

“I Saw the World Around Us Changing... and I Wanted More”:

Examining the Figured Worlds of Experienced Teachers Seeking to Transform Teaching Practices

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ABSTRACT

Transforming teaching practices can be regarded as a complex process. Using Holland et al.'s (1998) figured world concepts of cultural artifacts, discourse, and identity, this article explores the journey of five experienced teachers as they seek to shift their classroom practices from traditional methods to inquiry-based teaching. Findings from this study discuss what happens when experienced teachers let go of traditional teaching expectations and reimagine new teacher identities. This article concludes with implications about the versatility of identity theories to both study and facilitate teacher transformation and its impact on teacher professional development.

KEYWORDS

design-based research, figured worlds, transformative teaching, teacher identity, middle level education, secondary education

“I was just wanting to seek change. I saw the world around us changing and, you know, what I do doesn't make sense anymore, and I wanted more.... but I didn't really know how to do that.”

This quote, stated by Suzie, an experienced middle school English teacher in central Illinois, captures the professional crossroads moment that birthed the teacher-created, grassroots group “Teacher Church.” Originally formed in the fall of 2019 as a focus group for exploring inquiry-based practices, the group's purpose shifted rapidly under the weight of COVID-19, school closures, and social unrest. Coined “Teacher Church” by the participants based on their regular Sunday meeting and general restorative nature, the space became a sanctuary where educators could process the world around them while figuring out how to return to their classrooms equipped for meaningful, critical conversations with their students.

Initially, the group sought to disrupt the traditional “grammar of schooling”—pedagogical habits characterized by teacher-led lectures, standardized pacing guides, and the compartmentalization of literacy into isolated, testable skills. While we began with a desire to move away from these safe, coverage-based routines, the challenges of 2020 accelerated our focus. We moved from simply “doing school” to investigating how to engage in inquiry that reflected the real-world complexities our students were navigating in real-time.

For the participants in this group—including myself—historical priorities no longer aligned with the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of our students. Our previous practices relied heavily on predetermined curricular sequences and assessments designed to measure compliance rather than deep understanding. Teacher Church emerged from a collective desire to replace these restrictive approaches with student-centered practices that positioned learners as questioners, researchers, and agents capable of engaging with the contemporary social issues shaping their lived experiences.

Rather than focusing on the fears often associated with justice-oriented teaching—such as administrative pushback or community resistance—this study asks a different set of questions: What happens when experienced teachers intentionally relinquish instructional control to invite student inquiry? How do educators learn to design experiences that privilege depth over coverage and dialogue over delivery? And what kinds of professional structures support teachers as they navigate the risks inherent in transforming their practice? Grounded in Holland et al. (1998) figured worlds framework, this study examines how experienced teachers shifted toward inquiry-based, justice-oriented pedagogy—and how this transformation fundamentally reshaped their professional identities.



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MAKING A CASE FOR CHANGE

Adolescents in today's classrooms seek to discuss, understand, and disrupt instances of injustice (Watts et al., 2011). To support this development, it is essential that classrooms serve as sites for lived experiences that invite students to break down perceptions and read the world through a critical lens (Freire, 1970). Freire's critical pedagogy (1978) reminds educators of their vital responsibility to help students recognize their power to take action in efforts to seek justice. Meeting these student needs requires educators to re-evaluate their established teaching practices and seek transformation through a commitment to new, inquiry-based pedagogies.

While these foundational theories remain vital, recent scholarship emphasizes that for experienced teachers, transformation is a deeply emotional and political process of "re-authoring" the professional self (Aguilar, 2020; Muhammad, 2020). Despite the desire to engage in justice-oriented work, many educators feel isolated within district initiatives that prioritize performative metrics and high-stakes testing over transformative growth (Fullan, 2020; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). This "professional isolation" is often the root of resistance and fear, rather than a lack of motivation. Consequently, sustaining long-term change requires moving beyond traditional Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) toward "Transformative PLCs" that prioritize social justice pedagogy and allow teachers to explore the "extrarational and emotional" dimensions of their work (Vescio & Adams, 2021).

For many experienced teachers, traditional professional development structures feel forced and unsupported (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012; Spelman & Rohling, 2013). Engaging in sustaining, long-term change takes time, as professionals must explore their own understandings to draw authentic conclusions. Mezirow and Taylor (2009) argue that transformative learning involves extrarational, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that go beyond simple modifications in thinking. Instead, this process requires a fundamental shift in identity—characterized by new ways of feeling and acting (Cain, 1991; Meyer & Land, 2005; Sfar & Prusak, 2005). Through this identity shift, teachers gain the agency to re-evaluate and "remake" their practices. By engaging in dialogue and analysis, educators can move toward a new paradigm that replaces compliance with student-centered inquiry.

STUDY OVERVIEW

Throughout the 2019-2020 school year, participants for this study were recruited through purposeful sampling within an established professional network of educators in central Illinois who had previously expressed interest in implementing the inquiry-based framework (Seglem & Bonner, 2022). While many were colleagues or professional acquaintances, the selection criteria focused on "experienced" status (minimum 7 years in the classroom) and a self-identified readiness to disrupt traditional curricular boundaries. No participants were "rejected"; rather, the final group of five (Table 1) represented those who could commit to the framework implementation.

Seglem and Bonner's (2022) framework invites students to read a whole-class novel, participate in a series of activities that help students think about the social issues within the book, and ask questions about those issues. Student questions are collected and

used to generate overarching research topics. Collaborative student groups choose an area of focus and support various interests with additional research. As students complete their research, groups continue their inquiries by producing an awareness campaign that integrates a variety of media. Considering this production, the use of inquiry within this framework can be situated as inquiry as disruption. Collaborative student groups not only construct authentic media campaigns that cultivate awareness on social justice-related topics inspired by the initial class text, but they also have the potential to cause disruption to both their personal beliefs and the beliefs of the community.

Table 1: Teacher Participants, Grade Level/Positions, Years in the Profession, School Teaching Context, and Classroom Texts Selected During this Study

Participant	Grade Level/Position	Years in the Profession	School Name	Classroom Texts Selected During this Study
Jim	10-12 High School English	10	River Valley Junior/Senior High School	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> (Lee, 1960)
Ryan	9-12 High School Social Science	7	River Valley Junior/Senior High School	<i>Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases</i> (Wells, 1892)
Greg	7th grade Social Science	14	Eastview Junior High School	<i>Internment</i> (Ahmed, 2018)
Suzie	7th grade Reading	25	Eastview Junior High School	<i>Internment</i> (Ahmed, 2018)
Winnie	8th grade Literature	7	Oak Hills Junior High School	<i>Maybe He Just Likes You</i> (Dee, 2019)

Grounded in design-based research (DBR), this study invited teachers and researchers to co-construct and collaborate throughout the framework's implementation (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Reinking & Bradley, 2008). DBR is interventionist in nature, allowing teachers to not only implement the framework but to collaboratively rethink their existing practices through the lens of this new experience (Bakker, 2019). The research followed three distinct DBR cycles during the 2019-2020 year:

Cycle 1 (Fall 2019): Initial implementation within physical classroom spaces.

Cycle 2 (Winter 2020, Jan–Feb): Transition to collaborative artifact construction, with teachers meeting every three weeks to co-construct digital archives and share feedback.

Cycle 3 (Spring 2020, March–May): An interventionist pivot in response to COVID-19 closures. Collaboration increased to weekly "Teacher Church" Zoom sessions, allowing the study to explore how teachers renegotiated their identities during a period of extreme systemic dissonance.

The data for this analysis came from teacher reflections, interview transcripts between teachers and the researcher, and transcripts of collaborative online discussions between participants. Teachers met regularly using Zoom to collaborate and participate in discussions centered around the progress of implementing the inquiry framework. However, as schools shifted to remote learning throughout March 2020, teachers collectively decided to meet weekly rather than only every three weeks. This weekly Teacher Church meeting tied directly to design-based research as teachers approached the problem of feeling disconnected around this work



and developed a solution that allowed them to meet more frequently and collaboratively.

Teachers participating in these regularly scheduled online meetings spent an average of an hour to an hour and a half discussing their thoughts with one another.

In addition to these dialogues, teachers constructed a shared Google Drive archive of planning materials such as unit guides, culminating projects, and supplementary texts to support inquiry-based teaching. These artifacts, along with reflexive researcher notes, were coded in multiple cycles (Saldaña, 2009). The coding process focused on factors influencing learning design (e.g., administration, community), shared mindsets of teachers seeking change, and the specific challenges faced when new ideas pushed against established practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study utilized the "figured worlds" theoretical framework (Holland et al., 1998) to examine the transformative shifts in middle and high school teachers' professional practices. This framework posits that social worlds—and the cultural artifacts and discourses within them—actively shape an individual's identity. The findings illustrate how participants' identities evolved as they moved away from traditional "banking" models of education, where knowledge is static and deposited into students, and toward a co-constructed model of learning rooted in inquiry. Specifically, the data reveal how teachers' positionality (their perceived roles), their "space for authoring" (the internal negotiation of new practices), and their engagement in "world-making" (the reimagining of professional actions) were fundamentally reshaped throughout this process.

Cultural artifacts

Text selections. While student interest and canonical requirements often drive the decision-making process among classroom teachers, text selections in this study served as the primary cultural artifacts that sparked transformative inquiry. For teachers like Winnie, moving beyond the "traditional" scope of ELA meant selecting texts that served as catalysts for criticality rather than mere comprehension. This autonomy allowed her to transition from a curriculum of "coverage"—finishing a novel by a certain date—to a curriculum of "discovery," where student questioning dictated the year-long trajectory of learning. Winnie reflected on how this shift invited new ideas into her practice:

"I'm thinking about like as we move forward into like next year how would the conversations and inquiries go around the novels if [I] started the year with a unit like this versus, you know, ending the year because I'm thinking a little more critically about the books we're reading because there's a need to explore more."

Winnie's experience served as a catalyst for what she could do in Language Arts beyond simple reading. By thinking broadly about the nature and ambiguity of her students' conversations, she was able to "mantle" her students' voices, discovering their thinking and affording them the autonomy needed to engage in critical work. And, ultimately, seeing the positive implications of doing this work as a foundation to the school year rather than a final capstone.

Even within the constraints of mandated curricula, transformation remained possible. Jim, restricted by the requirement to teach Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), began to view

the text not as a static artifact of the past, but as a bridge to contemporary social issues currently facing students. While he lacked the autonomy to select his texts, he started to think differently about his ability to implement them:

"So, I think there's this notion of school where we're going to come in and read *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) or we're going to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). I don't think there's anything wrong with reading classics, but I do think that there's so much room to read texts that our kids relate to and to read texts that are based on their world."

As Jim grappled with these constraints, he saw an opportunity to make contemporary connections. Being a part of Teacher Church allowed him to engage with peers already implementing justice-oriented frameworks, acknowledging that transformation within an established practice is possible when one is invited to think differently about required texts.

Expanding learning communities. Teachers who seek to transform their teaching practices want to engage in practices or strategies that allow students to be in the driver's seats of their own learning. From implementing other inquiry-based frameworks to discussions to alternative research practices, teachers willing to transform exhibit a drive that, as Greg states, "goes beyond surface learning like worksheets and packets." The nature of the inquiry-based framework that began this project invited teachers to examine social issues that existed in real life. From this examination, teachers started thinking more broadly about their learning communities.

Channeling experts throughout the community proved to be an important centerpiece to teacher participants. As teachers nurtured authentic student questioning, the need to integrate more perspectives into the learning context became prevalent. Suzie and her students read Samira Ahmed's *Internment* (2018). Bigger themes throughout that young adult novel related to immigration, racism, religious intolerance, and resistance. While Suzie had years of experience working with middle school readers, she acknowledged that she needed to broaden her community and bring in voices that could help speak to these bigger themes. She stated:

"I was inspired to bring in more outside community members and additional resources that lent itself to that [her students'] thinking...I can't presume to be the one and only expert in the classroom when doing work like this."

Making this discovery and seeking outside community members as a solution to support her teaching sparked a change that invited Suzie to see the benefits of broadening her classroom space. As Suzie made this discovery, Jim, too, shared his thoughts about expanding the boundaries of his classroom. In his interview, he noted:

"I need to realize that my classroom is not an island - I think an evolution is happening slowly but surely now that we're getting away from the repeated recognition of facts and phrases to trying to get real world questioning."

Inquiry allowed Jim to reflect on his practice in a sense that made him rethink his space out of necessity. He recognized that he needed other experts to help support his students' questions and in-class discussions. Jim saw value in creating a space for other voices to be present. Additionally, as he considered incorporating outside community members into his teaching practices, he also acknowledged that past practices - such as teacher-centered lectures and rote memorization-based questioning - felt outdated and ineffective. This dialogue provided an insight into the criticality and

analysis of teachers' needs to entertain new ways of transforming their practices.

In addition, an emphasis on a broadly defined sense of community appeared within the data among the teacher participants. For teachers like Greg, Jim, and Ryan, the class community became a cornerstone to the work they did with their students. To safely and effectively discuss topical issues in their classrooms, they focused on building a community of trust. To build these communities, these teachers engaged their students in a variety of Socratic discussions, collaborative research experiences, and questioning techniques. The investment these teachers placed in their own classroom communities not only mantled students as experts but also in Greg's words - fostered a "we not I" mindset in learning.

Teachers in this study became highly aware that this work went above their knowledge and expertise. The social issues students addressed in the classrooms went beyond their own knowledge and identities and invited a shift in teacher positioning by learning alongside their students. Greg and Suzie collaborated to expand their community by infusing community experts into their lesson designs. From the integration of TED talks to in-person interviews, Greg and Suzie redefined community for their students by providing opportunities to expand voices and perspectives around the topics their students cared about. After participating in the inquiry framework and seeing this emphasis take shape in their classrooms, Greg and Suzie shifted their thinking on the role of community and furthered this work throughout their school year. While it is not the focus of this study, Greg and Suzie's experience inspired a sustaining change to their ongoing practice in connection to integrating community by designing units like the initial inquiry framework.

Classroom spaces. Thinking about their purpose with students first rather than prioritizing texts or topics can offer an opportunity to expand learning in a way that makes it more authentic for the learner. In connection with community spaces, teachers also emphasized physical spaces. Understanding creating physical space for his students in an inquiry framework, Greg spoke about the physical changes he made to his classroom to better support his students. While he had tables and chairs in his classroom prior to the experience, he noted how he took down the collapsible wall that separated spaces and rearranged classroom furniture to support student collaborations, varied group work related to research, and to network more with Suzie, his team colleague. In the same conversation, Suzie saw the need for change in physical spaces and resources for her classroom, as well. However, when speaking about her classroom, she discussed potential barriers before starting her work with inquiry. In her interview she stated:

"I'm very interested but I'm just kind of hung up on the logistics of getting started...the current school system, the parents, the administration are all there, too, and the resources that we have are you know fairly well set, so how can we overcome these difficulties to really bring inquiry into the classroom."

For many experienced teachers, this work stops before it even begins because of the barriers that Suzie acknowledged in her interview, especially when it comes to classroom resources. Suzie and Greg both noted many physical needs their classroom lacked and were unsure of how to secure these resources as they pushed against the materials already provided from their school. Teachers who have regular experience with inquiry understand that the nature of this work is not straightforward as it embodies authentic student questioning and student-driven action. To support students, space

must also be created as well. However, as teachers first enter inquiry-based teaching, the fear of the unknown can be enough to discourage work like this with students. As Suzie touched upon this briefly, she also demonstrated the desire to rethink and seek solutions to these barriers as she committed to leaning into this work with her students, especially in connection with the needs of her classroom space.

Experienced teachers like these participants often thought of space as a barrier. Prior to entering this study, many of the teacher participants focused on time - reading a novel at a certain time of year, being on time and pace with other colleagues, or having the amount of time to cover material within a designated school year. However, as student-driven practices and inquiry came to the forefront of their work, their focus on time pivoted toward a focus on space. Greg and Suzie created a physical space where they rearranged their schedules to co-teach their lessons to facilitate their learners' experiences together.

Discourse

Holland et al. (1998) describe discourse as the mechanism through which participants process cultural artifacts, institutional expectations, and interpersonal roles. For the teachers in this study, a fundamental shift in discourse occurred across three primary areas: 1) the role of students, 2) outlooks on failure, and 3) the purpose of assessment.

Role of students. The implementation of the inquiry as disruption framework (Seglem & Bonner, 2022) fundamentally challenged the teachers' established professional identities. Initially, the discourse was teacher-driven; however, adopting a justice-oriented framework required a deliberate decentralization of authority. Jim described this transition as "giving them the driver's seat," a process that created significant professional friction. He grappled with the tension between his past role as the "sole expert" and his new role as a facilitator:

"I'm trying to get more towards that path of giving them [his students] the driver's seat but it is hard...I mean some really struggle with these questions or they don't want to ask a question because they'll be like "well this is a stupid question" but it's really a not... it might be a lower level question but you gotta start there to get to the deeper stuff and some of them don't want to share and I want to help them, like, do it for them sometimes but I know I can't."

For Jim, giving up control meant that he needed to commit to his students doing the work regardless of the outcome. His concern for quality experiences among his students challenged him to rethink his role as a facilitator in his classroom. As much as teachers like Jim want to protect their students from those moments when they may not be confident in their questioning abilities, students can also learn from these moments the more times they engage in questioning practices. While Jim wanted to help his students in times where his students demonstrated struggle, he resisted. Not only does Jim provide insight on how hard it is to shift the roles of teachers and students in a classroom, but he also takes it a step further by acknowledging the resistance he had to maintain to allow his students to learn from these experiences.

Student-driven practices do not come naturally to students. Working within this framework, teachers concluded through their discussions that students both needed more support than they anticipated as well as more practice with this type of inquiry-based thinking. Greg and Suzie's co-taught experience using *Interment*



(2018) invited students to create their own questions and then to progress a step further by folding those questions into an action-based project. From this stance, there was a definite shift in student power and ownership within the learning space. Not only did Greg and Suzie ask students to design their own questions, but there was a sense of dependency on those questions to use throughout their research and drive their student-designed projects. Greg spoke about his students in this role by saying:

"I think one of the things that I thought was really really cool in the unit was when we got to the phase when the kids started making their projects... There was a lot of work that the kids had done to get to that point but, you know, you get to the end and it's relatively open ended and I was really impressed with how a lot of the kids really found something that was of interest to them."

While the young adult novel presented concrete themes such as religious intolerance, racism, and rebellion, Greg was surprised by the variant studies his students were inspired to work on because of the learning experience. An example of this being a student's interest in climate change - specifically looking at how youth can be empowered to evoke real change. Shifting that role of students in this experience, Greg and Suzie were able to see their students broaden their curiosities and explore issues that took them beyond the initial unit of study. This empowerment reshaped how Greg used class time; instead of delivering content, he pivoted to conferencing with students, allowing him to tailor instruction to their specific needs.

Failure. As the data supports, teachers shared similar mindsets when engaged in inquiry. These mindsets were identified as celebrating failure and staying connected to supportive communities. In many classrooms, the term "failure" often correlates with punitive consequences. Yet, for teachers in this study, failure became a celebration among themselves and their students. Teachers viewed failure as a sense of being uncomfortable, trying new things, and a willingness to fail in front of their students and classroom shareholders.

Ryan described failure as "something that makes him uncomfortable but you've gotta go for it." For him, it was a humanizing component in his classroom. Having a mindset that celebrated failure provided unspoken permission to his students that they could do the same to learn from those moments. By modeling this mindset, Ryan wanted his students to embrace this feeling of being uncomfortable and coached his students on how to positively respond. Additionally, Greg noted that failure was a "healthy addiction." Comparing his mindset on failure to stand-up comedians, Greg thrived on failure because it made his work with students stronger. Failure allowed him to rethink why and how he was constructing learning experiences for his students. And, like Ryan, he, too, wanted to exhibit a sense of modeling for his students that offered a way for them to see adults grapple with failure.

Seeing failure as a learning opportunity rather than an outcome to be punished became a mindset that many of the experienced teachers faced when working with their students. As Jim continued coaching his students toward this mindset shift, it was hard to conceptualize himself. He, too, needed help with failing. When Jim decided that he wanted to incorporate the inquiry framework into his work with his high school juniors, he realized that the number of texts he had worked with in the past were too many if he wanted to go deeper into the material with his students. Afraid that he was going to fail by not covering the prescribed number of texts for junior year English, he needed support in taking risks because he equated

failure with the possibility of losing his job. To work past this sense of failure, he spoke about needing a safety net. Jim noted:

"I think the fact that I was tenured at the end of last spring gave me a little more freedom. I'm sure freedom was there before that - but this is just kind of like a little safety net."

While Greg saw failure in his own teaching context in front of students as a healthy experience, Jim was cautious. While he encouraged his own students to construct their own questions, discover facts independently, and formulate their own personal viewpoints, Jim's own personal hesitation to fail resulted in growing doubt. Teachers like Jim and Ryan admittedly wanted to change their practices for quite some time; however, were only prompted to act when they achieved tenure in their school. Citing that they both felt "safe and secure" in their positions as classroom teachers, they were more comfortable trying new practices with their students because of the positive relationships they had with their administrators and strong connection they had with their students' families in their communities.

Grades. Experienced teachers in this study faced a crossroads that challenged their previous practices and sparked a new perspective on students facing issues within their communities. Greg discussed this shift in his students' thinking as he highlighted the "superficial nature of school vs. what the real-world demands" when he addressed the need for integrating social issues in his classroom. He noted that he observed a tension between school and learning and, while he "couldn't change the entire school experience for students, he can change what he does in his classroom to make it more relevant." The need to incorporate social issues in the classroom became a shared belief among the participants. However, within this shift to empower students and rethink the learning community, traditional grading practices came into question throughout this study as well.

Winnie spoke about assessment, grades, and feedback. Her school implemented standards-based grading two years prior to this study. Winnie and her department constructed shared rubrics, and as part of her practice, she had to implement these rubrics into her work with students. When Winnie and her students began working with the inquiry framework, they were able to read their class novel and cultivate questions and research topics. Winnie noted that while she continued to use prescribed rubrics mandated by her department, she felt the need to both invite students to self-assess their work as well as provide more feedback due to the nature of the work.

Greg and Winnie witnessed their students owning so much of their learning that practices like percentages and rubrics did not equate to the needs of their students at the time. They both noted the power of feedback and how that can directly impact student growth. Thinking about how we learn, how we think about learning, and how we spend time in the messiness of learning proved to be a change in discourse around grades, a value that surfaced with these experienced teachers and changed the trajectory of their practices.

Identity

Holland et al. (1998) emphasize that figured worlds provide the primary contexts for identity work, offering "guidelines" or "social forces" that influence behavior (Hatt, 2007). In this study, the development of a new professional identity involved three critical movements: the negotiation of positionality, the claim of a space for authoring, and the eventual production of world-making.

Positionality. Within the figured world of the classroom, positionality is defined by the discourse and social constructs offered to participants (Holland et al., 1998). Additionally, one's positionality is not only constructed by lived personal experiences but continues to be shaped by the social constructs that make up those experiences (Dahl, 2015; Herr & Anderson, 2005). In this study, the teachers' positionality shifted from a traditional "custodian of knowledge" toward an approach that intentionally decentralized teacher authority. This transition pushed against conventional teaching practices to empower teachers to dissolve their control and reimagine the learning environment. By prioritizing student agency, these educators adopted a new professional identity that viewed students as proactive investigators of their own communities rather than passive recipients of a fixed curriculum.

When examining the transformative nature of the experienced teachers within this study, it became clear that as new information continued to influence the classroom context, teachers also needed to evaluate their past ideas and understandings as they not only shifted their worldview but also challenged the status quo of teacher identities. Throughout this work, teachers went beyond acquiring knowledge for themselves and experienced fundamental changes in their perceptions of how learners connect to learning. They noted how teachers can play a pivotal role in this process when open to prioritizing values that reflect both student agency and real-world applications.

Greg spoke about this when reflecting on his experience with Suzie co-teaching the unit connected to *Internment* (2018). He discussed the need to be a learner in this position as well by saying:

"...sometimes the best way to address ethical questions in the real world isn't clear, so by asking questions myself and with my students, it's a way to investigate them without coming to a teacher-driven conclusion."

Greg acknowledged his role as the classroom teacher in the moment and, rather than being the sole expert in the class, he positioned himself as a learner alongside his students. Experiences like these provided teachers with the insight they needed to integrate more experiential learning into their curriculum as well as being vulnerable to try new approaches, celebrating failure, and uplifting student voices in meaningful ways to author a new learning space.

Authoring. The space of authoring (Bakhtin, 1981) suggests that identity is continually processed through internal and social dialogues. For these teachers, authorship was a necessity; they had to answer the outside world by negotiating their personal beliefs against external institutional demands. Teacher Church provided the essential communal space to navigate this internal struggle. Winnie explained how this community validated her new identity:

"I really used you guys a lot... it validates what I'm doing... well, there's a bunch of teachers doing this and it's working."

This support helped teachers overcome professional isolation. Jim used this space to author a new approach to the canon, realizing that "the value is not in the words... it's in the message," which led him to pair classic texts with contemporary issues. Similarly, Suzie's positive experience with *Internment* (2018) inspired her to treat established texts like *The Giver* (Lowery, 1993) as a student-driven "book club" focused on curiosity rather than rote comprehension. Ultimately, Teacher Church served as a powerful space of authoring, allowing experienced teachers to express their internal doubts, find affirmation, and construct a new, student-centered role for themselves in the classroom.

World-making. World-making is the final stage of identity formation, rooted in the idea of "serious play"—the process through which people develop new behaviors that differ fundamentally from their old ones (Holland et al., 1998). For the participants, world-making involved confronting and dismantling long-maintained instructional routines. Jim engaged in world-making by interrogating his previous "coverage-based" model, which he realized often lacked authenticity. By transitioning to student-centered inquiry, he saw his students transform:

"This inquiry method really focuses on purposeful learning... This gives them the ownership of where we go and what to do as opposed to just being zombies for 8 hours!"

World-making also involved extending the boundaries of the classroom to include the broader community. While teaching controversial social issues can carry the risk of administrative or community pushback, Winnie created a new "world" that actively invited parents into the conversation. She was surprised by the overwhelming support:

"The reception I've gotten is so unreal... so many parents have commented saying that they are totally in support of these types of discussions... 'My kid goes through so much more than I ever did and I'm so glad somebody is willing to talk about it with them!'"

Winnie's experience demonstrates that world-making is not just an internal shift, but a social one. By reimagining their roles, engaging in communal authorship, and building new community connections, these teachers constructed professional identities grounded in a student-centered world that was significantly different from the one they had previously occupied.

Implications and conclusions

The journey of transformation for experienced educators is rarely a linear progression; rather, it is a complex negotiation of identity within shifting figured worlds. This study began with Suzie's reflection on her professional crossroads, a moment characterized by the recognition that traditional pedagogical frameworks often fail to meet the demands of a modern, ever-changing world. While foundational literature provides the theoretical scaffolding for change, the most significant pedagogical shifts occurred within the teacher-empowered, shared collaborative, peer-led community: Teacher Church.

The findings suggest that traditional, compliance-oriented professional development (PD)—often characterized by top-down, one-size-fits-all workshops—is insufficient for fostering deep identity work. By utilizing synchronous video conferencing, shared digital archives, and reflexive dialogue, the Teacher Church model offered a space of authoring that was both valuable and restorative. This model empowered professionals to move beyond professional isolation and navigate the pedagogical turbulence of systemic change with communal support, allowing them to reclaim control over the why, how, and what of their practice.

Crucially, this study posits that transformation, especially for those with established careers, cannot be coerced. Change—inevitably—takes time. The shift from teacher-centered to student-centered inquiry requires a safety net, often provided by tenure or supportive administration, which allows for the celebration of failure. While the educators in this study possessed the intrinsic motivation to "do better" for their students, their ability to act on that motivation



was tethered to their sense of professional security. Affording teachers the space to push beyond existing narratives around teacher expectations served as a new path to transform how they reflect and change their professional practices.

Because the span of this study lasted only one semester, it served as a catalyst for challenging established beliefs rather than a longitudinal record of sustained change. While a fundamental shift in professional identity was observed, the timeframe was not sufficient to explore how these changes manifest in long-term, specific lesson design or sustained student outcomes. Future research should benefit from an evolutionary lens, investigating how these identity shifts translate into practice over multiple academic years and across diverse district contexts.

Ultimately, the barrier to transformation is not a lack of teacher motivation, but the rigid figured worlds of traditional schooling that prioritize coverage over criticality. These Teacher Church participants demonstrated that profound shifts in mindset and practice are possible when teachers are afforded the autonomy to rethink their roles. By expanding the boundaries of the classroom and positioning themselves as co-learners with their students, these teachers moved beyond the existing narratives of schooling. They did not just change their curriculum; they reimagined their worlds, offering a roadmap for other experienced educators seeking to align their professional practice with the urgent needs of their students.

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