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# TeachingEnglish

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## **Early career English teacher identity project report: Exploring teacher identity and agency through the Tree of Life approach**

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# Acknowledgments

Our heartfelt gratitude to the ten participants who volunteered to take part in this project. We truly feel honoured to have shared the research journey with such a brilliant, humorous, energetic, passionate, steadfast group of young English teachers.

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# Executive summary

This report presents the findings from a participatory research project conducted with a group of ten early career English teachers from Armenia, Brazil, Morocco, Nigeria, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as part of the British Council's Widening Participation programme. The project purpose was threefold: first, to strengthen teacher development by providing an opportunity for teachers to meet and exchange knowledge and experiences with colleagues from different backgrounds; second, to understand early career teachers' perspectives on teacher identity and agency, including their roles within their local communities and within an international community of teachers; and third, to understand the value of bringing together a small group of international teachers in this way, with a view to informing new ways of working at the British Council.

These aims, and the ethos of the project, called for a participatory and decolonising research methodology. The Tree of Life is a strength-based tool used to develop collective narratives, which was first used in the context of therapy work, but has since expanded into research methodology. Through a series of three workshops, we explored participants' roots, their strengths and capabilities and their dreams and hopes through a visual, metaphorical representation of a tree. The approach proved to be useful both in terms of providing relevant research findings, and more importantly as a way of enabling participants to feel heard and valued. After the workshop series we had individual interviews with all the participants, and a final meeting where preliminary findings were presented and participants provided their feedback.

Our findings focus on four main points:

a) Participants perceive identity as a transformative process, strictly intertwined with agency, (by agency we mean what they are capable of being and doing to change their reality according to their values and aspirations); b) Participants believe in education for hope and social change, where students can flourish and have a positive impact on their communities and society; c) In order to achieve change, participants feel they need to work both within and outside the system, since the education system itself may limit teachers' freedom in constructing the education they aspire to be part of; and d) While teachers may experience isolation and even despair, participants raised the need to keep their motivation alive and that one way of doing this is through peer-to-peer collaboration.

In relation to the British Council's work, the research indicates that there are opportunities for the organisation to play a role in nurturing teachers' sense of agency and strengthening their identity, while also looking at the barriers that prevent them from acting in the ways they would like to and which they consider important. We conclude by proposing the development of further research projects that adopt participatory and praxis-oriented ways of working, which may be increasingly sustainable and have long-term impact, and with the suggestion that teacher identity and agency are embedded in teacher development.

Figure 2 (following page); Visual summary of report captured by author during feedback session with participants



# EARLY CAREER TEACHER IDENTITY PROJECT

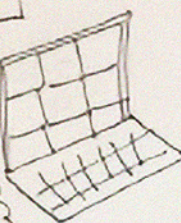
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March 2021

## WHAT

Research during Covid



International Group of English teachers

Moscow Armenia  
Brazil Nigeria  
Palestine

**PURPOSE of the PROJECT**

- RESEARCH
- TEACHER DEVELOPMENT
- NEW WAYS of WORKING for the BRITISH Council

TEACHER COLLABORATION across BORDERS & DEVELOPING CULTURAL RELATIONS

## HOW

PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY:

3 workshops  
interviews



## TO EXPLORE

- our ROOTS
- our CAPABILITIES
- our DREAMS & ASPIRATIONS

## HOW?

What do you want me to know about you? ✓

I'd like to know a -b -c ✗

## WHAT TO DO NEXT

SUSTAINABILITY

OUTREACH PROGRAMMES

COMMUNITIES of PRACTICE

Teachers are THE EXPERTS! → set a clear target

SHIFT DISCOURSE?

teaching skills → strengths & values  
success → hope & motivation  
what they do → who they are

## WHAT we FOUND

"We preach English instead of teaching it"

EDUCATION for SOCIAL CHANGE

"Teachers stopped being & becoming teachers"

TEACHER COLLABORATION & MOTIVATION

WORKING WITHIN & OUTSIDE the SYSTEM to CHANGE THINGS

new resources

Join Group

IDENTITY as a PROCESS

"It's about change"

IF I change...

A friend?  
A model?  
A teacher?  
A mentor?  
A leader?

share your knowledge & capabilities

You are NOT alone!

Exchange ideas.

Look at your strengths

How can I keep improving?



# 1

## Introduction

This project was commissioned by the British Council as it looked to build on learning from increased remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a view to developing its work with English teachers in national education systems across the world, and widening opportunities for participation in its programmes. This included examining its relationships and interactions with these teachers, looking for ways to contribute to a more representative, equitable ELT sector, and considering new spaces to bring together teachers from different contexts. A recently published essay *Language teachers as agents of cultural relations* (Imperiale, 2021), recommended more research into the role that teachers have within their communities in terms of exploring how they shape cultural relations. The essay also pointed out that a deeper understanding of teacher identity and agency may result in foregrounding these concepts in participatory teacher development programmes, where teachers' knowledge and expertise are valued and recognised. This would ultimately strengthen cultural relations and the mutual benefit and reciprocity these aim to achieve (Imperiale, 2021). Following on from that, there has been increased interest within the British Council around teacher identity and agency (for example, Singal and Ware, forthcoming), in terms of exploring how these concepts could shape teachers' sense of self-empowerment and their ownership and status within the ELT sector.

Teacher identity has been widely described, conceptualised and even represented, although it is a challenge to find a univocal and completely satisfying working definition (Mockler, 2011; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). In this project we aimed to develop a better understanding of teacher identity and its relation to agency, while also piloting participatory and decolonising methodologies which could represent innovative ways of working for the British Council. Adopting a decolonising and participatory tool – the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006, 2007) – we developed a series of three workshops with ten early career English teachers from Armenia, Brazil, Morocco, Nigeria and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. During the workshops we discussed participants' roots, their strengths, and their hopes and dreams, which also gave us insights into identity and agency, as we will demonstrate in this report.

This report is structured as follows: in the next section we introduce the research approach and methodology, then present the research findings in sub-sections, the first of which focusses on the description of the collective Tree of Life, and the second presents the main themes that emerged in relation to identity and agency. Following this we reflect on the project as a whole and present our recommendations. We then highlight conclusive remarks.





# 2

## Research approach and methodology

### A participatory and decolonising approach

Given the aims of strengthening teacher identity and agency, and given that the ELT sector is still led by anglophone countries even though English, as an international language, belongs to all its users (for example, see Canagarajah, 2003), in this project we adopted a participatory and decolonising approach. This allowed us to recognise teachers' 'voice and agency' (Imperiale, 2018) and provided an opportunity for teachers to nurture these, and strengthen their ownership of ELT.

We co-constructed knowledge with the participants, adopting inclusive ways of working which foreground collective ownership and narrative creation.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, problematises the role of Western academics conducting research with non-Western groups; she argues for developing research that benefits participants in the first place – acknowledging people's capacity to build knowledge in localised ways – and argues for the respect of those local knowledges (Smith, 1999).

This kind of research puts participants at the heart of knowledge co-construction, and this fits well with our project aims. The term 'participation' in research, can have a variety of meanings, from negotiating access with local partners through initial consultation, to aiming to build a sustainable network that could last beyond the research project (Fassetta and Imperiale, 2018). We tried to do the latter, even though we acknowledge that in order to develop these kinds of projects, relationships and trust need to be built, and doing it online and in a very limited time period can be a challenge. It is therefore our hope that this project can be followed up by further research to make it truly participatory and sustainable.

As part of 'decolonising approaches' we also adopted 'strategic positioning' (Smith, 1999) which is taking a deliberate stance to avoid the imposition of the research aims on participants. We aimed to avoid limiting their engagement to what we would like to know as opposed to what they would like us to know about themselves (Frimberger et al, 2018). This was also a way to allow them to express themselves freely and to co-construct knowledge together with us. In order to be consistent with this research ethos, we adopted the Tree of Life method.

### The Tree of Life method

The Tree of Life is an approach developed by the Zimbabwean psychologist Ncazelo Ncube (2006, 2007) with the support of the Dulwich Centre (Australia). It is a strength-based approach which aims to foster individuals' wellbeing. It was initially designed as a narrative therapy technique with children who had suffered loss and trauma, and its aims were to build a safe place where children could share their traumatic stories while also becoming aware of their abilities and daring to dream. Denborough (2008) then presented examples of the Tree of Life used in different contexts, as hopeful methodologies for individuals and communities experiencing challenges and hardship. The approach helps to unpack individuals' stories, strengths, dreams and hopes while also building collective The approach was then also used as a decolonising research methodology outside the therapy domain (White, 2007), due to its positive impact on individuals. Even though we did not work with 'vulnerable' individuals, teachers in ODA contexts may still live in difficult circumstances and building a safe space where participants feel valued and welcome is good research praxis for any research project.

Through a metaphorical representation of a tree, participants are usually involved in a series of workshops to discuss their past (the roots of the tree), their strengths (the trunk), and their dreams and hopes looking at the future (the leaves and blossoms). In narrative practice, participants are invited to develop individual trees and then collect them in a 'forest' (Ncube, 2006). However, in this project, this was slightly adapted and instead of growing a 'forest', we opted for integrating all participants' stories into one 'collective tree', in line with our aims of strengthening community and shared identity.

## Recruitment of participants

Participants, as illustrated in the table below, were ten early career English teachers from, and based in, one of the following ODA contexts: Armenia, Brazil, Morocco, Nigeria, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The countries were chosen based on internal British Council considerations in relation to: willingness to work across different regions making the project truly international, considerations about time zones and considerations about ongoing projects within the British Council in those countries.

A brief outline of the research project was sent to British Council offices in Armenia, Brazil, Morocco, Nigeria and the Occupied Palestinian territories, and it was then advertised by those offices through different channels according to their in-country ways of working. Potential participants were invited to fill in a brief online application form. This included personal information and contact details, and two questions, one on the role of English, 'Can you tell us why English is important to your community?', and another one on motivation, 'Can you tell us why you are interested in meeting teachers from different countries?'

We received over 350 application forms, the majority from Nigeria, and selected 20 teachers, aiming to get 15 participants in total, with five reserves. However, after having gathered their availability, some dropped out, leaving a total of ten participants who attended the majority of the workshops, despite occasional connectivity issues, changes in their availability, and last-minute work commitments.

Participant	Country	Gender	Experience
Ta	Morocco	Male	1-3 years
La	Palestine	Female	3-5 years
Jo	Nigeria	Male	3-5 years
Jy	Nigeria	Female	3-5 years
Ma	Armenia	Female	1-3 years
Na	Morocco	Male	1-3 years
An	Brazil	Male	1-3 years
Ru	Nigeria	Female	3-5 years
Ah	Palestine	Male	3-5 years
Za	Morocco	Male	3-5 years

<sup>1</sup> We did not give pseudonyms to participants. This decision is informed by the Freirean importance of naming, as acknowledging the presence of the unique other, of the unique voice and agency that is behind that particular name/person – hence our decision to use the initials of participants' names rather than de-personalizing their identities by replacing them with a fictitious pseudonym.

## The research process

Participants attended an introductory meeting during which we outlined the project and went through ethical procedures, which are detailed in the following section. Then, based on their availability, on their location, on gender balance and on ensuring a balance between primary and secondary teachers, participants were divided into three small groups. Each group attended a series of three workshops to focus respectively on their roots and past, on their strengths, and on their dreams and hopes for the future. After the workshop series, we conducted in-depth interviews with each participant. Finally, we analysed the data and hosted a conclusive meeting to present the findings of the study, during which participants had the opportunity to check our interpretation and analysis, providing feedback and asking final questions. They were given a certificate of participation, and we also provided links to freely accessible resources based on the needs they manifested during the workshops. Finally, after the project finished, participants decided to organise a WhatsApp group through which they continue to be in touch.

Data was analysed thematically through a process called 'crystallisation' (Ellingson, 2009), during which the researcher, instead of adopting coding software, used a creative approach to data analysis that included visual mind-maps and illustrations (see for example the illustration of the executive summary). The term 'crystallisation' was coined with a crystal as a metaphor for the data analysis process, as it is multifaceted, necessarily partial, and multidimensional.

Data analysis in crystallisation involves the use of tools such as sketches, mind-mapping, pictures, poems, and other creative strategies: crystallisation allows the mapping of the transformative process of research making, without aiming to provide epistemological correctness and infallibility (Imperiale, 2018). Using illustrations and mind-maps helped both the thinking process and the analysis, and provided an immediate representation of the research findings. It could also be a useful tool for disseminating research findings in an accessible way (Imperiale, 2021b).

## Ethical considerations

In our project we followed the BERA guidelines (2018). Participants heard about the project in the introductory meeting; they were sent an information sheet (appendix I); they had the chance to ask questions, and then gave their signed consent to participate in the research (appendix II). The ethos of the research was reflected in our methodology, in that we tried to ensure participants felt comfortable, heard and valued throughout, and that their consent was given as an ongoing process rather than a tick-box exercise. Involving them in providing feedback on our analysis was particularly rewarding, since, as some of them mentioned, this does not often occur in traditional extractive research and allowed them to feel a sense of ownership of the narratives constructed throughout the project.

In terms of data management, we did not retain participants' personal information apart from their contact details, and these were stored securely and not shared with anybody. Data and recordings were password-protected and only the researchers had access to these. During our workshops we used Google Jamboard as a shared interactive document, and only the researchers and the participants had access to its link.



## Considerations of inclusion and safeguarding in remote delivery

We considered carefully issues related to inclusion and safeguarding in remote delivery. We used Webex software for our meetings, giving considerations to bandwidth and possible poor internet infrastructure in some contexts. Prior to the meeting, we provided information on how to use Webex, including information about accessing it from phones. This provided participants with the basic digital literacy necessary to be fully engaged in the research process. We also developed an online etiquette for our meetings which was presented during the introductory meeting. Our etiquette included when to switch on/off microphones to avoid echoes and background noise; the use of the chat function; the use of webcams according to what best worked for participants; the reminder to speak slowly and as clearly as possible, and issues related to possible interruptions. It was important for us to spell out that interruptions caused by poor internet connections, or by family members interrupting the meeting, were part of the process, and that no one should feel uncomfortable if and when those things happened. Private messaging between participants was deactivated during the workshops.

Since all participants were fluent English speakers, we did not need interpreters. However, as we all were non-native English speakers apart from the research assistant, we opted for avoiding live captions, as these may have been potentially confusing and distracting since, as we found with some experimentation, the voice recognition software does not work well with non-native accents.

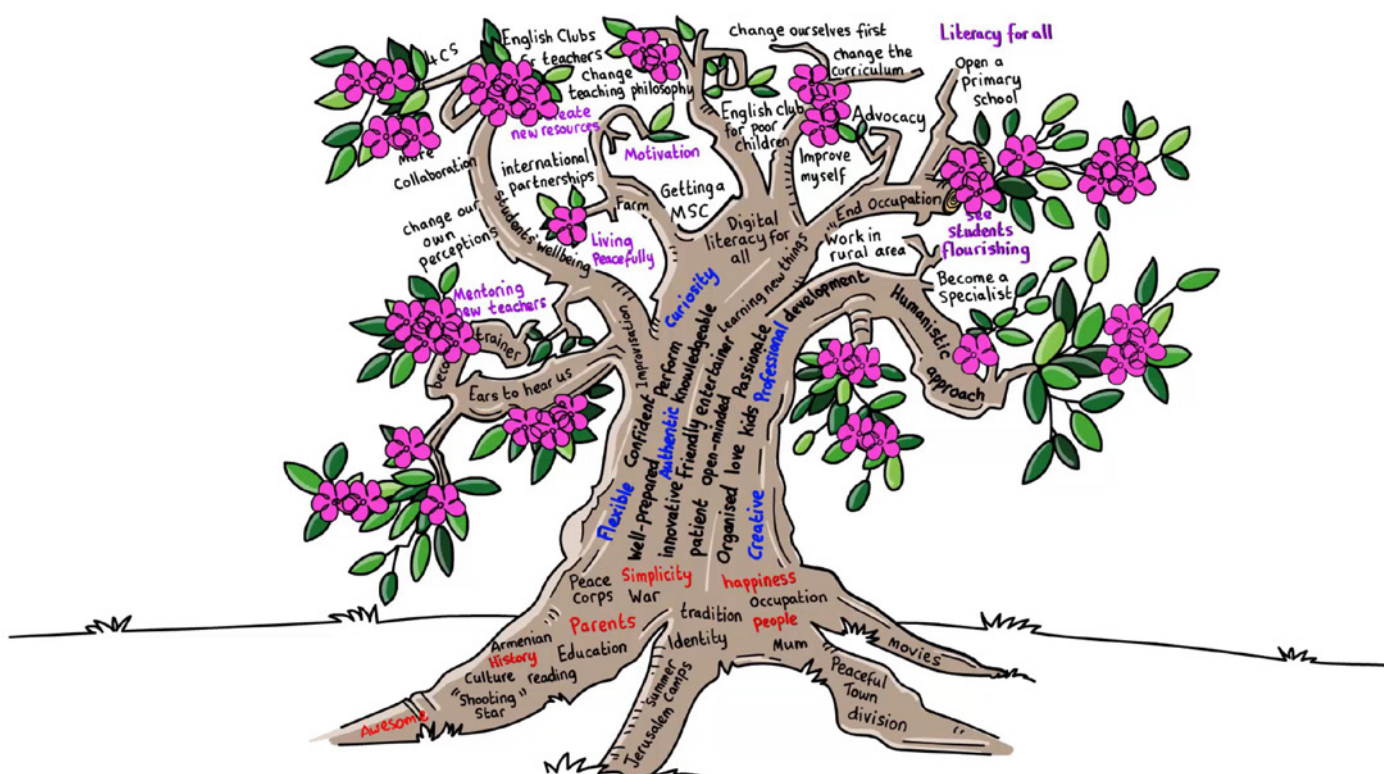
Issues related to gender and inclusion were also taken into account. Although the shortlist had a gender balance, the final participants who were able to attend were six men and four women. During the discussion we ensured equal participation and balance through training-room management skills, despite connectivity issues. To ensure inclusion we selected a mix of teachers from rural and urban areas, and from primary and secondary schools.

# 3

## Findings

The data collected during the research was abundant and multimodal as it included workshops, visuals and in-depth interviews. In this section we present the collective tree of life constructed from the trees of the respective small groups, and we reflect on the three different parts; the roots, the trunk and the leaves. We then focus on teacher identity and agency, highlighting the four main themes which emerged.

### Our collective Tree of Life



## Where we are from – our roots

In the first workshop, participants were invited to discuss their 'roots'. We asked them to add words that related to their past and roots, without giving further explanations. We then invited them to explain their choices.

Most of them interpreted the question in relation to their profession as English teachers. For instance, they focussed on the role their families had played in showing them the importance of education and in nurturing a passion for language learning. Some of them described their experiences as children during summer camps, others their interest in English as a result of being exposed to movies, video games, and social media.

The contexts in which they grew up also constituted part of the discussion. For example, participants focussed on local cultures and traditions, and mentioned the historical roots of these places. In the representation they provided about their contexts, it was interesting how they depicted difficult and challenging situations, for example Palestinian teachers mentioned the occupation, and the three military operations that worsened the already challenging situation in the Gaza Strip. However, participants also provided a very positive picture of their countries of origin. For example, the same Palestinian teacher, La, who talked about wars and occupation also provided images of a castle in the Gaza Strip that might be of interest to a tourist. Jo, a Nigerian teacher, mentioned the difficult history and legacy of colonialism but to represent his past he chose the word 'awesome'. All the teachers showed attachment to their own contexts and countries as they performed the role of experts before the international audience. The international context in which we operated clearly had an influence on the aspects that teachers chose to share. As English teachers, they are usually seen as having knowledge about others' contexts in front of their students, but in this workshop they were invited to reflect on their own context. Teachers were 'agents of cultural relations', as they created meaningful interactions with each other, with mutual learning about themselves and others (Imperiale, 2021).

Values were also mentioned as foundations. For example, An chose 'happiness' and 'simplicity' as these drive and influence his choices. These words were representative of his past, but we reflected on how they are also part of his present and constitute what he hopes to reach in the future. He also explained how, as an English teacher, he holds to these values and hopes his students can find happiness and simplicity too.

## Our strengths and capabilities – our trunk

At the end of the first workshop participants were asked what challenges they face in their teaching. These were numerous and even though they largely depended upon specific contexts, there were many similarities. For instance, the lack of students' motivation, the use of students' native tongue in class being perceived as a barrier to practicing English, the lack of adequate digital literacy, the pressure from school leaders and parents who would like students to 'finish the programme', and a too dense curriculum that prevents teachers from going into a deep discussion of each topic.



Based on these challenges, during the second workshop we presented a series of hypothetical scenarios to participants and they were asked to discuss how they would act in these situations. Participants while exchanging ideas and solutions demonstrated their capabilities in specific situations. We then elicited what each of them thought their strengths were, and reflected as a group on these, noting that often we cannot see ourselves in the ways that others see us, and that often we are not even fully aware of our own potential until someone else points it out to us.

We defined these as ‘strengths and capabilities’ as opposed to skills. In the illustration of the Tree of Life above it is clear that what participants mentioned were in some instances teaching skills, but mostly were about who they are as people rather than what they do as teachers. Upon reflection, the list of strengths included: being flexible, creative, innovative, knowledgeable, eager to learn, interested in professional development, curious, and able to improvise. These are overarching dispositions rather than specific skills used to perform and accomplish a certain task in the context of the classroom.

Other strengths, on the other hand, were more classroom specific: for example, being authentic and being a ‘good performer’. Some participants mentioned the importance of being authentic and transparent, ‘while not sharing too much’ about themselves, whereas other teachers were more inclined to share who they really are with their students. For example, Jo said she always tries to share ‘a part of [herself] with [her] students’. It is interesting that women overall were more inclined to be open about aspects of their lives, whereas most male participants said they prefer to use anecdotes, jokes, or ‘sharing what [they] like doing, but not too much’, as An put it. We refer here to the work of Michalinos Zembylas (2012) on pedagogy of discomfort, where he integrates insights from the critical pedagogue bell hooks (1994) and Judith Butler (2005), to highlight that as teachers we need to be ready to take risks and to be vulnerable in front of our students, even if this may be a source of discomfort.

## Our hopes and dreams – our green leaves and blossoms

In the final workshop, we focused on participants’ dreams, hopes and aspirations. The prompt for discussion was again left deliberately open to avoid unintentional leading and extraction. Participants’ answers varied and we categorised them into three groups.

Some discussed their *individual* dreams beyond their profession, for example to live peacefully in a farm outside of town, to relocate to a different area, or to travel abroad. Others included short-term projects and hopes related to their direct *professional context*, for example creating English clubs for teachers, creating English clubs for children living in poverty, enhancing teacher collaboration with colleagues worldwide, developing a teacher development programme within their own school to strengthen teacher motivation and collaboration, and strengthening teachers’ digital literacy in the post-covid world.

Other aspirations were about *long-term transformation* and social change, for example to see students flourish, to become a teacher trainer, and to improve oneself as a teacher to then have an impact on students’ lives.

## Teacher identity and agency

While articulating their roots, their strengths and their hopes and dreams, participants also gave us insights into their perceptions of identity and agency. We identify four main themes in relation to these concepts: a) Participants interpret education as a tool for transformation and social change; b) They constantly work within and outside the education system in order to change things; c) They feel it is important to retain teacher motivation, even and especially in their challenging contexts, and that one way to do this is through strengthening teacher collaboration; d) They perceive identity as a relational, dynamic process about change.

### a) Education for social change

All participants showed a strong commitment to social change and transformation, perceived as part of their responsibilities as educators. Some of them specifically acknowledged that they are not fully able to accomplish that, as they are limited by the curriculum, the school leadership, parents' expectations, students' lack of motivation, and other contextual constraints. However, it seems they all developed resistant practices to redress these challenges, which could prevent them from being the educators they would like to be.

One participant pointed out that first and foremost, education meant safety and care:

*I need to protect my students [...] they live in oppressed conditions and when they come to school they could be more free. Because it is a border school, you know, here it is bad, like worse than usual. All the teachers want to leave this school, we are just fresher teachers here. [...] But I was determined to stay in this school for boys, because I know that someone needs to be with them and to protect them. I'm almost like a mother to them. (La)*

Another teacher mentioned during the workshop that his dream was to live in a farm away from all the things he does not like in society, but during the individual interview he stated that he wanted to raise 'good citizens':

*Na: I think my dream was minimal ..., ehm compared to the others. I just think about myself, but it is true, the only thing I want to do is to be a good citizen and to raise good citizens responsible for their communities ... and that's it. It is not as important as others, like working with poor children etc.*

*Researcher: Well, I wouldn't say it is a small thing. Raising good human beings is a difficult task ... and an important one.*

*Na: (giggling) Yeah maybe ... I'm enjoying this conversation. (giggling) Yes. Thanks.*

Participants felt responsible for raising new generations of good and capable people, in spite of – or probably because of – the difficult circumstances they themselves face. This recalls the work of critical pedagogues on education as the practice of freedom, hope and transformation (Freire, 1994, 1998; hooks, 1994), whereby education is seen as a way to make individuals flourish, and to make them aware of their role in society. The aim of language education goes beyond neoliberal market needs and is related to individuals' wellbeing and to the development of their societies (Imperiale, 2018). Teachers help students develop their potential as members of their communities and of the community of global citizens.

<sup>2</sup> A school at the border between the Gaza Strip (Palestine) and Israel.

## **b) Working within and outside the system to make change**

In order to achieve the change they aspire to, especially related to their direct professional context, participants gave us several examples of the work they already do within and beyond the education system to resist contextual challenges. Within the school system for example, they support peers and are involved in mentoring programmes, and develop book clubs and competitions for their students, but perhaps more interesting is what they do beyond the school system.

A teacher from Nigeria, Ru, told us she started a WhatsApp group during the pandemic with a small number of colleagues to support each other during the transition to online teaching. The group grew into a much larger entity with over 100 members, including educators, parents, colleagues, and academics. They are now organised to provide monthly input for discussion, sharing of best practices, and consultation. Another teacher, Za, said he is conducting his own study on classroom management, and was trying to develop a new textbook to complement the resources in school. Ma, Jo, Jy and Ah, told us about initiatives to support their communities, for example setting up informal tutorials for the children of the neighborhood who during the pandemic did not have the chance to learn.

We analysed these examples in terms of teacher agency, where we interpret agency as the capability and opportunity to act and make change according to one's own values and aspirations (Sen, 1999, 2002; Imperiale, 2021). In our understanding of agency, it is important to point out that we do not consider whether teachers were successful or not in running a WhatsApp group, or in offering tutorials to students, but we are interested in the opportunities they had to do this, if that was what they valued. Importantly, teachers felt they have less opportunity to 'act' if they work just within the education system, which most of the time limits their creativity and initiatives.

## **c) Teacher motivation and collaboration**

Participants mentioned they are aware that the majority of teachers after some time lose motivation. Research confirms that after the initial 'shock' experienced when teachers enter in the classroom, early career teachers often find motivation and their way around it for an initial period, but it is challenging to retain this positivity and energy for a longer period of time (see the review of Han and Yin, 2016). Our findings confirm this trend.

Some factors that 'make us lose hope', as La said, are related to the specific context in which they live, while others are related to their professional context. For example, Ta told us that 'students are oppressed, parents are tired, everyone feels bad' and that overall, trying to maximise teachers' motivation in these circumstances is challenging. Other teachers mentioned the conflictual relations with parents and school leaders, who do not fully understand that teaching English has its own specificities (for example, practicing speaking and listening needs to be a constant effort and it is not just a matter of a fill-in-the gap or a multiple choice exercise).

However, what strongly emerged when asked how to retain this positivity, most of the participants giggled and smiled and said that 'it is something innate'. They stressed that when working is part of a vision, 'how can you lose positivity and motivation'? (Ru).

*This started even before... I became an English teacher when I was a teenager I think, because I didn't have money so I went to work and then [...] I did an English course when I was 19 ... and I felt wow. I felt the love. I felt I was a human being [...] so the love I have for the profession it will last, because it was there before I started. Really, I think it is just love. It is who I am. (An)*

*It is innate [...] It is part of who I am. I just love it, it is me. You know when I am outside I could just be sitting at home, but if I hear young people's conversations, I don't know, I just do it... Educate, even if I am outside the school. It is in me. [...] I am also hoping to do a Masters' in the UK, to learn, to do education also for me. (Jo)*



Jo and An similarly tried to explain during the individual interviews that being a teacher is just 'who they are' and perhaps how they feel they can be truly human, by educating and by learning. This recalls Phipps' (2014) work where she says that language learning makes us feel human, as it is about relating and knowing, and therefore has a strong affective dimension.

Another teacher talked about her faith and the positive people that helped her find energy and motivation in her life: by being a mother during her maternity leave, and by being a daughter and relying on her own mother's support:

*I'm about to lose this positive energy [...] but I think the maternity leave made me rethink and charged me again with energy. And then my relation with my God is good, when I feel down I pray... it always gives me the energy to continue. I think that this helps me [...] and my mum. [...] even if I am a mum I still want to be a daughter. Actually, my mum is my force, she inspired me to do many things. (La)*

These extracts are quite poignant, as teachers were sharing their deeper thoughts in relation to who they are as human beings. This clearly goes way beyond a rhetoric on teaching skills and of being knowledgeable and successful, and we argue rather that such holistic perspectives are the ones that should be foregrounded in teacher education programmes.

In addition, participants all commented on the importance of teacher collaboration, whether within their own schools, or also as part of international communities. Teacher collaboration could keep motivation alive, and could help teachers feel less isolated, as discussed in the section on hopes and dreams.

### **e) Identity as a process**

All the sections above, in one way or another talk about identity. As the literature on teacher identity demonstrates, teacher identity involves many factors and components, and it is difficult to find a satisfying definition (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). What emerged in our study was that participants understood their teacher identity in terms of change and relationships. Identity therefore is built relationally (for example with students, colleagues, and friends), and is continuously changing. Agency is an important component as teachers often reflected on who they are in terms of what they are able – or unable – to do, and why.

*I think teacher identity is.. ehm.. about change. We change all the time right? Maybe if you met in... I don't know, in another place, maybe you would not even recognise me because I changed after I met other people. Does it make sense? (Na)*

*An: I think it is about me, the way I see me, the way I work, the way I change during the process [...] it is about the essence.*

*Researcher: – What do you mean with essence?*

*An: Essence is kind of built you know, from experience, personal and professional... we build it everyday in our lives because what I do and the way I teach reflect who I am*

Again, in these extracts we have the dimension of being, doing, and relating as part of building one's own identity. In the follow up interviews, participants were asked how they would like their students to see them, and only one participant said 'as a good teacher' (Na) while the others mentioned different roles. For instance, a model, a guide, a friend, a companion, a mother, a leader. All of them, apart from one, said, 'I don't want them to see me just as a teacher'. This is interesting in terms of perceptions of teacher status, which is not highly valued in most parts of the world (UNESCO). As a result, teachers may feel they need to prove their value ('I don't want to be *just* a teacher'). This may have an impact on their own professional affiliation, and may create hostility rather than solidarity between highly committed and less committed teachers. However, this is also significant as it suggests that trying to compartmentalise identity (in this case professional identity versus one's broader identity) may not be appropriate as there is no strong separation between them.

Mockler (2011) captures a variety of contexts that play a role in identity formation and has a holistic and ecological approach which we identify with. This includes the overlapping spheres of personal, professional and 'political' contexts and environment. However, Mockler's diagram is not entirely satisfying as the choice of using spheres – even though linked and overlapping – still presupposes the 'spatialisation' of identity, as opposed to a representation which foregrounds the relational and fluid dynamics that identity entails. We argue that teacher education programmes could be key in shaping teacher identity as socially co-constructed, also helping teachers unpack how the different contexts in which they operate are intertwined. This ultimately would probably lead to a more comprehensive understanding of teacher identity and agency.

# 4

## Reflections on the project and recommendations

In the previous section, we discussed the findings of the research project, and we wish now to reflect on the whole process and draw recommendations that could be useful for other projects and for potential ways forward.

The approach chosen for the project was appreciated and valued by all participants on several levels. They appreciated the chance to work with other teachers from different countries, as well as with the researchers. They felt it was an opportunity to develop collaboration, and felt a sense of ownership for what we built over the course of the project. The Tree of Life was useful in terms of their self-reflection. In their words:

*I loved the approach [...] in the meetings, you kind of guided me to think. You asked questions that are important, and I will use these in my work. It was an opportunity because it was self-reflection, to reflect about me and the way I work.' (An)*

*The questions, and the approach were really useful, how they were asked... It was good to think. (Jy)*

*It was an opportunity to be inspired and to inspire as well, so I am so grateful I was part of it. (Ta)*

Feedback on the approach was unsolicited and came entirely from participants. During the individual interviews, they were asked if there was anything that was overlooked, and they felt that was important. One of the participants mentioned that what was unique in this project was that although it was somehow related to professional development, it looked at teachers as human beings, recognising and acknowledging their agency, as these extracts exemplify:

*Thank you for hearing us... I mean as persons, you did listen to us... and this felt good. (Jo)*

*You know why I registered for this programme? Because there were no lesson plans, no formal things to do. It was different. I liked it [...] it felt nice. I had a sense of nostalgia because we used high level language that I don't use anymore... It felt very nice and I learned a lot [...] but what happens now? [...] Can we be in touch with the group? Can we have a group ... I don't know, just to become friends [...]? (Na)*

We worked with a committed group of people who were genuinely interested in exchanging experiences and ideas with other teachers, and who firmly believe in the role of education to create a better society and in their role as English language teachers; a role that covers more than 'preaching English', as Ta said. They were highly committed to be part of an international community which could be a safe space for them to find inspiration and motivation, and also to inspire and be the source of other people's motivation. As the extract from Na's interview demonstrates, they were interested also in developing relationships – even friendships – with international colleagues, and in the sustainability of the project, and created a WhatsApp group after the official end of the project. It is our hope to expand this research project, building on the relationships that are already established.



### **Recommendation 1 – Overarching project approach**

We recommend developing projects grounded in participatory and decolonising approaches which allow for knowledge co-construction, benefit both researchers and participants, and enhance cultural relations. By using this approach, projects can cover two overarching aims: first, they can be beneficial in terms of teacher development; and second, they generate co-constructed knowledge.

These kinds of projects are usually long-term, due to the need for building relationships and trust, and this needs to be considered in terms of project design. These projects have the potential of being sustainable as relationships unfold beyond the duration of the project, bringing unexpected fruits and carrying long-term impact.

Participants – recognised as experts – can benefit greatly from taking part; having their voices heard and having the opportunity to have an impact on the ELT sector, thus increasing their perceived ownership of ELT.

### **Recommendation 3 – Building sustainable digital communities**

To support Recommendation 2, we suggest that training programmes also aim to build sustainable (digital) communities, since teacher collaboration is perceived as key for teacher development. Motteram and Dawson (2019) provide useful guidance to support this complex process. It is also important to recognise that levels of teacher motivation and purpose vary, and self-selection or other ways of identifying highly motivated teachers to lead these groups may be a way to achieve sustainability. This group's high level of motivation and ability for critical reflection – not just on classroom practice but also education systems and communities – shows the potential of young teachers to shape and contribute to these communities.

### **Recommendation 2 – Teacher identity in teacher development**

We recommend that teacher development programmes encourage reflections on teacher identity and agency, acknowledging that these are the result of the interaction of contextual factors and do not only involve the work within the classroom but rather extend beyond it. We encourage reflections to address values and roots, strengths and capabilities and future dreams and aspirations since these are intertwined with teachers' classroom practices. This enables the articulation of a teacher's purpose and reflection on how they align this with their practice. We also recommend that awareness is raised about teacher status and recognition, and that teachers are engaged in reflection and self-reflection on motivation and on how teacher status can be strengthened as a collaborative effort.



During our project we also learned about aspects of the research process. We believe these are important learned lessons that need to be shared as they could help the development of similar projects. For example, an aspect that enriched our work was the difference in profiles of the research team members, who have similar background but are specialists in different areas: Imperiale is an academic, whereas Mander is an educator and teacher trainer. We built on our respective areas of expertise, contributing to the project in different ways. For instance, we were able to provide participants with advice on pursuing a higher level of education, but also with links to free resources they could use in their everyday practice. The fact that there was gender balance within our team was another strength, on which participants – particularly the women – picked up:

I wanted to tell you that it was the first time for me with [working with] a woman.. and that was great. I felt closer to you because before I was a participant on other research projects but with men... and you know... sometimes is weird. So I felt much closer to you. (La)

I wanted to thank you both Grazia and Mr Stephen [...] because you two helped us in different ways and it was great to have *you both* as we learned from you, *with* you. (Jo, his emphasis)

As the first extract shows, La stated she felt more comfortable participating in the project because the main researcher was a woman. All participants appreciated the team effort throughout the workshops and individual interviews.

#### **Recommendation 4 – Considerations on the project team**

We recommend having a research team whose members have different profiles and areas of expertise. This will enrich the project, and all those involved will benefit from sharing knowledge and ways of working. This requires individuals to have an open disposition towards experimenting with new concepts, and a willingness to go beyond their comfort zones. Ensuring gender balance within the research team will be beneficial in terms of establishing relationships with participants, who, in some cultural contexts may feel more at ease with team members of a specific gender.

For teacher development, the British Council does not often use open recruitment, and during these initial stages we learned important lessons on logistics. During the recruitment process we had over 350 applications for the 15 places on the research group. In total we selected 20 participants (15 + 5 reserves), however, some of these dropped out without notice and we therefore worked with ten participants, which was fewer than we originally hoped for. In addition, during the setting up phase, we exchanged several emails with participants with the intention of working around everyone's availability. While trying to accommodate everyone's needs, we perhaps over-complicated the process of setting up the project. We had initially planned to have separate in-country meetings but due to time constraints and the challenges of finding availability, we opted for having an introductory meeting with all the participants. This worked well, as it was a useful moment to introduce the project, let participants ask any questions, present the information sheet and the consent form, and give them a chance to introduce each other. For those who could not attend, the main researcher recorded a video with all the information about the project.

We also tried to be as inclusive as possible when selecting participants, focussing on those who may not often be reached by British Council projects (such as those living in rural areas), ensuring gender balance, and a balance between primary and secondary teachers. We also considered how inclusion and safeguarding may be achieved online (see the Research Methodology and Approach section).

### **Recommendation 5 – Recruiting and getting started**

We recommend recruiting a larger number of participants, perhaps twice or three times the number the project is aiming for, to cover for potential drop outs. We also recommend keeping communication to the essential before the project, even if this may mean taking decisions in terms of dates and times without consulting all participants. We recommend running an introductory meeting, and if participants cannot attend, this could be followed up either via email, or by sending a pre-recorded video with useful information about the project; the main point being to give participants the possibility to interact with the project leaders and among themselves before starting the project.

### **Recommendation 6 – Inclusion and remote delivery**

We highlight that considerations on project inclusion are important, not least in relation to the remote delivery aspect. For example, after having experimented with Webex and different software, we found that Zoom may be the best application for people in ODA contexts due to its low bandwidth requirements, accessibility from phones, and its particularly user-friendly interface and functions. We recommend where possible to consider whether the project could provide mobile data to participants, or other financial or in-kind forms of support, as this was highlighted by participants.

We also recommend – and participants strongly stressed – that programmes in ODA contexts are able to reach rural areas, as those living in these areas are the ones who have very limited access to forms of professional development, facilities, and collaboration.

Finally, our project did not offer monetary incentives and teachers were not remunerated for their time. We gave a Certificate of Participation where we acknowledged teachers' contribution to knowledge creation, and we included participants in dissemination events as speakers. However, this was a short-term pilot project. We recognise that if teachers are expected to be involved for a longer period of time, or if the research project is practice-led, where teachers will be involved in the creation of outputs, then teachers might need to be adequately remunerated for their time. Monetary incentives, on the other hand, could alter or reinforce certain power dynamics, where researchers own the money and knowledge, and participants are the receivers of this. As Fassetta and Imperiale (2018) point out, the role that money plays in projects is never examined in reports and academic publications, but should not be underestimated.

### **Recommendation 7 – Incentives?**

We recommend that incentives are considered for future projects, and that there is an open reflection upon what it might mean to pay participants, or to offer other forms of support, and how these change relational dynamics, and therefore have an impact on the project outcomes. An open and honest account of those relations would definitely strengthen the project and international development research more broadly.

# 5

## Conclusions

In this project we worked with a group of ten early career English teachers from Armenia, Brazil, Morocco, Nigeria, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The aim of the project was three-fold: firstly, to provide an opportunity for teachers to gather together and share experiences and insights with colleagues worldwide, contributing to teacher development; secondly, to investigate teacher identity and agency; and finally, to pilot innovative ways of working that could inform future British Council projects. We achieved our aims by developing three workshops using the Tree of Life approach. This is a strength-based participatory and decolonising tool for reflection on individuals' roots, strengths, and hopes and dreams with careful considerations of the barriers they face in their own contexts.

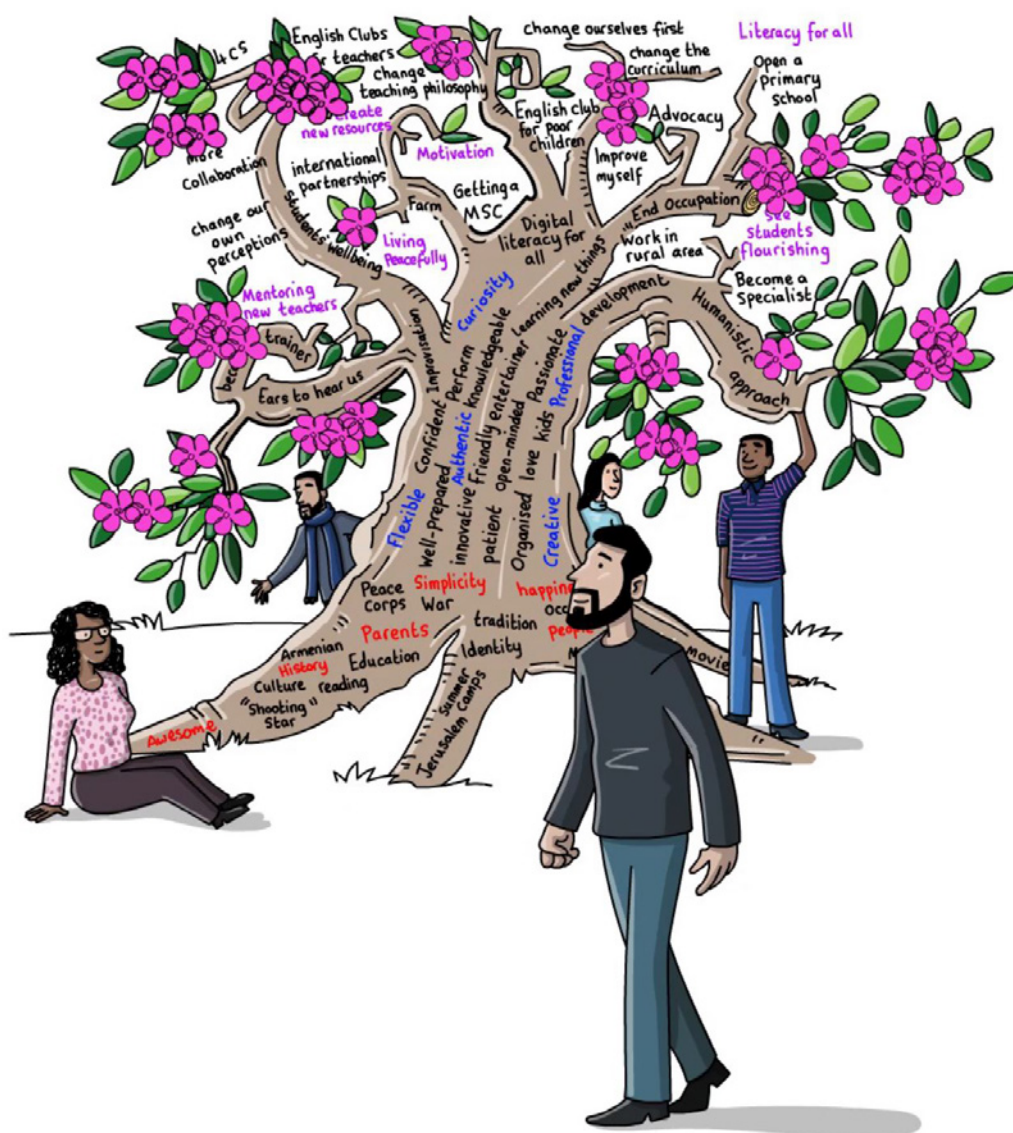
Based on the findings of this project, we can argue that bringing an international group of teachers together online to reflect on identity may contribute to enhancing: a) Teacher status, for example the recognition of actual and potential roles, teachers' investment in their jobs, and what they are able to do within the constraints of their systems and settings; b) Teacher wellbeing and pleasure, as through peer-to-peer support, they feel less isolated in their everyday practices; c) Teacher voice and leadership within the ELT sector, and acknowledging their role in shaping and co-constructing knowledge (for example, through enhancing their participation in research dissemination events); and d) Teacher learning, from each other, from researchers and from participating in the research process.

The research project allowed us to reflect on teacher identity and agency. These two concepts constantly emerged in relation to what the participants do within and beyond their classrooms in relation to their hopes and aspirations. They aspire to education as the practice of freedom and of hope, where they can protect their students and can see them flourish, building the lives they have reason to value. However, due to the hardship and specific circumstances in which they operate and live, it is often challenging to keep motivation alive, even if all participants are passionate about their jobs and consider teaching as their mission. They all perceive their role as going beyond the 'role of the teacher', as they want to be friends, companions, models, and guides for their students, and leaders for their communities. They 'don't want to be just a teacher'. This reflects perceptions of what a teacher is or needs to prove they are before a community. Participants don't perceive education in terms of instilling knowledge in someone, but rather as Ingold (2018) and Ruitenberg (2015) argue, as 'leading someone out'. Participants work in a way that is hospitable to their students, and they do it with care. We argue that teacher education programmes should foreground teacher identity and agency.

Our research project was also about piloting approaches and ways of working. We demonstrated that the approach we used was considered valuable by all participants, who felt they were inspired and were engaged in inspiring others. The approach was participatory and decolonising, and allowed us to co-construct knowledge. Participants were involved in checking the researchers' interpretations and analysis which contributed to creating a sense of ownership about the narratives we co-constructed. We therefore argue for integrating participatory and decolonising approaches into research projects, which may also involve some practice-led component. This would combine praxis, theorisation, and reflexivity and lead to a way of working in which relationships and sustainability are catalysts. We recommend that projects have a clear, sustainable design, and as part of that, we suggest building on communities that are already established, while making sure these are inclusive and reach teachers in rural areas.

Embarking on this kind of work may take time, as what we are suggesting here is probably a paradigmatic shift from reaching thousands of teachers, to working in small groups which are long-lasting; from focussing on teaching for success to teaching for hope; from developing immediate teaching skills to enhancing teachers' capabilities, and from being able to quantify impact, to letting it go a bit out of our control to see the unexpected legacy and fruits that these kinds of projects bring. We suggest doing it in a rigorous way, which helps further theorisation, knowledge co-construction and development, where all those involved – participants, researchers, teacher trainers, and project leaders – might indeed feel they can benefit.

Finally, we want to recognise the commitment and the sense of collegiality of this group of participants, and the opportunity they gave us to learn. Participants are still in touch via a self-organised WhatsApp group and they will be involved in further dissemination activities, contributing to the British Council's work and to the ELT sector.





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# Appendix I

## Information sheet for participants

**Project title:** Early career English teachers' identity

**Researchers:** Dr Maria Grazia Imperiale, Stephen Mander

**Project leader:** Damian Ross

### 1. Invitation

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide if you can take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

### 2. What is the purpose of the project?

This project aims to understand the perspectives of early career teachers from different countries on the role of English, and their identity as English teachers, both within their local community and within an international community of English teachers. We also would like to explore if being connected with teachers internationally is beneficial and valuable to you, and how the British Council could support this further. We also want to provide an opportunity for you to meet and work with colleagues from different backgrounds, learn about different perspectives on English and teaching, and share your experiences and beliefs.

### 3. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are an early career English teacher (up to five years of employment) in mainstream schools in one of the following countries: Armenia, Morocco, Palestine, Brazil, Nigeria. Your experiences and expertise are therefore very valuable.

### 4. Do I have to take part?

Taking part in the study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part and later on you no longer want to continue taking part, you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason.

### 5. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will meet other teachers during three workshops, where you will discuss your strengths and values, what motivated you to be an English teacher, how your work could support your community, and you will exchange experiences and ideas about English language teaching. This will also contribute to your professional development, and you will receive a Certificate of Participation from the British Council. At the end of the project, you will be asked to participate in an interview to evaluate the project. The interview and the workshops will be done online.

### 6. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected during the study will be kept confidential. Any information about you will have your name removed so that you cannot be recognized from it, unless you want your name to be disclosed (for example during a webinar). All the recordings will be password protected, and only the researchers will have access to them. The files will be deleted after one year.

Should you wish to, after the project, you could also participate in a British Council webinar (online) to present the project along with the researchers and the project leader, and you could do that either anonymously or with your name disclosed.

### 7. Who is organising the project?

The project is organised by the British Council, under the programme Widening Participation. It follows the BERA ethical guidelines.

### 8. Contacts for further information

Contact us at: [englishteacheridentity@gmail.com](mailto:englishteacheridentity@gmail.com)

# Appendix II

## Consent form

**Title of the project:** Early career English teachers' identity

**Name of Researchers:** Dr Maria Grazia Imperiale, Stephen Mander

**Project Leader:** Damian Ross

I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason

I confirm that the interviews and workshops will be video recorded with my consent. The recordings will be used only for the stated research purpose. Any other use will only be undertaken after separate consent has been given.

I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the project.

---

Name of participant

Date

Signature (Print name will be accepted)

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