school radio and school online, the learning packages provided little evidence that learning outcomes were met. The World Bank (2022) report noted that the strategies Latin American countries attempted were relatively unsuccessful at reaching students.

Even in the gallant effort to use these three approaches to reach students in lockdown, the learning losses were staggering. The Ministry of Education's (2022) report indicated a significant drop in national scores. Oliver's (2007) poetry continued to express not only the universal human anguish in desperately reaching for something so important without success, but also the specific anguish my Belizean participants experienced as they struggled to reach their learners during the global lockdown.

> *It's not the weight you carry, but how you carry it –*
> *books, bricks, grief –*
> *It's all in the way*
> *you embrace it, balance it, carry it when you cannot, and would not,*
> *put it down.*
> (pp. 53-44, lines 16-22)

Where Are Our Children?

As Belizean educators worked tirelessly to reach students using school radio, online learning, and learning packages, another theme emerged from the data. It was the question of where these students were and what they were doing as these two years stretched out. I searched for children and families, myself, to find answers to what was going on during those two years their classrooms were closed. I found few answers.

Some children actually found a sense of community and purpose within the crisis. Rachel, who was ten when the lockdown began, explained:

> People that we know caught COVID, so my mom would make herbs and remedies for them. I helped with them. It made me afraid, but it also made me happy knowing they would get better.

Tony, was born with phocomelia, resulting in the absence of the lower part of his arm. His mother, Bernice, reflected on the extra time that the lockdown afforded their family. "Tony learned to help himself. During lockdown he learned to feed himself. He also learned to bathe and to fold his clothes. He is more independent" She laughed as she continued, "He wanted to do nothing, but we didn't let him! He didn't know how to use his hand, so we worked on that." Tony, himself, confessed, "I *did* learn to cook a few things, like eggs and Raman noodles." Rachel also noted, "I learned to bake, and my mom showed me how to cook rice and beans."

However, there was also a deep sense of loneliness and isolation. Rachel explained, "I was stuck in my house and felt I would never get out of here." She continued, "My mom was afraid all the time." As the second year approached, Rachel recalled, "a month before school was supposed to start, I found out we weren't going to school again. I thought we weren't going to do anything ever again. I also worried about my friends." Her sister, Esmerelda added, "In September, we were doing the same thing we did last March - *Nothing*."

The students and families I spoke with were the easy ones to find. There were others that were difficult to reach, even to find. Flora told me,

> I have a student who came in January, but he told me, 'I am sick, I have the cough." He hasn't returned, and that is bothering me because it has been a while now. I have tried calling his parents and they are not getting back to me.

The concern for all students' wellbeing weighed on the teachers. Flora continued,

> I was concerned about them. Some of these children come to school without food. When a child at school needed some food, we obviously shared what we had with them. But during the pandemic we weren't in contact with them. We didn't know what kind of conditions they were living under. We didn't know if they needed food - if they were safe. You know there are lots of things going on - things we don't publicly talk about. All that goes through your mind. Are they going through any kind of abuse? What is going on at home? You know it bothers me as a mother and as a teacher.

Shantell had the same concern: "A lot of our students experienced more domestic violence. For many of our students, school is their haven." Masten and Mott-Stefanidi (2020) explained "children who were already struggling with the risks and harms associated with poverty, neglect, food insecurity, and violence were even more isolated during the lockdown" (p. 100). The World Bank (2022) concurred, explaining that schools offer safe spaces for protection, which caused children's health and safety to be jeopardized during the pandemic, as domestic violence and child labor increased.

While the lockdown regulations prohibited students from coming into the classrooms, Flora confessed, she sometimes "threw caution to the wind." As she came to the classroom to prepare packages, she explained,

> Sometimes I would have a student or two pop in and say, "Miss, I don't understand this. How do we do this." How can I tell a child "You are not supposed to be here?" I sat with them, and I worked with them! I taught them. I recognized these children need to be in school. I guess I threw caution to the wind at times because my students needed me to be there.

Flora proved to be the exception for a very few numbers of students. In general, educators yearned to reach their students, to somehow touch and impact their lives, and yet, my data indicated they could not.

We Attempt to Return

After two years, teachers and students began to tiptoe back into the sacred space of their classrooms. My field notes from the classrooms of Belize in March of 2022 reflected another theme which revealed the tremendous agility in which the schools managed three forms of instructional delivery methods simultaneously. First, the learning packages, for parents who were still reluctant to send their students, had been placed in tubs or baskets on chairs or tables at the entrance of their classrooms. Second, teachers had open laptops, tablets or even phones to usher in students still attempting to join the classroom via the internet. Finally, the teachers addressed the needs of the students physically present in the classroom, engaging in interactive lessons. The flexibility and the resolve of these teachers to reach *all* students in whatever way they could reflected a commitment I was coming to understand.

These classrooms, which had opened just weeks before, did so using the "hybrid model." Students attended class two days a week to keep class sizes low. Rachel told me, "I go Monday and Wednesday." As a teacher, Anna shared, "We are doing it in two groups. Monday/Tuesday and Wednesday/Thursday. It is frustrating. I can't give them the attention they need." Melvin also noted, "Some students only come 1 day a week."

"Frustratingly slow" is what the United Nations report (2022) called the return to school with the hybrid model. The report claimed the pace of learning for countries using the hybrid model is so slow, that skills typically mastered in two years, will take seven to eleven years to master (para 15). This pace of learning assumed all children would return to school, which was not the case.

The sentiments from the teachers and the students, along with the United Nations (2022) illustrated the challenges of returning school as COVID-19 restrictions let up. Resuming school as my participants had previously known was still a distant hope.

Where Are Our Other Children?

While classroom doors had opened, attendance was also still optional and sparce. As I unpacked and analyzed the data, a reoccurring theme which held what Ely et al. (1991) may have referred to as "heavy emotional data," emerged. It was the alarming realization that schools were still missing children - a lot of children. Anna described the weeks prior to my visit in March 22. "Parents were still afraid. My co-teacher had only 6 out of 20 students. I had 2 out of 17."

The question of where the others were lingered on. Some families were still afraid as Melvin told me, "Two of them dropped out because they caught COVID earlier. They are not going to risk it again." Elizabeth voiced, "Our parents said, 'we do not want our children to die.'"

More commonly, however, students had moved on with their lives in the past two years. When the lockdown began students may have been twelve years old, and as Melvin explained, "Now, they are already 14, they don't want to come back. Elizabeth expounded that, "Many students haven't come back because they are harvesting beans or working at Spanish Lookout. They get a little bit of money, so they have lost focus on education." Shantell echoed Elizabeth, "Students went to work because their parents lost their jobs. There is no other alternative." Shantell described one student in particular,

> She was working from 6:00 in the morning to 10:00 at night, because some restaurants were still open in those smaller villages. She was cooking for a restaurant in one of those villages and was basically head cook. She was 16 and making $20 a day.

The United Nations (2022, September 16) reported that the past two years had resulted in increased drop-out rates, which had impacted the most vulnerable students disproportionality. The Belize Ministry of Education (2022) also revealed an increased number of students dropping out of school (p. 54). While some students returned to the hybrid model of the classroom, many did not.

The Learning Loss

Even for the students who did return to school, the data also revealed the resounding theme of learning loss. After I left the cinderblock walls of Anna's classroom filled with six-year-olds, she cried out, "When my children came back – they had zero! Nothing! It is all new to them again." She continued, "The students are frustrated. It is going to impact them for a while. They are years behind."

This feeling of learning loss was conveyed over and over and in a multitude of ways from my participants. I chose to include several examples from teachers, students, and families to demonstrate the varied expressions of this theme.

As a student, Esmerelda expressed her own experience, "I felt lost when I went back to school. I didn't remember anything. I was totally lost. Right now, I am *still* lost." Esmerelda's mother, Valaree, weighed in, "I was very worried because I tried to help them at home, but they were not understanding the work."

Tony, who left the classroom as a ten-year-old and returned as a twelve-year-old told me, "I felt behind. I didn't know much of the stuff they were talking about." Like Esmerelda's mother, Tony's mother, Bernice, also voiced her concern, "I was worried about Tony. He was getting slower and slower."

The implications reverberated across all levels of education as Shantell observed, "This has hurt us from preschool all the way up to the universities." The United Nations (2021, December 6) concurred with Shantell, noting that 147 million children missed their in-class instruction over the past two years – amounting to two trillion hours of lost in-person education globally. Put another way the report stated,

> This generation of students now risks losing $17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value as a result of school closures, or the equivalent of 14 percent of today's global GDP, far more than the $10 trillion estimated in 2020. (p. 1)

Furthermore, as Belize is a resource poor country, the same United Nation's (2022) report reminded us that students living in poverty, or the most marginalized students, have been disproportionately impacted.

Shantell also considered the learning loss of the past two years, compounded with the use current of the hybrid model:

> We need leaders. We need people coming into the work world who are well prepared. All schools have had to cut back on what they are teaching. Now you are getting 50% of the curriculum that you need. You are getting 50% of the skills that you need to get into the work force or to prepare for higher education. You get less rounded individuals. All those necessary skills that used to be there have been diminished.

Grattan and Machicau (2022) agreed with Shantell, as they wrote in Reuters, "This locked-up generation is going to suffer the consequences, not just for five years, but for the next 20 or 30 years, which implies all their education, even university, and their working life" (para 8).

Along with the loss of learning itself, educators were concerned about the drive to obtain an education. Shantell explained, "Motivation has diminished. Students that were doing well, are now lackadaisical. That drive, that determination, that effort - that was there before - is gone." Shantell offered an explanation:

> Some students are saying "Our parents had jobs, then the pandemic came. Everything was lost and they got fired. So, why even bother? You can eat from the tree. Why educate yourself? What's there to gain from education at this point? If a pandemic comes again, and shuts us down again, where are we at?"

Motivation of students in the aftermath of two years of school closures was global. Bauld (2022) wrote in the Harvard Education Magazine that the lockdown resulted in tremendous loss of motivation. Bauld's (2022) observations echoed what my data revealed. Students had lost motivation to continue their education during the two years of COVID lockdowns.

The literature and my own data revealed that the impact of COVID-19, not only worldwide, but specifically on Belize, was staggering. The twelve themes in the first part of my findings demonstrated the enormity of the disruption. This cannot be overstated.

A Story of Transformation

The magnitude of the damage felt in the wake of COVID-19 and the lockdown was not lost on me. Yet, in the process of witnessing my Belizean colleagues amid this COVID-19 wreckage, I was also struck by final themes my data revealed, which was the resilience, the hope, and the resolve. These final themes addressed the second research, question, "*In the context of this disruption, what nourished the capacity for resilience in rebuilding their community?"*

The capacity to recover from such a devastating two years is complex. I longed to better understand what it was that made Anna declare, "Let's rebuild where we left off. Let's continue the work we are doing - maybe continue even *better* if we can. Yes, let's rebuild."

I came to wonder how shifts in identity and practice of these teachers, families, and students might nourish the resolve to rebuild their community, their schools, and perhaps most significantly, themselves. As I analyzed my data in this quest, three themes organically presented themselves. First, the meaning these educators found in their call to teach was strengthened and served as a transformative force in this crisis. Second, the meaning my colleagues found within the relationships they held with each other served as a transformative force. Finally, this community found transformative power in the shared beliefs and visions they collectively held. It was within the power of these three forces, I came to see true transformation both in identity and practice as these Belizeans began to rebuild. I came to recognize the same surprise Oliver (2007) found in hope that emerged from what appeared to be hopeless.

> *Have you heard*
> *the laughter*
> *that comes, now and again,*
> *out of my startled mouth?*
> (p. 54, lines 25-28)

Transformation Through the Call to Teach

Perhaps it was initially a sense of meaning that was found within the practice of teaching and learning. Recall my data indicated that even before the pandemic, the subset of my participants, the educators, had found tremendous purpose in the call to teach. As Holland et al. (1998) noted, we experience our existence itself in our practice. Put another way, Wenger (2008) reminded me that our practice deals with the "profound issue of how to be a human being" (p. 149).

The data indicated what educators in Belize had already found in their practice was intensified during the two-year lockdown. Melvin reflected, "I take my students more seriously since the pandemic." Tanya also explained how her commitment to students surpassed the trials of COVID-19. "Despite the challenges we face as humans, when it comes to school, we are there, we take care of our students." Shantell echoed Melvin and Tanya's thoughts:

> Even though it is difficult for us as teachers to be there for our students, especially when we feel like we can't even be there for ourselves, we *have* to be there, and we *are* there for our students.

Shantell continued, "The students are looking to us. They are looking to us as their source of hope, their source of motivation. We may be their only source of hope that they have." My data indicated that these teachers may have been expressing what Liston (2000) referred to as "transformative or enlarged love" which has the potential to lead teachers through this despair. Put another way, Liston (2000) wrote that this "enlarged sense of love could move a teacher beyond his or her particular concerns to a clearer, less noise-filled focus on beauty and the good, and on the world around and beyond us" (p. 95).

Elizabeth articulated her new identity not only as a teacher, but as a survivor. "Even though we thought that we wouldn't be able to survive. We *have* survived. I might think 'I'm not a good teacher.' But I *am* a good teacher. I found ways for children to learn. Right?" Elizabeth may have demonstrated what Liston (2000) described - that in the process of teaching, teachers' preoccupation with self and vulnerability is lessoned (p. 97). Perhaps this allowed Elizabeth to lift her eyes and look beyond her own sense of lack. Melvin, too, expressed transformation of practice and identity, "Yes, the pandemic caused us real problems, but it is bringing out the best of us too. We found innovative ways to reach our students." In this, both Elizabeth and Melvin found faith in themselves as teachers. Perhaps this faith in themselves was what Liston (2000) described "our saving and amazing grace" (p. 102).

It could also be that as Elizabeth and Melvin learned new ways reaching their students, the process of learning itself, was transformative. This could reflect Wenger's (2008) important insight that learning, "in its deepest sense, is about disarticulating and rearticulating identities; it is about exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current states; it is not merely formative; it is transformative" (p. 263). In other words, learning, itself, is the act of transformation in that it implies becoming a different person (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). Huebner (1923/2008) also claimed that learning is the recognition "that which we seem, is not what we are, for we could always be other" (p. 360). This process of learning, of course, extended to students as well. Esmerelda expressed, "I have grown and now I understand the real value of life. The pandemic taught me this Now, I am less afraid of trying new things and seeking help when I need it." After all, Huebner (1923/2008) also wrote that learning new things "is the protest" against old forms of who we are or were, that we may be changed (p. 360). Learning ushered in transformation.

Lessons of crises serving as a transformational for educators exist historically across the world. Winthrop (2020) drew on her global experience working with education facing emergencies and 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). Not unlike previous global and historic examples, perhaps it is here where Belizean teachers and students could occupy what Liston refers to as "the space between the known and the unknown, the actual and the possible" (p. 92). The sentiments expressed in my data conceivably demonstrated that within the challenges of COVID-19 these teachers, families, and students looked beyond limitations, or barriers, which the pandemic threw down. Perhaps the data showed that in this space, they could begin to see new possibilities and could begin the work of transformation.

Transformation Through Each Other

"We learned to value human beings more." Flora explained to me. Flora's statement articulated the next theme, the sense of community was an engine for learning and transformation. My participants found that within the act of teaching and learning, the strength found in *each other* empowered this community to begin the process of transformation. Wenger (2008) explained that learning which is most transformative is found within the context of community (p. 6).

Tanya echoed Flora's sentiment, "I have learned that together we can make a difference! Despite the different challenges we face as humans, we take care of each other." Elizabeth, a principal, explained it in more practical terms. "My teachers said, 'Ok, let's go into the classroom and just start working.' And they did. Then one teacher tried something, and it worked. The other teachers saw it and tried it too. You know, motivation spreads!"

As I witnessed the power for transformation that my Belizean colleagues were finding within their connection to each other, the writings of scholars continued to swirl in my thoughts. Tanya, Clarissa, and Elizabeth may all have embodied Holland et al.'s (1998) idea that shifts in individual thinking have the power to mediate change for whole communities (Holland et al., 1998, p. 46). There are biological reasons for this as well. Kaye-Kauderer et al. (2021) explained the neurological impact that connections within a community have on the brains under stress, including the activation of reward circuitry, oxytocin release, and decreased cortisol which could be cathartic (p. 174). Biological or psychological, this sense of solidarity may have nourished the capacity for transformation. In other words, the web of connections may have empowered my colleagues to re-construct old versions of themselves and become not only different people, but a different community than they were before.

The idea that suffering, loss, and grief can produce connections with each other, and positive transformations is ancient (Tedeschi et al., 2007, p. 32). Elcheroth and Drury (2020) also reminded me that "times of great tragedy can bring out the best in the human spirit: Ordinary people show extraordinary courage, compassion, and generosity in helping kin, neighbors, and strangers to recover and rebuild lives" (p. 710). For instance, the devastating earthquake in Pakistan served as an example of the power found within the community to rebuild. Hagan and Shuaih, (2012) explained that eight years later, hundreds of thousands of earthquake survivors saw the fruits of a massive rebuilding effort (para 1). They continued to quote MacLeod, 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). Patton (2008) quoted a survivor of hurricane Katrina as she discussed her transformed understanding of relationships in the wake of the hurricane: "The most important thing is having meaningful relationships with people that can uplift you" (p. 10). Patton's (2008) hurricane survivor's observation of the new importance found in relationships mirrored the data I had unpacked with my Belizean participants in their own understandings of the deepened connections with each other.

This phenomenon is also specific to other experiences during the recent global pandemic. Elcheort and Drury (2020) wrote that the only way to come out of the pandemic more resilient than how we entered was to reaffirm our joint humanity in the face of COVID (p. 710). Even at age twelve, Esmerelda reaffirmed the humanity Elcheort and Drury (2020) referred to as she told me, "I wanted to love my family more." She shrugged. "I decided it was necessary for me to learn to cook. In that way, I could cook when my mom comes home too tired." Perhaps Flora, too, summed it up in her concise words, "We can do this. Yes, ***we*** can do this." The volume and passion found in Flora's singular word "we" may be the most critical utterance of her declaration. Perhaps Oliver (2007) expressed Flora's personal understanding of the universal and sacred power found in the strength of each other.

> *I went closer,*
> *and I did not die.*
> *Surely God*
> *had his hand in this,*
> *as well as friends.*
> (p. 53, lines 5 -8)

Transformation Through Shared Visions

"We are all hopeful. We have an upward struggle. Yes, a struggle, but we will be moving upward." Shantell reflected the shared vision her community had, articulating my final theme. Collectively, this community could imagine new worlds. Wenger (2008) explained the power found when a community shares a collective vision of worlds yet to be. Specifically, he wrote these shared visions and passions held the "key to real transformation – the kind that has real effect on people's lives" (p. 85). In this, I believe my participants had become what Wenger (2008) described as "a force to be reckoned with" (p. 85).

As Flora looked at her students in the space of her classroom, she could not help but note the vision she shared with her students, "I am optimistic. What comforts me is the children's willingness to work with me." Abram, a father, implored other parents to share his vision:

> We as parents share a very important task for our kids. I want to say to parents around the world, "It's time for us as parents to get up and tell the children that, yes, they can do it. They can fulfill their goals. We can recover." Parents must *see* this in their heads and make their children see it too!

Walsh (2020) also wrote that resilience is fostered by shared convictions or principles. (p. 905). Common spiritual beliefs may have also cemented and inspired this community. Shantell spoke about the power of the unflappable spiritual faith shared by her community: "We cannot give up because we are here to love and serve. That *has* to be the key thing, to love and serve. God had called us to do everything for his Honor and Glory." Kaye-Kauderer et al. (2021) wrote that spirituality may be defined as the "attempt to seek meaning, purpose, and direction in life from a higher power, universal spirit, or God." They suggested that it could be a "potent resilience factor" (p. 174). Perhaps this was one more strand of this tapestry of resolve for my Belizean colleagues.

Through what my Belizean colleagues explained to me in the interviews, and through what I witnessed myself through field notes, I began to understand that the capacity to rise above suffering and hardship is buttressed through larger and *collective* visions for better imagined worlds. In other words, the data indicated that these shared visions could create a sense of purpose, deeper bonds, or simply put, collective transformation. Hope.

Discussion: Parting Gifts

The first implication of this qualitative research was that of tremendous loss. The injury my Belizean colleagues experienced due to the two-years of disrupted classroom learning was (and continues to be) immense and perhaps immeasurable. The loss of learning, the haven of the classroom, the connections with each other, and the motivation to continue education have impacted this communities in ways we may never fully appreciate. This research illuminated aspects of this two-year disruption for both the present and the future of this community. It also recognized the disproportionate impact on this community of Belize because of its relative economic status. The disparate impact of COVID-19 on global education will forever impact our understanding of global literacy. This loss cannot be overstated.

The second implication of this research is that of resilience. This research also delved into the capacity to rebuild that my Belizean colleagues found in their call to teach and learn, in each other, and finally their shared visions of potential. In other words, while one hand still hand clutched the grief and the loss of this virus, the mighty combination of these three forces empowered members of this community to reach their *other* hand toward new ways of being and toward new possibilities. Like Oliver (2007), my participants noticed that even within their troubled lives, they found much to admire.

> *How I linger*
> *to admire, admire, admire*
> *the things of this world*
> *that are kind,*
> *and maybe also troubled…*
> (p. 54, lines 29-33)

I was clear that this piece of qualitative research was unique to the experiences of my Belizean colleagues and myself. Following Heath's (1983) wisdom, I was reminded that "every ethnography is a unique piece of social history" (p. 7). Still, understanding both the devastation of being out of the normalcy of the classroom for two years, as well as the capacity to begin the work of restoration, may have lessons for us as educators and as members of the human family. As we emerge from the global experience of the pandemic, we all continue to wrestle with the devastating implications, as well as the possibilities, that face us. This small, but mighty, community in the tiny country of Belize may have important gifts to offer in our human quest for new possibilities.

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