

Teacher Transformation through a Professional Changing Experience: the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process

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Introduction

This research sets out to explore how a group of nine educators from a Catholic Church school in Malta, who have attended a professional learning Process targeting self-knowledge and knowledge of processes of learning, experienced personal and professional transformation. Those factors influencing participants in their transformative learning journey are investigated. The exploration of the dynamics of transformative learning and an analysis of whether individual transformation affects the school's transformative learning experience also form part of the study. More specifically this study set out to explore how teachers who participated in this professional Learning process have experienced transformative learning.

Literature Review

Mezirow's theoretical framework serves as a conceptual framework for the study. The theory's complexity and multifaceted nature enabled the researchers to better understand and analyse contextual data, which from its nature is complex and multifaceted.

Learning, according to Mezirow (1996) is "understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (p. 162). Such meaning making is accomplished by "projecting images and symbolic models, meaning schemes based upon prior learning, onto our sensory experiences and imaginatively use analogies to

interpret new experiences” (Mezirow 1996, p.162). As can be appreciated, such an insight has particular relevance to teacher education. Acculturation of teachers within the profession can only take place when they become aware of the knowledge, influences and hidden theories accrued over the years.

Mezirow’s rendering of transformative learning, emphasises the importance and centrality of experience, the understanding of one’s frame of reference and the role of disorienting dilemma. It acknowledges the importance of critical reflection and critical self-reflection as well as the role of rational discourse and of dialogue when communicating with others.

In his work, Mezirow amply discusses the conditions that foster such transformation. A discussion of these concepts would reveal “a picture of transformative learning theory that is much more complex and multifaceted than originally understood” (Taylor, 2000).

Mezirow’s analysis of adult transformative learning was used as a background to understanding the transformation experienced by a group of educators who participated in a 24-hour professional learning process spread over a 6-month period. This process is based on a model of learning that helps one to understand one’s own learning preferences, develop a “unique set of learning tools, and an array of practical skills, and a set of terms to equip learners of all ages to communicate to others about their individual learning process” (Johnston, 2009, p.1).

Methodology

This study takes a qualitative phenomenological approach. It seeks to identify phenomena of personal and professional transformative learning through the perceptions of the educators participating in this study. Through the use of semi-structured interviews it seeks to gather ‘thick’ data. This data represents the voices of those educators who have participated in this professional development in the past years, emphasising the importance of the personal perspective and interpretation. The whole process allowed this research to understand the subjective experience, motivation and actions of the participants.

Findings and Implications

The study showed that all participants, albeit at different levels, have gone through the ten-phases proposed by Mezirow in their professional transformation. What follows is an analysis of the voices of the participants describing their change process as educators.

1. Disorienting dilemma

A disorienting dilemma is an incident or experience that disturbs the individual's current view of reality. For the purpose of this study this phase is seen as a trigger event that initiates reflection and challenges the participants' 'engrained professional behaviour'.

This study generated four themes that were seen as triggers that initiated reflection by participants on the need to transform their practice. The themes generated from the interviews with participants were the following:

- 1.1 Awareness of incumbent diversity
- 1.2 Urge for social justice
- 1.3 Incongruence between espoused and prevalent values
- 1.4 Policy decisions

The text analysis showed a high concentration of the school's leadership references falling under the first three themes, with a total of thirteen references compared to four references made by the teachers. The teachers' main trigger for attending the LMLpLp was instigated from an external force. The school leadership saw value and congruence between the values being promoted by the school and the philosophy underpinning the Let Me Learn process. This led to an open invitation to all teachers to participate in this course. Those teachers, who accepted the invitation, participated in the training.. The teachers were sent for the training in groups over an extended period of time.

The school's senior management team's (SMT) shared concerns, triggered their search for means of transforming the school's "visual image and educational goals" (Bezzina & Testa, 2005, 145). Their main concern originated from an awareness of the challenge of the incumbent diversity within the student population and the need to address it efficiently. They discovered it was no easy task to encourage teachers who had developed a set of teaching behaviours to adopt different approaches to teaching which address the diversity of needs of the students.

"Since we have a mixed ability school, I think that it is part of our school ethos that we try to cater for differences found in our students, so it was really important that we do something of the sort." (Chiara – Assistant Head)

This prompted the urge for the fair treatment of all students, irrespective of their social and academic background. As members of the SMT, they wanted to create a school that is based on the realisation of the principles of equality and solidarity – a school that understands and values each student's worth.

“... we are eternally engaged in the context of justice and by justice I mean the need to realise that each child is different, each needing their own space and we need to find the means - the responsibility of every educational entity is to find the means to reach each child’s aspirations” (Joseph – Head of School)

“I worry about those students falling behind maybe because we are not finding the best ways to tackle them...” (Chiara – Assistant Head)

The interviews with the teachers show that they shared the same concerns with the school leadership. The impetus, though, came as a result of the leadership’s policy decisions. Carmen, a primary school teacher, felt that the school’s encouragement to attending this training had addressed her need to:

“... understand the students more than I already was. To be given tools which were practical tools in the classroom.”

Thus, what became evident was that a seminal group, which includes the participants of this study, saw the opportunity to attend the training as an opportunity to learn and transform their practice:

“I was one of the first teachers who were approached by the headmaster, where we were told of his idea of having teachers in our school trained in the Let Me Learn process... I accepted because it was something new which I wanted to be trained in.” (Andrew – A primary teacher)

2. Self-examination

Self-examination is a natural consequence of action when one is faced with a disorienting dilemma that makes one question the intentions driving professional practice. This research yielded four themes that could be categorised under this phase, namely:

- 2.1 Realisation of limitations
- 2.2 Recognition of ‘Fad’ syndrome
- 2.3 Culture of labelling *and*
- 2.4 Scepticism

Most participants expressed their initial disappointment when their expectations of being handed universal strategies that would solve all their problems were not delivered. Joseph, as Head of school, reflects on these initial expectations and came to the realisation:

“... that Let Me Learn is not a recipe but a process of understanding.”

Chiara highlights the limitations that the administrative pressures often cause. She admits that notwithstanding the good intentions,

“... what happens to us during the year, ... is that you don't have the strength, you don't have the energy because you would have other things on your plate as well.”

Yesmin, a primary school teacher, voices this same concern:

*“... sometimes there are things which teachers go through, there is a day when you might say ‘oh I feel I haven't dedicated so much time to that particular student’...
... sometimes you want to reach every student in class, it is like you are running against time to check that no student leaves the class with a question mark on his mind...”*

Sarah, another SMT member, refers to the failure of the educational system to guard itself from novel, but not necessarily theoretically sound processes or systems of learning; these tend to fade quickly but leaving behind a trail of negative consequences. At times this led educators to look at new school initiatives with a sense of scepticism, fearing of yet another fad that comes and goes quickly. Initially, the LMLpLp experienced the same fate:

“To tell you the truth, I was very sceptical at the beginning, and to be honest I wasn't expecting anything really. I thought it was just another fancy programme that we encounter in everyday life.” (Sarah)

3. Critical reflection and re-evaluation of assumptions about oneself and one's professional learning

Whilst self-examining their intentions for participating in the LMLpLp, participants reflected on their professional learning. This study has generated six themes that describe the type of reflection that the participating educators underwent in their transformative process. The themes generated were the following:

- 3.1 Problematisation of past intents
- 3.2 Problematisation of practice
- 3.3 Global re-evaluation of the implications to one's practice
- 3.4 Reflection on the process of collective transformation

3.5 Reflection on inter/intrapersonal relationships and

3.6 Reflection on the non-linearity of the process of change.

The Senior Management Team reflected on the intentions that propelled the school towards the Let Me Learn process in their search for tools to help them achieve their new school vision. Joseph, as head of school, speaks of the Let Me Learn process as that programme which made him aware of the contradictions that often cloud one's perspective:

"... it made us aware of a number of contradictions. ... I think that there were a number of situations where these contradictions were evident."

Joseph, Sarah and Chiara saw Let Me Learn as a tool that helped them become aware of how their learning processes were ordaining their teaching:

"I think Let Me Learn was instrumental as a tool to first and foremost realise this sense of diversity even in the way we learn. Secondly, we as teachers realise why we prefer to teach in certain ways and why we may distinguish between the students in the classroom." (Joseph)

For Sarah the Process has helped her to question her practice:

"In that sense I started questioning myself, on what I was achieving in class, was I fulfilling my learning patterns or the students'? I started to notice how my learning patterns were influencing the students."

Chiara perceived Let Me Learn as the means by which she could rise to the challenges of her new experience within a new school with a new vision for meeting the diverse needs of the student population.

Similarly, amongst the participating teachers, there were those who emphasised the fact that the Process made them re-evaluate their teaching methodology and therefore enabled them to appreciate Let Me Learn as an opportunity to learn new ways for addressing the diverse needs of their students.

One of the teachers, Josephine, a secondary school language teacher, reflects on how the Process led the school community to:

“discuss the learning process. To [reflect on] the part the students play in the whole process. [We often talk about] what we should be doing and we question our teaching methods when we’re not reaching particular students. A lot of focus is on the student and the learning process. Definitely. More than ever.”

Participants problematised and re-evaluated their practice as a result of the new awareness. The SMT reflected on how Let Me Learn impacted practice on different levels of communication and in particular, on the curricular and pedagogical level.

“... I think that the effect it had was on a personal level, on the level of relationships and also on a curricular level and also on the pedagogy. It obviously helps you think about different ways of working.” (Joseph)

This change was also highlighted by Mary, another language teacher in the secondary school, who attributed the change in her perspective and approach towards teaching, to the Process:

“Like I told you, this has changed my life, and this change was reflected in the way I teach...”

Sarah, on the other hand, emphasised how the Process has provided the community with intentionality of purpose. Whilst good practice was already in place and teachers always gave their best to respond to the needs of the learners, the response was often impulsive and not based on the knowledge of students’ learning preferences:

“... (after attending the LMLpLp) it was possible for us to understand different strategies and why some weren’t working... with Let Me Learn we became aware that there are different patterns that one can develop, so in that way it helped the process that we had already started, in a way that we could help our students better.”

All participants agree that a deeper understanding of the programme and its application to one’s practice requires time. Notwithstanding, participants felt they have acquired the skill to address individual needs and have a better understanding of how different learners learn.

“... whereas before I had one approach, which had to apply to everyone, nowadays I know that I had to change, I changed my own approach trying to appeal to more than...to individuals.” (Josephine)

Three of the teachers highlighted the fact that the Process gave them the possibility to target more precisely their response to individual learners. It gave them the skill to plan and respond with intention.

The head of school expressed his trust that when a critical mass is formed and a culture of change takes over progressively, others within the community will be swayed towards the collective vision. He believes that as a leader, he needs to respect the pace of different individuals that make up the school's community, without losing sight of a common vision and a clear path that leads to the realisation of the same vision.

The next theme that emerged from this research concerned the way the Process helped the participants reflect on the self as a learner and the effects of this awareness on the relationship with others. Joseph and Sarah reflect on how the Process helped them understand themselves better. Such an intrapersonal understanding has led to an improved interpersonal communication with colleagues and students. One of the teachers underlines this positive relationship with the school senior management:

“The idea that the school has faith in you, makes me appreciate it even more. It is like they know what you can do, what you achieve and they give you a certain responsibility to carry out the work.” (Paul)

Joseph reflects on how his new understanding of himself as a learner has led him to discover a colleague who due to lack of communication was hidden behind a false façade. He explains that he could only bypass this façade once he understood the obstacles to communication that he was causing.

Three of the participating teachers comment, on how the Process helped them to better understand their students and as a consequence a marked improvement in interpersonal relationship was experienced.

“I think that is it, that I value each student as an individual... I think the students feel this a lot, the fact that you are not relating to them in a generic manner, the fact that you continue to motivate them, you don't give up, if there is someone facing a difficulty in a particular task, you encourage him to continue to try and not accept it, I think that is what I value most, that everyone feels comfortable in the classroom...” (Jane)

Joseph points out the importance of certain aspects of the Process that in his words have enriched and supported the process of transformation, these being the role of the trainers as mentors. Here mentors intervene and support the school and individual teachers in their quest to transform their practice.

“One of the positive things about the Let Me Learn team was the sense of support...” (Joseph)

One of the teachers looked at the relationship with her mentor as an opportunity to fuel her determination to grow and transform into a more effective teacher.

“Nowadays, I think I have taken a lot out of it. I used it a lot.” (Josephine)

The experience of growth is an experience when “at times you feel there are tangible improvements whereas at other times, you feel that there is the need for more, more, ...” (Joseph). This perception is corroborated by Taylor (Freire, 1994)(2000) who suggests that the transformative learning process is not as linear as Mezirow might have suggested. Taylor and others have suggested that transformation is in fact recursive, evolving and spiral in nature. This study shows that the transformative experience of the community is characterised with fluidity and change.

4. Dialogue and discourse with others

Taylor (2009) affirms that “engagement in dialogue with the self and others” (p.9) is one of the core elements of transformative learning. Taylor defines dialogue as a “relational and trustful communication” (p.9). According to Schapiro, Wasserman and Gallegos (2012), dialogue provides a unique container for transformation. This study generates six themes that describe the “transformative dialogic moments” (Wasserman 2004 cited in Schapiro et al., 2012) as expressed by this group of educators. The themes are the following:

- 4.1 Dialogue between mentor and teacher being mentored
- 4.2 Dialogue between teachers
- 4.3 Dialogue between teachers and parents/guardians
- 4.4 Dialogue between SMT and practitioners
- 4.5 Discourse with self and others to problematise alternative perspectives and
- 4.6 Development of a shared language of possibility.

Two members of the Senior Management Team (SMT) refer to the mentoring service as one of the major strengths of the LMLpLp. It is their opinion that the mentoring process created a possibility for educators to enter in a dialogic communication with their mentor about their practice. This dialogic communication helped participants reflect on the realities of their practice in the light of their new understandings. Sarah views the mentor as that person who brings the knowledge and expertise into the realm of practice. Sarah also refers to the process of mentoring

and training as one that respected the pace and curiosities of the participants, allowing space for reflection and praxis.

“...they encouraged a free process, they didn’t pass on any kind of recipe. ... when I realised that it was a free process, which you discover as you go along, nothing had to be done because you had to, then obviously my expectations started to change.” (Sarah)

Joseph, as head of school, spoke about the need for a safe dialogic environment, where individuals can talk without being judged or exposed to inquisition. Such a safe environment allows for communication space to ‘think together’. Josephine, Mary and Jane also make reference to this. Josephine claims that dialogue between teachers would lead to a better understanding of concepts and issues. Mary continues to explain that an effective professional dialogue would lead to collective reflection and a clearer understanding of the dynamics of learning.

“...we spend a lot of time, most of our PD days discussing the learning process. What we should be doing is questioning our teaching methods when we’re not reaching particular students. A lot of focus is on the students and the learning process” (Josephine)

“I have learnt to share things that have worked for me with my colleagues... when we find something that works, we share it together...” (Paul)

Paul emphasised the sense of empowerment he felt when the SMT showed interest in his initiatives. This sense of freedom facilitated the communication channels between the teaching staff and the school management while it ensured a motivating learning experience for the learners.

“Our leadership has given us the freedom to choose certain things (here he continues to explain a creative art activity which he organised for his class and which created a mess)... Not only did I not get – ‘oh be careful because you will create a mess on the roof’, but I was encouraged, even having them offering me materials that I needed for this activity.” (Paul)

Dialogue about the Process went beyond the confines of the school and also included the parents. Joseph refers to the importance of communicating and dialoguing with parents. He claims that parental exposure to Let Me Learn gave the

school community a common language to talk about the teaching/learning process and to talk about the development of their son in what Freire (1994) calls a language of hope. Through this shared language, talk about learning needs was facilitated without recurring to negative labels. When shared language is part of the dialogue, communication is facilitated and parents truly become collaborators in the educational project. Christine, a primary school teacher, also underlined the value of dialoguing with parents to help them understand their own children's learning processes.

“Because even parents, sometimes they don't accept their children the way they are, but when I am with them, and I explain the learning patterns and explain 'it's his way of learning, listen, try to help him in this way', yes there are parents who understand...” (Christine)

Joseph explains that knowledge of the process of learning helped parents to “relate to their children” better and to create a constructive dialogue with them. It helped teachers to communicate more effectively with the students' parents through a positive language of possibility. According to Chiara, parents can truly and effectively get involved in the learning process of their children through an informed dialogue and a shared language.

By acquiring the language, Christine was in a better position to identify the need and “name it”. It also gave her the skill to share this knowledge with the children that she teaches:

“I didn't have the skill to use the characters (representing the learning patterns proposed by the Let Me Learn Process) to make the students understand, but the characters help the students a lot.” (Christine)

Sarah and Andrew spoke about a language that led to a positive response. Sarah spoke about a language that enabled her to isolate the problem from the student. In her new paradigm, the student became the learner and the problem was transformed into a challenge. The use of strategies for learning enabled her students to take control of their learning and overcome that challenge. According to Andrew, through the refinement of the language, learners can experience the thoroughness of the dynamics of learning.

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions

The enriched communication within the school has led participants to the exploration of new options for their professional practice. This study generates five

themes that highlight the different roles adopted by the participants as a result of their new awareness. The themes generated from the interviews with participants are the following:

- 5.1 The educator as a catalyst of change
- 5.2 The educator as an ‘archaeologist’ of learning potential
- 5.3 The school as an example for other schools
- 5.4 The educator explorer of alternative discourse and
- 5.5 The educator as an explorer of alternative pedagogical praxis.

Participants saw their role within the wider educational community as catalysts of change. Chiara believes that her role is primarily that of an educator, and thus she strongly believes that she needs to lead by example and apply the Process in her teaching of Math.

Mary, a secondary English language teacher believes that by sharing her practice, she would be helping colleagues to transform their practice whilst transforming her own in the process.

Paul speaks about how structured opportunities for teachers and other educators to share their practice, have served as an opportunity to spread the word even amongst those who have not as yet attended the training. These structured opportunities create space for cross sector sharing.

The theme “the educator as an ‘archaeologist’ of learning potential” refers to the teacher’s role in recovering, surveying and excavating learning potential. Most participants made reference to this theme, including one member of the SMT who makes three references.

As a deputy head, Sarah speaks of a school that tries “to find out what students are good at.” She explains that through a change in the language used, afforded by their new awareness through the Let Me Learn Process, the school can now

“... use what he (the student) is good at, and tackle the difficult situation.”

Jane explains how students are encouraged to work outside their comfort zone, allowing for their full potential to emerge. She also talks about a strategy she implemented, allowing students to explore their preferred mode of learning while sharing their learning experiences on a diary.

Both Andrew and Paul speak of how Let Me Learn has provided them with the knowledge of pupils’ learning processes. Through such knowledge they have a better understanding of how they can best support students in their learning and boost their self-esteem.

“So when you take a look at their patterns, and you adapt your lesson to their needs, they start to realise that ‘yes even I can do this.’ (Andrew)

“This year’s group is doing really well because we have found the right programme that can cater for them, and it is catering for their needs and there I think that they are improving and the most important thing is that their self esteem is increasing..” (Andrew)

Two participants have referred to theme 5.3 since they could identify their school as a model for other schools that might also be aiming towards transforming their practice into a more learner centred approach.

New roles, relationships and actions instigate a type of discourse that is aligned with the new perspective. The head of school and a teacher from the Secondary mentioned the acquisition of a discourse that reflects the new perspective. Joseph views the Let Me Learn process as an agent for problematising the traditional educational system and therefore the dominant hegemonic culture. Through the exploration of new discourse, Joseph believes that one can approach ‘old problems’ with a new transformed perspective.

Jane refers to a language which helps learners to move away from their comfort zone and strategise to find ways of forging, intensifying or/and tethering their preferred patterns of learning, leading them to maximise their learning potential. This is a fundamental role of a teacher who has experienced a perspective transformation and thus is exploring new ways of making his role relevant to the new perspective.

Acquisition of this shared language leads to the exploration of alternative pedagogical praxis that emerges from a process of reflection. Sarah refers to how her new awareness has made her realise how her teaching, which reflected her learning profile, could be hindering the process of learning for certain students whose processes of learning patterns differ. This awareness has brought about an intentional change in her teaching. Other teachers speak of how this process made them re-think their approach to teaching and to explore other methodologies and strategies.

“Basically I changed the way I used to teach in class.” (Mary)

“The fact that you realise that it is not because they are no good, but because they learn in a different way, ‘so let’s see what I can do so that I help them and make them realise,’ ‘yes we are good, we only learn differently from others.” (Jane)

6. Planning of a course of action

Once new options were explored, participants could start planning a new course of action. This study generates four themes that represent how participants planned a course of action reflecting the new perspective. The themes reflecting this phase are:

- 6.1 Initiating others into the Process
- 6.2 Reflecting on school policies
- 6.3 Bringing about change at a paced growth and
- 6.4 Changing practice as a result of a better understanding of the learners.

The first theme refers to how the participants in this study promoted the Process with their colleagues. It explains how they supported each other in the initial stages of the Process. All three SMT members made reference to this theme, with Chiara making as much as five references.

Both Joseph and Chiara make reference to the importance of a strategy that ensures the creation of a critical mass. A critical mass needs to be formed before any effective change can occur. Joseph explains that the strategy was to first send those educators who showed a positive disposition towards the Process, and were therefore willing to learn further. Chiara deemed this strategy as important because it gave the community a shared language that facilitated communication between members of the community of practice.

Chiara recognises the limitations and hurdles that the education system offers and the difficulties these impose on teachers who are trying to immerse themselves into this whole process. Often this led to an initial reluctance.

Josephine believes that immersing students into the discourse afforded by the Process should be the initial step. In her interview she speaks of introducing her students to the Let Me Learn Process and its language to help her communicate more effectively:

“So once (...) I embarked my students on the Let Me Learn project, (...) when I take up a Form 1 class, (...) I embark my students on Let Me Learn, knowing that I’ll be using it every single day for the rest of their lives here.” (Josephine)

The next theme (6.2) refers to the re-thinking of the school policies as part of the plan of action inspired by the new perspective. Chiara reflects on the process of building a school’s learning policy, in which the Let Me Learn process plays a key role.

“It was a very long process (referring to the process of writing the learning policy), (... and) Let Me Learn is part of the checklist, where eventually a policy is going to be introduced.” (Chiara)

Here the Let Me Learn Process is seen as forming a part of the school's learning policy, acting as a means to help initiate further learning initiatives.

A school policy that respects diversity should respect the paced growth of the different members within the community of practice. The next theme (6.3) refers to the importance of a change process that takes its due time without being rushed. This provides participants with ample time to reflect on how this new perspective affects their actions and their persuasions.

Joseph and Chiara reflect on how the school community has grown to challenge the dominant discourse. They claim that while in the past certain values would find opposition from certain teachers, nowadays teachers are more open to accommodate the students' diversity of needs. Obviously, every course of action needs to respect the fact that different teachers might be at different stages within the new perspective. The school therefore needs to respect the pace of every individual within the community.

The final theme (6.4) in this stage refers to the development of pedagogical practice fitting the new perspective, aimed at guiding the course of action. As the head of school and the motivator for the embodiment of the new perspective within the school community, Joseph noticed that the shared LML language as a result of the school involvement in the LML process, has had an impact at classroom level. Sarah talks about a change in approach once the new perspective became the dominant discourse within the school community. She claims to have witnessed a change in the teachers' approach to teaching. This was sustained by Josephine who claims that Let Me Learn has permeated all the work that they, as teachers, do with the children. The awareness of their learning patterns has become an important aspect of their planning for learning.

7. Reference to acquisition of knowledge and skill for implementing one's plan

For this phase the study generates five themes that refer to the knowledge and skills acquired by the participants through their participation in the LMLpLp. The themes are:

- 7.1 Improved personal and professional interpersonal communication
- 7.2 Improved understanding of learners' needs
- 7.3 Intuitive deciphering of learning patterns
- 7.4 Reference to success and
- 7.5 Application of differentiated strategies.

The first theme refers to the improvement in interpersonal communication within and outside the professional community. Two members of the senior management team make reference to personal understanding of self. Both Joseph and Sarah feel

that through their exposure to this new knowledge they are now in a better position to understand their reactions to certain situations, contexts and the dynamics of interpersonal communication.

“I started to make sense of the way I work. I began to understand myself better, that is, the way I work has a logical meaning behind it. I think Let Me Learn gave me a model to make more sense of what I was doing and how I was acting. It also gave more sense to my social life and relationships with others....”
(Joseph)

Joseph also refers to the newly acquired ability to understand the processing patterns of others and hence their conduct. During his interview he refers to a colleague whom he used to consider as an individual who “kill(s my) spirit”. He explains how by understanding her processing patterns, he is now in a position to understand the conflict between both sets of patterns, namely the colleague’s and his. This resulted in an intentional change of comportment towards the person.

Jane explains that she can now

“... look at people individually not like you have a whole group in front of you, I think that is it that I value each student as an individual.”

Jane, Mary, Josephine, Paul and Christine also spoke of how the Process has helped to boost their communication with students. Students now feel valued as individual persons and not lost in a crowd.

“My relationship with them (the students) improved, they learnt more, they remember more.” (Mary)

“I started to understand myself and other people a lot better.” (Jane)

Sarah, Andrew, Paul and Christine feel that through the acquired knowledge they can have a better understanding of the students as learners. They can better understand their academic, emotional and social needs and adapt to these needs. Mary explains that she can now better understand certain classroom situations and the behaviour of certain students. Christine explains how now that she understands her students and their learning pathways; she can better understand what drives their actions and react with intentionality of purpose. She asserts that while before her participation in the process she was able to identify certain behaviours in her students, she feels that

now she has a deeper understanding of what triggered such behaviours and can react with more precision and skill to their needs. She is now able to identify each student's 'learning comfort zone' and to initiate her response from there.

Both Chiara and Mary explain how this new awareness has opened up a space for communication that led to a collaborative spirit amongst teachers.

"... we are not afraid of speaking about things with each other although this is not always easy to do.." (Chiara)

"We 'steal' each other's ideas, that is how we work." (Mary)

The ability to decode and use the knowledge of learning patterns to inspire and drive one's response is a fundamental finding of this research. Joseph speaks about how his teaching staff can now respond to situations that in the past would have caused great distress. He explains that now they can communicate their needs better and respond more effectively to specific situations. He observes that teachers' individual strengths have turned into collective strengths because they are able to recognise their learning patterns and identify those needs that can be supported by the rest of the community.

The skill to decode the patterns and to use specific categorisations and descriptions in one's interpretation and evaluation of the actions of others has helped Joseph and Paul to modify their response to the specific needs of others. Similarly, Sarah explains how her ability to decipher how students and teachers process information, has helped her understand certain reactions and behaviours. In understanding such reactions, she could then guide others in their response to alerted situations. Mary and Andrew on the other hand link this to their learning activities and explain how it helped them create activities that respect the students' learning profile whilst still delivering the required content.

"The fact that you can understand others through observing the things they do, and knowing how you act, you can react in a better way and you can make leeway where necessary." (Joseph)

Participants highlight their learning transformation by referring to their successes in implementing the Process. This next theme captures the different aspects which participants experienced as a result of their learning transformation. Joseph refers to two observed improvements, namely the nurturing of solidarity amongst the student community and the marked improvement in the delivery of lessons. He observes that now, students are more engaged in the learning process.

Mary and Andrew also make reference to their successful metamorphosis in the way they deliver their lessons. Through allowing multiple approaches in expressing one's knowledge, the students and the teachers themselves experienced academic satisfaction.

The quality in the delivery of lessons resulted in an observed academic improvement:

"... by the end of the first year I compared their first writing task to their last writing task (and) it was impressive..." (Josephine)

The teacher's feeling of success mirrored itself in a shared feeling of accomplishment amongst the students. Josephine and Andrew make reference to how the students felt and how the experience has boosted their self-esteem.

The feeling of success is the result of, and has resulted in, the application of differentiated strategies. Throughout the data generated one can find numerous references to the teachers' effective response to their learners' needs that resulted from their understanding of the learning process. Joseph, Josephine and Mary make clear references to this as a way of incarnating their perspective transformation.

Joseph refers to an observable change in the general approach to teaching. When reflecting on the qualitative change of his teaching, he explains how through this new awareness he can better understand his students and thus he can respond with more specific intentional strategies.

"... if I had to look at what I am doing now, as opposed to what I used to do before, it is different. So the processing of why I am doing certain things has changed, and has changed for the better." (Joseph)

Mary also refers to her newly acquired awareness and how this has changed her approach to the teaching of poetry.

Josephine also makes reference to her improved skill in creating individualised strategies that respond to the needs and processing patterns of the learners. She explains how she successfully helped learners to generate strategies to succeed. This could be done once the learners themselves became aware of what was driving their learning.

8. Provisional trying of new roles

Acquisition of knowledge and skills pertaining to the new perspective equips the learner with the tools needed to start experimenting with new roles. This study generated five themes that describe this stage in Mezirow's conceptualisation:

- 8.1 The moment of realisation – Aha moment
- 8.2 Exploring different venues for implementation
- 8.3 Attempts at integrating the Let Me Learn process with other tools/methods and/or processes
- 8.4 Application of the Process in non-formal situations and Awareness of the challenges ahead.

The first theme refers to that moment when the actor realises the usefulness of the process and starts thinking of provisionally experimenting with the new perspective in new roles. Joseph refers to that moment when during the training he was asked to administer the Learning Connection Inventory (LCI) with members of his team. On learning about his colleagues' processing patterns, he could apprehend how and why certain individuals behaved in certain ways. This realisation helped him explore differentiated ways of working with these individuals.

"I had told the learning assistants to do the LCI and it was very revealing as you begin to understand why certain persons work in certain ways." (Joseph)

Paul realised that this acquired knowledge about himself and those around him, was crucial to help those with whom he interacts both at school and within his immediate family.

"... during my presentation, something clicked, I am not saying a miracle occurred, but I realised that we need to find a way on how to help the others around us." (Yesmin)

Mary, on the other hand, had this moment of realisation when she experienced the application of the Process with a colleague of hers. Her colleague who was attending the training at the same time presented a lesson in a way that respected the students' processing patterns. Her success prompted Mary to start applying the Process in her own practice.

"As regards the profound moment, ... it happened when a colleague of mine and myself shared (a common lesson)." (Mary)

Teachers experienced the Process and started to associate certain positive outcomes with the application of this knowledge to their practice. This prompted some of them to implement their acquired skills in various locations, within and outside the school environment.

Joseph and Chiara both explored how one can use the Let Me Learn process as a means to strengthen professional collaboration amongst the teaching community. This is believed to provide a way in which the isolated and often unvoiced wisdom (Shulman 2004, p. 505) of teachers is given the space to develop and blend into the perspective of the school.

“I think that it can be a very important tool even to eventually interpret a sense of community that is the sense of diversity that we have among us.” (Joseph)

Joseph also suggests that the Process could also benefit those that still have an important role to play in the perspective transformation of the school even though they are not teachers. Christine commends the work of a Learning support assistant, who although not trained as a teacher, gave an important contribution in providing students who were struggling, an alternative learning environment where their learning processes could be accommodated.

Sarah, Josephine and Andrew explored the sharing of this perspective with parents. It is believed that strengthening the collaboration and communication with parents would heighten the possibility of sharing the transformed perspective with the larger community of the school.

Both members of the senior management team and teachers could see avenues through which knowledge and skills learnt through their participation in the LMLpLp could be fused to other methodologies and subject specific processes. Joseph and Chiara refer to collaborative learning, while both the two language teachers and two Primary teachers refer to the Writing Process.

As educational leaders, both Joseph and Chiara believe that their guiding perspective can be translated into practice through the fusion of different techniques. Let Me Learn is seen as a foundational scheme that helps one to utilise different strategies and techniques with intention.

Participants also refer to how knowledge and skills learned could be applied in non-curricular purviews. Chiara mentions an extra-curricular activity (Education unplugged) in which the knowledge and skills gained in Let Me Learn could be easily transferred and applied. Here Chiara brings to the front a reality of our educational system that is conditioned by what Armstrong (2006) calls the ‘academic achievement discourse’ – a discourse that is obsessed with documentation of results of instruction. In an activity such as ‘education unplugged’ teachers can really address each learner’s preferred modes of learning.

Jane refers to how this knowledge helped her in her private life. She can now better understand her family dynamics and thus agree on how they can compensate for each other’s idiosyncrasies.

9. Building competence and self-competence in new roles and relationships

Competence is the result of directed experience. Directed experience leading to learning involves a range of experiences in which knowledge is seen as a process of “finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives” (Fawler, 1981, p.4). Through practice and negotiation with others within and outside the community, a learner gains greater control over one’s understanding and the quality of one’s actions through meaningful learning (Mezirow, 2012, p. 77). This phase generates four major themes namely:

- 9.1 Feeling of competence in adapting to response
- 9.2 Feeling of competence in motivating students
- 9.3 Feeling of competence in understanding oneself and
- 9.4 Awareness of the challenges of reintegrating the Process into new roles and relationships.

The first two themes are most popular with the teachers whilst the third and fourth themes are most popular with the SMT. The first theme refers to the sense of competence that an educator feels when responding to the needs of the learners. Chiara and Christine refer to the successful collaboration between teachers and Learning Support professionals in supporting students who are academically challenged. Both Chiara and Andrew believe that the school has succeeded to boost these students’ self-esteem and in providing them with learning opportunities to help them develop their areas of strength.

A key competence of any educator is surely the ability to motivate learners to learn. Sarah and Josephine share their respective experiences in which they capture a ‘ray of light’ in some of their students who otherwise are seen as problematic. Their new perspective has given them a new awareness, forging a renewed relationship. For Sarah, the experience with a particular ‘problematic’ student gave her a reassurance of her ability to motivate the student to learn and to use this experience to mentor other teachers. Josephine explains how, through her renewed approach, she had successfully motivated students to give their best and to never to give up.

A sense of accomplishment was achieved as a result of the new awareness and acquired skill in understanding oneself as a learner. Joseph, Sarah, Christine and Andrew speak of an epiphany through which they could better understand their private and professional behaviours and actions.

“First and foremost I started to make sense of the way I work. I began to understand myself better that is the way I work has a logical meaning behind it. I think Let Me Learn gave me a model to make more sense of what I was doing and how I was acting.” (Joseph)

The final theme within this phase refers to the challenges that inhabit our lifeworld and govern our actions. Such challenges require us to sustain and reintegrate the new perspective in all our actions and environments. This requires perseverance but when achieved, a feeling of accomplishment is experienced.

Joseph feels satisfied with the level of integration of the Process within the school community, even though he is aware that there is still work to be accomplished. He is aware that the school’s professional and student community is in a constant shift and there is a perpetual need to ensure that the school’s perspective continues to be shared by all. Sarah is also pleased with the level of integration of the Process within the school community, not just amongst the teaching staff but also amongst the student community, who have a voice in the school, which if cultivated can be very effective.

“... salt gives the taste but does not necessarily show, but you can notice the taste and I think that for a number of people, which, luckily is not small in number, it has made a difference, ... (Joseph)

“In a way Let Me Learn has managed to infiltrate in all the school processes.” (Sarah)

10. References to a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspectives

The final phase in Mezirow’s ‘phases of meaning’ (Mezirow, 2012) refers to the actualisation of the new perspective into the lived experience of the actors. Thus according to Mezirow (2012), “[a] mindful transformative learning experience requires that the learner makes an informed and reflective decision to *act* on his or her reflective insight” (2012, p. 87). Thus for Mezirow and others a true transformative learning experience should be mirrored in action.

This research generates four themes that either point to the location in which the transformative learning is embedded or refer to statements that highlight a recognition or reaffirmation of an action informed by the new perspective. The themes generated are the following:

- 10.1 Extensive use of language conditioned by the new perspective
- 10.2 Reference to recognition of competence from outside the school community
- 10.3 Critical reflection as an integral aspect of professional practice and
- 10.4 Assimilation of the Process as an integral part of one's actions.

The fourth theme has been referred to by all the participants, most of whom made multiple references to observed changes in practice as a result of the change in perspective. Yet another important theme emerging from this research is the extensive use of language conditioned by the new perspective and the integration of the new discourse within the community's personal and professional interactions. The senior management team makes reference to the fact that this change in perspective has been recognised by outside agencies (other organisations and/or individuals). Some even go as far as to try to emulate this practice. During the interviews, teachers in particular (four out of six teachers) and the Head of school emphasized the importance of critical reflection on assumptions made within the community. They argued that an integral aspect of the professional practice is to engage in effective discourse as a means of validating one's own beliefs and experiences.

The first theme points out the level of reintegration of the new perspective within the professional discourse and serves as a witness to the transformative learning experienced by the participants and the school as a transformed community. The integration of an inclusive language inspired by the Let Me Learn process permeates the prevalent discourse within the school community.

“The professional attitude that we have taken is to find means of how to articulate this discourse so as not to remain the run of the mill, that we always take the common sense interpretation of things, but that now Let Me Learn has helped us continue to develop this discourse of diversity and community.”
(Joseph)

Josephine and Andrew refer to the sharing of this language with the students as a tool that helps them to become aware of their learning patterns and to engage themselves in metacognitive talk about learning. Both Josephine and Andrew refer to it as a language that helps them, as teachers, to better articulate their strategies and approaches to learning and support.

Joseph and Paul show how this language has pervaded their way of thinking about themselves. Every action is seen from the perspective obtained by this language:

“(Through this language) I could make more sense of the way I act and how I am going to act with others, ...” (Joseph)

“Even nowadays when I am doing something, I start saying to myself, I am doing this because I am precise, I’m doing this because I am sequential, deep down even every day thoughts would be linked to (the patterns)” (Paul).

The ability to reflect on what informs our perspective and what is driving our actions is of fundamental importance in our quest to tackle the challenges that our professional practice presents. As we have discussed in earlier sections of this discussion, one of the major themes emerging from the interviews with this group of educators is the qualitative change in language used in their interactions and diagnostic exchanges. Language has changed and now includes positive action that connects with the processing patterns of each learner. Yet a major disconcert amongst these educators is that the espoused language informing their transformed perspective is often burdened with external forces “of increased performativity (Ball, 2013) and accountability in the education sector driven by neoliberal policies” (Kreber 2012, p.335).

When others from outside the immediate community of the school recognise certain actions as distinctive qualities and start to associate the school with these qualities, it might be the case that this is a reaffirmation of a perspective transformation that has been reintegrated within the existing patterns of action. This makes a distinctive difference in the lived experience of those within this particular school community.

Joseph mentions how their transformation has been instrumental in highlighting contradictions in values within the community of church schools. This led other schools to refer to the school under study as an example that they can follow in their quest to bring about a transformation within their own communities.

What clearly emerges from this research and from the analysis of the interviews is that most teachers were very much aware that through the inherent shared perspective, they have transformed their classroom practice and their personal as well as professional relationships with their students and other adults. Joseph refers to the discourse related to the profession within the school community. He notes that as a community they engage in what he terms as “continual exploration” of issues that arise in the school. He talks at length about a community that is always questioning and discerning one’s own practice in the light of a perspective led by social justice.

This type of collective critical reflection that Joseph refers to can be seen as a creative professional discomfort, an attribute of change that is led by a value system

that would transform on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective. Joseph believes that "what you believe can be done into practice and what is done in practice fuels the theory behind it". This statement defines Joseph's understanding of transformative learning. Joseph reflects on his role to bring about an ethos that is reflected in the type of practice that takes place in the school, an ethos that sets it apart from all other schools. It is therefore Joseph's wish, as head of this school, to expand and 'indigenise' the Let Me Learn process within the ideological belief system of the school community.

According to Kreben (2012) we would be working towards critical reflection in our professional practice when we carefully consider the implications of our actions and examine whether what we say and do inadvertently sanctions or contributes to power relations.

Christine explains that through the internalisation and critical appraisal of the Process, she is now able to use the knowledge to defend her actions.

"If someone comes up to me asking me why I allowed a student to behave in a certain way, I can give them an answer. I'd say that boy is behaving in that way because at that time I was giving that type of lesson and for him that is not interesting, it is not part of his life, it is not concrete, I can give a reason."
(Christine)

The final theme explores how different participants integrated the Process and assimilated it as an integral part of their actions. The Senior Management team refer to a number of locations in which the Let Me Learn perspective plays a central role. Both Joseph and Chiara believe that Let Me Learn has become an integral part of their decision-making process. It has given them a framework through which they can make educational decisions built on a value system inspired by the new perspective.

Joseph and Chiara explain how they refer to and share this perspective outside the immediate context of their school. Joseph explains how on a number of occasions, he had the opportunity to talk about his school's experience in dealing with differentiation issues, especially with those schools that are also exploring different authentic means for transforming their practice. Chiara on the other hand refers to how she shares her experience with student teachers during her lectures on collaborative learning.

Both Joseph and Sarah mention how the students themselves also shared the value of the new perspective with other European schools. This European project was an opportunity for the teachers involved, to show how this perspective has given them and their students an effective means for teaching and learning.

The integration of the new perspective informed by the Let Me Learn process in the personal and professional life of the participating teachers is very convincing throughout the generated data. Jane explains how her knowledge of the patterns has helped her develop a process of support for students in their scientific writing, starting from their strong pattern/s and gradually developing strategies to stretch other patterns needed to complete the task. Andrew explains how knowledge of Let Me Learn has impacted his planning. He therefore makes a conscious effort to plan activities that respect students' diverse combination of patterns. Josephine, on the other hand, explains how her knowledge of the Process and its internalisation has helped her to understand her son's mode of working and to allow him to learn through his modality without imposing her own.

Mary explains how Let Me Learn has been fundamental in the process of changing her approach to teaching. Andrew, Paul and Christine describe how the Process has become an integral part of the way they think and plan for learning. For Josephine, Mary and Paul, Let Me Learn has permeated their actions and they claim that it has become a foundational concept that informs their pedagogical decisions.

For Andrew this process of reintegration and assimilation is a collective effort. The school community as a whole are moving in this same direction, sharing the same perspective.

"I wasn't on my own, other teachers did the same thing, even during the staff meetings, those teachers who attended the training had ample time to share what they had learnt with other members of the staff" (Andrew).

Conclusion

This research has shown that individual constructs are strongly determined by an individual's personal learning characteristics. Awareness of these personal learning characteristics (self-knowledge) helped educators assess their practice and understand how their personal characteristics were determining their approach to teaching and affecting their interpersonal relationships with students and colleagues.

This research showed that transformative learning is a mutually interdependent experience. Individual transformation amounts to and is influenced by the collective transformation. This study highlighted the role of the school community in the pursuit of personal transformation.

Yet another important finding of this research is the importance of a shared language of possibility. Through a shared language, a learning community can create a dialogic environment through which intentions, beliefs and interventions can be

shared among the professional community. This research accentuates the importance of a shared language as a means of articulating a change in perspective.

The study identified three main agents of change. The LMLpLp, the teachers, who internalised the Process and applied it to their practice and the school's senior management team, who internalised the Process, positioned it into the larger vision of the school and created a conducive environment through which the whole school community was empowered to take responsibility to bring about change in practice.

A number of implications emerge from this study that could inform policy on teacher professional learning. A major implication concerns the importance of a shared language – a language that reflects the shared values and ideological position of the community. Such language frames the learning process and makes learning visible for teachers to be able to respond effectively with strategies that respect each learner's learning preference. The language also makes learning visible to the learner him/herself.

Another implication from this study arises from the finding that the transformative learning process of any individual educator and effectively of the whole school community, goes beyond the effectiveness and limitations of any one professional development programme. True and deep-seated transformative learning comes from within the individual educator. This statement has serious repercussions on any professional development programme that aims to aid participants in their quest to transform their practice.

This study also emphasised the importance that any professional development requires to be seated in the local experience and needs of the school community. Any attempts at developing comprehensive, nation-wide projects with pre-packaged approaches, are doomed to fail. What this research has shown is that for effective professional development, the identified outcomes must correspond to the local requisites of the school, rather than the national guidelines, detached from the realities of the particular school.

Finally, this study accentuated the importance of incorporating mentoring support in any professional development proposal. Delivery of information and skills without follow-up tends to lead to superficial application. Transformative learning presupposes a period of shared reflection on practice and collegial mediation of ideas through contact between teachers and their leaders and on-the-job support from their professional development mentors.

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