International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies
ISSN: 2202-9478
www.ijels.aiac.org.au

Interview with Jean Kirshner, co-founder of *Belize Education Project*

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INTRODUCTION

Jean Kirshner holds a Ph.D. in Education and Human Resource Development from Colorado State University and specializes in literacy and teacher education. I came to know Jean and her school adoption project in the process of publishing her article in our previous issue. She graciously accepted my invitation for this interview that we carried out through emails in July, 2020. In this interview, you will be reading about Jean and the impact she and her colleagues have created in the lives of school children. You will learn more about Jean as you read through, but here is a brief introduction. Jean started her career as the Early Childhood Director at Saint Ignatius Grammar School, Chicago in 1988. After two years she joined the Child Opportunity Program in Denver as a Head Start Supervising Teacher. In 1994, she became a kindergarten teacher and has been a First Grade Teacher since 2006 in Douglas County School District, Parker, Colorado. She co-founded the Belize Education Program in 2007 which is the main topic of this interview. The world needs more inspiring educators like Jean who contribute selflessly especially to the underprivileged communities that need more love and attention.

THE INTERVIEW

VN[1]: Could you first perhaps tell our readers about yourself and the Belize Education Project? Our readers would especially want to know all that is unique about you and your project.

JK[2]: I, myself, am a practitioner. That is – I live and breathe the true experience of teaching young learners how to read in a classroom *every day*. I am a first-grade teacher. That unique role affords me the trustworthiness and the credibility of my authentic solidarity to my colleagues in Belize. While each October *Belize Education Project* draws teachers, administrators, professors, and scholars from around the United States to travel to work side by side with Belizean teachers in their classrooms, it remains an organization with teachers at the core. In addition, each April, we bring educators from Belize to Colorado to work side by side in our Colorado classrooms. Drawing on our combined experiences teaching in each other's classrooms, we co-create professional development.

Bringing teachers from a developing country into suburban classrooms in the United States is a unique way to approach global professional development. In sharing our life worlds, we allow teachers from Belize to witness the good, the bad and the ugly moments of our own practice in our Colorado classrooms. This has influenced the nature and effects of our work together.

VN: How did the project begin? I'm particularly interested in the person, event or anything else that sparked the idea in your mind.

JK: It really started with a strange question. "Are you a male or a female? Jean could be a name for either," That's what the principal in Belize, Tharine Gabourel, asked in her first email to me in September of 2007. That was the first email I had received from this unknown principal in Belize. Somehow, it felt larger than the letters on the screen. My first trip to Belize in 2007 was with a friend of mine, who was a surgeon on a medical mission. The hospital administrator in Belize had given me the email address of a principal of a nearby school. It was through this email I connected with a school, a principal, and a handful of teachers near the hospital where the medical team was working. I had asked the principal if she "needed anything." As a gifted leader and advocate for her school, before she could get a response on my gender, Tharine described the needs of her school. She also asked, "Could you also please teach the teachers at my school how to teach reading."

That year I filled two fifty-pound suitcases with pencils and books and filled my heart with a sense of hope and purpose as I headed down to Belize with a medical team. Tharine met me at the airport. There was so much energy in the air between the two of us that it felt we could taste the electricity of what was unfolding. We unpacked and stacked the pencils, crayons, pens, markers, and books carefully in her living room together with her husband and four-year-old daughter looking on. A life-long connection was born and this cradle for our infant friendship was sturdy and warm. It foreshadowed a transformative relationship, which, during the next decade, would not only shift our own identities and practices, but those around us as well. Perhaps we were already beginning the process of creating new possibilities for who we could become as educators.

For my part, I knew I would remain in this community for a lifetime. I had spent the week reading alone with

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Published by Australian International Academic Centre PTY.LTD.

http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.8n.4p.100

students sitting on a rain tarp under a tree. I remember a particularly overwhelming sense of commitment wash over me as I stepped over some cinder blocks of a yet-to-be-built wall of a classroom. At that moment, I became sure of two things. First, I would be back. (This turned out to be true.) Second, I could teach every child in that school to read using the resources and strategies I had brought with me. (This morphed into different truths.)

At the end of that first visit in 2007, when I got back onto the plane, the emptiness of the suitcases spread to my own state of being. I was not finished. When I returned to business as usual in my first-grade classroom and suburban elementary school, Tharine's presence would not leave me. She seemed to be with me everywhere; my drive to school, every corner of the classroom, the library, and in my conversations about teaching reading with my colleagues in the United States. Tharine and I continued to talk and write through e-mail. I told her I would send more books. She was grateful and pushed me to explain how to organize and utilize so many books in a classroom.

I knew I had to invite her to Colorado. She belonged in this space with me. My family combined efforts to purchase Tharine's first airplane ticket to Colorado for my birthday. She left the tropics of Belize to join in me in Colorado that chilly January of 2008. Along with a photograph of her standing next to the thermometer reading 11 below zero, she also took pictures of my classroom books, my reading groups, the school library, and more. She came to know about a Colorado morning, which involved a cold drive to school clutching a hot cup of coffee. She came to know, and to fall in love with, my 7-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy. She helped inspire my other young daughters who dreamed of becoming teachers themselves. She came to know my family, my colleagues, and my life world. We were beginning to share our lives and our professions. I began to visualize the lifelong commitment to my colleagues in the classrooms of Belize. I co-founded Belize Education Project with other members of the medical mission, including a surgeon, Rebecca Knight, a nurse, Christine Robinson, and my own mother, Judy Denison and with another teacher, Shari Griffin, which became a non-profit organization in 2008.

VN: In a retrospect, if you could go back to the day you started the project, would you change anything about it?

JK: If I were to change how I approached this project as on the first day, I would have to transform into a person whom I later became. My first day, or my "call to adventure," might have had Joseph Campbell (1949) smiling to himself. Only once I had passed through the threshold of my first Belizean classroom doors, could I begin this work. I walked past this threshold with a complex positionality. At first, I simply considered myself an insider within this community of Belizean teachers. After all, I, too, am a teacher. As a first-grade teacher, like my colleagues, I, too, found joy and purpose in teaching young people to read and write, and to grow within our community. I, too, found value and importance in literacy and lifting my eyes to the future through the students placed in the stewardship of my classroom. In some senses, this positionality was foundational in becoming a committed ally to my Belizean brothers and sisters. This insider assumption of positionality led to my initial work, which involved gathering material resources, such as books and pencils, along with bringing programs for assessing and differentiating instruction for emergent readers. I believed this was to be my task.

It's painful and quite frankly, I am ashamed, to think back on the names given to my mentality at the time…I have heard "Lady Abundance," "Barbie Savior," or now what the millennials in the United States have coined "Karen" to describe what scholars like Teje Cole (2012) described as "the White Savior Industrial Complex." Whatever one calls this approach, it did not work. With my laser focus on bringing school supplies and on changing instructional practice to my own understanding of effective instructional strategies to teach reading, I would have at the very least expected practice to change. Not so. Small instructional gains we had made early in our work had plateaued. I was missing something. Something big. It was time for a shift. I needed direction.

With mentors, both in Belize and in the United States, I walked right into the abyss of my own identity crisis as a white American woman. In this space, long held deeply sedimented assumptions had to be upended. My assumptions of what knowledge was valuable, who held that knowledge, and who held the power had to die and new co-created assumptions had to be born alongside my colleagues.

As much as I cherished my role as an insider, I discovered I was an outsider as well. As an outsider, my education had been delivered to me with ease and with an unwavering assumption that it belonged to me as a birthright. The economic and personal realities of a resource-rich life in the United States created perspectives and assumptions that will always be a part of me. While my work may be permanently bound to viewing my colleagues' lives through this lens, transformation of assumptions could be, (and were) in store for me.

This space in which I began this work, that is, in this intense focus on Belizean teachers' instructional strategies, caused me to ignore key things that actually mattered to these teachers. I had dismissed who these educators were. I had ignored their lives, their desires, and the challenges of their own human experience. If I wanted more attention on teaching reading, I found that I needed to attend more to the reading teacher. Ironically, early in our work, Tharine had been inspired and had trusted me with my use of the word "solidarity." In fact, an article that had been published early in my work in *Kappan* had even been titled "From Charity to Solidarity" (Fry, 2012). Yet in reality, in this early paradigm of mine, I had to question - where was the solidarity?

I began to consider what effort I was making to know and to connect, not with the instructional practice, but with the humanity of those who deliver instruction? This abyss, this death of old assumptions, led me to the epiphany in which I began to understand, that building relationships had to be central to this work. To co-create effective and sustainable professional development, my colleagues in Belize, along with my colleagues in the United States, would have to become deeply committed allies. To do this, we would all have to become vulnerable. We would need to work toward decolonizing pedagogies, and in this, be deliberate in our

dialogue, in sharing our life stories, and in sharing our life worlds. I would have to come to really know who Tharine and her colleagues were. What had their journeys been? Who were these women and men who held the potential of these young Belizean learners in the palms of their hands? What had they been through to get to this sacred space of a classroom? What would happen if I became vulnerable enough to travel with these teachers as they traversed that rugged trek again in retelling it to me? What if they became vulnerable enough to take me back on that arduous voyage? What kind of comrade could they trust me to be?

With these hazy realizations, the work of building my relationships with Tharine, and with all the educators I worked with, became deliberate. I shifted my focus from changing instructional practice, to building a sense of solidarity, to more deeply connecting with each other as mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters, and sons, and yes, as imperfect, yet committed teachers. I wondered if an important shift could occur if we ALL became vulnerable and if we ALL became available for transformation. Only in this way, as truly collaborative partners with genuine and abiding relationships, could we begin to help our students become more successful, more critical readers and writers. Here the transformation occurred.

Could we have all started with this paradigm on the first day? I believe the first day began an incredible journey of transcending our old assumptions, old identities, and even old practices. As we all returned back to our focus on enhancing instruction for our shared students, we carried new gifts of understanding and a newly co-created space, in which we held more equal footing, more trust, and more capacity to reach the shared future stewards of our collective global civilization.

VN: You have certainly experienced many inspiring stories ever since you set off the journey of this project. Would you mind sharing one with us?

JK: Watercolors, flying white boards, and song! I actually have THREE stories that changed the course of our identities and our work forever. These three moments in time began to shift our old and deeply held assumptions of who owned the knowledge, the power, and the wisdom of not only classroom practice, but the human experience.

I recall a particular moment in which I was modeling a lesson in Belize for an Infant 2 class (6-year-olds) in front of a group of Belizean teachers. My intent was to demonstrate the importance of extending both the author's and illustrator's craft. I planned to use a mentor text and watercolors to engage students. I was still becoming familiar with the classrooms in Belize. Although I knew there was no running water, I had never experienced, nor even considered, the implications of watercolors and 6-year-olds without running water or an endless supply of school-provided paper towels. With my water bottle in tow, I poured a couple of tablespoons into a lid for each child. Soon, colored water was all over wooden desks, little hands, and faces. My heart raced. I knew what it took for their uniforms to be clean for the rest of the week without washing machines. I turned around to see every one of the Belizean teachers who had been observing me, as the expert on delivering effective literacy strategies, jump up to save me from myself. Each one of them found the rationed amount of tissue they had in their own pockets and mopped up my mess. In the end, we all looked at each other; laughed; shook our heads; and we began talking about what had just happened. This shared moment, the dialogue that came as a result of it, and yes, the laughter too, began to trouble years of sedimented assumptions we held about each other's positionality, authority, ability, strengths, failings, and simple humanity.

The second story takes place in my own first-grade classroom. Perhaps, even more courageous than allowing ourselves, as teachers from the United States, to be vulnerable in the space of the Belizean classroom, was in opening up our classrooms to our Belizean colleagues. It was in those moments when we allowed the Belizean teachers to witness our life work in the nitty-gritty and messy everydayness of how we teach. It was there Belizean teachers could witness our greatest shortcomings right along with our triumphs. It was there we were completely exposed. One particularly transformative event occurred in 2018 when Eve witnessed an exceptionally trying moment while observing me teach in my Colorado classroom. One of my most behaviorally challenging students, who at the time was being diagnosed with Obsessive Defiance Disorder, was engaging in some especially problematic behaviors, including shouting and throwing white boards across the room. The school psychologist, one of the school district behavior specialists, Eve, and I were all trying desperately to meet the needs of not only this child, but the rest of the children in the classroom at this moment, but to no avail. When the moment had passed and the children had left for the day, Eve and I cried together. It was another moment of truth. No longer could this Belizean teacher believe educators in the United States had all the answers to the challenges we face. Eve recalled this moment later that evening after we had all prepared and enjoyed dinner together and sat down for a focus group conversation:

I identified with you because I have been through that. I have been there, so I know. At first I thought, they are Americans. They have everything under control. They don't have to worry. They have counselors, special needs teachers; they are all set. And now that I see the class that you have, I kind of say, "We don't have counselors, or anything like that, but we go through the same thing." Even though you have counselors and all those people who help you, you suffer what we suffer without the counselor. I could see that it hurt you because you wanted to meet his needs. (Eve, personal communication [focus group], April 4, 2018).

It changed who we (me and my colleagues at the table) thought we were as teachers; it changed our relationships; and it changed our capacity for self-reflection about our own practices.

Upon hearing Eve during the focus group, Tharine responded with similar thoughts, along with her own realization that, even though teachers in the United States have abundant resources, we don't always have answers to the problems we face:

When I hear about that moment in Jean's classroom, it makes me know for a fact that our hearts are united because we all deal with children and their common problems. The

thing is that sometimes we depend on you to see how you are going to solve the problem... like for you to model it for us to take it back to our country. But then again, you are a teacher, you are a colleague, we are human. (Tharine, personal communication [focus group], April 4, 2018).

Tharine's comment reflected the fact that Belizean educators typically assume that educators from the United States have better and more effective answers to issues like behavior. Among other things, her comments reflect an emerging understanding that we do not; that we struggle too.

The third story further indexes how our sedimented assumptions about not only who owned what knowledge, but also what knowledge had value, began to shift. We began to examine assumptions about how we show up in each other's lives, and in how we express our existences not only to ourselves, but to those around us. We began to think more intentionally about our voices. As an educated, white, middle-class woman, my understanding of self-expression, or ensuring I had a "seat at the table," involved expressing my mind and my soul through the articulate use of spoken and written language. My hope, of course, was to offer my Belizean colleagues and their students better and more sophisticated ways of articulating themselves. To me, being in solidarity with them meant that they, too, should have a "seat at the table," that they, too, should have their voices heard in a global conversation about education. I am ashamed to admit that I believed my own voice was more than well developed - at least until my Belizean colleagues challenged this belief.

Every teacher who traveled with the *Belize Education Project* to Belize noticed and commented upon the fact that the Belizean teachers (and students) sang often, and with such a soul stirring execution, that it took our breath away. It did not occur to us that this may be their voice, that this may be a primary way they express their own experiences and announce their existences to this world. As Americans, we nodded, even teared up, in appreciation for this expression, but never took part in it. Song belonged to them, not us. We could not begin to be so bold as to believe the beauty and power of song could be ours too. We thought or assumed that high levels of musical production belonged to those who had had years of musical training.

In the evening of April 6, 2018, we sat at my kitchen table in Colorado, a couple of the Belizean teachers broke into song, as usual. As usual, I listened and appreciated it... They stopped, and asked, as they had before, why I wasn't singing. I explained, as I had before, that I am "not a singer." This time was different though. This time, they didn't let it go. What did I mean by "not a singer?" they asked. We discussed this some more. It became apparent I may as well have told them, "I have no voice." The word "voice" came up over and over. I recall they implored me to try; they promised, "Jean, we know you, too, can find your voice." I had never viewed singing as part of "my voice." I shakily tried. I felt foolish and vulnerable, but they were unrelenting. It was a beginning.

Later that year, in October, on the first day our American team sat for lunch crowding around a singular and welcome fan. Asa and Mabel showed up with lyrics to a hymn printed out for us. They informed the teachers from the United States that we were all going to sing in harmony for the farewell lunch. They promised to teach us, support us, and not leave our sides in what for us was a frightening undertaking. We resisted them. We explained, again, that we were "not singers." And again, the two teachers who had initially broken into song promised us that they would help us "find our voice." They enlisted Noah and Mathias to help. The four teachers pushed through not only our perception that we were not singers, but even more importantly, they pushed through the lack of value we had put on singing. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, they pushed through our fear of vulnerability. Some teachers from the United States used humor to deflect their plea to become vulnerable, "Ha, ha… trust me, nobody wants to be around when I sing." However, the Belizean teachers were not having it. It was not humorous to them. This potential for self-expression was dead serious. And in the end, we, who were not singers, sang…in harmony, no less. We sang in front of all of the teachers from all of the schools. In doing this, who held what knowledge, what knowledge was of value, and who got to be in charge of deciding that, was upended for a small, but very significant moment.

VN: What is your biggest dream about this project?

JK: Although my colleagues and I have made progress in becoming committed allies, we still have a long way to go. This effort has taught me that working toward more humanizing approaches to relationship building and collaboration across cultural lines of difference will be part of my work for a lifetime. My dream is that my colleagues in Belize and in the United States continue to work in this newly co-created space towards more effective strategies to teach reading, continuously coming to better understand each other, and in that process, better understand effective instructional strategies.

Understanding that the residual effects of colonization are not going away any time soon, I hold a broader dream - that professional developers of teachers across the globe can use this example to construct transformative professional development for classroom teachers across cultural lines of difference

My hope is that our work together can be a testimony to the power of collective struggle and triumph through dialogue, sharing life stories, and sharing life worlds to build an increasingly committed, knowledgeable, and united teaching coalition that will shape our shared future in an increasingly complex, globalized, connected, transcultural world.

VN: How can our readers contribute to your project?

JK: *"Whether through democracy, strong public education, quality health care, or broad economic opportunity – **reducing inequity is the highest human achievement."** (Gates 2007)*

As I reflect on how, or who, or when any of us choose to contribute, I am moved by the above statement from Bill Gates's address to Harvard graduates in 2007. Impacting the education of young students in Belize can be one of those "highest human achievements." When I consider the quality of those who are reading the *International Journal for*

Education and Literacy Studies, I draw on the words of Gates as he continued to talk to that collection of intellectual talent gathered in the Harvard Yard:

"Should our best minds be dedicated to solving our biggest problems? Should the world's most privileged people consider the lives of the world's least privileged? These are not rhetorical questions – you will answer with your actions. When you consider what those of us here in this Yard have been given – in talent, privilege, and opportunity – *there is almost no limit to what the world has a right to expect from us."* (Gates, 2007**).**

With those words resonating in my head, I am clear that one way that we can address inequity is simply through monetary donations. We recognize that where the money flows is precisely where one finds power. Every time monetary resources are directed to the education of these learners of Belize, we know we are collectively building their power and their capacity to find their voice, to impact their own communities, and in the process, our shared civilization.

The schools we work with certainly need material resources. Specifically, as our colleagues prepare to meet the needs of COVID requirements this fall, their schools need to install sinks and plumbing. In addition to the structural needs of their classrooms, the lack of materials such as classroom books, pencils, pens, etc. are a continuous barrier to instruction. Finally, without funding, the education for a majority of Belizeans ends at the completion of primary school. In other words, they cannot continue their education past the age of twelve or thirteen years old. With a sponsorship through *Belize Education Project*, a young person can attend high school. Readers can sponsor a high school student. Information on contributing monetarily to Belize Education Project is found on our webpage.

In addition to a monetary contribution, there is the gift of skills, passion, and time. We welcome educators to travel with us next October (2021) to work side by side with these unbelievable teachers in their classrooms. Our collective vision, expertise, and passion for teaching young learners is what Wenger (2002) describes as a "force to be reckoned with." We believe that is exactly what we are. We invite others who share our yearning for connections and for lifting lives through literacy to join us.

I conclude this critical question about the possibility of contributing to this work with Gates's (2007) own concluding remarks to that same group in Harvard:

"I hope you will judge yourselves not only on your professional accomplishments, but also on how well you have addressed the world's deepest inequities … on how well you treated people a world away who have nothing in common with you but their humanity." (Gates, 2007).

I believe we have an opportunity through the *Belize Education Project* to meet our highest human achievement.

VN: Is there anything that you have always wanted to tell someone but you have not and now you wish to use this platform to say it?

JK: Stranger danger. It's real. I don't often talk about the courage it takes to truly invite "Others" into our consciousness, into the midst of our fragile identity in order to be transformed. Make no mistake. There is death in that.

I rarely speak of the enormous courage required from myself and from my colleagues. The journey of transformation that my Belizean colleagues and I took required all of us to give up at least some of what we have spent a lifetime coming to know and believe as true. In that sense it required some death as we willingly gave up part of ourselves. The process of giving up old and beloved parts of our previous selves in exchange for new understandings and perspectives which we did not yet know was terrifying – and reasonably so. These new ideas from each other or "the stranger" in our midst also required that we acknowledge the possibility that the "stranger could overpower us rather than empower us" (Heubner, 1923/2008, p. 363). To be clear, when I use the word "stranger," I am referring not only to new people we are meeting, but also the different ideas and assumptions of these new people that we have invited into our consciousness.

In this invitation, we had to reconfigure sedimented assumptions and practices gradually, often mundanely, often unnoticed, but always with undaunting courage. What audacity it took to experience a multitude of "deaths" so that we might become more! I rarely discuss this, nor do I do not dismiss this.

And yet, we did. How did we find this courage? Perhaps it was our desire and our ability to transform, which I believe to be one of humanity's greatest capacities. But perhaps, more truly, I think the answer lay in each other. We were not alone in these tumultuous waters of transformation. In this regard, Heubner (1923/2008) claimed, that with deepened relationships comes hope and that "new creation is possible. Old forms can be transcended" (p. 350). We were mutually changed, as one of my Belizean colleagues Eve declared: "We have changed you. You have changed us" (Eve, person-al communication, [focus group], January 8, 2020). Risking ourselves to become more than what we were was, perhaps, made possible through our connections, our deepened rela-tionships, and our shared community.

This process was messy, and at times, emotionally reckless. Yet, I think we believed we could endure the raw vulnerability of transformation because we had become deeply connected. In other words, we had become a community where vulnerability could be endured in our newly created space of care and support. In this, I wonder if we were able to transcend previous forms of who we were, and in that process, we were able to collectively create new imagined worlds and try to make them realities. We were able to imagine our instructional practices within today's classrooms not only for our own future, but also greater possibilities for humanity.

The claim of transcendence became ours, as we were members of our shared community, and maybe even as members of the family of humankind. As teachers of our students and of each other, too, we also held Freire's (2005) claim it is "impossible to teach without the courage to love" (p. 5). With tremendous courage, we transformed. We were able to do that because we knew that as we experienced fear and vulnerability, we still "loved" one another, and we were (and are) still learning.

Yes, we have experienced a multitude of "deaths" so that we might become more. Even in the celebration of our new

selves, we still walk with doubt and with disappointment that we are still not our best selves and that we still inhabit an imperfect world.

Yes, we are still afraid of transformation.

Yes, we still search for courage.

Yes, stranger danger is still real.

Yes, there is still death in that.

And yet… in that understanding*, together*, we *still* embark on the courageous work of transformation.

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