

# Igniting Images for International Innovation and Integration: Belizean Principals Meet U.S. Teacher Candidates

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## Abstract

*This qualitative research explores the experience of Belizean principals on an American university campus engaged in Freirean-Like dialogue with pre-service students. Leveraging two focus groups: Belizean principals and U.S. pre-service teachers, this study aims to capture the thinking that this experience sparked within the two groups. Through thematic analysis, the research reveals the development of deeper connections between the participants and the desire to create communities of practice. The findings index the possibilities found from global interactions to create more complex connections and communities of practice. The study contributes to the understanding of how international experiences can enhance global citizenship in both educators and our youngest citizens.*

**Keywords:** Global Collaboration, Education, Pre-service Students, Schools

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## **Introduction**

Our youngest citizens are growing in a time where borders might be increasingly fluid, and cultures may intermingle like never before. Yet, cultural misunderstanding, distrust, division, and even visceral hatred between races and ethnicities across the globe appear to be intensifying. With this grim reality, there exists the realization that both the possibility and the responsibility for a more cohesive future lies within the walls of classrooms where our youngest global citizens are nurtured.

For these classrooms to be a space where global and democratic citizens are nurtured, the classroom teachers themselves must possess a profound appreciation for the interconnectedness and interdependence of humanity across our shared planet. In other words, if the very youngest inhabitants of our world village are to become globally aware and culturally competent, their teachers must be as well.

## **Objectives**

This research examines the work of bringing educators from Belize, Central America, to interact with our pre-service teachers at a university in the United States. Through this process we wondered if we could spark a global conversation about educating our collective future. We also wondered if this interaction could ignite a desire to create a shared community of practice made up of educators across the globe. Our qualitative research delves into the perspectives of educators on both sides of the borders in diverse places of their life-call.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Our theoretical framework was informed by our work with educators both in the United States and in other countries. We came to understand two formidable influences on educators. First, we considered the influence of shared Freirean-like dialogue. Second, we looked at the power that a shared community of practice could have on the identity and practice of teachers.

We drew on scholars who wrote about simply talking with each other, or shared dialogue, decades ago. Freire (1970/2015) discussed the power of conversation as he claimed that as human beings, we “are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (p. 88). Bakhtin (1986) also argued that dialogue “is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (p. 60). Connelly and Clandinin (1999) who built on both Bakhtin and Freire’s insights, discussed how dialogue can empower people to become the “masters of their thinking.” and applied it specifically to educators, writing that “when teachers come together to share stories, new stories to live by can also be composed” (p. 102). Our experience, combined with the thinkers who came before us, clarified the transformative power of shared dialogue as a framework for this research.

Second, through the process of engaging in dialogue and sharing in the experience of each other’s classrooms, a community of practice can be created. This, too, is life changing. Wenger (2002) explained “The learning that is most personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice” (p. 6).

In this way, our qualitative research was framed through the lens of understanding two transformative forces: Frieren-like dialogue and creating communities of practice.

## **Approach to Inquiry**

We drew on focus groups to best explore how educators in different parts of the world were impacted by dialogue and could create communities of practice. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013) explained that “the intensely social nature of focus groups tends to promote a kind of ‘memory synergy,’ among participants and bring forth collective memory of particular social groups or formations” (p. 325) We found this to be

true as the social nature of the focus groups intensified the level of participation of both the Belizean educators and the university students.

Four principals from Belize came to our university campus and spent the day interacting with our university students on April 4, 2024. This day of interactions inspired conversations that revealed enthusiasm and new thinking on the possibility of deepening these connections. We harnessed these conversations through two focus groups. We recorded the focus group and transcribed them ourselves for the most complex understanding of the apparent nuances. Using a basic thematic analysis approach, we began by familiarizing ourselves with the data in a way that Nowell, Norris, and White (2017) described “as a faithful witness to the accounts in the data” (pp. 5) Then we distilled themes from the data to more deeply understand our participants’ perspectives. First, we conducted a whole class focus group at the university of 18 students or pre-service teachers. We highlighted five participants’ words as representative of the focus group. Table 1.1 reflects the participants using pseudonyms.

<b>Table. 1 University Student/Pre-Service Focus Group in the United States April 25, 2024</b>	
Addy	Pre-Service Teacher
Blake	Pre-Service Teacher
Cassidy	Pre-Service Teacher
Daria	Pre-Service Teacher
Emerald	Pre-Service Teacher

**Table. 1 University Student/Pre-Service Focus Group in the United States  
April 25, 2024**

The second focus group included two of the four principals who came to the class. Two of the university students from the above class ran the focus group for the principals. Table 2.1 reflects the two principals in the focus group using pseudonyms.

<b>Table 2. Belizean Principals May 9, 2024</b>	
Fredrico	Principal
Gabriela	Principal

**Table 2.1 Belizean Principals  
May 9, 2024**

## Results and Discussion

As we collected and analyzed our data, three themes emerged. First, our global educators discovered a shared passion and commitment to educating our shared future. In that awareness, a deep sense of connection was revealed. Second, an increased desire to better understand and become interconnected with the “Other” was birthed. Finally, our participants defined their desire to create a shared community of practice as a path to improving education for all and to forge ahead with a striking clarity that education holds the key to realizing democratic and global ideals

### *Shared Purpose, Shared Passion*

As educators from across the professional spectrum of experiences spoke with each other, they experienced that fire that comes from the discovery of a shared purpose and passion they found in this noble work of teaching. Johnson and Golombek (2002) discussed what our data told us; that when educators talk to each other, they share “the struggles, tensions, triumphs, and rewards of their lives as teachers” which empowers “Teachers to not only to make sense of their professional worlds, but also to make significant and worthwhile changes within themselves and their teaching practice” (p. 7).

Fredrico, a principal in Belize, kicked off the conversation with the heartfelt words, “We teach because we are responsible for the continuity of our existence. You know, we teachers are the ones who create societies. We do it from a place of love. That’s why we are who we are.” This interaction sparked not only a conversation about the call to teach, but more importantly, it cemented a sense of solidarity between these global educators on the responsibility our profession holds in realizing democratic ideals across the globe.

Future classroom teachers, our university students, spoke about this sense of solidarity they experienced in their interactions with the Belizean principals. Addy explained, “We started talking about our role as teachers and how we support our students. We were talking about words like ‘service’ and ‘collaboration’ and how we support our children.”

Blake chimed in, “We were all speaking the same language. It was awesome. First, we had strangers in a room but all of a sudden, we weren’t really strangers. We had common goals and common values about education and how we can better the world.”

The principals from Belize, too, were inspired, Fredrico claimed, “This conversation has renewed my sense of purpose and commitment as a principal.” His colleague Gabriela, also a principal in Belize, echoed his sentiment as she described her time with the pre-service teachers on campus, “Looking at all the pre-teachers that were there in the room, I was able to really identify with them. You know, these young teachers are engaged and motivated. They are excited about what teaching is.” She concluded her thoughts with “I was really amazed. I have not had such a feeling in a long time.”

### ***Increased Desire to Connect***

With this renewed sense of energy, came a sense of urgency to forge deeper connections with each other. Daria explained, “For me, when I heard of Belize, I only remember my friends going on vacation to a resort. So, I had that thought in my mind.”

Emerald built on this thinking, “I never had a face-to-face interaction with somebody who lived in a different part of the world and had them share their perspective. So, it was easy for me to not think they were real.” The group concurred when Emerald concluded, “I think it’s important to humanize people. We need to do better.”

As these educators considered how to “do better,” the participants began to discuss the power of experiencing each other’s life-worlds. Addy told us, “Now I am really curious because I got to meet these wonderful people. Now I want to know more about them and like physically where they are from. Addy went on to explain her vision of global collaborations. “The idea is that we will learn more about each other’s ideas about education.” She continued, “When we come back to wherever that place may be - like they’ll go back to Belize, and we’ll come back to (our state), we’ll use those ideas and share those ideas. We can share what we learned. Everybody can share what they know, and it can keep going and going...”

Blake talked about the ways sharing life-worlds could impact his own students. He told the group “We need to do in-person collaboration. It is one thing to show students videos and books, but it’s a whole other thing to physically be with somebody from another part of the world and learn from them in real time.”

Cassidy considered the impact of a teacher sharing the life world of another educator on her own future students, “Having the teacher first experience time in a classroom in another part of the world promotes the global perspective. For a teacher to say, ‘I went to Belize,’ instills the idea, the positivity, and the benefits of going somewhere else to learn.”

Blake expanded on this thinking and considered his own future students. “It’s important to get kids thinking about their place in the world, that it’s not such a solo journey that they are on. We have seven billion people. It’s important to hear other perspectives.”

### ***Building Shared Communities of Practice***

The principals from Belize also felt the urgency to raise global citizens that understand how deeply connected we all were. They explained that it had to begin with our own practice as educators. Simply put, they believed educators across the globe must develop a shared community of practice. Gabriela put it this way, “If we are to meet the needs of our own children, there has to be an interaction and a connection with *us*. *We* have to collaborate.”

Fredrico expanded on Gabriela’s reflections, “Yes, we have to collaborate. I think that *no, no, no* country can stand alone. We can learn from each other in the field of education, and we can collaborate. That’s how we make the world a better place.”

Gabriela concluded, “As you said, Mr. Fredrico, We cannot stand alone. In this noble profession, we cannot stand alone.”

### **Significance**

This small sample of global educators represented different life places, different global locations, and different lived experiences. Their common call to raise the next stewards of our shared world is instructional for those of us in the field of nurturing our next democratic and global citizens. The significance of this research is in its demonstration of the transformative power found in shared dialogue and communities of practice, which can unify educators in the call to raise global citizens who understand how deeply connected we are simply through our shared humanity.

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